

PHNOM PENH — Budget fares can be a good stimulus for people to travel and visit other places, and acquire the benefits from coming in contact with people from a different culture or see how things are done differently in these places compared to how we do things in the Philippines. But flights on budget fares are not scheduled for the most convenient time. And there is the rub.

On this latest trip to Cambodia I took the Cebu Pacific flight to Saigon with 3 friends from Cebu. They wanted to go by plane from Manila to Saigon on the budget fare and then from Saigon to Phnom Penh via a 6-hour bus trip. The saving can be significant using this mode of travel. I had done the bus trip before between Saigon and Phnom Penh and it is quite comfortable. But I had never flown the budget fare flight from Manila to Saigon.

The flight leaves Manila at 11:00 pm and gets into Saigon 2 and a half hours later, or 12.30 in the morning Vietnam time, which is one hour behind the Philippines. For night owls getting luggage from the carousel, taking a taxi to a hotel and checking in at that time is nothing but for some one like me who is normally in bed by nine this was not an activity to be very cheerful about. It was a good thing I was with friends whose company I enjoyed.

My friends are all younger than I am so right after a hearty buffet breakfast in the hotel on the first morning it was off to the Ben Thanh Market for shopping. Ben Thanh is well known as something of a Divisoria or Baclaran here. It seems that the shop keepers in the market are familiar to the shopping-loving Filipinos since we were greeted by the Vietnamese who touted their wares by saying “Bili dito mura” or something like that in Tagalog. It was my observation that the shopkeepers are not as charming as Cambodians in the equivalent shops in Cambodia. This was confirmed by one of my companions who has been to Cambodia twice before.

We were all overwhelmed by the number of motorbike-riding people and crossing a street was like risking life and limb. Thank heavens nothing like that happened to us.

We were in the vicinity of Ben Thanh again later in the day. I told my friends that it would be interesting to experience the night market there. Around 5:30 pm two streets flanking the market on either side became the area for “shops”. It was interesting to see the shops rolling in from somewhere else and being set up to do business, one after the other in a line along each side of the street. There were food shops selling Vietnamese food – noodles, porridge, spring rolls – and shops selling clothes, bags, shoes, house décor, souvenirs and whatever will part you from your money. It is a lively and stimulating experience.

The next morning we checked out of the hotel and simply pushed our luggage a few meters to the stop where we would take the bus to Phnom Penh. And the bus left exactly at 8:30 as stated in the ticket. --REMEDIOS F. MARMOLEÑO