

# Worldwide Symphony



## A Traditional Laotian Wedding

I was born into a big, warm family in Laos. I never thought that I was going to leave my family, but then I met a man who was living in the U.S.A.

This man was visiting his sister in Laos. One day when I was doing my shopping, we met at the grocery store. When I first saw him, he was wearing a kilt. He looked so funny! Since he was walking with a lady and a little girl, I thought he was married.

When I went past him, he smiled at me. He walked back and forth for a long time, until finally he came up to me. He asked my name and my address. I told him a wrong number because I didn't want him to be able to find me again.

It only took him one week to find me. I was embarrassed because I had lied to him the first time we met.

After that, we continued talking and getting to know each other better. He was a nice guy. When I talked to him, he made me feel happy. We spent three months together, and we fell in love. But his passport was about to expire. He had to go back to America.

A couple of days before he left the country, he asked me to be his fiancée. We told our families. He promised he would return to Laos in two years and we would marry.

It took one year and six months for the government to finish the documents he needed to return to Laos.

In 1998 we got married. We invited all the members of our families and our friends to come to the wedding. Both of our families prepared food.

My wedding day was a special day in my life. The wedding took place at my own house. I wore a red silk sein (skirt), a gold shirt, and a red silk parbieng (scarf). We believe that the color red

will bring us luck. My husband wore a white tuxedo.

For the ceremony, we sat around a parkuam, which is a special Laotian wedding decoration made of banana leaves and covered in ribbons and flowers. We sat side by side and bowed to the preacher who was facing us across the parkuam. The wedding ceremony took about one hour. Afterwards, we could go see our friends.

From that special day until today, we have been married for eleven years. Our marriage is still happy.

~ *Khounkham Khamvongsa*

## Natural Disaster in the Hispaniola

I am from the Dominican Republic, a country that is part of Hispaniola, the biggest Caribbean island. In my opinion, this tropical island has some of the most beautiful beaches, most delicious foods, and most gentle people in the world. We currently have a democratic government. Even though it is a poor economy, we all have enough to survive.

Our capital is Santo Domingo. The Dominican Republic occupies about two-thirds of Hispaniola. It has an area of 48,442 kilometers. By 2007, the population was estimated at 9,760,000. The country has been hit by several hurricanes. David, a category 5 hurricane, devastated the country in 1979.

Ironically, we share the island with Haiti. I say “ironically” because even when we have a big slump in our economy, we still have to handle illegal Haitian immigration. Haitians are poorer than Dominicans; their country is not as developed as ours. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Haitians have migrated illegally to the Dominican Republic. The estimate is that over 800,000 Haitians are living in our country. They live and work primarily in cities that have sugar refineries, such as Bajos de Haina, Santo Domingo, San Pedro de Macoris, and La Romana.

According to the Richter Scale, Haiti had a 7.0 earthquake on January 12, 2010. It devastated many families with death and health problems. Now many Haitians have nowhere to live and no food to eat. Many buildings collapsed. Major buildings, such as the Presidential palace, Court of Justice, and other government offices fell because of the earthquake. But nothing is more crucial than the tens of thousands of lives that were lost that day.

Even before the disaster, Haiti was the poorest country on our side of the world. Over 75% of its population already had to work in horrible conditions to survive, and few people with jobs earned enough money to cover their needs.

Historically, Haitians have lived with a lack of natural resources like water, clean air, and trees. Haiti has never had a stable economic system. The President of Haiti is Renee Preval who, by the way, is 67 years old. Even before the earthquake, he didn't have absolute control of the country.

About 120 flights land in Haiti daily, bringing food, medicine, and donations from many locations around the world. Unfortunately, the distribution of these supplies is not well organized, and it is difficult for all the people to get food and water.

According to the news, as of January 25, 2010, the American Red Cross has gathered about U.S. \$1,000,000,000 in donations. Many other donation programs, such as "Save the Children," are also working to help Haiti recover from this disaster.

I am very proud of my country, because it was the first in the world to bring aid to our neighbor. Even with our own medical and financial needs, we are still helping them as much as we can.

~ Onasis Pena

## The Legend of a Chinese Family's House

I was born in the 1970's in an old fashioned country house located in southern China. The house was somewhat similar to a hut in a primitive society. The walls were bricks made of clay and the roof was covered with rice straw. It consisted of three rooms, a bedroom, a kitchen and a storage room. I still remember being about four and watching the men in the village helping each other make the clay bricks. They would mix the clay with water, smash it, use a mold to form the brick, and let the sun dry the brick. They would collect the bricks to make houses. A single brick was very big so a wall made of this kind of clay brick was very thick making the house warm in the winter and cool in the summer. But most of the houses in the village built with clay bricks and a few wooden poles to support the roof couldn't withstand a flood or an earthquake.

When I was ten years old, the dream of the whole family was that my dad would make enough money to change the roof to tile made of baked clay because a roof covered with rice straw would rot, and my dad was tired of repairing the roof every winter to prepare for the rainy spring. My little sister, brother and I were scared by the worms falling from the roof. The rice straw roof was a good place for the worms to grow. We were lucky to realize our dream. In the beginning of the 1980's we changed our roof to tile, and my dad also managed to build another two bedrooms. We began to use electric bulbs to replace the oil lights. I still remember the night when the engineers finished assembling the circuits, and my dad told me to turn on the bulb. The whole house became bright, and we all screamed in delight.

With the development of my country, our life improved. My parents managed to send all three children to study at the university. But it was a difficult time for our family. My parents worked day and night, and they even sold parts of our house to pay for our studies. After graduating we got jobs and helped our parents to build a very solid house made of cement and steel. It was a two-story building with enough rooms for the whole family. It was

beautiful with flowers and evergreen trees surrounding it. The interior was very nice also. My sister, brother, and I would return to our hometown every year to celebrate the Spring Festival with my parents. I felt so happy seeing my parents laughing with their children and grandchildren.

Sometimes when I think of the development of my house, it seems like a legend. It started from such humble origins and became a modern house with access to the Internet in just thirty years! I feel I am so lucky. The experience taught me the meaning of life and how to cherish the life I have. In the course of realizing our dreams, we learned to work hard, never give up hope, and love each other.

*~ Zhihong Chen*

## France

**Whoever** wants to travel to France should know details,  
**E**specially about shopping in a store. Be sure you have a  
**L**ittle coin of 50 centimes of Euro to borrow a  
**C**art that you'll find exclusively  
**O**utside in the parking lot. You'll get your coin back only if you are  
**M**eticulous and return the cart to a specific place and not  
**E**lsewhere.

**T**o agree with the French environmental politics, don't forget bags  
**O**r baskets to carry your purchases. Cashiers won't give them to you!

**F**rench people have to utilize their own bags many times and then  
**R**e-utilize them again.  
**A**nother important bit of information is not to forget your smile because  
**N**ot many of them are found in French stores.  
**C**ertainly the cashiers have to be trained to use friendliness and they  
**E**xcel in this competence! Welcome to France!

~ Delphine Brunet

## On the Other Side of the Mountains

I was raised in the City of Zacatecas, Mexico. I remember the majestic mountains surrounding the city and the most amazing blue sky, among many other things. I had a father who was a happy man that loved life. My mother was a beautiful woman who took full charge of the household, cleaning, cooking, and taking very good care of two older brothers and me.

I was a very active and happy girl. Things were going very well. I participated in many activities and festivities at school. We sang, danced, and recited poems. I remember in 3rd grade during Geography class I realized there were other places on the other side of the mountains. I asked myself where are those places and what did they look like? I secretly promised myself that I would find out sooner or later.

My mother then had another son and daughter. When I was about to finish the 4th grade, my father felt ill. He died shortly after with "Black Lung." At the time of my father's death, my mother was seven months pregnant. Things changed dramatically. One year before my two older brothers had left to another city to attend a seminary to be Franciscan priests. They did attend my father's funeral and shortly after returned to the seminary. They left me no choice but to become head of the household.

I had to put my education on hold, and get two jobs at age ten to help support the family. It was hard to keep up with two jobs, but I felt very important. My first job was in a small clinic from 6 a.m.-1 p.m. I cleaned, helped deliver the food to the patients, and ran errands. My second job was in a bakery from 3-9 p.m. My job was to bag the pastries for the customers. Two years later my mother became a very good seamstress and started to work from home.

I then went back to school to finish my elementary. If there was any doubt that we weren't going to have enough money for the bills, I always had an answer. I had my mother sew little

dresses for little girls, and then I would go and sell them for her. It was such a pleasure to do that for my mother to help out.

I would listen to the radio frequently because we had no television. The radio station always talked about other countries. My curiosity grew; I wanted to know what was on the other side of the mountains.

I really wanted to attend cosmetology school, but my mother told me that I had to continue working. I wanted to visit my mother's sister who lived in the state of Aguascalientes to see if I could get a better job. My mother agreed with me, so we took a two-hour bus ride south. The bus ride was wonderful. We saw small towns and land filled with cactuses until we arrived at the big city. My mother left the next day, and I stayed with the family. My aunt decided that I was too young to be working. The following week I went back home. I took a job as a receptionist at a small doctor's office in Zacatecas.

Two years later my aunt visited us from Guadalajara, Jalisco. She told my mother to let me go with her, so that I could get a better paying job. My mother agreed again and thought it was a great idea. I then packed my bags and went. It was an eight-hour ride. I loved it! There were more cities, states and agaves (plants that produce tequila). We finally arrived to the second largest city of Mexico with one of the best climates of the country. I adjusted well with the family, which consisted of my aunt, uncle, and their children.

One Friday night my uncle got home drunk, screaming at my aunt to get up and fix him something to eat. He would hit her continuously and none of the children would do anything about it. My aunt said that this happened every payday. My uncle had a good paying job working with marble. On payday, he would spend all his money on alcohol and who knows what else. My aunt would clean homes and the oldest children had to work to bring income in.

That night I made up my mind that I had to do something for me. There was nothing I could do to help my aunt's situation. I

refused to watch continuous abuse. My only choice was to find a job with living accommodations.

The next morning I told my aunt that I was going to look for a job. Guadalajara is a big city, and I had no idea where to go. I took a bus ride until I saw a residential neighborhood and got off. I then began knocking on doors to see if anyone needed a maid. Unfortunately everybody had a maid. I took another bus and went further down to see if anyone in that area had an opening. I think I knocked on at least eight doors until a beautiful elegant lady let me in. She interviewed me and I told her that I had never been a maid before. I promised her that I would be a good one. She smiled and told me to start that day. One of her daughters and a chauffer took me back to get my belongings. As they drove me back, I didn't realize how far I had gone to get that job. I promised my aunt I would visit, and I did.

The following morning I found myself in an enormous home that belonged to a well known physician. The physician and his wife had eleven children. He had six girls and five boys. The house was run by three maids, two cooks, two nannies, two chauffers, and a gardener. I helped with laundry and learned to iron. The four oldest daughters and I became very good friends. We used to hang out together and go shopping, to soccer games, and to coffee shops. The family often took vacations and I went along. We visited different beaches, which is how I encountered the Pacific Ocean. I couldn't believe how beautiful and peaceful it was. I stayed with the family five years. During that time I visited my mother once a month to take money and presents.

One of my friends from my home town moved to Mexico City, looking for a better life like me. She needed a roommate, so I decided to move to one of the largest cities in the world. It was hard to leave the great family who had given me so much love and comfort. I did promise the family that I would visit them often.

I took a bus going south again, passing through more states and cities, green and not so green land. Ten hours later we arrived in Mexico City. Once we arrived, I was very impressed

with the size of the city. It was huge, too crowded, lots of traffic, and noisy. This definitely was so different than Zacatecas, where it is small and quiet. I quickly got a job selling magazines door to door. It was so great that it gave me opportunity to learn the city. I was one of the best sellers. I would get prizes once a month for selling the most magazines.

A year later someone approached me with a job offer to be a traveling pharmaceutical representative. I accepted, and began my journey down south. It was so much fun. I met so many people and the journey was beautiful.

Three years later I had the opportunity to go to the United States. Without any thought I accepted. I then flew to Cincinnati Ohio. This was the hardest challenge for me because of the language barrier; again I made up my mind to learn the language and the laws of United States. Shortly after arriving I went to work in a five-star hotel as a housekeeper. One year later I was promoted to a supervisor. I stayed there nine years.

During that time I met a wonderful gentleman. We dated for a year and then got married. Our first daughter arrived two years later. Our second daughter was born four years later. When my children started elementary school, I decided to accomplish one more thing, cosmetology school. I attended school and obtained my Managing Cosmetologist and Instructor's License. I had a successful working career in a salon in one of the city's department stores. While working there I won a trip to London, England, to a world-wide hair convention.

My husband and I are retired now. My two daughters are married to great guys. We have an eight-month-old grandson. Through the years I have traveled into the United States and other parts of the world. I have encountered so much beauty, experience, happiness, and a great family. That is what I found on the other side of the mountains.

~ *Velia Ripperger*

## Miracle in the Mediterranean

You can already see the 2000-year-old miracle from the airplane as it begins its descent; the white sandy beaches that outline the pristine blue water of the Mediterranean. Its beauty invites you. In just a few minutes you will land and arrive at Ben Gurion airport, located halfway between the ancient, holy city of Jerusalem and the much newer urban center of Tel Aviv. From the moment you land, you know this trip will be like no other.

From the airport, it's an historical 1½ hour drive to Jerusalem, up through the mountains of green forests until you reach the summit and "The City of David," Jerusalem. You can immediately feel you are in a special place, that you are at the center of the world.

Jerusalem has a history that goes back to the fourth millennium BCE but was chosen as the capital of the Jewish nation in 1000 BCE. Today, Jerusalem is the center of the world's three major religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Muslim. "The Old City" is home to sites of key religious importance. Among them are the Temple Mount, the Western Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Dome of the Rock, and al-Aqsa Mosque.

The city is really a city within a city. The old walled city is divided into four quarters, named for the churches that dominate them; Jewish, Armenian, Christian, and Muslim. Outside of the walled city is the modern city of Jerusalem which houses the Knesset, Israel's parliament, shopping malls, five-star hotels, and all the amenities of a twenty-first century growing city. The exception is on the Jewish Sabbath, Saturday, when the city sleeps.

The most holy part of Jerusalem is located in the old city and is referred to as the Western Wall. This is the part of the wall of the Jewish Second Temple that the Romans destroyed in 70 CE. Jews from all over the world come to pray or to leave written messages. But the "new city" of Jerusalem has more to offer: museums, fashionable and ethnically diverse restaurants,

many outdoor cafes featuring exotic and authentic foods from the Middle East and all over the world.

Traveling east out of the city for a short twenty-minute drive, you will arrive in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus. There you will find the Church of the Nativity, a favorite pilgrimage site for Christian tourists.

If you continue to drive east for another fifty minutes, you will reach the lowest place in the world where you can experience the magic of floating on water in which you cannot drown: the Dead Sea. This body of water is so salty that there is no organic life in it. A favorite tourist picture shows a person lying on his back on top of the water reading a newspaper! But many tourists from around the globe also come for the healing properties of the water and the mud packs. It is said that the air around the sea has a healing quality. Some tourists have even sworn it removed their warts. But all around, you are surrounded by the beauty of the hills and mountains of the Judean desert. The weather is always hot and sunny, as it rains very rarely.

I am originally from Israel. I remember my first visit to Jerusalem when I was nine or ten years old. It made a big impression on me. Now, I have lived more than half of my life, and I have visited many other world cities. But there is no other city on earth where you can feel history in your bones like you can in Jerusalem.

When you go to Israel, the country that made the desert bloom, don't end your trip in Jerusalem. North, South, East and West, you can experience the beauty, history, and specialness of the whole country. It is for everyone, so come...and enjoy!

~ Hanoch Grinshpan

## What Is the Soul of My Country?

Colombia, my home country, is often shown by Hollywood or international news as a place full of drugs and violence, in a stereotypical way. Not everybody knows the real soul of my country. I'll give you an idea from my experience as an au pair in the United States, a student of ESL classes living in this American culture, how beautiful my country is. And I'll also let you know a little bit more about this stunning Latin American country. It has problems like all nations, but with great expectations about its present and future.

Colombia is a gorgeous country considered the gateway to South America. The stark gray of the mountains, the lavish green of the Amazon and the deep blue of both oceans, Atlantic and Pacific, are the canvas of my home. These gifts make it one of the places on the planet with the most exuberant and diverse flora and fauna.

It has five regions, like the regions in the USA, and thirty two "departments," similar to your states. It is full of colors, food, music, flavors, sites, and forty-four million hardworking, kind people who work every day to build a peaceful and dynamic country. The people are usually happy despite the difficult situations they face daily. In addition, they are women and men with problems, but who is not hindered by problems?

This is Colombia, a place with many festivals, celebrations, and concerts. Examples of our vibrant culture are Barranquilla's Carnival, the International Book Fair in Bogota, or Miss Beauty Queen in Cartagena. The music of my country is as varied as the landscape. Vallenato music is one of my favorites; the accordion and the rhythm make me feel closer to my home. The Salsa and Merengue are from inside of the country, Llanera from the Southeast, Pop Rock from all parts, and many others. Moreover, good singers of Colombia are internationally recognized, such as Juanes, Shakira, Carlos Vives, Fonseca, Fanny Lu, Jorge Celedon. These singers give passionate performances with each one of their songs.

Similarly, there are good actresses such as Catalina Sandino, who was nominated in 2005 at the Academy Awards in the category of Outstanding Lead Actress, becoming the first Colombian to get this distinction. She was one of only three Latin American actresses nominated for an Academy Award.

Likewise, Gabriel Garcia Marquez was born in Aracataca, Colombia, in 1927. He is a Colombian novelist, short-story writer, screenwriter, and journalist. In fact, he is considered one of the most significant writers of the twentieth century. Additionally, he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1982 “for his novels and short stories, where fantasy and reality are combined in a peaceful world of rich imagination, reflecting the life and conflicts of a continent,” according to the laudatory Swedish Academy. His novel most recognized internationally is *One-Hundred Years of Solitude* (*Cien Años de Soledad*).

At the same time there are many good athletes in Colombia; however, the sports are different from those in the USA. The popular sports are soccer, cycling, swimming, race car driving, tennis, and others that provide so much fun. There are excellent athletes like Carlos Valderrama, “El Pibe” with his mass of blond hair, who captained the Colombian national soccer team in the ‘90s and in addition, three World Cups. Juan Pablo Montoya is a race car driver; currently, he competes in NASCAR, and many others.

Colombia has one of the greatest tropical climates in the world. In fact the average is not the same across the territory. For instance, Bogota is 2600 m above the sea level and the Valley of the Magdalena River is 300 m above sea level. That means you could travel around it according to your preferences. They provide a most beautiful place to live. In addition to this, there is colonial architecture based on Spanish architecture from the era of colonization in Colombia. Furthermore, there are exquisite women, coffee and orchids, recognized at the international level. Finally, its racial identity, ideology, and culture add to the Colombian experience.

Spanish is our official language with different accents in spite of speaking the same language. The vocabulary around its regions is totally different; sixty-five ethnic languages have been studied by many linguists, because they belong to the cultural and social heritage of Colombia.

Finally, I should say one more thing about this marvelous place....All of you are totally welcome to come, enjoy, and taste our most complete and beautiful weather, food, coffee, music, carnivals, beaches, and warm people never seen before. Discover what is the soul of my country...Colombia.

*~Yuleidy Lizarazo*

## **A Wise Decision**

In 1993 after I had married my husband, I came to the United States. He wanted to live in the U.S.A. after he had finished his college degree at Y.S.U. He felt we could have a better life here as opposed to a life back home in Jerusalem.

When I came to the U.S., I was so happy because I love my husband, and I wanted to go with him anywhere he wanted to go. However, after a while I started to get bored because I had nothing to do while my husband worked many hours a day. We didn't have children yet. I had no job, no friends, and no family nearby! Everything was difficult for me!

Later I started to work with my husband, and I liked doing so. Then I had my children. So I stayed home because I wanted to rear my children.

Today I am happy and busy, but I miss my family overseas. Whenever I have any small problem, I feel it is big because I have no help. I would love to move back home to Jerusalem, and my children want to go back too because they have many cousins and friends there. My husband can go back and forth between the two countries until he has set up a good business in Palestine.

So we have decided to go back this coming summer.

*~ Manal Ilaiyan*

