

## **Dancing Roads Through Cambodia**

*November 25 – December 6, 2005*



**Lai**

Potholed roads that cause passengers to sway wildly, as if dancing, are called dancing roads. On more than 1,000 kilometers of such roads, we foxtrotted through obscure towns in the western half of Cambodia behind wheels in all shapes and forms.

### **Phnom Penh – Battambang – Siem Reap**

Visitors are quick to learn that the concept of time, schedule and distance does not jive with the relaxed local lifestyle. Depending on which concierge is in attendance, the 1.5



kilometers to the central bus station is 20 minutes by taxi or 15 minutes on foot. As it turned out, a quick stroll took only 10.

Dazed backpackers dotted the buzzing station haphazardly, trying to extract sense from moving vehicles, lounging locals, loud speakers, food vendors and a ticket checker trying to bring order to the scene. It was sheer miracle that the Battambang bus finally jolted off at 9:30, an hour later than scheduled. The rest of the 6 hour ride stretched over lush marsh land with occasional clusters of thatched bungalows.

With a cloud of orange dust and a swarm of eager motorcycle drivers, the bus turned into sleepy Battambang. The city would have been brushed over had it not its strategic location on the mouth of Sangker River. A few French houses can be found along narrow streets to remind passersby of the grand colonial times passed. There is a sense of hushed anticipation amongst travelers here because most of them come to cross Sangker to reach the mysterious Angkor. To Sangker's credit though, it has more than just a passageway to offer.



Speed boats are generally disliked since their engines interfere and sometimes destroy fishing nets that fishermen painstakingly lay out every morning. However, little children find endless amusement in waving, hollering and running along when speed boats make their roaring appearance. One cannot help but reciprocate as enthusiastically as possible. Mind you, it takes 7 hours to drift down Sangker and children are plentiful along the way.



Random rickety wooden houses erected on even shakier stilts house fishermen, their families as well as animals over flooded planes. Some live completely on boats that float in rhythm with the river, as happy as can be. During the dry seasons, they are joined by migrating birds that congregate around Sangker. Flocks of different species would take off together when boats approached, among them the rare spot-bill pelicans.

Reaching Siem Reap, anticipation bubbled over as clay-covered and awe-stricken tourists returned from the day's sightseeing. What is Angkor really like?

## Angkor

A steady procession of cars and diehard bikers paved the scared road with patches of headlights to form a string of pearls to Angkor Wat. A gentle drift of soft morning dew was just parting when the first rays of sun started to illuminate the eastern sky. The grandeur and enormity of the silhouette gradually intensified with dawning light.



Steep stairs to the top demanded climbing on all fours on uneven narrow stone steps but offered an unhindered bird eye view of Angkor Wat in return. Constructed entirely in sandstone, the world's largest religious building nestles peacefully in the jungle, barely visible above the tree line. Spectacular, elaborate, expansive, yet weathered and partially fallen, Angkor Wat is undeniably Cambodia's national pride and symbol. The temple ground also had its fair share of mines during the war times and was only recently declared safe to tourism. It is a privilege to be there.



In a radius of 5 kilometers around Angkor Wat, there are some 30 wats of different sizes and in varying states of preservation, each deserving at least a stop over. However, for the more adventurous and devoted explorers, the most unique sites are further afield. The two most impressive ones are Banteay Srei and Kbal Spean at 16 km and 31 km northeast of Angkor Wat respectively.

Petite and ornate, Banteay Srei is almost like a doll house. Unlike most carvings found on other temple walls, the bas-reliefs here are almost 3 dimensional. Each tuck and fold of the skirt, each curvature and gesture of the limb is so delicately and precisely chiseled out that it is impossible to believe a rigid medium such as sandstone is the material. Under direct high noon sun, all its beauties are ready to be unveiled.

Another hour of dusty tuk tuk ride on the red mud road begins the trail to Kbal Spean. Three liters of water and an hour of tropical hiking later, there is a small waterfall. This pathetic body of water could not be the source of fame, where is the famous waterfall carving? Looking every where around the waterfall, there isn't so much as a hint of carvings since only trees were in close vicinity. To quote Holmes, when everything is proven wrong, the impossible must be the reason. And there they are, hundreds of lingas



and even of Vishnu himself, carved into the riverbed. One can only imagine the magnitude of labour and conviction for endeavouring such an amazing project as this.

Equally devoted is a modern man named Aki Ra, who was forced to join the Cambodian army, the Vietnamese army as well as the Khmer Rouge during the war times. Orphaned and dependent on the ruling army, Aki Ra laid landmines between the age of 13 and 20. After international intervention arrived in Cambodia, he was finally able to change his life and is now a self-funded de-miner. Working on the most heavily mined areas close to the Thai boarder, Aki Ra detonates 200-300 mines per day without any means of protection. At his homespun landmine museum, Aki Ra educates people about the harms of mines and provides shelter for 11 mine victims. With his and international efforts, let's hope that Aki Ra's dream of making his country a safe place will be realised soon.

### **Sihanoukville – Kampot**

What it lacks in development and services, Sihanoukville makes it up with character and atmosphere. For the few wondering souls who stumble here, there is a variety of activities to choose from. In fact, why not go all out and get a wax, manicure, pedicure and massage while lying on the beach. Barbecued squid, mixed fruits and fresh spring rolls can be helpful in filling those idol moments between strokes. Chances are there will also be a little girl or little boy braiding your name onto a bracelet. Blissful!



Diving and snorkeling are rather poor here, the probability of spotting an oceanic creature is higher on the lunch menu than in the water. However, rides between islets are gorgeous and some islets offer strips of white sand to relax on. To make the trip extra special, we had the rare luck of sailing right into the eye of a storm. Buckets of rain and gusts of wind appeared all of a sudden, beating down and bellowing through the tarp that barely covered the boat. Temperature dropped 10 degrees and everyone shivered while the boat gingerly maneuvered to avoid waves. The message on the young seaman's T shirt, "Jesus Is Lord, I Am Ready, Any Questions?", made more sense then.



Equally bumpy was the 20 kilometers to Bokor Hill Station, where the French built a luxury retreat in the 60s only to abandon the site after losing the war to Vietnam 10 years later. The winding mountain road has been deteriorating for the last 30 years to reach its current state of total

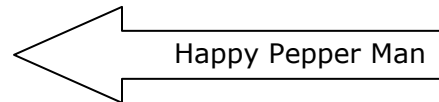
ruin, sadly fitting to lead to a ghost town. Eerie, lonely and covered in striking red mold, shells of buildings stand silently on the mountain top. In its hay day, Bokor entertained the most elite and was outfitted with two casinos, a school, a church and even a post office.



Being of military importance, the Khmer Rouge, Vietnamese and Cambodian armies had occupied this area and used to shoot at each other with machine guns between the casino and the church. Legends have it that there are ghosts wondering the hill, some from committing suicide after losing all their money in the casino, others from the war. If you do not believe in ghosts, the cool breeze over the 100 meter drop will whisper secrets in your ears to convince you. Still

skeptical? Try having a flat tire when the sun has been long set or staying over night at the tiny guesthouse without steady electricity.

There is nothing like shopping to end a vacation on high notes and the Russian Market in Phnom Penh is the perfect choice. A nice old pepper man looked after the luggage while we went from food stalls to carving counters to spider sellers. Orkun pepper man, hope to be back to claim our luggage soon.



## **Itinerary**

Friday  
Shanghai - Phnom Penh  
Holiday International Hotel  
Dinner at Nouveau Pho De Paris

Saturday  
Phnom Penh - Battambang  
8:30-2:30  
Chhaya Hotel

Sunday  
Battambang - Siem Reap  
7:30-2:00  
Angkor Town Hotel  
Dead Fish Restaurant

Monday, Tuesday & Wednesday  
Siem Reap & Angkor  
- Angkor Wat, Ta Prohm Kel, Angkor Thom, Ta Prohm  
- Banteay Srei, Kbal Spean, Preah Khan  
- Preah Ko, Bakong, Lolei, Roluos Town

Thursday  
Siem Reap - Phnom Penh  
7:30-12:30  
Foreign Correspondence Club  
Khmer Borane Restaurant  
Bright Guesthouse

Friday  
Phnom Penh

Saturday  
Phnom Penh - Sihanoukville  
6:55-12:00  
Diamond Guesthouse  
Mick & Craig's Restaurant

Sunday  
Sihanoukville  
Monkey Republic

Monday  
Sihanoukville - Kampot  
7:30-9:00  
Blissful Guesthouse  
Orchid Guesthouse

Tuesday  
Kampot - Phnom Penh - Shanghai  
8:30-11:30