

Cambodia 2002

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Cambodia is a small nation of just over 10 million unfortunate souls situated between a prosperous Thailand of 61 million and a powerful Vietnam of 79 million. I recently spent five days in Cambodia after a five-day visit to Vietnam. Visiting Cambodia is more than a quaint tour of beautiful temples; it is an emotional assault and intellectual challenge that hasn't left me even months after my return.

If you are like me, the events that have taken place in Cambodia in the past 30 years have been hard to recall. In 1968 Cambodia was a peaceful little kingdom trying hard to maintain her neutrality. She wanted to be the Switzerland of southeast Asia.

The fabric of the Cambodian society caught its first snag when the United States began secret bombings in 1969 to destroy Vietnamese supply routes from North Vietnam supporting the assault on Saigon in the south. The king's failure to respond to these bombings demonstrated his ineffectiveness and undermined his policy of neutrality. In 1970 the Cambodian military took over the country, ousted the king, and ruled corruptly and ineffectually for five years. The military regime of Lon Nol fought the communist Khmer Rouge movement, banishing them to the countryside where they gained sympathy from the peasantry and grew from a small band of rebels to a major insurgency. The relief that Cambodians anticipated when the popular Khmer Rouge liberated the people from the military regime quickly turned into the darkest hell imaginable. In three years from 1975 to 1979, two million Cambodians, a fourth of the population, perished from execution, torture, starvation and disease.

Cambodia was "liberated" again in 1978 when the Vietnamese invaded and drove the Khmers into the wilderness. The puppet regime installed by the Vietnamese fought a civil war with the Khmer Rouge for 14 years. In 1993 the United Nations attempted to conduct elections and resolve the conflict but the U. N.'s farce of an effort sowed more social disintegration and continued warfare.

Finally in 1998 those remaining in the Khmer Rouge were exhausted and began defecting to the government as credible elections were held. The fighting was over. Most Cambodians alive in 1998 had never known peace and so the slow process of reforming a society got its tentative beginning.

Next to sympathy for Cambodians, tourism is the country's largest export commodity and this industry has just begun to gain momentum in the last two years. The crown jewels of the tourist industry are the spectacular ruins around the northern city of Siem Reap, including the famous Angkor Wat. It is a great irony that the miserable

modern day Cambodia contains the majestic monument to one of the most powerful and prosperous empires in human history.

Arriving in Siem Reap, we were more than surprised by the contrast with Vietnam. The Vietnamese have certainly known their share of hardship and their 30 year struggle for independence cost millions of lives. But the enemy was always a foreigner and the fighting ended in 1975. The fabric of Vietnamese society was left relatively intact. The Vietnam we experienced was filled with lush fields, robust irrigation canals, industrious people and cities booming with growth and energy.

Cambodia, by contrast, was exhausted. Pale, dried rice stalks sparsely covered the bleached, chalky soil. Small irregular fields were separated by neglected little berms. An occasional bony cow grazed on scrub in the fallow fields. Rivers and canals were dried up and children played and bathed in the muddy stagnant pools filled with trash.

The people of Cambodia are exhausted too. One out of every 300 Cambodians is missing an arm or leg from the million and a half land mines deployed in the civil war. Millions of mines remain in the countryside and injure hundreds of people each year. Everywhere we went we were rarely out of sight of an amputee. People moved slowly in the oppressive heat and filled their days with idle survival going long distances for a little food, a little water, or health care.

We hired a guide, Kouch, for our time in Siem Reap. While he drove us, took care of us and introduced us to Angkor Wat, it was the story of his life that moved us. Born in 1969, he was six years old when the Khmer era began. He was from Pailin in western Cambodia, the center of precious gem mining. His father was a successful businessman and was among the first executed by the Khmer Rouge. Kouch's mother, brother and sister also died at the hands of the Khmers and all that is left of his family is his 91-year-old grandfather.

Kouch is a gentle, plump man, a modern day Buddha. When we parted he clasped his hands together and wished us good complexion, good fortune, peace, and happiness. It was hard to imagine that he had carried a gun everyday for years during the civil war. It was even harder to think of what he has seen or done to survive.

In the Khmer Rouge era, the cultural suicide was so widespread that no one group of people was spared. However, the focus of the revolution was a return to a pre-modern agrarian utopia and consequently successful individuals and those with any education were completely annihilated. Reading was punishable by execution. One article I read noted that at the end of this era there were less than 300 people living in Cambodia with a higher education.

Kouch was coming of age at the end of this era and told us of the people's first exposure to automobiles and televisions in the early 1980s. Kouch was able to go to a crude school during the civil war and picked up what English could be learned. This slight advantage, along with his natural brightness, led him to a job as an accomplished guide in Siem Reap.

We arrived in Siem Reap in the afternoon (my birthday) and were met at the airport by Kouch. After settling into our hotel we headed out in the late afternoon for Angkor

Wat. The Angkor Wat site is one of the many ruins built between the ninth and 14th centuries by the mighty Khmer empire, which are scattered in a broad area around Siem Reap. These particular ruins were perhaps the most majestic and are certainly the best-preserved, having been occupied continuously by monks since the decline of the empire.

The awe and drama we experienced approaching, entering and ascending the Angkor Wat complex transformed a simple temple visit into something more profound. The temple complex is surrounded by a reservoir so broad and so level with the surrounding land that it made the temple grounds inside seem like an island reachable only by a long causeway. The causeway leads to the entrance gate of a wall that surrounds the temple. The view through an opening in the gate drew us along the causeway, as the inner temple loomed larger through this growing aperture. Inside the wall we experienced a broad flat courtyard surrounding the mountain-like temple building. Having crossed an ocean we now are crossing a vast plane as we approach this sacred mountain.

The temple itself is a series of three concentric courtyards with the one inside sitting atop the one surrounding it, which in turn sat atop its surrounding one. In plan it was a step pyramid. A square wall or gallery surrounded each courtyard. Each corner was anchored with a stupa, a tiered pagoda resembling a large pinecone, which is used throughout Indochina as a sacred tomb. The top courtyard had a grand stupa in the middle. From the galleries surrounding this topmost courtyard we could take in a spectacular view of the surrounding area.

There is something about getting up in the air that elevates the spirit. That's why we climb mountains and why we ascend skyscrapers and cathedrals. Although the afternoon was a hot, humid and uncomfortable I sat at the pinnacle of the temple watching a hazy sunset and felt I had risen above all of the every day cares of life on the ground. Our entrance to and climb through Angkor Wat recreated the feeling of otherworldliness that the Buddhist rulers must have felt a thousand years ago.

Angkor Wat was only one of many monuments of equal scale and grandeur. I had to marvel at the vigor of the people and the society that built these temples and all the other impressive works of this era. How could a group of people, the same kind of people as live in Cambodia today, create such contrasting histories? The ancient Khmers had a society of prosperity, order, industry, and exquisite artistic accomplishment. A thousand years later the same people have poverty, chaos, exhaustion, destruction and desecration.

We got a better understanding of Cambodian history a few days later when we visited Phnom Penh, the capital. While still the capital of one of the poorest countries in the world, Phnom Penh is a bustling city of large apartment buildings, offices and hotels. The streets are paved but dilapidated and the landscape of the few parks and boulevards is dried and worn out. The widely advertised tourist attractions are the King' Palace complex and other Pagodas and parks. Not as prominently advertised are the killing field and the Tuol Sleng Prison Museum.

We visited the killing field before we went to the prison. Located in a quiet rural area south of Phnom Penh, the killing field is a small patch of land from which the remains of some 20,000 executed Cambodians have been excavated. While people refer to this site as "the killing fields" it is actually only one of dozens and perhaps hundreds

of sites throughout Cambodia where people were executed or where those dying of disease and starvation were buried. This field is merely representative.

The site consists of the field with gaping holes of excavated graves, one after another and a newly built memorial tower standing some 60 feet in the air. Of perhaps 30 depressions where remains were excavated, only two gave any hint of what had taken place there over the three-year period during the Khmer Rouge era. One pit had a thatched roof cover and a sign indicating that 166 bodies had been recovered, without heads. A sign on a nearby tree told how infants were smashed against it to kill them before their bodies were thrown into a grave. Otherwise, depression after depression lay silent, saying nothing of the horror they had beheld except for the occasional bone or tooth found lying on the ground.

The tower was built recently to honor the dead and to house the thousands of skulls removed from the mass graves. The tower was in the form of a "stupa" or tomb, with massive corners and continuous vertical glass windows on all four sides that ran the entire height of the six-story structure. Through these windows we could see shelf stacked upon shelf of skulls. Nearby a crude exhibition explained that those executed here were killed by a blunt blow to the neck, followed by the slitting of the throat. The horror I imagined from taking in this wretched place disturbed me. As I wandered in silence I felt some of the fear and helplessness of these unfortunate souls; my heart pounded and my mood soured. It wasn't until we visited the Tuol Sleng Prison afterwards that I came to the perverse conclusion that perhaps these executions were a "blow of grace," providing a cherished end to the living hell the prisoners had endured for months.

Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21, was a high school complex that was converted to a prison in the early days of the Khmer rouge era. It is a complex of several crude buildings located near the center of Phnom Penh. Cambodians of all kinds, often Khmer Rouge party cadres, were brought to the prison for interrogation, torture and abuse usually for three to six months. When the desired confessions had been extracted the prisoners were taken to the "killing field," for execution and burial in a mass grave.

The director of the prison photographed and documented all the prisoners and maintained detailed and complete files including the written confessions. Touring the prison, we walked through room after room with walls covered with the pictures of the prisoners. Elsewhere there were displays of the living conditions where dozens of prisoners were manacled by the ankle to a single bar of iron bolted to the floor. These prisoners spent the remaining weeks of their lives lying in the same place on a concrete floor. They were to urinate in a plastic jug and defecate in a single steel ammunition box, both of which were used for the entire room and were passed from person to person for public use. It was about 95 degrees as we toured the prison, and I could only image the exhaustion, starvation, sickness and demoralization the prisoners endured.

As if all this were not enough, we viewed displays of the torture equipment and murals of the prisoners being tortured. One room had a poster with a list of prison rules for the torture. Prisoners were given no choice but to confess to what the torturers were suggesting. Evasion, failure to recall or not giving the "correct" confession resulted in horrific tortures; bones broken, limbs pulled out of sockets,

fingernails pulled out, electric shock, and submersion in water while bound. Death often resulted.

In a small building near the front of the complex, a half-hour film was shown. It told the story of a young man and woman who had fallen in love and secretly married during the Khmer Rouge era. The young guards who governed their agricultural dormitory discovered their relationship. Both of them were apprehended and sent to Tuol Sleng for torture and confession. As the film ended we were told that they were executed on March 18, 1977. As I sat in the darkened theater next to my 25-yearold daughter, it occurred to me that she was born at about the same hour that this couple's lives were ending.

I have read about and been exposed to inhumanities such as these in other parts of the world. Once again I found myself asking the same questions I had asked myself before.

What could my country have done to end or alleviate such suffering?

What could I have done individually to end the suffering?

What can I do now to help those still suffering in Cambodia?

What can I do now to help avoid the next Cambodia?

The easy answer to these questions is that there is nothing that could have or can be done; this is just human nature and the course of history.

There is something in me, though, that makes this answer not so easy.