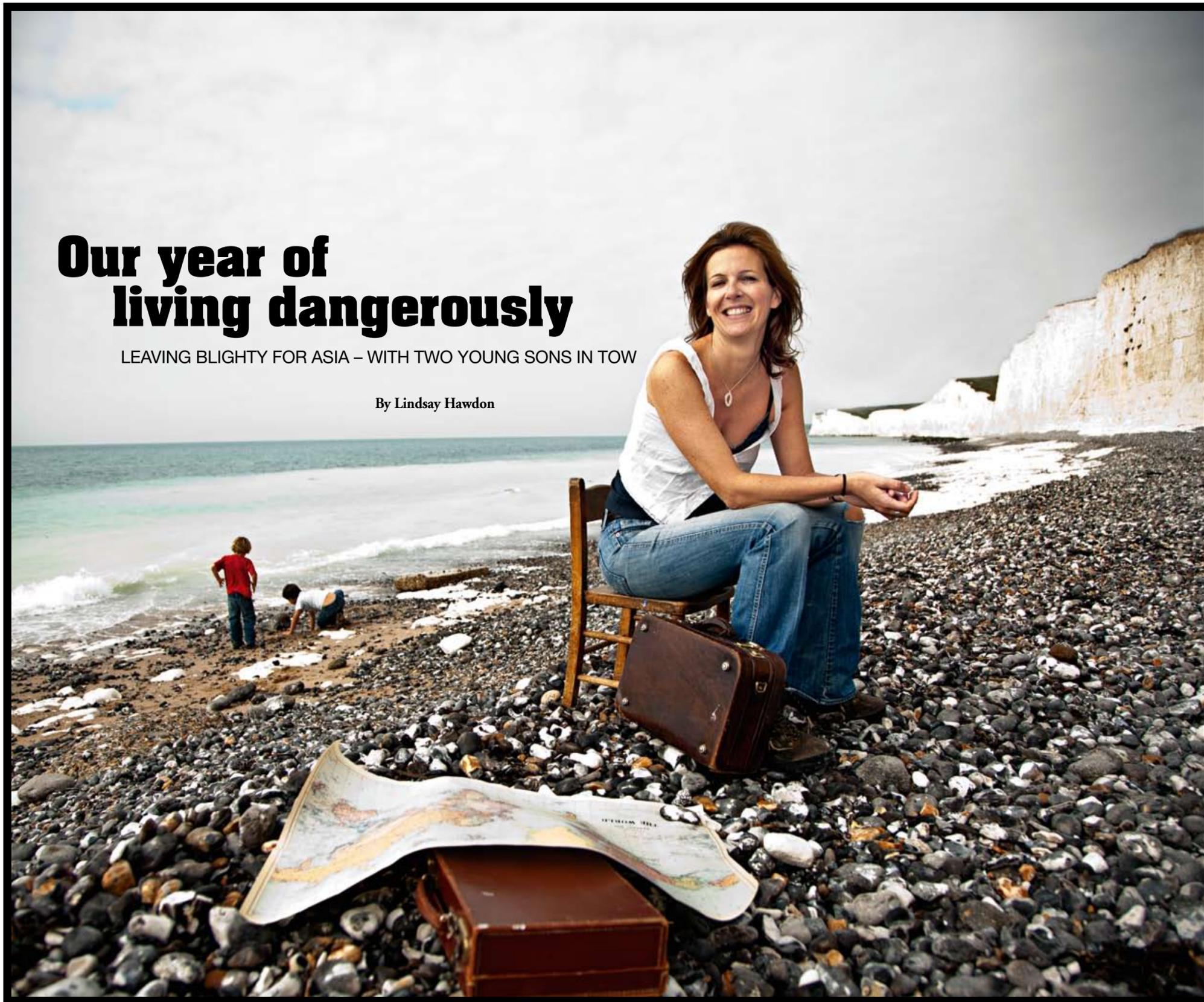


Our year of living dangerously

LEAVING BLIGHTY FOR ASIA – WITH TWO YOUNG SONS IN TOW

By Lindsay Hawdon



T

he three of us are cycling along the jungle roads around Angkor Wat in Cambodia when the storm breaks. There is a flicker of

lightning across the sky, a rumble and a clap, and then raindrops the size of thumb nails come smashing down against our skin, soaking us in moments.

My five-year-old son Orly is perched behind me, his arms gripped around my chest as we splash through potholes in the tarmac. Dow, my eight-year-old, is behind us riding solo, his little legs pedalling madly; he's shrieking with exhilaration. I've never known rain like it. It hammers against us, pouring down our faces, filling our boots. We are still seven kilometres from Siem Reap, the town where we're staying. We're on bicycles that are rust-ridden and rickety and have seen better days.

My two children and I have been travelling since November 2011 on a trip that has taken us around Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Australia, and in the coming months will take us on to Burma and Laos. We are officially homeless, shackle-free for a year of boundless vagabonding. Our first stop after leaving the comfort and familiarity of home in England was Bangkok. It was confusing at first, a lot for the boys to take in as they came across scarlet-lipped transvestites and children who lived in the gutter. Everything was lower to the ground. Cooking pots spread out over the cracked pavement, filling the humid air with the smell of fried spices. Men sat on their haunches selling cigarettes and warm Coke. Women with baskets that hung like weighing scales across their backs tip-toed from street to street with pineapples and starfruit. The world around us was

poorer, dirtier, a land from the past, an uneven mix of the medieval and the new.

Within days Orly had fallen into the River Kwai, cut his hand on a machete, and got trapped in the toilet on the overnight train to Chiang Mai. Dow had swallowed copious amounts of river water filled with elephant dung and fallen into a tank full of doctor fish as they nibbled the dead skin cells from our feet. Food was a game of roulette; we were never sure until it was too late whether "hot" meant just very warm, or spicy hot. Sleep was the same. Home was a jumble of tribal lodges, jungle camps, home-stays where bed was the floor, five-star boutique hotels that eased the travel tiredness from limbs, and \$10 windowless rooms with stained walls and wiry beds that creaked beneath us.

However, from the outset the boys embraced the adventure. We have travelled with the deluded belief that somehow, because we are living life to the full, we will be rewarded for doing so and kept out of harm's way. I've taken risks I would never take with the boys at home. We've ridden on motorbikes, all three of us sandwiched together. We've sat on the roofs of long-tail boats for days on end to reach a destination, squashed into rickety buses, and shared tuk-tuks with live chickens. We've dined with Hmong shamans, sailed down the Mekong, ventured into bat-infested caves and kayaked through the backwaters.

The maternal instinct to protect has been all the more poignant with the unfamiliarity of the world around us. But at the same time the world has opened up in ways it didn't when I travelled alone. People respond differently to children, and children themselves don't always see things the way we see them. In the Vietnamese capital of Hanoi we found ourselves standing on the curb, contemplating the seemingly impossible task of how to cross the road through the blur of passing traffic. The boys stood either side of me, grasping my hands tightly, as we stood waiting for a break to appear. None came. Just when I was about to give up, a young man joined us on the curb. He sat on a small trolley that supported his twisted, hunched body, and walked with his hands, using them to push his wasted legs along the ground. He ventured out into the oncoming traffic, then turned and looked right at us and gave a small, almost imperceptible nod of his head, indicating for us to follow. There was nothing to be done but take a deep breath and step out into the traffic after him. Mopeds, trucks, bikes sped towards us. Step by step we shuffled forwards. "Don't stop," we'd been told by the hotel staff. "Keep moving forwards." Our hearts were hammering when we reached the other side.

Some of our best experiences have been the simple ones. In a small village near Hoi An we went out with

a local fisherman, setting off on a long-tail boat to an archipelago where white sand beaches glimmered between palm fringes. The boat bobbed on the water just off from the beach. He was about 70, with only one tooth in his upper jaw. “Sometimes in the bad weather a fisherman can lose everything,” he told us. “Even their lives. To be a fisherman can be a dangerous job. So we sing to the ocean to calm it.” He showed us how he held the cast-net, one side slung over his shoulder, the other woven through the fingers of his left hand. He rocked for momentum before flinging the net out and up into the air where it splayed like a bird in flight, beads of water in the nylon catching the light as it fell onto the water and slowly sank beneath it. Then he waited momentarily before pulling it in, hand over hand. He would cast his net like this for 10 hours a day.

Other experiences were spectacular. In Thailand, right from the outset we were awed, terrified and seduced by the elephants. We saw our first one the night we arrived: a street elephant that came trumpeting out of the humid night air, its feet shackled in chains, its trunk curled like a saxophone, led by a man who begged for change. After that we made sure our experiences were at sanctuaries, where they were looked after. At Elephant’s World near Kanchanaburi we washed the animals in the river (their hides were the texture of an old leather couch) and painstakingly fed them balls of sticky rice. Nothing will ever beat the sight of my two precious children riding elephants bareback out of the water, like real-life Mowgli-boys, and off into the jungle.

Elephants, tuk-tuks, cycles, scooters and the old hay cart – getting around was like a continuous fair-ground ride for the boys. One of our most memorable forms of transport was the bamboo train in Cambodia’s Battambang province, the lifeline from one middle of nowhere to another. It clicked and clanked its way along warped rails, jarring our backs

and rushing the wind through our hair. It was a simple contraption, a three-metre-long wooden frame covered with slats of bamboo, sitting on cast-iron wheels with a motorcycle engine that thrummed merrily at the back. The boys and I couldn’t stop grinning. It felt like flying on a magic carpet, the ground rushing away beneath us, heading towards a distant point of hazy heat waves.

It hasn’t all been light and life-affirming. There have been places and stories that have challenged us. At the Killing Fields outside the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh, where the Khmer Rouge regime carried out many of its atrocities, what was most apparent was the silence. Tens of thousands of people were murdered in the fields in which we walked; they were brought in trucks, blinded and bound; many had been tortured and starved. They were accused of crimes against the state and summarily executed. Meadow flowers now grew up from the long grass, butterflies flitted through the air, birds sang; but beneath our feet lay thousands of bone fragments.

I have not hidden the harsher side of a foreign land from the boys. You can’t: it’s there in front of you. But sometimes the things that have been the hardest to see have turned out to be the most special. One of my

most poignant memories from this trip is of a street boy in Chau Doc, Vietnam, who we used to watch from the veranda of our dilapidated guesthouse. He was no older than Dow and he slept curled by the roadside, his arm for a pillow. The only objects he owned were a small battered metal bowl, and a blue string bag that he dragged behind him.

“That’s his home?” Dow had asked the first morning we saw him, wide eyed and anxious.

“Yes, sweetheart. That’s his home.”

“Does no one look after him?”

“No one.”

Each morning this boy crossed to a water tap, where he undressed and washed himself. Afterwards he shuffled on up the street, collecting discarded plastic bottles in his string bag and selling them for small change at the stores that would use them for refills.

One morning we were already out on the street when he headed off for his daily wash. I could see Dow watching, could see the allure and the hesitation. In the end an interaction happened between them just as it would at home, because boys everywhere are drawn to water. T-shirts removed, my two approached tentatively at first. The street boy took them in for a moment, registered that they were different from him; whiter than him, richer than him. But then his dirt-smearred face broke into an easy smile and he moved aside to share the stream from the tap. They took it in turns to fill his bowl, pouring water over themselves, eyes blinking, mouths gasping for air. They could have been anywhere in the world. Three boys: two blue-eyed, one brown-eyed, playing in a water fountain to while away the heat of the day.



Hold on tight: the writer and her sons Dow, 8, and Orly, 5, share a scooter with a local in Chau Doc, southern Vietnam; Orly at the elephant sanctuary in Chiang Mai, Thailand



Back in Siem Reap, the rain is still hammering down, the light is fading and the boys are shivering with cold. Everyone we pass shrieks and waves, seemingly delighted at the sight of a drenched white woman and her two young children on their bikes. But the mother in me is taking stock of the situation. People are bruised by the rain here; the ground can slide away from where one is standing; houses can disappear down steep slopes.

I see a coffee stall at the side of the road and pull in to find a group of locals sheltering inside. They rise from their seats with helpful inquisitiveness. As the boys are being wrapped in blankets by a group of smiling women, a man rushes to our aid, offering to fetch a friend of a friend who owns a tuk-tuk.

There is a lot of cheek-pinching going on but the boys are in good spirits, basking in the delight they are creating. Eventually the tuk-tuk arrives, they load up our bikes and the crowd waves us off, all cheers and grins. So we make it back through the downpour and the flooded roads, the darkness and the traffic, to the safety of our guest house. We had been dancing with death in our own little way. But it hadn’t felt like that. It felt like we were living life to its utmost, with our heads held back, drinking water from the sky, and the world passing by in a blur of watercolour. ●

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