

The first 50 hours in Battambang *(Battambang, Cambodia)*

The banquet of exotic impressions before the food poisoning:



Today may well prove to be my equivalent of the morning in Krabi in '99—a wedding of exotic impressions with sharpened senses:

If I do get another day here that is half as engaging as this one—then the sacrifices (before and yet to be known) of getting to Cambodia will be justified.

It started auspiciously with the kindness of the optometrist in fixing for free, my glasses which I stupidly rolled over on in the middle of the night. For his kindness I tipped him nothing more than a \$1 Loonie Plus maple leaf flag decal.

Later, as prearranged, I hooked up for the day with Mr. Soka, a first-rate guide in his mid-40s, who from 9:00 AM-3:00 PM, took me on the back of his motorcycle through the dusty roads and back lanes of Battambang into the surrounding countryside. The experience was precisely what I was longing for—close-up glimpses of the Cambodian rural scene.

In the midst of the bounce along the dusty road, we stopped where a small crowd was gathered at a smoldering pit behind a small school. Mr. Soka informed a cremation ceremony had just concluded. I offered condolences to the man who came forward introducing himself as an engineer from Phnom Penh, a brother of the deceased whose ashes were still cooling.

“My brother was a teacher at this school,” said the engineer in passable English, “He got a terrible headache in the morning 3 days ago and in the afternoon, he was gone. He was just 37.”

Guiltily, almost at the urging of Mr. Soka who waited on the motorcycle behind, I performed my expected role of tourist. “Do you mind if I take a picture of the grave? I just want to understand this part of Cambodian life.”

“No problem,” he said.

Perhaps my sudden odd appearance was regarded as auspicious. Or perhaps Soba, along with many of his fellow citizens were still self-consciously deprogramming themselves from years of Khmer Rouge xenophobia. At the same time, as an innocuous tourist venturing into this area still seldom travelled, perhaps I was serving to inoculate them from the more blatant voyeurism of the

hordes who will all too quickly descent upon this landscape. In any case, it was strange for a parachuted visitor to be thrust into such intimacy: a sense that was to linger through the day.

An hour later, when Mr. Soba went off to attend to his sputtering Suzuki engine, I trudged up the steps of Wat Sampeau with a boy, about 11 years of age, who had enough English to introduce himself as Pan. For a negotiated 2000 riel (about 50 cents) he proceeded to guide me through the potential snakes and landmines. With slingshot protruding from his back pocket, he could well have stepped out of the pages of a *National Geographic* article on the ‘Children of War’.

The initial fear of a set-up or ambush was soon dispelled by the breathtaking views of the countryside from the summit and later, by the tattered rags on top of the cage of bones at the Killing Fields’ cave.

On the other side of the summit below the hilltop monastery called Wat Sampeau, the young Pan showed me the Vietnamese gun emplacement with the East German manufacturers’ loading. Its aiming and firing instructions were inscribed in German on a metal plate fixed below the muzzle. Later, I was to read in the *Lonely Planet* Guide that the area was still not free of mines.

On the path down from the temple summit, the boy was more pleased by my offer of the toy Canadian money than by the 2000 riels (again, double the going rate) for his guiding service...



After lunch at the café at the base of the hill, we puttered on to Wat Banon where not only the heads of the Apsara figures were conspicuously chiseled off but even the lingams crudely lobbed off at the base. According to Mr. Soba, the looting was directed by the District Police Commissioner. He pointed to the red brick mansion, conspicuous amid the fields below by the satellite dish gleaming from its roof.

After climbing back down the stone steps, we sipped lukewarm water at the makeshift canteen table at the base of the hill, apparently built over another ‘killing field’, evidenced by the pile of bones in the stilted platform. On it sat an old monk holding a Karaoke microphone apparently preparing for a prayer session:

“How is this killing field?” Mr. Soba suddenly asked. “What is your opinion?”

I told a deep breath. Just as I was about to attempt some Buddhistic-style parable about the heart of darkness, I realized that all he wanted was for me to provide a segue for his telling of a well-rehearsed version of how he survived the Khmer Rouge horrors.

“I don’t know—it’s really beyond words,” I said. “What’s your opinion?”

The story he then launched into may well have been repeated in this same venue to every one of his tourist clients. I was also reminded of the numerous ‘harrowing escape’ ‘narratives chosen for composition topics by Vietnamese ESL students. Like those first-person dramas, Mr. Soba’s *‘How I survived the Khmer Rouge’* story— even if embellished in each retelling— was no less compelling:

It began with the disappearance of his father, a professor of French literature, and older brothers in the first months of the Khmer Rouge terror. Even though the young Soba had barely finished his upper primary education in Phnom Penh, being from a *petit bourgeois* family, he was singled out from his student cohort work unit, assigned to rice planting.

We were back on the motorcycle, steering along the dusty trail towards the rutted main road when he reached the climax: his ordered appearance before the dreaded black-clad Anghor Committee:

“I was given a book and told to read.” Driving with one hand, Mr. Soba mimed, “but I hold it this way,” Both hands back on the handlebars, Mr. Soba turned the imaginary book upside down.

“*“You lie!”*” they said.”

Above the put-putting motor, he told how he refused to be intimidated (“I was very cold inside, but I was ready to go to a better life, so I didn’t scare.”)

Somehow spared and released back to his work unit, he claimed that every night thereafter as he lay in his hut among fellow teens, he could hear the moans and screams of the tortured.

When we stopped at a shop on the town to buy petrol, I finally gave my reaction.

“The way you suffered,” I said, “is really unimaginable to most people in the west.”

He nodded as he poured the petrol from the king-size Coke bottle into the sieve held over the tank.

“But what I don’t understand,” I faltered, “I just don’t understand how the Americans could support the Khmer Rouge through the 1970s only because they opposed the Vietnamese.”

“Why not?” he said quickly, “They did the right thing. They opposed the foreign aggressors.”

Perhaps that was his most revealing political comment of the day. It suggested that pretending to be ignorant was only one tactic in his overall strategy of surviving the Khmer Rouge. In any case, he well knew the story that tourists wanted to hear...



‘This is jackfruit. This is kapok.’

As the afternoon wore on Mr. Soba became evermore talkative and informative, stopping the motorcycle every few minutes to point out a plant or tree while encouraging me to take photos. He even discreetly suggested I could join him for an evening meal in a friend’s cafe where I could enjoy *bhang* laced chicken soup, a Cambodian specialty. (Not my vice, I chuckled).

“What’s that word?” All the while, he spelt out every unfamiliar English word on the palm of his hand to jog his memory. “I can’t remember English very well anymore— but I try.”

Still, so impressed was I by this font of information—even in the wariness of his expectation of my generosity in tipping—I decided to delay the trip to Anghor and book his guiding service in Battambang for one more day. However magnificent Anghor surely was—given the choice of jostling though the world heritage site among hordes of fellow ogles (wary here of a repeat of the afternoon in Ayutthaya, Thailand, a few days ago) or getting a few more intimate glimpses of rural Cambodia—the choice was clear.

Returning at dusk from the walk along the river where I took a few photos, I was hailed from a darkened French Colonial balcony by two girls, twirling parasols.

“*Can’t you see, gals,*” I mumbled to myself, *‘that this fossil could be your grandfather?’*

With that moral victory under the belt, I retired to the TV with my can of Anghor beer: an ethical tourist.



As should have been predicted, a second morning on the back of Mr. Soba’s motorcycle was more than my fill. Today, for my \$5 fee, I was bumped along the dust-choked roads alongside a dirty canal running through rice fields only to arrive at a concrete dam.

Even with Mr. Soba's quirky history (the dam apparently built by Khmer Rouge directed slave-labour) the itinerary itself seemed to have been Soviet inspired: being trooped by a minder-guide into a blistering sun and subjected to water capacity statistics.

Growing weaker and woozy headed, I ignored his suggestions of finishing our day at a fancy restaurant.

The only consolation in the 2-hour bump over red-dust choked laterite was the absolution of conscience in not offering a tip as lavish as that I'd considered yesterday. Did he not benefit as much from my sheltered English as I from his information? In the lobby I awkwardly shook his hand while slipping the 2000 Riel tip (about \$2) between his fingers. He slightly smiled and slipped it into his pocket. I was definitely not to be remembered as one of his generous clients.

However dust-caked and sore, I decided to head out to eat and then retire early in preparation for tomorrow's boat journey to Siem Reap. Before the restaurant, I took a final stroll along the river, possibly recognized by now as an odd *farang* in a city where few travelers spend more than a night. It struck that my appearance there was hardly less strange than a rural Cambodian would be on the streets of small-town Canada.



Fatigued and thirsty, I stopped in one of the cafés advertised in the *Lonely Planet* guide. When 2 uniformed waiters and an unsmiling Beer Girl (“Cold beer, mister?”) rushed a little too eagerly forward, I retreated to the White Rose cafe, where I'd eaten for the last 2 nights.

“Want to sit inside, sir?” asked the young waiter nervously.

“Why?” I asked piqued that he assumed my unkempt appearance might be driving away custom. Stubbornly, I persisted and sat at the same outside corner table where I'd sat the first night—even ordering the same rice and beef dish I had then relished.

No sooner did I take the first bite when a little waif approached from the right and tugged on my sleeve. Stomach faltering, I made a ‘Are you hungry?’ sign and pushed over my bowl of rice. Almost instantly, 3 older boys barged in behind. They grabbed the bowl and began shoveling handfuls down their gullets while begging chunks of the grilled beef which I dropped, half horrified, into their open hands.

A moment later, the little girl who had stood back while the boys scarfed the rice, wandered closer. Having seen her get barely a mouthful, I nodded to the girl at the till that I wanted the

baguette inside the glass case. As soon as she put the baguette on the table, I handed it over to the little girl.

For the remaining 5 minutes while I sat with shrunken appetite, the ragged little girl wandered to and fro across the café, the uneaten baguette tucked under her arm. Meanwhile the White Rose proprietor, seemingly wary of my dark shadow, took my money without a glance or a smile. I assumed I was not welcome back.

With shriveled stomach, I was on my bed by 6:00 PM, drinking a Singha beer and eating the Planters dry roasted peanuts bought last week in a mall, 15,000 kms. away.

After scribbling in the notebook under the battering fan, I fell fitfully asleep, only to wake at midnight with severe stomach cramps. Immediately thereupon, I staggered into the toilet where I was wrenched by an attack of dysentery even more violent than that suffered in Benidorm, Spain, more than 30 years ago.

In alarm, I checked the *Lonely Planet* health guide and determined that the symptoms (which included vomiting) were either of amoebic dysentery or giardia parasites—likely ingested in the dirty glass of sugar-cane juice or the raw vegetables eaten at the Wat Sampeau canteen yesterday. Why hadn't I been as sensible as the old Frenchman who sat at the next table of the café— contented with a beer and cigarette?

It was not the first time that a high price would have to be paid for a flickering instant of 'adventure'. Thus, I rolled sleepless through a long night— no less tormented by a Calvinist masochism than by the spasms of dysentery...

-2002, March 10-12