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## Pimps and Paws

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For the last 14 months I have been travelling throughout Asia at a slow pace to get in touch with the people, environment and culture. I am from Switzerland where I was able to attend school for many years for free, and where I was able to learn four languages. On this journey my mission is to give something back, to do many good things for the greater good. In Indonesia I followed the workers of a sulphur mine on Mount Ijen in Eastern Java, and met people living in a rubbish dump to recycle materials. Malaysia's Taman Negara got my attention for its stunning wildlife. In Thailand I did a documentary on Muai Thai in the country's second biggest arena, and one about a place called 'elephants and friends' where they look after long-time suffering animals. In Myanmar, I made it a mission to document the life of the monks. Cambodia's massive rubbish dump in Phnom Penh with its people living within was an extreme experience plus the sad testimony of the land mine victims in Siam Reap.

Now, I am in Vietnam, where illegal animal trade is a common thing, and this topic needs to be told over and over again ... until the public awareness has reached a level where action is taken from many different sides.

**A popular saying in Vietnam goes: "We can eat anything with four feet except the table. We can eat anything in the ocean except submarines. We can eat anything in the sky except planes."**

I came to Ho Chi Minh City to see some medical specialists because my back had been hurting for a while. Between my appointments I had plenty of time to do research about hot topics that needed to be addressed! My guide Mr. No and his driver were my companions for the day. My goal was to find places (restaurants, bars, industrial areas) where they offer animal products for trade, food or medicine as well as the actual animals which suffer their whole life in cages.

Our day trip first brought us to a tourist friendly restaurant with swimming pool, karaoke bar and its own little private zoo. Plenty of crocodiles, gibbons and other monkeys are kept in cages. I received a friendly greeting from the staff, and was shown around since they had nothing to hide. There were no bears, tigers or any other big animals. The owner gave us the address of a million dollar zoo project in a notorious province outside of Ho Chi Minh City, and we continued driving to this place. I had to tell my translator to really translate the exact thing I was asking for, I had a plan to find out more about the precious liquid called bear bile that brings pleasure to the dealer and pain to the animal.

We arrived at a construction site that soon will be turned into a 200 million US\$ zoo and family entertainment park with hotel rooms ranging from 5 to 100US\$. We made our way into the main office and administration centre where I made them a large offer. They were told that I was a large investor from overseas with many rich clients interested in bear bile. The general manager had stars in his eyes and was suddenly very helpful. He showed us around the half complete complex of gigantic measures. Despite my disgust for zoos, I have to say that the size of the compounds that the animals will live in is bigger than anywhere else I've seen. A white tiger and two rhinos were already being housed while workers finished cages and compounds next door. The GM assured me that when they have the 20 bears or so (this place opens in December) that we could do some 'side business' with bile.

**"For some people, having a Ferrari outside their front door is not enough, you have to have a chimpanzee or an orangutan in your backyard as well. Then you are really the man"**

Binh Duong Province just off the doorstep of Ho Chi Minh City is unfortunately very famous for this type of business and some of these places have already been raided or otherwise investigated. Mr. No and his driver were always on the phone, talking to friends, friends of friends and so on to find more places where animal abuse was taking place.

Then we got to the place which is hell on earth. We received a friendly welcome, chatting and laughing, but the people there would not sell me anything despite any amount of money I offered them. My camera did not help even though I had told them that I needed photographs of their animals for my clients. No see - no money! I got shown around and was disgusted.



The front consisted of karaoke houses, but the back had a different sound altogether. There were two fully grown tigers, leopards, a panther and some other wild cats I couldn't name. There were tropical birds with stunning colors and big beaks singing wonderful melodies out of their caged bodies. The cages were the equivalent of us living in a 2x3 meter room for our entire lives.

The tragedy continued. After the cats, the bear section started. Two rows on each side all the way to the end of the trail and then more towards the left. These big moon bears live in 1.5 x 1.5 meter cages, nothing but concrete floors and lying in their own excrements. Some were licking the bars. Some looked at me like a drug addict, and some had pure fear or agony in their eyes. The only joy these bears have is that they can see out a little to watch a tourist or local swimming in the pool near the cages. Others have a roof above them and won't see daylight again in their lifetime! They can't stretch or stand up properly. They don't deserve this life!

**I won't forget the bear that looked at me, stuck his paw through the cage trying to say "get me out of here, I don't belong in here, please".**

I wanted to take photographs, but I had a constant escort from one of the staff members that did not want me to do this at all - well, I don't blame him! I did not want to put my driver and guide in danger so we left. But I knew I would be back with some serious backup.

Just 10 minutes down the road we had lunch at a resort with lovely staff, good atmosphere and food and many tropical animals in cages as well as fishing pond. There were French, English and German tourists around. It looked like the perfect location for a chill-out holiday. There are many kinds of snakes, three wonderful gibbons (even a rare white one), and their own house bearsk, which they use for special occasions. When companies come for banquets or conventions, they milk the bears and sell the bile for some good money, not knowing that what they are doing is illegal and causing harm to a beautiful animal.

Two days later I went back with my friend Bob, who has some very useful contacts in Vietnam plus a security team of four. I wanted to take more photographs. I wanted to provoke the karaoke bar people and see how far they would go. They recognized me of course, and whenever I took my camera out, they blocked my lens, pulled on my shirt or tried to push me away. Good I had my buddies to back me up, and I was able to capture some emotions from these people. I hope it helps the animals.



On the other side of the so called restaurant are wooden shacks, very visible by eye from the riverside lunch tables. There are about 16 young girls living in these houses for sexual services. I would guess their ages to be between 16 and 22 years old, and when they saw my friend Bob they got excited because they thought 'a new customer is on the way'. Then the 'pimp boss' got out of his house and screamed 'Get off my property!. What is your problem?' Slowly we made our way out of this 'karaoke bar' that is involved in animal trade and prostitution - both illegal in Vietnam!

### **Many wild animals end up in restaurants, traditional pharmacies and souvenir shops. Southeast Asia's forests, a biological treasure rove, have become a gold mine for wildlife traffickers, say ecologists.**

On the way back to the city we stopped in Chinatown to find not only bear bile, but also tiger penis and rhino horn. One chemist wrote down the ingredients I would need for 'good long sex', which includes a tiger penis. His friend (whose number I got) could get me all that I needed, every tropical animal, every 'whatever' - if it is on this planet, I could have it within 24 hours if the price was right.



My journey soon brought me to China to the border crossings at Lang Son and Mong Cai, which are notorious for animal trafficking. I stood my ground and took photos. Some believe up to 3,500 kilograms of illegal wildlife goods pass through these border towns daily, including pangolins, lizards, turtles, cobras, pythons, monkeys, bears and tigers. Smugglers have used ambulances, wedding cars and funeral hearses to smuggle the contraband, or hired foot porters through middlemen so that they cannot reveal the identities of their boss if caught. Permits and licenses are sometimes forged, and customs officials threatened or bribed, blaming "influential people", a euphemism for organized crime.

A recent survey by WWF and TRAFFIC found that nearly half of Hanoi's residents had personally used wildlife products, a trend the groups plan to tackle with a public awareness campaign. In Ho Chi Minh City, a survey of 1,600 restaurants by the group Wild Animal Rescue found 15 wild species on the menu, among them deer, snake and turtle.

With virgin rainforests now reduced to a patchwork, fewer than 100 tigers, 100 wild elephants and 10 rhinos believed to be left in the wild in Vietnam, their gene pool is already too small to ensure their survival there. More tigers in Vietnam live in captivity than out in the wild. Vietnam banned hunting without a permit in 1975 and has signed several treaties, including the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora.

As long as demand grows, experts agree, trade will grow and continue to threaten the heritage of Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

I wanted to tell this story, even though it has been told many times before. It is important to tell it over and over again. There are many good people in the world, and the small amount of bad ones have to be punished so that this cruelty comes to an end or at least is reduced to a minimum. Go to these places yourself if you do not believe me, they are just outside the well known tourist areas.

## **About the Author**

### **Alex Kaeslin**

#### **Photographic Background**

In 2003 I decided to follow my dream of becoming a photographer and enrolled in a two year photography course in Melbourne, Australia at ICPP - International College of Creative Arts - I graduated in 2005 with a Diploma of Arts applied Photography. During my studies I was lucky enough to assist several professional photographers, working with celebrities, advertising and events. I worked with The Wilderness Society in their campaign to preserved old growth forests in Victoria, Australia and four of my shots where chosen for the 2005 Penrite Oil calendar. Amongst all of that I freelanced shooting weddings, portraits, art work, architectural shots and much more during my studies.

#### **This Trip**

In 2003 I had a terrible flight from Switzerland to Australia, the turbulence during the flight made up my mind for me - I never wanted to be in a plane for that long again! During a phone call to my best friend, Albano, I joked that I was going to take the land way back to Switzerland. A few days later he called me and told me that if I really want to do it, he will too! It started off being a joke, then it became a dream and now, here we are ...

Follow Alex's trip by visiting his website: [alexkaeslin.com](http://alexkaeslin.com)

#### **Sources:**

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- [www.animalsasia.org](http://www.animalsasia.org)
- [www.wildlife1.org](http://www.wildlife1.org)
- [Frank Zeller / Agence Presse-France](#)

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