

Another Bloody Day in Paradise

Part 1

A holiday for Life

This Story is Dedicated to

Colleen Allan-Burns

Without her love and enthusiasm
our adventure in Cambodia would
never have been the success it was



In 2003 Colleen and I left our predictable lives in England to an unpredictable life in Cambodia. It was an exciting time and a cultural experience setting up our “Fawlty Towers” in Cambodia. We had many amusing stories to tell. The title arose from the times when I would wake up and Coll would greet me with a smile and the words “Good morning Dave; Another Bloody Day in Paradise”

This journal is a selection of diary entries, stories and anecdotes for your entertainment. Don’t take it too seriously!

The story Starts the Royal Hotel Bangkok as were planning the next stage of our life changing adventure in Southeast Asia.

Scam bus to Cambodia

12th November 2002 in the Royal hotel in Bangkok. We had been travelling in Thailand and were planning the next part of our southeast Asia Trip. I had heard so much about border scams that I wanted to avoid tourist rip offs.

“I have checked at the hotel tour desk they have a trip for 350 Baht in luxury bus to go to Siem Reap” stated Coll.

“We should be going to Cambodia by the route suggested by Gordon Sharpless on his Tales Of Asia Website”

Coll looked anxious, “I don’t want to do that way. Its too complicated”

“Its no problem Coll, all we need to do is take a bus to the border buy our visa and negotiate for a taxi to take us to Siem Reap”

“Look Coll there are so many scams at that border over priced visas, currency scams and more, I don’t want to have any part of it”

“Well I aint bloody doing it then” Coll replied “you can go yourself I’ll take the Hotel Bus”

Coll was not going to budge on this’ I thought. Still at least I can say ‘I told you so’ if it all goes belly up. So I reluctantly agreed.

6:30 the following morning we were picked up by rough minivan full of backpackers with crinkly dark tinted windows. The words ‘I told you so’ were not needed. We found out this cramped minivan was our transport to the Cambodian Border. The Dutch guy sitting next to us was paying 125THB!

We were now on a scam bus to Cambodia.

I had followed with interest the reports on Tales of Asia about the delays and overpriced visas, currency scams and the selling of passengers to cheap guesthouses in Siem Reap. The owners were reluctant and unhelpful for those who wanted to stay elsewhere. At least we were forewarned.

It was almost a textbook journey. We arrived at Aranyaprathet a few Kms from the Cambodian Border at Poipet. At a lunch stop we were given the opportunity to have our visas done for us at a \$5 surcharge on top of the \$25 visa fee. The courier warned us about the immigration delays and risk of the transport leaving without us. So reluctantly capitulated on that. We waited for an hour over lunch before setting off to the border.

At Poipet we were offered to change Baht to riels as we were told US dollars could not be changed in Siem Reap. This was a blatant lie. We crossed the border and waited for an age in a hotel lobby for the pickup truck to take us to Siem Reap. We had inside seats. I wanted to ride outside in the bed of the pickup. Coll persuaded me to join her inside as we had paid extra for it.

Poipet was a miserable dusty border town and the road to Siem Reap was a rutted dusty track with a 3rd World landscape of crude wood and tin shacks with palm trees, stained red by the clouds of dust. We were thrown about the cabin as the young driver sped over the potholes jarring our spines and me hitting the roof lining. It was not a comfortable journey.

We stopped for a break at the Hotel Sauria on the outskirts of Sissophon, 75 kms from the border and a third of the way to Siem Reap. Those who were on the bed of the pickup were hot, thirsty and covered in red dust. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad thing to be in the air-conditioned cab. 3 hours later and well after dark we emerged from the dust to a sealed road lined with glitzy hotels. This Disney World was Siem Reap.

We were taken down a darkened dusty lane to a guest House 'Home Sweet Home' It was neither homely or particularly sweet. The manager tried to persuade us to stay there. Guest houses and some budget hotels pay money in commission in advance for the transport companies to

bring guests to their premises. So they put guests under pressure to stay at their establishments.

We had booked and paid for a \$50 a night hotel in town. We were not going to stay at the Home Sweet Home under any circumstances. We eventually were allowed to leave on two motos to find our hotel. The drivers did not appear to know where it was. I had to resort to a lonely Planet map to get us to the hotel. The hotel was very good and we had a nice big ensuite room.

Angkor with Sang kimleng .



14th November and on my Birthday, it was time to visit Angkor Wat.

Colleen was feeling bad with the shits and vomiting. So I went to the temples alone leaving Coll in the capable hands of the kind hotel staff.

To start off I found at random, a young tuk tuk driver Mr Leng near the old stone bridge in Siem Reap. His red tuk tuk was bedecked in pink frills and tassels. Kimleng or Sang as we called him (not realising that surnames were reversed) was such a knowledgeable and friendly guy.

He took me to most of the main temple sites, which were a lot less crowded than they are now. I had trouble remembering the Khmer names. Mr Leng took me to my first Angkor Temple. I walked through the archway under the stone faced tower in awe of my surroundings. I

was a bit confused as I could not see any of the famous Ta Prohm tree roots. It took a while for me to find out through asking that I was in Banteay Kdei which adjoins Ta Prohm. I walked out to the green pasture with buffalo grazing and along the laterite wall to the entrance of Ta Prohm.

This was the jungle temple that I was expecting. The stunning tree roots and disordered ruins were almost untouched since discovery. I was in Jungle Temple Heaven with only a few tourists about. I must have been in those temples for 3 hours to more. I emerged at the far end of Ta Prohm; a long way from my tuk tuk driver. I asked one of the drivers to take me back to Banteay Kdei where Kimleng was dutifully waiting for me.

Angkor Wat was no disappointment; this spectacular Temple was never left to become a ruin like most others as it had been continuously occupied by monks since Angkor was abandoned in the 15th century. The Bayon and the iconic faces. The Elephant Terrace, and the great plaza kept me excited and in wonder of that great civilisation lost in time. My favourite temple was Preah Khan. I was totally amazed by scale and spectacular architecture of this vast complex. It still remains my favourite now 18 years on.

Mr Leng took me to the causeway of Preah Neak Poen, this unique temple in an ancient pool surrounded by shrines with an island temple at its centre. Not one of Angkor's biggest, but one that had a big impression on me. Walking along the causeway path I passed a group of Musicians, land mine disabled playing traditional music. As I walked towards the temple pool listening to the music and the birdsong a sense of euphoric high hit me. I was surrounded by jungle sounds in this incredible peaceful place which I never dreamed I would ever see. At this point a khaki dressed policeman came over to me showed his police badge to me and offered it for \$10. Not the kind of thing that would happen at Home!

After two days I really got to like Mr Leng. Little did I know at the time how a big part of our life He would eventually become?

Boat to Phnom Penh

Coll was feeling better after a few days rest. It was such a disappointment that she was unable to see the magnificent temples of Angkor. We took the fast boat from the Siem Reap boat port at Chong Khneas. That was a National Geographic third world experience. The port was a chaotic noisy mess. The activity on the dusty rutted causeway with the impoverished shacks was almost shocking. Yes it was the kind of thing I wanted to see; but felt so alien to anything we had ever experienced .

To get on board the boat involved a balancing act on a narrow plank with blocks for grip but no handrail. Coll managed it surprisingly well considering how apprehensive she was. We had to wait a long time before the boat departed. I stayed out on deck to watch our progress along the narrow channel lined with boats and crude thatched shacks and floating houses. Many of them being little more than tarps or rough cane and rattan shelter one the wooden boats. Once clear of the river channel and shore, I descended to the cabin where Coll had a seat in under the icy air conditioning.

The noise from the engine, cold temperature and dark blue windows did not encourage me to stay inside for too long. I wanted to go on deck so I could view and photograph the scenes on the Tonle Sap Lake. There was not a lot to see after we left the port area. The lake narrowed after a couple of hours as we approached the blue hills of Kampong Chhnang. The six hours passed without incident; but the fast boat did rock a bit so as to give concerns for safety. We arrived safely and on time at Phnom Penh Port. This was far more organised than at Siem Reap, with proper metal pontoons and no real hassle.

We found a taxi to take us to the Bayon Hotel. The driver charged us \$5 for a roundabout route to the Bayon Hotel. This turned out to be only a



short distance from the Port. The Bayon had a smart restaurant; rumoured to be used by some of the Cambodian Royal Family. It was a great place to stay, not far from the centre of the city.

The city was under siege; not in a wartime sense, but from up to a million Khmers coming for the Water Festival. The Bon Om Touk Festival celebrates the turning of the waters; where the Tonle Sap River reverses its flow. The Tone Sap joins the Mekong River to the south of Phnom Penh. By November the rivers and Lakes are at the end of the annual flood. The water backs up as the Mekong Delta cannot absorb the water flow. So after months of a reversal where the Tonle Sap Floods, the annual tide turns and the rivers start to flow out towards the sea again.

The most important part of the Water Festival is the boat racing with hundreds of dragon boats racing over a measured course on the river. Some of these boats are up to 30 metres long with up to 70 rowers. It was a spectacular event. With over a million Cambodians crowding the waterfront traffic was banned. We had a great view from the Foreign Correspondence Club of Cambodia. The FCCC was a gathering place for journalists but is a hotel and upmarket restaurant. Filled with photos of old Cambodia and the wars. It was and still is, a part of Cambodias recent history.

On the Second Day I left Coll, chilling out in the hotel while I walked among the thousands of Khmers to the river to get more of the action It

was fascinating to experience the atmosphere among the crowds. I could not see many foreigners here. I did not know what was going on in detail but I could see the match races between the teams lasting all day.

A young Cambodian explained what was going on and offered to get me back to the hotel. We linked hands through the crowds and had to avoid a man laying on a bed of nails. My new Khmer friend took me to a Dailim moto and asked if it was OK to take his brother as well. So we set off with 4 up on the little 125cc motorbike with the rider on the tank, me sharing the seat and the brother on the rack. The bemused reaction of the doorman of the posh Bayon Hotel, when he saw me on a moto with 3 Cambodians was priceless

Sobering reminders of war and a Victim Of The Revolution



Our last day in Phnom Penh was intended to visit the Royal Palace. This was closed for the festival. So we decided to visit The Toul Sleng Prison and Chung Ek, the Khmer Rouge Killing Fields instead

These are places which many tourist forgo due to upsetting nature of these grim reminders of the Khmer Rouge Genocide. Toul Sleng is a former high school which was commandeered by the Khmer Rouge in 1975. This was used as a detention and torture centre. We had a lady

guide to take us around and see the horrors of the Khmer Rouge. To see the pictures in the lower galleries of the many thousands killed in this prison was a sobering reminder of the inhumanity of war and genocide. We were shown the cells where those were interrogated and tortured on crude metal beds. A faded black and white picture showed one of the dead victims laying in a pool of blood. The upper cells were in old classrooms with crudely knocked out door openings peppered with gunshot. The individual cells made out of rough brick, only had hard concrete floors to sleep on. The shackles of the incarcerated, chained the prisoners, whose only escape from the torture was death.

In one of the old interrogation rooms was this instruction in Khmer and English.

THE SECURITY REGULATIONS

1. YOU MUST ANSWER ACCORDINGLY TO MY QUESTIONS_DONT TURN THEM AWAY.
2. DONT TRY TO HIDE THE FACTS BY MAKING PRETEXTS THIS AND THAT. YOU ARE STRICTLY PROHIBITED TO CONTEST ME
3. DONT BE A FOOL FOR YOU ARE A CHAP WHO DARE TO THWART THE REVOLUTION.
4. YOU MUST IMMEDIATELY ANSWER MY QUESTIONS WITHOUT WASTING TIME TO REFLECT.
5. DONT TELL ME EITHER ABOUT YOUR IMMORALITIES OR THE ESSENCE OF THE REVOLUTION.
6. WHILE GETTING LASHES OR ELECTRIFICATION YOU MUST NOT CRY AT ALL.
7. DO NOTHING, SIT STILL AND WAIT FOR MY ORDERS. IF THERE IS NO ORDER KEEP QUIET. WHEN I ASK YOU TO DO

SOMETHING, YOU MUST DO IT RIGHT AWAY WITHOUT PROTESTING.

8. DONT MAKE PRETEXTS ABOUT KAMPUCHEA KROM IN ORDER TO HIDE YOUR JAW OF TRAITOR.
 9. IF YOU DON'T FOLLOW ALL THE ABOVE RULES, YOU SHALL GET MANY LASHES OF ELECTRIC WIRE.
 10. IF YOU DISOBEY ANY POINT OF MY REGULATIONS YOU SHALL GET EITHER TEN LASHES OR FIVE SHOCKS OF ELECTRIC DISCHARGE.
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We left the cells down the balconies covered with barbed wire to prevent the prisoners committing suicide. Outside we saw some graves of those who were too late to be rescued after the liberation by the Vietnamese of what was then the Republic of Kampuchea. Under a gallows was a water tank where prisoners were dunked in the fetid water filled with faeces until they almost drowned in effluent.

Back inside we were shown the Kampuchea map made up of human skulls with the red bloody rivers flowing through. The paintings of the torture and killing of these victims of this revolution were too distressing to photograph then. However I did return a couple of years and take more photos. By 2004 the skull map was replaced by a large poster. The genitals of one man being led to his death in the killing fields had been painted over. Was that more offensive to the Khmers than the images of such atrocity?

Toul Sleng was an evil and depressing place which we left, to go to Cheung Ek the Killing Fields, which was even more disturbing.

Anyone who may have seen the Killing Fields movie may have been shocked at the graphic scenes of horror. The reality of The Khmer Rouge was a lot worse than depicted in the film.

It was with a sense of trepidation that Colleen and Myself embarked on a wet gloomy ride on muddy roads awash with the floods from a sudden and intense rainstorm. It set the scene for the most disturbing and upsetting places, we had ever seen. Cheung Ek was the scene of the most horrible and vile treatment of tens of thousands of Khmer Rouge victims. The Fields were at that time out in the country. At first it seemed a peaceful place; however the story behind it was to say the least dreadful.

At the centre of the Fields was a new monument filled with the skulls of the dead. The surroundings had many burial pits where the prisoners were taken after interrogation to be killed. The pictures at Toul Sleng graphically illustrated how these manacled prisoners were taken to the graves sites. The lucky ones were shot; but most were hacked to death and thrown into the deep pits with hundreds of other corpses. It was not only men that had this fate. Women, innocent children and even babies were murdered here. loud music was played at a volume to drown out their screams. We could see scraps of clothing of the victims in the dust and mud. A large tree draped with streamers and garlands had been used to kill babies by flaying them against the tree trunk. It was so overpowering and shocking that we left the area almost in tears.

On the way out we saw a girl selling flowers through the barbed wire. This was such a poignant statement of optimism that I was compelled to photograph her. I did not buy the flowers but gave some money to her. I dont think she understood that at all. It was the image I wanted; not the flowers.

Minutes later we saw a man in a wheelchair outside the compound begging. Coll and I went over to him. He could speak some English, so we asked him what happened to him. He had both his legs blown off by a land mine during the civil war. He removed his shirt and showed us the horrible scars from his injury. It was unpleasant to look at but a miracle must have happened for him to have survived. Needless to say



we did give something; but he gave so much more to us in terms of his character, tenacity and optimism that someone who could come away after such a terrible injury and live!

When We returned to England I wanted to make an image that summed up my feelings about the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge War. It was not something that happened Centuries before. Cambodia was still suffering the aftershocks of the Civil War that only ended in 1998; four years before our arrival.

I made two images; one of the Girl “Bouquet Through Barbed Wire” and “Victim Of a Revolution” with the land mine Survivor, with a backdrop of the bullet hoed Toul Sleng cells and the Security Regulations sign.

It still remains my most important image; and 2 years later we were was to meet the man again and give him the image I took 2 years before.

Onwards to Vietnam

Our plans to catch the early boat to the Vietnam Border and on to Ho Chi Minh City had to be changed as there was no morning boat running. So We had a relaxing morning around the Bayon Hotel This was known

for its fine French Restaurant favoured by Cambodians Queen. On our last lunch there we saw an elderly lady eating with a couple of uniformed guards. I guess she was the royal diner.

To travel on Mekong river for the first time was a travel ambition for both of us. We took a small fast boat from Phnom Penh to the Chau doc border of Vietnam. The only other passengers were a group of stoned Aussies. The lazy river 2-3 kilometres wide appeared more like a lake than a river. The distant banks were lined with tiny rustic shacks and golden pagodas. A storm hit us violently. Torrents of rain obscured the banks. The violent motion and jolting of the planing speedboat had us to wishing we were in the back of a dusty pickup.

According to the newly published 2002 edition of the Lonely Planet Guide; we were supposed to exit the boat and take motos 3 kms to the Vietnam border post. We alighted from the boat and passed through Cambodian Immigration. We asked the way and were directed two motos outside on a muddy morass.

“Do we really need to do this I don’t like motorbikes” Coll said with some concern. “It looks like this is the only way. Its clear in the Lonely Planet Guide” I explained,

“Were are the Aussies?” Coll asked.

“They are pissed or stoned: so let them sort themselves out”

Coll got on her moto first; I followed. Colls rider headed off in to the unknown. My moto fell over sending myself and rucksack into the mud. The driver picked the moto up and we headed off. The 3 kilometres seemed longer. We rode through a river “Oh God” I thought “Coll is not in sight She will be shitting herself”

Ten minutes later I met Coll at the Border

“where the fuck were you? I had to go through a bloody river with this stranger”

“No worries Coll, My Bike fell over in the mud”

“I don’t care about that, I was scared”

‘So was I’ (at the thought of I Coll’s reaction!)’

“Look Coll we have to fill these forms”

“I’m not bloody filling these again we did them on the boat”

You flaming well have to” I replied.

By now it was pissing down so we took shelter in the immigration office.

“How do we get to Chau Doc?” I asked the Border official.

“you take motos”

“How far?” I asked.

“Thirty Kilometres” was his reply

Coll and I looked at each other. Before either of us could scream at the thought of 30kms on motos in a tropical downpour; a familiar figure appeared. It was the boatman. He pointed to the boat down a muddy embankment. We had gone through all this and paid \$2 each for this; what a bugger!

If that was not bad enough the suicide van from Chao Doc to Saigon was an experience not to repeat. We were driven by a maniac! Crazy overtaking with headlights coming at us, were a passenger’s nightmare. The Norwegian who was travelling with us decided to sleep on the back seat on the grounds that if he were going to die he would prefer not to be awake when it happened!

After a Mekong ferry crossing we had a change of a driver. Instead of being driven by a maniac; we were driven by a psychopath! The driver passed many aluminium-clad trucks reflecting the oncoming headlights in the rain. After about half a dozen insane overtaking manoeuvres; he pulled into a filling station then proceeded to go through the same scary overtaking again.

A heavenly end to the journey

We survived the journey ending up at our choice of Hotel. Col; had picked a standard room the Hotel Majestic, a 5 star French colonial hotel for £50 as a bit of Luxury for our last night before returning to England.

“We have a nice room for you Sir and Madam” explained the concierge. Having spent ten or more hours traveling and arriving at 1 am, several hours late; we looked tired and sweaty so must have smelt disgusting . We were taken to a lift like the interior of a small stately home. We were ushered over the plush carpets to our room We had been upgraded to a spectacular luxury 3-roomed suite with living room with chaise longue, a dining room and a table for six with double doors to the huge bedroom with French style furnishings. The bathroom looked like it should belong in a Hollywood film set. With 30 feet of windows overlooking the Saigon River. We slept well in a huge King Bed

When we woke the following morning it was like we had come to heaven. I had no decent clothes other than shorts and a T shirt. Breakfast was held in the sumptuous Dining room with its art deco features and grand piano being played. It was like a scene from a movie!



We did not do much other than hanging out and around the 1930s hotel. We did take a short walk to the small riverside park watching the activity on the Saigon River. We had a light lunch at the hotel and spent a while poolside resting. As we sat on the roof terrace by the pool watching the sun go down over the Saigon River, we reflected on the amazing time we had.

“Next Year” Coll said “Shall we continue our journey on the Re-unification Express”

“ That would be fantastic Lets do it” was my reply.

So after all the shit that happened on the journey; we were still crazy enough to want to continue our South East Asian Journey.

Little did we know at the time that we would be spending a lot more time in Indochina than we had ever imagined.

End Of Part 1

Part two continues with the story of our life changing decision to move to Cambodia