

LETTER FROM VIENTIANE

Dear Friends,

I have had pleasure in reading the articles contributed to "Externally Yours" and thought perhaps some members of the Department might be interested in my reactions to Indo-China.

I will begin by telling you how I happened to come to this part of the world. I was in Tokyo on a two-and-a-half years posting when I was offered the opportunity of working with the Canadians who were to form part of The International Commission for the Supervision and Control of The Truce Treaty in Indo-China.

Although I really enjoyed my year in Japan, I have always had a great desire to travel, so I agreed to go to Indo-China. Distant fields always look greener, but not that I am half-way round the world I find things less rosy than I had expected. However, I am not desperate and will try to depict both the good and the bad aspects of Vientiane.

I left Tokyo on September 8th and flew to Hong Kong. Hong Kong is like a fairy city. Sparkling mountain peaks surrounding this city of many coloured lights left me with a first impression of Royal Courts and diamond necklaces. I was only in Hong Kong for a day and spent a good deal of time in the shops and around the stalls, many of which have British goods for sale.

From Hong Kong to Hanoi is a three hours flight. In Hanoi I was met by one of our colleagues and taken to the Metro-pole Hotel. Hanoi must have been quite a prosperous city in its day. The boulevards, cafés and theatres are all indicative of the energy, money and artistry invested in Indo-China by the French. Today there is nothing but sadness. When I arrived in Hanoi the evacuation was well under way, but even during my four days there, more shops were closed and I was weighted with a feeling of futility.

Laos is 200 miles from Hanoi and Vientiane is on the north shore of the Mehong River, facing Thailand. One of

the pleasing aspects of Vientiane which I will always remember is the extraordinary effect of Avenues lined with great palm trees against the quaint architecture of the houses and pagodas, but somehow or other it's hard to be enthusiastic about aspects when you are hot and ill. The oppressive heat was what really greeted me and it's difficult to enjoy primitive modes of living coupled with numerous varieties of insects.

We all have to sleep under mosquito nets. At first, I felt trapped, but before long I grew to appreciate its assistance in keeping out the bugs which invariably crawl over us.

One morning I was preparing to take a shower (cold water only runs in the taps here and although its coolness is invigorating, its muddiness is discouraging) when I came face to face with a spider which must have been at least six inches in diameter. For a moment I stood paralysed at the sight of such an over-sized insect, but I quickly sharpened enough to evacuate the place. It took me all day to forget the incident, but that very same night when I put the key in the door of the house where I live, I heard a thud-like sound and found a snake. Then I truly wished that I had not yielded to my fancy to see the world. The grasshoppers in Laos measure a good four inches in length and the lizards in my bedroom make me shiver, but I'm told that they eat the insects.

The monsoon season has almost ended. It begins in May and lasts until mid-October. Needless to say, during that period, everything smells musty and we have to watch our clothes constantly if we want to keep them free of a thick green fuzz. This fuzz is especially bad for shoes, but I don't find it nearly as disturbing as the bugs.

I think it's time that I turned to the good side of the picture.

The country-side is really lovely and the climate, at this time of year, is very pleasant. It reminds me of July at home. The trees are enormous in size with jade coloured leaves, and the sky seems to have a different blue than in any other part of the world where I have been.

There are a great many fruit-bearing trees -- bananas, cocoanut and papaya. Laos is also noted for its mahogany