

Wed 11th November

Mon 9th set off from KL - bus and transit into centre - just time to visit gallery in KLCC before bus to LC (Low Cost) CA and flight to Phnom Penh and onwards to the *Feeling Home* Guest House - tuk-tuk driver and proprietors welcoming and helpful sorting out our onward journey on the morrow.



Then the excitement started! As we headed downtown to the river side, the city was buzzing and lighting up! Here there are at least twelve motorbikes to two mot-duks (here a motorbike which pulls 2-wheeled carriage) to one car. The wide boulevards (this was once a French Colony) were packed, and crossing roads and intersections a nightmare for me and a thrill for Nick. I hung on to him and he kept barking, "Stay close" and on 3rd crossing I got the idea! This was a special day, Independence Day 'followed by 3-day Water Festival. There's so much water here! This year festivities are

toned down i) because of the Thailand floods (Cambodia has given the money that would have been spent on the festivities to help) and, to listen to another report, ii) last year a stampede across a bridge during Dragon Boat Racing caused a fair few fatalities. Even so huge crowds down by river and as we arrived a half hour firework display started. Myriad impressions - hawkers, some with goods balanced like scales over shoulders, families on ground with picnics, oohs and aahs for fireworks seem same world over, small Buddhist shrines with devotees oblivious to frenzy beyond and Royal Palace lit spectacularly!

After all the excitement we found we were hungry having shared just a small snack at KL Airport - so back across crazy boulevards avoiding all pizza eateries in Back-Packer Land. We can be officially recognised as "Flash-Packers"... a tad up-market but 30 to 40 years adrift age-wise. made good choice on eatery - prawns, duck, mix veg in oyster sauce under tree with lanterns and full moon. Feeling stronger made for '*Feeling Home*' - got a bit lost, but by end of evening of road-crossing my nerves frazzled but Nick exhilarated (in spite of crashing into post, tearing trousers + grazing shin!

Thurs

am breakfast, Nick, American, me Feeling Home - soup (clear, refreshing, delicious) chicken and rice with fresh ginger, carrot and sweet chilli sauce. Outside our mooduk driver lounged in carriage awaiting us. 1st stop. small Buddhist temple - non touristy with saffron robed monk, couple of dad's and children. Next, very grand Royal Palace with host of flamboyant, colourful buildings set in amazing gardens. Highlights: i) wonderful painted ceiling panels in throne room ii) the Emerald Buddha Pagoda iii) the blue water lilies in pedestals (missed bumble bee but captured a bug in one flower) iv) tree with amazingly exotic pinky/red flower.



Final stop: Wat Phom, active Buddhist Shrine marks beginning of city. I was struck by the different offerings: incense, lotus flowers, fruit and copious wads of money, tucked into any one of a thirty or more Buddhist figures, but the grand golden Buddha sitting in splendour above all.

Said farewell to our tuk-dup driver with handshakes which turned into hugs, as we were deposited at MeKong Express Coach Station for long long journey. A/C not the best but we were fed and watered and a commentary kept us informed of our progress. The sights from windows kept me



absorbed for the long journey, at least till dark. The physical/human geography of this place, unlike anywhere else. First, evidence of floods - fields where there should be ripening rice, still awash on flood plain. Apparently a few weeks back cattle had to be brought up to road and some houses - even tho' built on wooden and brick pillars - flooded. I can imagine the difficulty that caused for the coaches coming north to Siem Reap! At first we ran parallel with Mekong River, then turned north where there were paddy fields

aplenty, also fields of lotus flower, kept for food as well as their beauty. The cattle started to look healthier and there were calves, many of the cattle were sheltering under the houses along with chickens, children and the odd pig! We oo-ed and aah-ed over the water buffalo we saw in Sri Lanka - now there were loads, most wallowing in the waters alongside the road, tho I did see two pulling a cart with another strung along behind. This is how they will be used when the fields are cleared and prepared for next year's crop. There was also a deal of fishing going on - lots in the flooded area to the south but also in the small lakes and ponds further north, Lots of men wading in water to see to their nets, children sitting on bridges with their rods. Mats with the rice grain drying ... fruit trees and gardens which looked so fertile (I guess bok choy takes a week or two to grow and it's such a delicious green!) oh such a different world! Although my neck was aching from gawping I just found it impossible to take my eyes away from the moving picture.



The trip also became increasingly sociable. behind us Danny, a Baptist Missionary (a fount of info. having lived here for 14 years) and in front, Lauren, an American diplomat, presently in Egypt visiting boyfriend in Phnom Penh

PP - and amazingly, both discovered they were from same town in S. Carolina!! Across the way, two Cambodian women, the younger, keen to practise her English. By the end of the journey we had shared family info and photos on phones!

Fri - Sun: Siem Reap/Angkor Wat

One and a half days of temples and a day of rest! This is a quite upmarket guest house with lovely tropical gardens and two pools, cleverly designed in a compact space.

Day One:

Main Angkor Wat Temple truly amazing and huuuge! After crossing the widest moat ever, 70 metres, to get to the outer rectangular tier - 3 and half km all the way round! And inside the towering cloister the most amazing bas-reliefs, showing stories of Hindu history and mythology. All this, built in sandstone brought 60km by water or by elephant. The sun/rain/centuries have not been kind to the sandstone but carvings on those inner walls are intact! Then the climb up to the second tier/cloister and the final courtyard with the five towering gopuras, their sandstone carvings seriously damaged by the elements.



Nick climbed to the very top to what is now a Buddhist Shrine, but for the first three centuries was Hindu. It is amazing to think this place had been abandoned and a French archaeologist came across it in the 19th Century and the



mammoth work of restoration began ... and is still underway, painstakingly slowly .. but at least its happening!

Heat excessive as we were taken on to Angkor Thom with its 56 towers, each with 4 faces – that equals 216! The sandstone here has blackened and appreciating the place is best done in the middle of the daywhich we did ...wilting by the minute! There was still **lots** more to see around this site which provided the city for the king and for the administration but I'm afraid I was all 'templed'-out and after 4-5 hours in this amazing archaeological park we limped to our tuk-tuk and begged to be returned to a/c room and swimming pool. Evening – more action and a buffet meal and traditional Chinese dancing.



Day 2: was my lovely Matt's special big **0** birthday .. and disaster – I had left the sim card from my phone in KL and couldn't speak to him on his special day. Had been trying to contact Pat for whom we **did** have e-mail contact but no response. Even tried ringing B&C in Reading but no response there. Pr'aps they are in Hinkley! Did a missive and bought a CD produced by group of landmine survivors –



hope you like it too Matt – it was bought with loving thoughts on your birthday. Had lazy day lounging and reading by pool tho'took moto-tuk into town for supper.



Today did shorter morning to another temple, Ta Phom – no where near as vast and grand as AW but altogether more magical, the forest having reclaimed it. Vast, strangler fig trees have burrowed into the building making it a place of wonder. This time, I found it difficult to put my camera down and the trees around and in the temple provided welcome shade. We were earlier in the day and it had started to get busy as we were leaving.



Move over Angelina!



So the hours in Cambodia are slipping away – we have a few hours now to have a bite for lunch, maybe a swim, then off to the airport and Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City.