

## Discovering kindred spirits, half a world away

By Sarah Lipman, Correspondent

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HUÉ, VIETNAM -- Before heading around the world, Andrea and I had visions of new friends in foreign places. After reading guidebooks and blogs, and hearing stories from other friends who have traveled, we conjured up images of the people we would meet and the experiences we would share with them.

There would be both like-minded travelers from all over the world and friendly locals willing to show us around their countries.

A trip already full of the unexpected has exceeded our expectations in the people department: The number of incredible, inspiring, interesting people we have met in just two short months seems to never end.

Travelers are a different breed: They're brave, excitable and probably a little bit crazy. But the same vagabonds skydiving in Australia and riding motorbikes down the coast of Vietnam (that's a column for next week) are also some of the brightest minds I've ever encountered.

I knew I was in for meeting a completely eclectic group of new friends when -- within my first few hours in Bangkok -- the first person I encountered was Benny, a 28-year-old from Ireland whose mission is to become "fluent in three months." Benny the Irish Polyglot, as he is known on his blog, has been on the road for eight years and lives in countries for three-month periods, completely immersing himself in the language and culture that surrounds him. Currently fluent in 11 languages, he proves his mission is possible by uploading videos of him conversing in the country's native tongue onto his blog, along with pointers for mastering a language.

In Laos, we met a 24-year-old couple, Alex and Cat, from England. They had to postpone their trip for a few months after Alex went through a near-fatal surgery just weeks before their original departure date, not too long after finishing his service in the

British Army. Traveling through Southeast Asia now, Alex has made it his mission to eat as many disgusting or unusual things as possible, including duck fetus, snake's heart and monkey skin.

Also in Laos, we met Merle, a Scottish TV producer living in London who has taken leave from her job



for three months to travel around Southeast Asia. At 27, she's traveling for the first time alone with her backpack and a point-and-shoot digital camera. Every day during her trip, she has made it her mission to see as much as possible and record at least one 10-second video for a 12-minute documentary to be made upon her return. We've been traveling together since we met.

More recently, during our trip to Halong Bay in Vietnam, we met Menh, a Vietnamese woman from Ho Chi Minh City vacationing in the north of her country with her husband. Eager to talk to Westerners and to practice her

English, she invited us to lunch with her while we were en route back to Hanoi from Halong Bay, and to act as a personal tour guide when we arrived in Ho Chi Minh City.

Those are just a few of the dozens of interesting people I've met who have made a lasting impression during my travels so far. And all of my great new travel friendships came from inconspicuous beginnings.

Shyness doesn't exist and conversations just begin. You can talk for upwards of 20 minutes with just about anyone, and you may never learn people's names or see them again. Things like age, sex and race fly out the window because, ultimately, everyone's in the same boat, sometimes literally, trying to get from Location A to B.

While the sights and experiences of a foreign country are something to be treasured and admired, I'm finding the people I see and the experiences I have with them are what is really making the adventure so grand.

Sarah Lipman is documenting her travels around the world. Visit her blog, *Passport: The World*, on The Advocate Web site. To read Sarah's blog, go to <http://blog.ctnews.com/lipman/>.

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