



When Paradise



Meets Hell

Cambodia is a land of striking beauty and rich cultural heritage. It also has a history so violent that it is unparalleled anywhere else in southeast Asia. HELEN BASILI visits Cambodia and finds that these contrasting factors have produced some remarkable individuals.

It is the majestic temple of Angkor Wat that first draws me to Cambodia. With its grand towers, expansive moat, labyrinthine passageways and stunning bas-reliefs, it is easy to see how Angkor Wat earned its place as one of the architectural wonders of the world.

I imagine Angkor Wat has the power to transport me to an ancient world. In this world bejewelled kings stroll in gilded palaces and command fierce, proud warriors; greedy crocodiles lie in moats waiting to snap up invading armies; beautiful courtesans strum harps; acrobats and musicians entertain the king's subjects with daring feats and catchy melodies; dignitaries are transported by elephants adorned with flowers and priceless silks; and temples are so dazzling that they need to be maintained by flotillas of servants.

There is ample evidence of this ancient world in Angkor Wat and the many temples and palaces in the surrounding countryside. In the Cambodia of 1000 years ago people lived as passionately as they ever have. There were times of hardship, where bloody wars were fought, and there were times of plenty, with lavish feasts and unspeakable debauchery.

But it is the plight of modern Cambodia, which grips me and moves me in a way that ancient Cambodia can't. Being in a nation that is coming to terms with genocide, poverty and decades of turmoil is confronting and humbling. In modern Cambodia you can expect to ride the crest of emotions you forgot you had.

It is in Siem Reap, the town near Angkor Wat, that I begin to learn about the impact of the Khmer Rouge. You only need to walk down the street to see that there are a lot of young people and very few old people. In fact, 50% of the population are 17 years or under. There is also a grave imbalance between the number of women and men in Cambodia, with women comprising about 53% of the population. This is the lasting legacy of the Khmer Rouge. In the four short years of their rule, between 1975 and 1979, they managed to kill off virtually an entire gen-

eration. Three million Cambodians died of torture, execution or starvation.

It is difficult to comprehend such massive trauma and the effect it has on a country. But as I begin to talk with local people, I see how the course of countless individual lives has been altered. Almost every person I speak with in their late 20's and 30's has lost one or both parents to the Khmer Rouge. The people who are becoming the leaders of Cambodia today are a generation of orphans I realise.

Akira lives at the end of a bumpy dirt road on the outskirts of Siem Reap. He is not sure of his exact age but estimates that he is about 27. At the age of five, his parents were killed by the Khmer Rouge and Akira was forced to work in the fields. Soon after, he was made a child soldier and planted hundreds of land mines.

Akira's childhood was spent on the battlefield. He had no education, no permanent home and no regular meals. He witnessed horrific deaths and injuries and even cannibalism, when soldiers became so famished they were forced to eat the bodies of their dead companions. It wasn't

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until he grew older that he discovered the concept of childhood and the fact that some people actually have one.

Today Akira educates tourists through the Land Mines Museum that he has erected in his backyard. As an adult, Akira has devoted himself to the dangerous task of diffusing and clearing many of the landmines scattered across Cambodia. He collects these and displays the different varieties of land mines in his museum, with handwritten signs and information photocopied from journals and encyclopaedias. He also presents a series of drawings, which illustrate some of his experiences as a child soldier.

Akira is obviously a man with a gift for communication. He is not content to let his displays speak for

themselves. He has taught himself English, French and Japanese so that he can discuss things personally with the many tourists who pass through his museum (about 50 per day). Akira does not charge an entry fee to the museum - his goal is to raise awareness not to make profits.

I encountered many other young Cambodians who had conquered massive grief and loss to make way for remarkable, selfless achievements. Sothy is 28 years old and also lives on the outskirts of Siem Reap. The Khmer Rouge killed his father and his mother now lives in France, where she was accepted as a refugee. Sothy has no idea what his father looked like as the Khmer Rouge considered personal photographs decadent and therefore all photos of his father were destroyed. I asked Sothy if he had considered moving to France to be with his mother. He seemed shocked by the idea: "But how would I continue to help my people?" he replied.

Seven years ago Sothy had a dream - he wanted to establish a free school for the children in a very poor village outside Siem Reap. The children would be given an opportunity to escape the fate of their par-

ents, who scraped out an existence through long hours of back breaking farm work. Not only would the children not have to pay school fees, as they do in government schools, but their parents would be supported financially to compensate them for the fact that their children were not farming alongside them.

A Japanese tourist visiting Siem Reap, who was touched by Sothy's vision, provided initial funding to build the school and employ teachers.

The school is now thriving. In addition to the usual subjects, students are also taught traditional Khmer song and dance. This provides them with a source of income as the school's dance group is often asked to perform in local tourist hotels and restaurants. Many students who have ▶

passed through the school are now enrolled in higher education courses elsewhere. Sothy's school continues to provide them with the financial assistance they need to complete their courses.

The Japanese tourist has been unable to provide ongoing funding for the school so Sothy works tirelessly to maintain a constant stream of funding from a variety of foreign donors. He does this in addition to the day to day administration and management of the school.

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After spending four days in Siem Reap, I catch a boat to the capital city of Phnom Penh. The sun is rising as I reach the departure point at 6.45 am, bleary eyed from a night spent watching the kickboxing. Along with 300 others, I squeeze my way onto a boat resembling a submarine that was designed to transport no more than 100 people. The boats are purchased second hand from Malaysia and Russia and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs advises tourists not to travel on them, as they are prone to sinking as well as the odd pirate attack. I plonk myself on the roof, hoping that this will be the safest place to be if the boat sinks, and brace myself for the journey ahead.

The boat travels up Lake Tonle Sap, one of the largest inland lakes in the world. At some points it feels like being in the middle of the ocean, as the lake is so wide that the shoreline disappears from view. Along the way we pass through a 'floating village' comprised of boats transformed into family homes. A little girl sits in an azure blue doorway nursing a duck. A woman squats on an outdoor platform washing her hair, another one scrubbing pots. Inside a child swings on a hammock and laughs at the 'barangs' (white people) cruising by. Almost everyone stops what they are doing and waves at the passing

vessel.

The five-hour journey feels like ten but Phnom Penh is enough to revive the weary and windblown souls staggering off the boat. Cradled by the Tonle Sap and Bassac rivers, the dusty city shimmers in the heat. Bronzed temples shine on almost every corner and monks walk around under orange umbrellas, their robes transformed into golden silk by the afternoon sun. I travel in a flock of tooting motor scooters, passing by street vendors selling crushed sugar

cane, slices of juicy pineapple, French bread, green, red and white jelly cakes and large, fuchsia-pink dragon fruit. Occasionally I catch a whiff of raw sewage or the overpowering scent of durian.

By the time I find a cheap guesthouse my face is encrusted with dirt. I have to wash myself twice to remove all traces of the deeply embedded grains. I throw my filthy backpack on the floor of a tiny room with stained walls and mustard-coloured polyester curtains and flick on the wall fan. "Welcome to Phnom Penh," I tell myself.

That night I take a 'moto' (motor scooter taxi) up Samdech Sothearos Boulevard, past the Royal Palace and onto Siswath Quay, running parallel to Tonle Sap River. I pass a flurry of street stalls, limbless beggars, young couples, scruffy children, restaurants, massage parlours, karaoke bars. There is even a neon-lit amusement park complete with ferris wheel, merry-go-round and dodgem cars and a glitzy casino for foreigners only. Khmer pop music blasts out onto the street through crackly speakers to a backbeat of revving, tooting motos. It is Thursday night and the town is out in full force.

In Phnom Penh I continue to meet Cambodians whose lives astound me. At 27 years old, Mao is the execu-

tive director of the Association of the Blind in Cambodia. But his achievements have come at an enormous cost. Until he was 20, Mao worked as a moto driver in Phnom Penh. It was then that he became the victim of a terrible robbery. A local gangster demanded that he hand over his moto and, just to make sure that Mao would never be able to identify him to the police, threw a canister of acid in his face.

The burns were so devastating that Mao lost both his eyes and much of his face. He spent a year in rehabilitation, undergoing intensive surgery. Seven years later Mao is an accomplished braille reader, English speaker and activist. He attends conferences in Australia, Europe and most recently, Japan, where he speaks on disability issues. He is also studying languages at university. Mao speaks enthusiastically about his travels in Australia, describing the differences between Sydney and Melbourne. I marvel at how he has been able to absorb and appreciate so much of the country through sound, smell, taste and touch. Hearing Mao talk about Australia, I forget that he is blind.

I learn of a place called 'Seeing Hands' in Phnom Penh which offers an excellent shiatsu massage. 'Seeing Hands' is a massage centre with a difference: all the practitioners are blind. I turn up for my massage and am introduced to Sothy, who leads me to a massage table covered with crisp, white sheets. Before the massage even begins I start to feel relaxed. Sothy's voice is so gentle and soothing that I instantly feel at ease.

During the massage, Sothy tells me his life story. He is 24 years old and became blind at the age of two as a result of a childhood illness. His parents sought medical attention for his condition but all doctors and hospitals had been obliterated by the Khmer Rouge. The next 16 years were spent in darkness: Sothy did not have an education and he was housebound.

Six years ago Sothy was discovered by an organisation with a rehabilitation program that teaches blind people anatomy, physiology, massage techniques, braille and English. He

Right: Khmer Rouge victims prior to execution, Tuol Sleng museum Phnom Penh.

Below: Part of the Royal palace in Phnom Penh.

completed the program and has been working as a masseur ever since. Sothy is a great conversationalist. His English is perfect and he impresses me with his knowledge of European culture and politics. It is tragic to think that he was deprived of opportunities for so long.

An important part of my journey to Cambodia is a visit to the former Khmer Rouge prison known as S21. Seventeen thousand Cambodians passed through the gates of S21 during Khmer Rouge rule. Many of them were tortured. All but seven were executed 15 kilometres from Phnom Penh at Choeung Ek, an area that is better known as ‘the killing fields’.

Walking inside S21, now known as the Tuol Sleng Museum, is an eerie experience. From the outside it looks much more like a school, as it was prior to Khmer Rouge rule, than a torture centre. There are rows of lush frangipani trees filled with twittering birds and neatly clipped lawns. It is only when I walk inside that I am swept with a sense of the horrors that have occurred here. Rusting beds with shackles are all that remains in Building A, the area used for interrogation and torture. The torture implements themselves are on display in Building C. There are tanks for drowning victims, a machine used to extract fingernails, electrocution equipment and a cage for scorpions used to inflict poisonous bites.

The Khmer Rouge meticulously photographed all its victims and Building B contains room after room of prisoners’ photographs taken before execution. There are men and women, old people and children, even a few Europeans. No one was exempt from Khmer Rouge brutality. The expressions on people’s faces are heartbreaking. Even more heartbreaking is the knowledge that scores of survivors have poured over these walls, searching for missing relatives. I imagine their cries of anguish as they see a loved one’s face on the wall.



I also feel the presence of the thousands of people who have been tortured here and later executed. They seem to be pleading with me, screaming out for me to take notice, to never forget what I have seen here.

Later that day I visit the mass graves at Choeung Ek. In the afternoon, I head back to central Phnom Penh, stopping along the way at Tuol Tom Pong market. A blood-splattered boy crouches on the ground, slitting chicken throats, draining the blood into several dirty bowls and tossing the corpses into a large bag. I go back to my guesthouse, cover my mouth with a plastic bag and heave violently.

For the next four days I lie sick in bed, the monotony only broken by a dash to the toilet at the end of

the hall. When there is no sign of improvement I haul myself to a doctor who cheerfully announces “it’s probably just a mild dose of cholera” and hands me some medication.

Cholera aside, I arrange a day of motorbike riding out in the countryside. It is the perfect therapy. The physical beauty of Cambodia somehow cushions the harsh reality of its political, social and economic agony. Jade-green fields of rice, pink waterlilies in ponds reflecting the blue sky above, coconut palms, buffalo wallowing in the mud, simple villages of wooden huts with thatched roofs and finally, a hill top temple at sunset. I stare out at the flat emerald fields that surround me as far as the eye can see and try to make sense of it all. ■