

Some call Jacek Palkiewicz's expedition on elephants through the jungles of southern Vietnam his 'last great journey'.

TO GO DOWN THE SAME STREAM TWICE

by Jacek PALKIEWICZ
Photos by the author

The East is the East. And you stoically take the bureaucratic formality of the Vietnamese officials, the long talks during which you try to explain the nature of the expedition, and the feigned slow-wittedness of the chief in Hanoi, convinced that we are either mercenaries or, at least, looking for American MIAs in Vietnam.

"Why do you want to go to the province of Pleiku and on elephants at that?" the official asks me for the hundredth time.

What could I say? I got the idea of going on an expedition on elephants many years ago. An Italian-Russian-Vietnamese group would cross the central plateau in the region of the Cambodian border. I had already flown to Vietnam twice and convinced the forever vigilant officials that I was not a spy. When the local tourist

Any journey puts one into
a philosophical frame of mind.

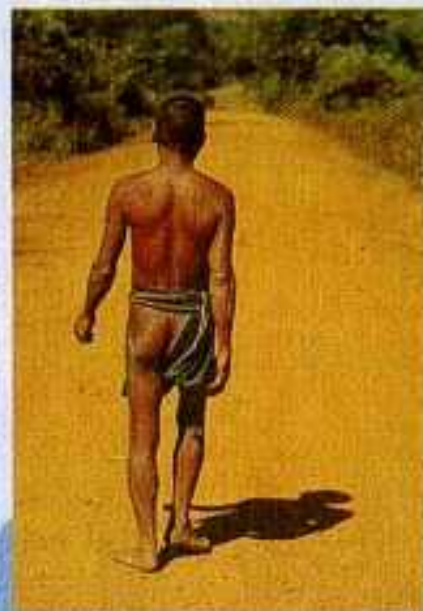




This is the way they lived in these jungles 100, 200, even 1000 years ago. And this is the way they live there now. We only enticed the young with our bright T-shirts.

agency finally issued us our visas, we ran into a new obstacle. None of the inhabitants of Pleiku wanted to help us. Finally, though, we found some elephants and the caravan set out.

Our journey began in a zone that is off limits to foreigners to this day. The local officials tried to discourage us by saying that armed followers of the old Saigon regime were still hiding in the jungles. But actually it was groups defending the rights of ethnic minorities. There are more than 50 of them in Vietnam. Most of them live in the mountainous regions.



The small dark-skinned people, who settled here two thousand years ago, have always been hostile to the Vietnamese. During the last war the Viet Cong took shelter in their abandoned villages in the jungle. However, the aborigines often refused to help them, as they did not want to become mixed up in the conflict with the Americans.

... It took a day for us to get to Piew, a little village—two dozen bamboo huts on piles—in the jungle. Its inhabitants are short and amber skinned. They are content with very little: wild game in the jungle and fish in the rivers. They cut down the trees and grow rice on the scorched plots of land. If the harvest is good, they have plenty to eat and all live.

"What else does man need?" says the elephanteer K'Palai.

They have never seen missionaries, the French-colonizers, or any Europeans in general here. These people don't know radio or television. It seems time has stopped in these jungles. And

one wants to agree with K'Palai and forever sink into this alien, but so understandable to me life.

We woke up in the morning to the cries of the elephantees. "Drum, drum," they shouted and the four-ton mountain dropped on its knees. First we loaded the baggage, then we got into the huge baskets—it turned out that they are very uncomfortable.

When the command "Nei!" was given the animals rose. To us sitting three metres up, it seemed like the elephants were barely moving. But when I got down on the ground in order to take a few pictures, the elephants were out of sight before I knew it.

There are only a few hundred elephants left in the woods of Vietnam. Almost all of them have been tamed: they

The inhabitants of the jungle have an instinctive animosity to strangers. They shunned both the Vietnamese and the Americans. And maybe they were right to...



drag huge tree trunks weighing up to two tons, over the ground and pile them up. To think that in the fifties they hunted wild elephants in these parts, and on holidays there were elephant competitions. According to scholars, there won't be any elephants in Vietnam in 30-40 years as a result of being hunted illegally for their tusks and the building of roads and civilization encroaching on the jungle.

We went 30 kilometers that day and arrived at the next village. The inhabitants—both men and women—were wearing loin-clothes. The hunters returned from the woods with a doe they had killed while we were there. They hunt with a bow and poison arrows just like their ancestors long ago. The women grind rice, gather wood for the hearth and make cloth with ancient designs. The front upper teeth of many women were sawed off and the stubs painted black.

One woman had a chain with a metal tag on it around her neck. "Robin Steven, No. 57154079" was inscribed on it. It must have belonged to an American soldier. Who knows what his fate was. Did he die? Or was he a MIA? All we got was her black smile in answer.

... And our caravan went on. I've never seen so many kinds of bamboo. Some of the plants were as thick as one's hand and as tall as a four-storey house. No wonder the Viet Cong could hide so well in these dense thickets. For some reason I kept thinking about their famous hole-traps.

We continued on in the baskets on the backs of the elephants. The roar of water falling from high up brought us back to reality. The elephants speed up at the thought of a bath. And we entered that stream together with them on their backs...