

# **Another Bloody Day in Paradise**

## **Part 2**

### **No Turning back**

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 continues as Colleen and I take the opportunity to leave England and move to Cambodia.

## **An Opportunity Arises**

End of November 2002

“Coll How do you fancy going back to Cambodia?”

“Why. We’ve only been back a few weeks”

“ I have just found out that the OS are getting rid of excess staff and giving early retirement deals and redundancies”

“That’s interesting; does this affect you?”

“Very much Coll; I finished my Data Protection project and have to find another job within the organisation. You have often spoke about running a guest house in Europe. How about Cambodia?”

“Wow that’s an Idea?”

“What do you reckon Coll?”

“I’ll have to sleep on it”

The following day I went to Colls flat in Winchester Rd. Coll had thought about it and was up for it! We had a few weeks to look into the possibilities. Intense Internet searches did not come up with much information; however the Tales of Asia Website run by photojournalist Gordon Sharpless had a lot of info and links. Cambodia Angkor Real Estate had apartments, villas, guesthouses and a few hotels for rent or Lease. The Cambodian Government had some limited information.

Some of our friends were sceptical; most did not openly say it but many thought we were insane! Talking to our friend Cece Raggett her reply

“Bloody hell Dave! Cambodia! Why do you want to go there and not France or Spain like anyone else”

“That’s the reason Cece; Everyone wants to go to Europe; Cambodia is different; exciting and developing”

After some thought I had this suggestion from Cece

“Have you thought of getting on the ‘No Turning Back Series?’”

This was a TV series following the exploits of Brits buying properties and setting up hotels and other businesses in Europe

“Not such a good idea I think. I don’t want a camera team following our every move. In any case most of those on the series are hapless dreamers who buy bad properties in France or are unsuited to the life out there. We want to be a success”

A similar conversation ensued with my old friend Keith Owens who was in the middle of a complex process of converting The Bridge Of Orchy Station on the West Highland Railway Line in Scotland into a backpackers lodge.

“Are you out of your mind Dave” was Keith’s response “What about the corruption; do you have any idea of what you are doing?”

In spite of our friend’s scepticism; we began to think it could well be possible. Prices were low, there did not appear to be many barriers to foreigners living and working there and an apparently low tax economy.

### **Important Decisions**

By the end of January it was decision time. I had to submit my application for early severance by the 31<sup>st</sup> January. The OS wanted to retire or make voluntarily redundant 350 staff. I

was in a very good position, as I had finished my current job with Ordnance Survey and was in limbo as what to do next. My task to ensure the departments compliance with the Data Protection and Freedom of Information Acts was completed by the end of October; allowing me to take the 5 weeks off for our Indochina holiday. There were few openings other than returning to Cartography. I did not want to do that as I had been away from drawing offices for 7 years. I was now working in the Record Store. I had a boring task removing any controversial or contentious entries in staff Personal Records.

By the 28<sup>th</sup> of January I had prepared my resignation letter with claim for an early severance payment. This was likely to be a significant amount of money as well as an enhanced pension at 60. We were not given any specifics on application; however in previous exercises of this nature I had ex colleagues with large redundancy payments depending on grade.

### **Trouble brewing in SE Asia**

With my application sent there was no turning back; the department were adamant that once the decision had been made; that was final. Returning home elated and also a little apprehensive I received a phone call from my mate Clive Parker.

“Have you seen the BBC news; there have been riots in Phnom Penh The Thai embassy had been set on fire, Thai business were attacked and there is a state of emergency with the borders closed. You're not going to Cambodia now are you?”

“Well Clive; I’ve just submitted my resignation which is irreversible”

“Shit Dave What are you going to do now?”

“ I have no choice; I have to leave and hope it all blows over” that was the only thing I could say.

The news reports stated that a Thai actress claimed on a radio station that the iconic Angkor Wat temple was Thai not Cambodian. This sparked off protests. The radio station falsely claimed that Thais attacked the Cambodian Embassy in Bangkok. This inflamed the hot-headed protesters who promptly burned down the Thai Embassy and attacked Thai businesses. The Police did little to stop the violence.

I found out later the violence had not been actively discouraged by the Cambodian authorities, who were also outraged by the claim that the Thais claimed Angkor Wat was Thai.

I met Coll later; she had heard the news too and justifiably concerned. We decided to wait and see until the situation calmed down. My return to the office the following day was met with a barrage of comment about the riots and that ‘Dangerous Dave’ was de-stabilising the whole of South East Asia by deciding to go there. It was an uncomfortable day at work.

Our prediction that the tension would blow over was correct. Tension eased and the borders opened. The borders were only closed for 24 hours and foreigners were allowed to pass through. I guessed that the departure of Thais might leave some business opportunities.

## **A Vital Communication**

We eagerly awaited the results of the redundancy and retirement programme. Letters were going to be sent out within days of the applications being approved. I was in a good position to leave. My task was over; I was just killing time in Records Management. I was not going to be posted elsewhere until the results of my voluntary redundancy was known.

My old pal Cliff was visiting the weekend the results were expected. On the Saturday Coll found the letter on the doorstep. She was the one to open it to shrieks of excitement. My last day at OS would be 28<sup>th</sup> February 2003.

Our fate was now sealed and we could now start preparations for our Journey into the unknown. Well it was not exactly unknown but it was a big step. We were too excited about the prospect to have any sense of doubt. There was a lot to do. We arranged a flight for 1<sup>st</sup> May 2003

I had to make my house habitable to rent. That involved a bit of redecoration and finishing odd jobs around the house. Coll ended the tenancy of her flat in Winchester Road and moved in with me. We had to fit her furniture into the house, which made it a bit cluttered. We managed; selling off, or giving excess furniture to charity shops. I was going to rent the house furnished; so had to run the gauntlet of Estate Agents to get the best deal.

I was not focussed on work for the last weeks. I was just killing time and would have preferred to have been at home. I was grateful that I had a short time before leaving, as a long delay of several months would have been frustrating.

My last day at OS could not come fast enough. I came into the office dressed in a bright yellow shirt covered in palm trees and green trousers. I said my goodbyes to my colleagues in the Old Thatched House Pub. My memory of that day was to say the least hazy. I have few pictures of that event; no social media or smart phones in those days.

### **Selling my car to buy a camera**

I also had to sell Rodney the Rover. It was about 4 years old and in immaculate condition. I wanted to sell it well in advance of our departure so as to get the best price for it. The first person to look at it asked “Why are you selling the car?”

“To buy a camera” was my reply

“A Camera!” was his incredulous reply.

“I am moving abroad as a photographer so am selling the car to buy a professional camera system”

The man had no idea how much a Digital SLR was going to cost.

Originally I was going to buy a compact digital all in one camera with zoom, but I knew of the Fujifilm S2 Pro. This was a new camera based on a Nikon. I discussed this with Tony Clarke, manager of London Camera Exchange. Tony knew me through the OS Photo Club so was able to give good advice based on my photographic style.

Tony had only one demonstrator camera in stock. It was expensive £2000, or the equivalent of \$3500 at that time. This was for the body only, so I had to get a couple of Nikon lenses as well.

I traded in my Pentax gear as part payment for it. The Nikon lenses and other kit swallowed up most of the cash from selling the car. I bought a Sony laptop in Staples computer shop. It cost the best part of \$2000 inc accessories for a 12" screen and 40gb Hard drive.

### **Preparing to leave**

Everything went to plan on the run up to the big move. We had plenty of information about moving to Cambodia and setting up our business on the Internet. We even knew the cost of electric and a good idea of real estate prices to rent a property suitable to run a guest house. We did have time for a few weekends away; hiring a car and getting some practice with my new camera.

Packing up our stuff in boxes for shipment at a shipping agency in Southampton and storing the rest in the attic kept us busy. We could only organise our shipment out of UK; but not until we had an agent in Cambodia to handle the customs clearance and shipment arrangement locally. This we had to do after we arrived, so had all our things packed up and labelled. We just needed to contact the shipping company by email later to confirm the arrangements at the Cambodian end.

We were letting out the house furnished. By the time we left, we had no tenants arranged. We were assured by the agents that we would have no problem letting out the house.

We had a farewell party with most of our friends and family at 54 Shirley Park Road. My memory of that event is hazy as our hangovers the next day. We allowed a few days to recover for our flight to Bangkok on Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> May 2003



*Clive Parker, Dave Giles, Andy Page, Phil Aldridge, Myself & Colleen in the Kitchen at our farewell party.*

## **Bangkok Calling**

The run up to our move accelerated by Thursday to the point that I was still doing odd jobs and moving things up into the loft almost until the taxi arrived. Trying to shoehorn our kit into two 65 litre packs and our smaller day sacs proved almost impossible, without removing some of the less important or replaceable items.

Although my Sony notebook PC was exceptionally light, all the cables external drives, transformers and the small Canon printer, soon mounted up so my rucksack was a bit of a dead weight. The notebook PC etc and camera gear and tripod did not face the axe; though some clothing and heavy guidebooks just had to be left behind. Coll had to leave a lot of cosmetics and clothing, as there as simply not enough room. Coll did take her little fluffy bunny, which she gave to her mum some years ago before she passed away.

The bus trip to Heathrow Airport was uneventful other than Colleen was feeling queasy. My Sister Sheila met us at Basingstoke bus station with a present; a lovely 'Bon Voyage certificate, card and a box of chocolates.

Cliff Phelps met us at the Starbucks café at Heathrow. It was really nice of him to come to see us off. At the security check, I calmly collected my gear, not noticing that Coll had been ushered aside along with her handbag. The officer was doing a random check, starting to pull her hand baggage apart. Her cuddly bunny was taken away and placed in a security basket and scanned again, and was returned unharmed to Coll's relief.

Once aboard the Emirates Airbus we settled down into our seats. The Dubai flight was soon over for a short break at the airport for the 2nd flight to Bangkok

Entering the cabin of the A300 airbus for the next flight, we found our seats 11a & 11b, on an almost empty aircraft. We walked past these seats thinking we were in economy, then realised that we had been upgraded to business class! The leg room, electric seat adjustments, video screens and in flight entertainment was second to none. We could not have wished for a better flight.

Arrival in Bangkok was a painless process, as the terminal was eerily empty. We were through to the baggage reclaim and out to the lobby in 30 minutes or so. We found a taxi (330B) to take us in the hot wet humid air to the city. We were mentally prepared for the heat and humidity, so it did not seem too much of a shock to the system.

### **Royal Hotel and Bangkok**

We arrived at the Royal Hotel at 8:15am . As a budget hotel we cannot recommend this place highly enough. 1930s splendour in the magnificent lobby, every facility we could wish for, with a 24 hour coffee shop bar/restaurant. The ambiance very laid back with young tour groups.

For £14 per night we had a splendid air con room with TV fridge, air con, nice furnishings and an all you can eat breakfast. We had time for a snack and a beer and a visit to the hotel Internet facility. A slow connection and difficulty getting into Yahoo meant we wasted 170Baht (5 per minute) without success, so retired for a much-needed sleep.

### ***Menu at the Royal***

*The 30 page Dinner menu at the Royal Hotel in included the following delicacies:*

*Spring Rool*

*Four friend vegetables*

*Boiled serpent head*

*Boiled pig stomach*

*Lonely beef*

*And the ultimate gastronomic challenge:*

*Fried uterus pepper and garic*

*If all this was too much then perhaps:*

*Potato chip & nut; for the lighter touch.*

We had a more conventional choice of French onion soup, roast chicken and banana split. It was very well presented and quite delicious, like all the food we sampled.

### **The Visa Run**

We found out that Monday was a major Buddhist festival and as such Monday 5<sup>th</sup> May was a bank holiday. This of course meant that the Cambodian embassy would be closed, so we would have to delay our Business Visa application. We reckoned that the process would take a couple of days, so we booked a couple of extra days at the Royal.

It as with some apprehension, that we took a taxi to the Cambodian embassy in Lumphini. This was the first bureaucratic hurdle in our plans. Signposted down a narrow alley opposite Lumphini Park we found ourselves in a cul de

sac with a grimy gate with only an A4 paper notice taped to the door to announce its presence.

We entered the yard to find a small office where there were two booths and some tables and chairs opposite. Visa forms were prominently displayed, so we wasted no time filling in the fairly simple form.

None of our specially prepared documentation was needed, only passports and photos. We ensured that these were correctly filled in with the 'business purpose' box checked. We also briefly noted the purpose of our visit, to set up a tourism business. We handed over our passports etc and \$50 for the two applications; to the disinterested middle aged man.

Back at the Cambodian embassy the following day, we arrived at 3pm only to find the gate was locked. Coll had the receipt in hand and we called over the guard who told us to come back at 4. We explained that the ticket said 3pm and to let us in please. We entered and moved to the visa office where we had our passports returned to us. We checked our visa we noticed that the visa stamp had "T" for tourist and "No employment permitted". We were not amused as we had clearly stated the purpose of our visit.

Returning to the desk I explained the problem to the official. He said the visa couldn't be altered and if we returned to this office in a month we could get a new visa. This clearly was not acceptable. At first he just ignored me, shuffling papers about in the hope that the problem would get bored and go away. There was no way we were going to return to Bangkok in a month to get a replacement visa just because of his

indifference and not looking at our form properly. I told him politely but sternly that we requested a business visa and we were not leaving without one. Within 25 minutes we left victorious after he peeled off the incorrect visa and replaced with a correctly endorsed one.

We left to join our waiting tuk tuk who took us back to the hotel where we were in the mood for celebration. We were so thirsty and dehydrated that any thoughts of getting plastered would have been unwise.

### **Welcome to the land of laughter**

We decided to make the first part of our journey in Cambodia as a holiday and see part of the South and coast before heading to the capital city Phnom Penh when the real work was to start.

We had an early start, which was not good for the soul. The lower temperatures were welcome, as we were travelling. We had help with our baggage from a bellboy who nearly overturned the trolley on the steep ramp; sending much of our worldly goods tumbling down the steps; not a good start. We had a decent Isuzu 4Wd taxi to take us on the ½ hour drive to the Eastern Bus Terminal.

We arrived just in time for the late 7:00 departure so it was a bit of a rush to get to stand 9 at the far end of the terminal. The smart blue bus was air-conditioned and the ride very smooth as we passed in heavy rain along the elevated expressway. We were so high up, the bus felt as though it was on a low level flight over the flat country to the east of Bangkok. The stewardess served us fairy cakes & Pepsi. Even the driver had a pilot style uniform.

Unfortunately the in flight entertainment did not live up to the standard of Emirates Airways; an American shoot em up movie dubbed in Thai with Japanese subtitles. Lip-reading was pointless as there was no apparent story anyway; just a series of car, bike, helicopter, boat chases and cataclysmic explosions, with the lead role coming out of various balls of fire without even a singed eyebrow. Well I guess as this is how the Thais like it, we can only sit back and enjoy!

We passed thought the busy town of Chonburi, unremarkable concrete blockhouse buildings with industrial areas. Leaving the high level roadways we moved on to Chantaburi on the coast. We had a short loo stop here then our journey resumed to Trat. The scenery was hilly and attractive with wooded mountains beyond the palm oil and rubber plantations. Every so often, a spectacular temple came into view.

It was very hot at Trat and we were in desperate need of food and drink. A taxi man offered us a lift; but we didn't want to go any further. The bus station didn't look very inviting. A sign directed us don a side alley to the Trat Hotel. This was a calm refuge for lunch. It was basic, clean with a well-spoken lady who served us cold drinks and sandwiches.

The minibus stand was a little way down the street. I tried to find a more comfortable taxi. The only taxis were shared covered pickup trucks with bench seats. These were not good for Coll's back, which had been troubling her a bit. With no success on the taxi front, we opted for a 100baht minibus for the 95km drive to the border at Hat Lek.

We were hit by a monsoonal thunderstorm and the road was awash for much of the journey. Only approaching Hat Lek,

did the skies brighten and we could see the lovely Gulf of Thailand with its distant island of Ko Chang. Coll loved the sweet if shy kids on the seats in front and tried to make friends with them.

It was with some excitement that we approached the Thai/Cambodia border. After the total chaos and hassle of the northern border of Poipet last year, I was a little concerned that Hat Lek might be a repeat performance. I wasn't expecting too much hassle, but the baggage would be more of a problem this time.

By the time we got to Hat Lek there was only one other lady passenger plus ourselves. We stopped at the smart Thai checkpoint where a few helpful souls offered us taxi rides. One grabbed our attention, as he had a boy with a truck to help us with our baggage. We knew they could want a few Baht for this and gladly accepted the offer of assistance. Passing through the Thai customs our helper directed us to Sam a taxi driver who would take us to Koh Kong a little up the coast.

We were soon through into the almost comatose Cambodian checkpoint where we had to fill our medical declarations about the SARS virus. The virus hadn't affected either country significantly. There had been no confirmed SARS cases in Cambodia but there were a lot of security measures particularly on the Thai side, with strict quarantine measures for those affected. This had caused a big drop in tourism.

We needed no assistance here through the checkpoints; having an advance visa speeded things up. Sam made a few jokes and wisecracks as we waited for the formalities. He

asked us where we had come from? Lovererly jubberely and a few pieces of rhyming slang had us reeling with laughter outside the immigration desk. We asked about football and what team he supported. An a Liverpool fan, we let him know we would be supporting Southampton on English cup final day.



The border settlement was a marked contrast to Poipet in that it was clean, neat, kissed by sea air and had none of the seedy casinos and terrible road system of that place. We had a few photos and relaxed chat as we walked across to Sam's car; a Camry (Toyota) the ubiquitous taxi and the only car seen in any numbers on Cambodian Roads.

Sam was touting for a hotel, the Raksmeay Makara. According to the Lonely Planet guide, this was one of the more upmarket hotels in Koh Kong. We had considered this one earlier and thought we'd give it a try as it was not expensive.

We explained that we liked Angkor beer, this went down well with Sam, who told us it was made in Sihanoukville. He continued to ramble on, suggesting that we go to the Tatal

waterfalls later that day. We were more interested in a shower and food, and would consider it later. Informative to the point of being garrulous, Sam was almost overwhelming in his enthusiasm. His attempts to talk to us fell on deaf ears due to the nice if loud music on his stereo.

We crossed the new bridge with a toll of 88Baht. Just beyond was the sleepy town of Koh Kong. A slightly ramshackle collection of brightly coloured wood and concrete shacks, sprawled along the main tarmac road. At the centre was a small traffic circle with monument and a rambling open-air market.

The Raksmei Makara Hotel was on the main road out of town. A very friendly and airy place, the hotel had rooms on two floors with breezy corridors and lovely verandas. We chose a VIP air-conditioned room with nice open views. Perhaps VIP was a bit over the top as a description, but the room was spacious and clean with nice bathroom, fridge, TV and big leather armchairs. The veranda was nice too, with a big teak table and chairs. We did however have an unwelcome guest; a gecko. Coll was not happy about this but I managed to persuade her that the gecko would keep the bugs away.

Sam offered to drive us to the market to get some money changed Coll stayed behind to get showered, while I went to the market.

I asked Sam “Are you married?”

“No” was his reply “I want to remain a bachelor and would rather have lots of girls. I do not want to be married and want to be free”.

“When you are married you cut your cock,” he added frankly.

At the exchange stall I changed around 3500 Baht to reils ending up with a house brick size wad of 1000r notes. (1000 reils are worth around 18p). I asked about breakfast and was told that we could have anything on the menu at any time. This was great, but steamed meats and fried rice was OK for locals, but we would rather have tea coffee and bread and jam. We were told that we could have jam, but no bread; however we could have baguettes? There was no point in querying the difference between bread and baguettes. We were just pleased to have breakfast.

We had dinner on the veranda overlooking and being entertained by the pop band at a restaurant at the back. A cooling sea breeze caressed us as we sat outside eating a nice meal of fried rice and chicken. Sam joined us suggesting that we go to the attractive waterfalls the following day.

A comfortable bed we had, but the continuous music from the karaoke session over the back, continued till well after midnight. It was slightly amusing to hear the drunken attempts at singing but we really wanted sleep.

A relatively cool cloudy start to the day was followed by my attempt to get breakfast. ? In spite of the previous night’s promises, the anticipated breakfast was not what we expected.

“Good morning, can we have breakfast?” I asked.

This was met by a blank stare.

“Do you have tea, coffee and bread.”

“No tea coffee, you must buy in market”

somewhat taken aback I repeated again this fairly reasonable request.

“We buy tea and coffee over the road”

“that was OK“ I said, not caring where it came from.

”Can you pay now for us to buy”

“Ok how much in reils?” I replied finding any excuse to reduce the burden of notes.

“Twelve thousand reils” This came as a shock, as it sounded a huge amount. In reality it was just under £3, hardly a fortune.

We walked down to the town along the main street to a small café where a lady served us bottled water under the welcome shade. We watched a group under a stilt house across the road. There were two ladies selling fruit in baskets. The smiling women walked to us and showed us the contents of their baskets. They opened a couple of the brown fruits. I tried the first rambutan, which were quite sweet but not sickly. They were laughing a lot, especially when we asked to take their photos. They giggled like children as I showed their pictures on the LCD Screen. Digital cameras were almost unheard of at that time.

We continued down the road to a traffic circle with a small statue of a boy with two baskets on his shoulders. We were looking for a pharmacy to get some back pain cream or spray. At a large well stocked pharmacy in an ornate new building. I removed my shoes and entered. The owner could only speak a little English as French as his second tongue. He apologised saying that he had only been learning English for six months.

Using a mixture of French and English I acquired some French muscular balm for \$10

The Internet café cum language school down the road was the only Internet facility in town. It was closed as it was a Sunday, but the owner opened specially for us. We had news from our British estate agent, Mews, that they had a tenant for 54 Shirley Park Road.

We had lunch at the Juliana restaurant. We sat in the open air under a green tin roof with a stage with a large 'Welcome' neon sign. The staff were welcoming and served beef and pork salad Coll was good and had water, while I had an Anchor beer (from Singapore) the staff were working on the band stage and it took a little time to get the bill paid. We had a brisk walk back to the Raksmeay as Sam was to collect us for the drive to the waterfalls at 2pm.

### **Tatal Waterfals**

Sam turned up a few minutes early to take us to the waterfalls He told us of his plans to buy a couple of vans and had borrowed \$20,000 from an American friend to do so. Sam lived with his family in an 8-roomed house a little out of town. He had a two roomed extension built for his own use. They were not a poor family or rich he said, though they must have been very well off by Cambodian standards. They recently had a wedding party for his brother with 800 guests at the Raksmeay a few weeks earlier.

The family were down at the falls for their regular Sunday outing. All ten of them went in their pickup truck. We commented on Sam's steady driving. He said that he had to know this dirt road really well to avoid damaging his car. He

admitted to not having a driving license, as most Cambodians do not bother to pay the \$50 to the police for one. Sam negotiated the narrow rutted track to the falls with ease belying his 12 months driving experience. We felt surprisingly confident. At the rough car park Sam pointed out the family's gleaming black pickup.



To approach the falls involved a steep path through Bamboo forest. We had glimpses of the white water through the foliage as we picked our way down. The intense sounds of cicadas were drowned out by the thundering falls and we were soon looking down on the splendid cascades. The water tumbled over low rock shelves towards a much larger drop into the small lake downstream. We rested, while Sam started to climb down among the torrents inviting us to have a shower.

Sam took pictures of us by the falls. Just after he took the pictures he said that he had seen crocodiles down there. He reassured us that they were not often seen here. Sam's family were bathing fully clothed just above us. We walked up to the

family in the fast flowing water, some were washing their hair and others were just enjoying a cool refreshing dip. Sam's mother beckoned to us and asked us to join them. We didn't want to impose, so declined the offer and returned with Sam up the step path to the waiting car.

We drove back over the pass where we had views of the mangrove forests towards the shore. Sam showed us the new bridge from the beach to the north of town. I got out of the car to take photos. The sandy beach looked inviting until I found that I had to walk over fetid piles of rubbish strewn over the grassy bank which led to it; what a shame! We returned in heavy rain to the hotel where we rested and had dinner on the roof terrace.

Sam arranged a car for us to take us to Sihanoukville. This cost a little more than we had planned, but at \$20 each the minibus wasn't exactly cheap and likely to be much less comfortable. Sam explained that there were 4 river crossings, which have added to the cost.

He could get us a car direct to the 'Small Hotel' in town for a fixed price. Sam had been to that hotel before and knew the Swedish owner Henrik. Sleep was not easy, as the nearby music bar continued noisily until after midnight, when a severe thunderstorm drowned out the proceedings.

### **To Sihanoukville**

A slightly better organised breakfast set us up for the day. The staff were somewhat vague and must have been unused to the demands of western tourists. They were confused when we asked them to settle the bill in Riels rather than the de facto Dollars.

Sam joined us as we left and said that he would take us to our transport. The hired a private car turned up at 8am as we spoke, so we were soon inside with a military policeman in the front, “ He is for security” Sam said with a smile. We settled down to the comfortable back seats enjoying the surprisingly smooth ride along the new but unpaved road. The road was good for Cambodian standards; the smooth graded red gravel cut a broad swathe through the beautiful forest. We made good progress along this empty mountain road round wide hairpin bends with new bollards and red and white kilometre posts. The road was too new for any major pot holes to develop. One wonders what would happen to the condition of this road after a few seasons of monsoon floods?

Dropping down into a wooded valley we saw a river and settlement below. We stopped here waiting for the ferry. We were surrounded by curious children peering into the car and showing us their drinks and snacks for sale. We were not hungry and the eager onlookers dispersed as a yellow Toyota minivan drew up.

The ferry was an old US Army landing craft with the sides removed. The driver reversed us on. We were hard up against the side of a truck, which made any attempt to get out, impossible. As we drove off I tried to take a photo. To my frustration the camera battery died. As I did not have any charged batteries, I could not use the camera for this part of the trip.

The wonderful scenery was almost too beautiful to describe and the children and adults were so very friendly and warm.

We had three more crossings on rickety wood and metal rafts. They were powered by car engines with long prop shafts which were swivelled around with amazing dexterity as we crossed the lazy rivers. It would have been a very different game if the rivers were in flood.

### **Loo stop**

I tried to ask for a loo stop, but this fell on deaf ears until the fourth crossing, where it was getting serious. Out of the car, I was able to make his wishes known. After landing we stopped for food and drink; Now desperate, I asked for the WC. We followed a girl to the side of the shack, through a steamy kitchen. We walked over a rickety ramp leading out to the river, around 10 meters away was a rough wooden shelter. The toilet was just a gap over the river between the two boards to pee into, with a plastic bucket for ablutions. There was no “Sit and Smile” toilet paper here.

Lunch was a bowl of freshly cooked rice each and a Fanta! It was lovely sitting there in that crude wooden shack by the river with all the village life passing by outside. The primitive conditions that the people lived here: their happiness and sense of fun were quite humbling. At his point, the feeling of being very far away from home was overwhelming.

After lunch we travelled on towards the coast through the rice paddy fields and along mangrove forests. Away from the mountains there were lots of settlements along the road. Water buffalo wallowed in cool muddy ditches some were in so deep all we could see were their heads and long horns. At a Sre Ambel some way from Sihanoukville, the car stopped unexpectedly. There was some discussion between

our driver and a couple of guys on the pavement. We were told that we would have to get out for a change of car. I got out to find out what was happening. A Toyota station wagon was behind us and the driver wanted us to go inside. I refused and came back and sat with Coll who was very concerned at this time. We wished that the policeman was with us, but he left us at the last river crossing.

We sat for a few minutes without the driver who was outside with the others. I tried to reassure Coll that there was nothing to worry about, but wasn't sure what was going on either. Another man came to the window, repeating the request to go into the other car. We wanted to know why? He said don't worry you won't have to pay any more. Coll said "too right were not" Very grudgingly we capitulated as we did not want to spend the rest of the afternoon here. We got out of our nice air con Camry to enter the Toyota shabby wagon.

"are you going to shut to boot door?" Coll asked

This was met with a blank look. The tail gate was fixed open with a welded metal bar.

A guy got in the rear wedging our bags securely at the back. He sat up against them with his feet over the rear bumper as we drove off. We noticed the head of a girl in the front seat; we were not alone. The driver called for a drink. He drunk it on the move and disposed it through the window. We stopped for an old lady, carrying plastic bags of fruit, who joined the man on the tailgate.

It was obvious that our exclusive car hire had now become an expensive shared taxi for the last leg. A few more passengers joined our vehicle, A girl attempted to get in the back with us,

but the driver directed her to the front drivers seat with him! So with 4 in the front ourselves in the back and two others on the tailgate we continued on to Sihanoukville. Thankfully that was only a few kilometres away.

Sihanoukville is a large port and seaside resort widely scattered over green hills. Compared to Thai towns it was spacious, with lots of open space and some impressive villas. There were no high-rise buildings, just an oddball collection of unplanned development strung out along the main roads. The compact town centre was marked by a collection of smart banks and a petrol station.



### **Henrik & The Small Hotel**

We had asked to be dropped off at “The Small Hotel” situated near the Caltex petrol station on the main road at the centre of town. We spotted it easily and before the driver and an English-speaking passenger who helped us navigate. A few metres down a muddy rack and we were met by the smiling girls and a guy in his 20s.

“The small Hotel” is a guest house run by Henrik a Swede . We looked at a couple of rooms and chose a lovely big double room with large Cable TV, well-stocked fridge and some exceptionally nice furniture. The bed was a work of art, made with marquetry hardwood panels and doors inset into the headboard. The foot looked as though it was modelled on a the front end of 1960s American auto. All it needed was four headlights and a chrome grille to complete! The large bathroom was lovely even by Western standards; though we couldn’t work out how to get hot water out of the Japanese electric shower.

We wasted no time in ordering fish and chips, which were so good to be better than at home. We met a guy known as Wiwa. He got this nickname after his Suzuki Wiwa motorbike. The Khmers cannot pronounce the letter V, so I will have to get used to being called Dawe, or Dawoo! “Colleen” was easy for them, thankfully. Wiwa had set up an English School in a deprived area near the port. Henrik had offered help and had befriended many of these people, who are very impoverished. Henrik showed us photos of the children there they looked quite delightful.

Henrik came to Cambodia while travelling extensively in south East Asia and like us, fell in love with the people here. He told us more about how he acquired the Hotel. He rented a small villa here for several months gaining the trust and friendship of locals before deciding to set up here. He advised us to do the same, as Khmer friends and contacts greatly helped him in his venture and would surely help us too.

Henrik told us the house was a typical wealthy Khmer villa and not purpose built. He explained the layout was typical Khmer in that the living area extended through 2 floors at the front. There was a lot of excess space in the vast galleried landing and upper living area. When we told him that we were hoping to settle here and run a guest house in Seam Reap, he was full of encouragement for us.

He gave us a very helpful insight into running a business out here. He told us that it was so easy especially as compared with Vietnam and Thailand. His Business Permit was fairly easily obtained, as was the Business Visa extension. Although it was forbidden, he came here with a tourist visa, which he changed to a Business one, by knowing the right people. We would not have this problem as we already had a business visa, which can be extended indefinitely.

There is however a lot of corruption; foreigners are charged much more than locals for many things. Electricity for example is charged at a very high rate to owners of foreign businesses. Even so, Henrik told us the overall costs of running this place still very low. Also the poorly paid police tend to target foreigners for traffic offences that the locals would get away with. He advised us to negotiate and offer no more than a dollar or two which usually keeps them sweet!

We both felt that our plans to rent a guesthouse were really possible. Many westerners rent their hotels/guesthouses in Cambodia. It is very straightforward and easy he has told us and the costs are unbelievably low! We saw an updated visitors guide to Siem Reap and our hearts were been uplifted because now there is a Real Estate Agent there who rents/

buys property in the area. As many as 10 new guesthouses have opened within the last few months there, the town is booming. We could not wait to get there to see what is on offer for us.

### **Weather Just like Home**

As we were staying in a beach resort, we decided go to see the beaches, Sihanoukville is famous for. The day dawned warm but cloudy and after breakfast we took a walk past the magnificent villas to the west of town. With a backdrop of green hills and a path away from the traffic, we enjoyed the fresh sea breeze and pleasant temperatures.

It took around half an hour to get to Victory Beach. It was hardly Cannes or Benidorm; more like a Robinson Crusoe beach, with a line of weather beaten thatched shelters behind a low sea wall. Delightfully undeveloped it was totally without the kind of ugly tourist tat we are used to, in more civilised countries. It was lovely sitting on deckchairs supping fruit juice overlooking this idyllic empty strand.

The sun shone briefly and became very warm. Fishing boats started to drift in to port and the only activity was a boy fishing on the shore. A small island well offshore became grey with mist and as suddenly as the sun appeared; a hot squally wind blew up! The man, who ran this primitive beach bar, put up a tarpaulin and called us to the shelter as it was beginning to rain. I got in the hammock, while Coll took some photos of the swinging monkey!

The rain eased off and I suggested we continue our plan and walk to the next beach. As we were rounding the headland it started to piss down with rain heavily. We looked for shelter

in a hotel on the map called Chez Claude. It looked deserted, boarded up and grimmer than the weather. We were not happy bunnies in the drenching rain. Coll's English broolly didn't stand a chance against the monsoon and blew itself apart in spite of our valiant attempts to save it!

Bedraggled, we arrived at the Golden Lion roundabout at the edge of Ochheutheal Beach, (try to pronounce that after a few beers!). A Moto driver offered us a lift. He started bargaining with 5000r but we offered 1000r (the going rate) he looked shocked but accepted. We straddled the tiny Dailim scooter, Coll behind the driver and me trying to hold on to the rear. Consequently the bike toppled over. We stepped off it, with the embarrassed driver saying "Sorry Sorry you're too fat".

We abandoned the bike ride and went in for a drink at a large Karaoke bar. The wind was windy! And the rains, rainy, just like Bournemouth on a wet bank holiday. We felt quite at home.

After a while, the rain did stop and after an hour we trotted off up the road. The warmth dried us out quickly. The torrential rain here doesn't deter people going about their everyday life. We were not uncomfortable in shorts T-shirts and sandals, with half an umbrella; which Coll faithfully kept open and now has abandoned in the bin at the hotel. We walked back along the main Ekkareach Street, ending our walk in hot sunshine.

## **Photos**

We got into a discussion with Henrik about photography. He showed some stunning portraits of the hotel crew done by a local studio. They were dressed and beautifully made up, in

front of exotic and fabulous painted backdrops. This kind of portraiture is something of a Khmer institution. Most locals do this as a very special occasion and make themselves spectacularly glamorous using make up, specially hired clothes and sometimes hair too.

I showed Henrik some of his sample prints of Cambodia and the Angkor temples He was very interested and enthusiastic about them. I gave him a copy of ‘Bouquet through Barbed wire’. The one of the girl handing a flower garland through the barbed wire of the Killing Fields. He was over the moon with this and wanted to get it framed and put up in his guest house .

### **Bus to Phnom Penh**

We were helped to the nearby GST bus station, by the two lads who carried our baggage on their motorbikes. We had a while to wait, but the time passed quickly and boarded the elderly blue and silver American style bus. There was loads of room and a comfortable, smooth ride; once we had made several local stops round town. The scenery going north was quiet beguiling, with attractive villas, small farms and palm groves with a constantly changing background of the forested Cardamon Mountains.

This is a very beautiful and fertile land. Looking out of the window watching the lovely scenery, I recalled the times as a youth, when I used to imagine myself in exotic tropical landscapes and discovering lost temples to help me go to sleep. I had an overwhelming feeling of travelling through paradise.

Paradise ended abruptly at the midway rest stop. The toilets at the service area cum café were quite diabolical, Coll could only find a tiled water filled trough to use, with a hole in the corner of the floor it was not very nice at all. The Gents were smelly but usable. These were the only really bad loos we had come across; most were well above what we would have expected for 3<sup>rd</sup> World standards.

A couple of hours later of driving through flatter though still attractive farm land and rice fields, we sensed an urbanisation of the landscape. The wooden villages strung out along the road, gave way to small towns and low-key industry. The townscapes were lined with colourful markets, charming villas surrounded by walls with gilded railings and impressive gateways.

### **Phnom Penh Arrival**



At 11:30 we passed the new Pochentong International Airport just outside the city limits of Phnom Penh. For those arriving by air and driving this way into the city, one could hardly think this as a Third World city at all. The wide boulevards

with immaculate lawns, smart smoked glass offices, neat whitewashed tenements and candy coloured villas, only emphasised this veneer. To each side of these boulevards the bitumen disappeared into dusty rubble strewn tracks, which make up the vast majority of the roads in this city.

As impoverished as this city is, it appears to be a generally happy, vibrant and young place. The destruction and rape of Phnom Penn during the Pol Pot era, has still not been fully repaired, more than twenty years after the city's liberation by the Vietnamese. The new developments funded by international aid, and the lovely new restorations of the French art deco style buildings, have done a lot to return this city to the "Pearl of Asia" on its heyday.

The Train Station at alongside the spacious Pochentong Boulevard is a stunning example of a 1950s Art Deco French Gare. Immaculately restored in pastel yellow, with a huge painting of King Sihanouk and his Queen, is nothing more than a lovely façade. The crumbling rail system is so bad and the track is so uneven, that all guidebooks recommend avoidance by tourists. We crossed the tracks a few times on the journey and it looked more like a roller coaster than a railway line!

The third world nature of Phnom Penh city reared its head most directly when the bus arrived and the GST bus terminal by the Central Market. To our surprise, we saw, out of the window, a man, Mr Bo, with a sign "Welcome Dave Perkes to Cambodia, We hope you enjoy your visit" writ large on it and correctly spelled. He was our taxi driver for the Riverside Guest House booked by phone the previous night.

Surrounded by noisy taxi touts with arms outstretched; they tried to “help” us with our baggage as we alighted from the bus. We attracted the attention of our driver who showed us to our vehicle.

Of course we knew what Cambodians mean by “taxi”, this is why I requested a car to pick us up. A 125cc Dailim motorbike wasn’t exactly ideal for an English couple with all our worldly goods for 3-4 months and a mobile office! We have seen families of five on these machines, as well as amazingly huge loads balanced on them; but after a long and comfortable bus ride; the last thing we wanted was to be part of a motor bike balancing circus act!

There are thankfully two kinds of Moto taxi; the “Moto” which is a small motorbike, or a “Remorque Moto” a similar bike, but with a trailer attached. They are increasingly being called “tuk tuks” now. They have 2 bench seats and are definitely our favourite transport here.

Our driver found us tuktuk, so we quickly struggled through the melee, not really knowing who was trying to help us with our heavy bags or who was attempting to spirit them away onto another moto! In reality they were quite cooperative and we were soon puttering away. “Puttering” is the operative word; as compared to Thai equivalent, the Moto remorques are painfully slow. In Bangkok these would be totally out of their depth. Here they are ideally suited to the traffic conditions.

### **A sinking feeling**

According to the Lonely Planet guide the “Riverside”, recommended by Henrik was just off the waterfront and close

to the National Museum. We began to get a little disorientated as we appeared to be going further up, Sissowath Quay. Before getting unduly concerned, we pulled up alongside the neat looking Riverside Guest House. Right on the quay on the corner of street 105, it had a slightly “New Orleans” flavour about the 4 storey building.

Helped with our bags, we asked to see our room. We were taken through the back of the tiny steamy kitchen and up vertiginous narrow steps, to a basic but otherwise OK room. Two simple double beds, a black vinyl sofa and a dressing table s all the furniture provide. We were shown the balcony with lovely river views and settled down to unpack.

“Dave, shouldn’t we have a sink here” Coll exclaimed from the shower room. I looked around and realised this,

“I think we should ask for another room”

I called the lady back and asked this. She really didn’t understand the question until I used the French word faucet. This had the desired effect but was told the room was “up floors two”

We followed up to the top floor and a was shown a nicer room with shower room, sink and large balcony out through a heavy iron framed door. This was accepted as OK until Coll discovered that there were no working lights in the room.

“Great! Coll said, “We have the choice of 2 rooms, one without sink, or one without electricity; surely this cannot be the hotel recommended by Henrik, or the Lonely Planet”

We looked at the menu only to find a very mean choice indeed. Coll wasn’t happy with the room and the hideously

steep stairs. While we were discussing this, power was restored. We agreed to stay here one night and look for somewhere else in the afternoon. We sat for a while poring over guide books and maps. I noticed an inconsistency. The Riverside GH where we were, appeared to be a different place to the Riverside mentioned in the LP guide; which doesn't appear to be on the river at all. Maybe we were staying in the wrong Riverside!

### **California 2 and Jim Heston**

We picked a couple of likely hotels and wandered off down the quay. It was quite hot now and the welcome shade and pleasant ambiance of the Café California 2 was irresistible. A colonial looking American, dressed in khaki shorts and shirt, introduced himself as the owner.

Jim explained that he had rooms and one of his girls showed us upstairs. We chose a lovely room at the front with a balcony. The view from this room was nothing short of fabulous. The lovely promenade of Sissowath Quay with palm trees and lazy flags stretched out below us with the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers beyond. Jim told us that the Old Riverside was not on the river at all and was now closed. We negotiated a weekly deal reduced from \$20 per night to \$17, this included breakfast for a special month long deal.

We had lunch in a La Dolce Vita an Italian style café a few doors down, run by a very friendly and talkative Khmer. It felt more like Paris here than SE Asia, but a lot friendlier. The baguettes have a reputation as being the best outside France; I could certainly endorse that. Walking back we were constantly asked for moto rides, so crossed to the river to get

some peace. The moto drivers weren't too persistent, but it was the number and frequency, which was a little irritating. Across the quay we were met with offers of boat rides instead; Cest La vie!

### **On the road**

One thing that does take a bit of getting used to is the driving style of the inhabitants. This city of motorcycles is one that is in constant motion. At first the traffic looks to be a total free for all without any rules, other than a loose adherence to driving on the right side of the road. Laid out in a glorious semi circular grid pattern with radiating roads, there are thousands of intersections but only a handful of traffic lights, yet the traffic is constantly moving.

Phnom Penh drivers had a kind of defacto speed discipline. Almost every vehicle travels at about 20 kph. This steady motion allows traffic to merge and cross-junctions and to allow moto drivers to perform U turns that would be suicidal in other cities. The amazing thing about the traffic is that no one uses indicators. There seems to be some kind of telepathic thought process going on between drivers and riders that is nothing short of miraculous.

To cross the road, just find a gap and walk steadily. The traffic just flows around you as though you were a moving traffic bollard. This takes some nerve at first, but once you get used to it seems quite natural. The one thing NOT to do is stop half way. You will be dead meat! Thankfully there are usually decent gaps in the traffic make things easier.

The same thing applies to crossing a main boulevard on a car or moto. They just pull out slowly and let the oncoming

traffic slow and drive round. Sometimes the drivers go on the wrong side of the road until a suitable gap appears then the just steadily drift to the correct side of the road, with traffic passing on both sides. Others just drift long the kerb on the wrong side of the road to the next intersection. This only works because of the wide boulevards and the high number of two wheeled vehicles.

Once an impatient Mercedes or Lexus driver enters the scene, the system begins to breaks down. It was quite noticeable that the only time traffic stops for any length of time is at traffic lights or police road blocks. It is quite amazing how the traffic keeps flowing.

\*things have changed a lot since then!

### **Foreign Correspondents Club Cambodia**

Another thing that keeps flowing is the abundance of alcohol. There are bars everywhere selling drink at very cheap prices. Our favourite watering hole here was the Foreign Correspondents Club of Cambodia FCCC. Commanding a fabulous view from the terrace bar, its colonial atmosphere and excellent food made it our first place to go for lunch. At the entrance, yet another moto driver offered his services. I pointed up the teak staircase “only if you can take us up here!” this was met by a hearty laugh by the driver as we chuckled up stairs.

Coll euphorically ate her chicken burger and fries and followed up with a banana boat ice cream. We lounged for a while here, supping Angkor beer on leather armchairs in the airy bar, listening to cool jazz and salsa; a sublime drinking experience second to none.

Not only is the FCCC the coolest place for eating and drinking, the gallery of photographs is quite stunning. Evocative and sometimes heart rending, the colour and black and white images here are an inspiration. Some however were almost too bleak; reflecting the tragic past of this county, yet others showed the optimism and joy of Cambodia today.

### **Sight seeing**

Our special treat for Sunday was the Garden Centre Café. This wonderful semi open-air restaurant served roast dinners with all the trimmings in a tropical garden setting. It is a popular hangout for Brits hankering for the taste of home. We found a tuk tuk driver Sok Vanna, to take us there. A lovely laid back guy, with an engaging smile and such helpful manner; we had to ask him to drive for us again. We negotiated \$12 per day to run us around the city arranging for him to pick us up 9am Monday.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in the fabulous Royal Palace complex. This was only a few minutes walk away across beautiful and immaculately kept gardens. Amongst the Buddhist architecture is an ornate Napoleonic style house looking quite out of place here. It was donated and rebuilt here in the 1930s. The vast Throne Room had rich carpets and spectacular ceiling almost Baroque in style. The centrepiece of the Palace complex is the Silver Pagoda. The floor of this is laid with 5000 silver tiles simple in design; most were covered with carpets.

It was particularly hot that afternoon and it was something of a relief to see a tropical storm rolling in. First was the hot

wind, which whipped up the dust into our faces, as we walked away from the Palace. The sky became black and the palm trees shook vigorously. The locals covered themselves with plastic macs and just as we were entering Sissowath Quay, big fat globby raindrops soaked us. Unlike in an English rainstorm, we were not cold, just refreshingly cool. We entered the California bar to a few welcoming laughs from the staff.



### **The Real Work starts**

Sok took us to the British Embassy just up Street 47 from the Bayon Hotel that we stayed in on our first visit. There was a slight change in the street furniture in that there was a roadblock and red and white barrier across the road. Walking through the pedestrian gate, we noted the high white fortified walls of the British Embassy. We approached the guard who told us that the embassy was closed, as it was a bank holiday; Royal Ploughing day. Not another one we thought, remembering the unexpected closures on our first Monday in Bangkok.

We rather thought this would play havoc with our plans to get money and post letters and cards. Sok took us to a street exchange booth on Monivong Boulevard. This was a rather exposed way to get money. Surprisingly, the Post Office was open, so we were able to send our many cards and letters home to England.

### **Visa by Visa**

Getting a visa extension reveals so much about the way this county operates. There are two methods. The official way, involves a visit to the Immigration Department near the Airport. From what we have heard it, is a very time consuming process with a lot of forms to fill in. We would have to deposit cash sum; the equivalent of our repatriation home. We had all the relevant information and cash that the immigration office would require; but the loss of our Passports for up to a month would really cause a lot of problems.

The second method involves a visit to an agency handling visa extensions. We picked a company called Tavia Angkor Travel on Monivong Bvd. When we explained to Sok that we wanted to have our business visas extended, he suggested the “Lucky Motorcycle Rental” shop. Now if we hadn’t heard of this place before, we would have thought this to be bizarre. We are in a very weird country and almost anything can happen.

Since we were nearer Tavia Angkor Travel and Tours we visited their air conditioned office. Visa extensions are just routine to them and our request was met with the following procedure.

“Can we see your Passports sir and Madam?”

Yes certainly we replied” with Coll handing them over.

A quick scan by them, established the type of visa. (Business or Tourist)

“How long do you wish? 3 months, 6 months or 1 year”

“Can you confirm the price of a 6 month visa” we asked.

“One hundred and forty dollar” was the not unexpected answer.

“Fine I said can we pay by Visa Card”

“Ok but we will take a 4% credit card fee.

This was a hefty commission charge, but in practice, we would have to pay more than this for Visa cash advance, unless we were taking out heaps of money.

This was all we had to do. No reason asked, or business case, Medical and Police reports or the repatriation bond. All we needed to do was to pay this Visa “tax” which is easily extendable with no time limit and wait 2 days for our passports to be returned.

Given the ease in which we got the Visas in the first place it was surprising even to us who had researched this. There may have been concerns about this procedure, especially if the Cambodian Government changed its mind; but to be honest, this would not be very likely, given the dependence that Cambodia had on Westerners for trade.

### **British Embassy**

We returned to the British Embassy where Coll had her bag vigorously searched. We were given passes and entered the

Consular section where a pleasant Khmer Visa Assistant welcomed us and handed over our registration forms. This procedure is recommended for expats as The embassy would offer help and advice and registration would speed up the process of getting in touch with next of kin in the event of any emergency. The process didn't take long and we were soon with Sok in search of JVK movers who would organise our shipment and customs clearance in Cambodia.

### **The Numbers game**

Although laid out by the French in a logical grid system of streets, the house and street numbering system takes a bit of getting used to. The main boulevards are usually named, but all the minor streets are numbered. We could normally work out where the minor roads were, but finding an individual building was a postman's nightmare. A typical address would be #125 Street 205. As the streets are often kilometres long, it is helpful to know the nearest street intersection. Sometimes this is mentioned in the address, but in the case of JVK we had no idea at all.

If the numbers were arranged in the usual western fashion, this would not be a problem. However Phnom Penh's colonial French house numbering system has long gone into disarray. For example we may find odd numbers on one side and evens on the other but the sequence might not be.

Occasionally we found numbers where expected, but the building numbers were so mixed up that we had to drive the whole length of the pot holed and waterlogged street to find it.

## **Encouraging news on the moving front**

Mark Donoghue the American manager of JVK was very helpful and offered a lot of advice and reassurance. He normally dealt with Companies and Non Government Officials NGOs. They do not pay duty, though private individuals would have to negotiate with the customs. He would handle our shipment from Phnom Penh Port, deal with the Customs, and pay the relevant tea money to the customs authority. Given the potential tax base on the value of our shipment approx \$10,000 he could save us a whole heap of money doing it this way.

It may seem like corruption, but for the Khmers and SE Asians the word does not exist. Basically; you just pay an official to get things done or speed things up for you. I only wish we could have done the same with the Inland Revenue as at the time of writing, I was still waiting for the tax on rental income to be sorted out. It has been over two months since the first application.

We visited the offices of Price Waterhouse & Coopers. We met Ngov Chong in a small conference room. He was very helpful, giving free advice on the tax regimes and a useful guide to the Cambodian tax system and laws. We finished off with jovial banter about English football.

## **Shopping!**

The first computer store we visited was ABC Computers. This small shop had most of the electronic goodies that we were likely to need; they could supply to order Epson paper and cartridges. They have a shop in Siem Reap, which will

help us a lot. The only downside was that the costs were just as high as in UK .

Anana Computers were the equivalent of PC World, on the ground floor of the massive Phnom Penh Centre on the banks of the Mekong. This most western of shopping centres had just about everything we could want, at prices well below what we would pay in Europe.

Above the computer store was the large International Stationary and Book Centre. This has a lot of English textbooks, Cambodian Law, computer and business guides. There is very little light reading here, but the selection is extensive. The “Market” on the ground floor had a plethora of Western goodies. Food, wine, beers, and cosmetics are good value; though breakfast cereals are very expensive. Electrical products; TVs, videos fridges etc were largely by Akira, a Japanese make not seen in the west. 29” TVs and huge fridge freezers are \$300 (£200) and DVD video players \$65 - \$100 (£40- £60).

### **Russian Market**

We took a trip out to the Russian Market. This is the most atmospheric in the city. Situated in a crowded city block to the south; it doesn't exactly look welcoming. Faded signs for ABC Stout and Tiger Beer overlook the chaotic street. Inside is a dark wonderland of consumer goods and food stalls. We quickly passed the fish and meat markets heading for clothing block after block of knickers and bras, followed by rich displays of woven materials sold from tiny stalls the owners usually hidden by their wares.

There were a few mine victims selling things, most politely. However one persistently pushing cards and guide books was getting really irritating. He followed us everywhere, in spite of our efforts to shake him off. We lost him in the vast motorcycle spares area, where everything from wheel nuts to engine and motor bike frames are on display. We filled our boots in the CD and DVD video stalls, where there is a great choice of music and DVD Video films. We were not there long before the guide book selling cripple, was with us again.

### **Ministry Of Tourism MOT test**

We looked into the Ministry Of Tourism office in a large French villa round the corner from the hotel. We were given an attractive and informative “Cambodia Journey of a Lifetime” brochure. It was evident from the time we walked in that this was the Tourist Information office, so we were soon pointed in the direction of the Main office on Monivong Boulevard.

Situated in an old school building similar to the Tol Sleng prison, the cell like offices on the first floor looked somewhat forbidding. Entering the office we were met by a warm reception and some friendly and useful advice. The official was toeing the official line about Business Licences, suggesting that we would be best to open up a hotel. It appeared that the government were encouraging new build scheme here on leased land. Foreigners cannot own land outright. It appeared that we would have to licence the premises conforming to a number of fairly straightforward building and fire regulations. We left with copy of this

information and a contact name in the local Siem Reap ministry.

### **Phun with phones**

Well something had to go awry while we were here and Mobitel the mobile phone and Internet Company were the first to put any bureaucracy in our way. I bought a high spec Nokia phone with an infrared link to enable wireless Internet connection to the laptop. Yes, you do hear right; a relatively poor country like Cambodia, has an advanced mobile phone Internet system, as well as satellite broadband access.

When I bought the phone we were told that we had to buy a SIM card from Mobitel. When we called in to ask about getting connected with the Cambodian local provider, they were helpful but would need a passport and address. This was a government law and the only way we could get one would be to get a letter from the company we worked for, or in our case, the hotel owner. Jim had gone away to Siem Reap and we had no idea when he would be back. So we would have to wait; probably until we got to Siem Reap.

The collection of our passports, with visa extensions was done at Tavia Angkor Travel. Dead on two pm a motor cycle courier delivered our passports with the visa extension stickers attached and dated 9<sup>th</sup> December 2003. We were now allowed to work here for the foreseeable future and renew our visa as we wished. Our visit here was now taking on a more permanent nature. Relieved, we returned to Sissowath Quay and nice pizzas at La Dolce Vita.

## **More on the January Anti Thai Riots**

We had a long meeting with Kenneth Cramer who runs Canby Publications. He is a journalist and photographer that publish the best tourist guides in the country. He also runs and the Canby web site that was invaluable in our Internet research. He was very complimentary about my work and has identified a few markets and at least one national publication that could be interested in my images. The market for fine quality postcards and high quality images is potentially huge. There are only a handful of postcard publishers and the cost of production is relatively low. So we will definitely have a opportunity here.

Ken gave us some very interesting and first hand knowledge about the Anti Thai Riots in Phnom Penh in January. The riots and subsequent border closure shook our confidence at the time with the negative press coverage in the media at home. Ken explained that Hun Sen the Cambodian PM apparently sparked them off. He started the rumour about the Thai actress claiming that Angkor Wat belonged to Thailand. This was to generate a little anti Thai feelings which might help him politically.

Unfortunately the whole situation escalated when the radio Station broadcast a story that Thais had burned down the Cambodian Embassy in Bangkok and had murdered many of the staff there. This sparked off the rioting, which resulted in the destruction of the Thai Embassy and attacks on Thai businesses. Most of the rioters were a hard core of disaffected students; not the illiterate poor as the western press suggested!

While this was going on, Hun Sen was out of the Capital. Ken suggested that Hun Sen requested the police to go easy if there were any trouble, not expecting more than a few bottles thrown at the Embassy. The end result of this rioting, was border closures to Cambodians and a multi million dollar claim for damages by the Thai Government; money which Cambodia could ill afford to pay.

The ironic twist to this being that most of the compensation was “donated” by the Thai casino owners in Poipet! Gambling is illegal in Thailand, so the Thais flock over the border in droves spending millions in Cambodia. Sadly little of this benefits the Cambodian economy.

The border closures only affected Westerners by a day or so; but the subsequent dent in the confidence has had serious effects on trade; not made any better by the paranoia surrounding the SAR virus. We left Kens office with mixed feelings. A poor start to the season may cause many westerners who were living on the edge to jump ship; this may provide opportunities in abundance for ourselves.

### **Banks and Estate Agents**

On opening the door of the smart Cambodia Asia bank I was confronted by a motorbike in the lobby. The rider was at the desk. He returned to the bike and wheeled it out of the door with the assistance of the doorman. It is a quite normal occurrence here as ramps wide doors are thoughtfully provided for this purpose. We still find this kind of thing really weird! Can we imagine what the reaction if this happened at home. I was told by the Clerk that there was a

problem with the line and they would not be able to complete any transactions.

During the run up to this trip, We had looked regularly at the Cambodia Properties Ltd, CPL real estate web site. This had given us useful information and some photos of properties in Phnom Penh. We had seen their colour property and business guide in our hotel which again only gave information in the city. On asking we were told that there were properties available in Siem Reap and that we could get more information there. They did show us photos of some hotels for rent and a lovely 8 room guest house for rent. We left here quite excited having arranged to meet them in SR the following week.

Coll wanted to visit the Nokia head office to find out about the use of her British phone in Cambodia. She had tested it and it worked, but she needed information on SIM cards. Coll established that she would need to get a Mobitel card for it to work here. While we were here a customer helped us out in translation. He asked us what we were doing in Cambodia. He introduced himself as Phanna a land agent. He sat with us for a while in the lobby over tea.

Phanna had an office in Siem Reap. They dealt mainly with the local market and would be more than happy to help us out. He was genuinely pleased when we told him how much we liked his country and as a very professional and competent English speaker We left him with our mail card and he told us that he would be in SR the following week and would look us up at our hotel.

**Wat Watching!**

Coll was watching a temple from the back of our tuk tuk on the way to the bank.

“What is that?”

Dave: “where?”

Coll; “over there”

Dave: “It’s a Wat”

Coll: “Which Wat”

Dave: “I don’t know what Wat”

Coll “So What



*Colleen at the Rising Sun Phnom Penh*

We have had such a successful and rewarding week here, that we feel that we are living a kind of world where everything is possible. In all our dealings; official and otherwise we have been overwhelmed by the kindness, helpfulness and positive responses from all we have met here.

## **End of Part 2**

**The story continues in Pt 3 as we arrived in Siem Reap  
and our quest for our home which became something of a  
Fawlty Towers Experience**