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travel famous flyer

Rick Stein ... country music convert, lover of local cuisine and accidental brothel guest

Which was your best holiday? Last month I went with my fiancée Sarah to Khao Lak on the west coast of Thailand and stayed at the Sarojin Resort Hotel. I had nothing but Thai food all the time, including breakfasts. What was so memorable for me, apart from the delightful and amusing presence of Sarah (pictured), was enjoying excellent Thai cuisine without having to film it.

And the best hotel you've stayed in? Though certainly not the most deluxe hotel I've stayed in, the Metropole Hotel in Hanoi was far and away the most interesting, with its French-colonial past and clientele such as Graham Greene, Charlie Chaplin, Noel Coward, Catherine Deneuve and Jane Fonda as well as royals, prime ministers, and presidents, including George Bush sr – and not forgetting Ho Chi Minh himself. The food is great, the bars are memorable and the wine list is one of the best in south-east Asia.

What do you need for a perfect holiday? What I particularly need is a CD that will become the memorable music of the holiday. Last time it was the music from the film *Crazy Heart*; I've always been a bit undecided about country and western music but with Jeff Bridges playing a hard-drinking, slightly tragic loser who gets it all together in the end, I'm a fan.

What do you always take with you? When possible, Sarah.

What's your best piece of travel advice? Fly club class!

Where do you want to go next?

I'd like to spend a few days in Amsterdam as I've only ever had brief visits and I'm told that a canal trip is a must. I'd love to go to Buenos Aires because everybody says it's a fabulous city and I'd probably take in Mendoza for the wines.

Which was your worst holiday? My first experience of Morocco was in the mid-'70s; it was our misfortune to go in the middle of Ramadan, about which we knew nothing in those days. Whether you were Muslim or not, there was nothing to eat between sunrise and sunset and obviously nothing to drink in the alcoholic sense. Not eating for 12 hours makes anyone bad-tempered, not least the local Moroccans. We were travelling on the cheap and we never found any good food and to say that the Moroccan men were overattentive to the girls would be an understatement. These days, Morocco is a changed place.

And your worst experience on holiday? It wasn't exactly a holiday but we were filming in India once and were detained at Mumbai airport upon arrival by customs, who impounded all our equipment as it didn't have the correct paperwork. They wrapped it all up in brown paper, tied it with string, put sealing wax on it and locked it in a room under the airport, telling us that unless we produced £64,000 (\$110,000) in cash, as a bond, there it would stay. We then had to wait for 24 hours until a friend of mine in Goa suggested he write a cheque for

the sum, which would have busted him had we defaulted. That's friendship for you. They wouldn't accept a cheque or credit card.

What's the biggest packing mistake you've made? Taking nothing but tropical-climate clothes to north Vietnam a couple of winters ago. It just never occurred to me how cold it gets in Halong Bay in the winter.

Which is the worst hotel you've stayed in? On two occasions in the '70s in Athens I found myself staying, with my ex-wife Jill, in a brothel, which we genuinely thought was a hotel. To do it once was unfortunate but to do it twice was just plain careless.

What do you avoid on holiday? I avoid any food that isn't local. What's the point of going on holiday, as a chef, and eating hamburger or steak and chips in Bangkok?

What do you hate about holidays? I hate losing my luggage or picking up somebody else's luggage by mistake and taking it to the hotel, as I did once in Venice. I was with Sarah at the time; not only did she roundly castigate me for being unobservant at the luggage carousel but then could not believe her eyes when I tried to open the suitcase to see who it belonged to.

Rick Stein's Christmas Odyssey, inspired by his Far Eastern Odyssey series, screens on ABC TV on Tuesday; the DVD of Far Eastern Odyssey is in ABC Shops now.

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