

Another Bloody Day in Paradise

Part 4

Life at Peace Of Angkor

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



Our story continues with a new villa; new friendships
dreams, disappointments and tragedies.

Moving to Our new Peace Of Angkor Villa

We hired a truck to take our furniture and possessions the kilometre to the new villa. It took several trips, but with the help of Sophath, Kimleng, Savay our new security Seth and Iem Saam, who had recently joined the Peace Of Angkor Crew. Our tuktuk drivers joined in too; so by early afternoon we had finished our move.

There was a lot of work to do over the next few weeks to prepare for our new guests who would enjoy our home so much more. Our rooms were so much bigger and nicer than our old place. We fitted them out as best we could. Siem Reap was not well served by furniture shops. We put a lot of business to the new furniture shop on Route 6. We could buy wardrobes; office furniture and many other items to furnish our new home.

The vast Psah Leu Market was our best source for kitchen equipment, bedding and curtains. That was more Colleens department than mine. Although our kitchen was modest we were able to make it usable by putting the washing up area outside in the narrow yard behind the building. Bunnet and Savvy were over the moon about their luxury working environment. Our existing Reception desk fitted perfectly in our lobby. We set up a tour desk opposite and a PC for guests to use.

The day after our occupation, our first guest was an American and his Korean girlfriend they had booked to stay at our old villa; so they had a surprise when they arrived at our new palatial home. We were hardly ready, so apologised for the unpacked boxes and lack of organisation. We gave them a bottle of wine in celebration of them being our first guests. We made sure they had a nice new deluxe room.

Setting up our offices

Having a dedicated Tour Office and Coll having her own Admin Office meant I could be as untidy as wanted :-). I was able to concentrate on the tours with Coll on taking the villa bookings and looking after the staff. Coll spent a lot of time giving support to our staff. Our booking system was improved by our good ratings in the Hostelworld website. We were not really a hostel, but for the first few months we were getting some solid bookings from that website.

My time was preoccupied with running the tours. We had a tour desk set up in the lobby, manned by Saam and myself. I was able to meet guest on arrival and sell the temple, lake and remote tours. This worked well as we were getting a good reputation for quality. I only went on a few tours at that stage, preferring to let our expert guides do their work around Angkor. I preferred to concentrate on the remote and lake tours.

Our wireless internet started reasonably well at first. However it was expensive and we had a strict data limit. The cost of \$280 per month was crazy money for speed little better than the best dial up. If we wanted a faster data speed we would have to pay up to \$1000 per month. Our connection did enable me to improve the website and was reliable enough to handle emails. It was not long before the speed of our internet became so erratic and slow as to be unusable.

We had numerous phone calls to tech support. None of the engineers could find out the solution. A lightbulb moment occurred when one of the engineers spotted the possible reason. A newly built 4 story house across the street was blocking the line of sight to the internet tower! So our aerial on the roof was extended.

In the early days Col and I we had many disagreements over the running of villa, tours and finance. For example I dealt with officialdom and taxation. Coll coming from an admin and accountancy background, did not like the “corrupt” Khmer ways of business. Taxation was done on a basis of estimation of income. I was not prepared to allow ourselves to be shafted by these officials, as there was no transparency and to where the money was going. Colleen could not handle this at all; so I was happy to play at the Khmer tax game. Villa tax was declared, but all the tour income was hidden from official view.

We did have the option of joining Real VAT Tax regime. Coll was keen on that idea. For the Estimated Tax Regime, we had to divide our annual tax payments into 10 months with no tax to pay at the end of the financial year (March and April). I did not agree with Coll in VAT, as keeping our estimates for tax below the small business VAT Threshold, we would have less paperwork to do. I expected that we would end up paying far more. Also I would have account for and declare the Tours Income ;-).

Noisy Neighbours

Noise from building in this fast developing town was a problem which continued to plague us for most of our time in Siem Reap. Although our building work was complete, we had our neighbours to contend with. We were surrounded on 3 sides with the construction of a new hotel, the Heritage Suites. We had to endure the sounds of drills, banging and the shrill of disc cutters from dawn till dusk. It wasn't so bad for the guests who were out all day, but to work with that racket all day was hard to take. There was nothing we could do about it so we just had to put up with it. Once this work was finished we had another set of building works on the remaining

side. A new house was being built next door. So this meant another 3-6 months of the sounds of building works.

Long Friendships

When Colleen and I set up Peace Of Angkor Villa back in 2003; we were expecting our guests to be transient in nature. Guests would pass through for a few days never to be seen again. To our surprise and pleasure a few of our Guests returned and some became good friends.

Janos the Barbarian & the Hostel Geckos Nest

We were preoccupied with our villa; but at the same time Janos Kis was setting up our old villa as the Hostel Geckos Nest. The name was due to the two large takeos that we previously had there. The villa was better suited as a backpackers lodge as it was simply furnished with small rooms,.

Janos loved the place. The house was not changed much, but Janos and his close friend Karoly had the rooms repainted, bunk beds installed and a large mural put up in the upper lobby. Janos was marketing to Hungarians. He more or less had virtually all the Hungarian visitors to Siem Reap.

I was a frequent visitor. It was good to get out of our own villa from time to time. Angkor beers and stronger liquor was always on offer. We always had a lot to talk about and I enjoyed the casual atmosphere. I had my 50th Birthday there.

Early in 2005 We had a group of Hungarians staying at our villa. I phoned Janos and invited him over to meet them. We had a few beers on our balcony. They wanted to go to Pub St and the Angkor What Bar. I hated that place so declined the invite. The Hungarians were booked on a sunrise tour the following morning. The guys had

a long drinking session, missed sunrise. all but one got up with hangovers in time for Sunset!

Janos had a few Khmer girlfriends in those days; but in 2005 he met Sophie. She was lovely, petite and a bit frail looking. Her family lived in Phnom Penh. Shortly before I departed for Malaysia I was given an invitation to the Wedding Of Janos and Sophie. They had been together for a relatively short time, so it was a surprise they were getting married so soon. Their wedding was to be held in Sophie's home city of Phnom Penh. The date was right at the end of my trip. I was so disappointed that I would be unable to attend. Colleen could not go either as she was committed to the villa.

Simon and Rosy Guest House

In late 2004 We had a visit from our near neighbour Simon who had just set up a new guest house. He had taken over a ex Khmer run villa on the Siem Reap River. We were able to give him some useful advice. I went round to Rosy's to see his place and rooms. Simon was upset over his neighbours. They had just started an extension which was to come up so close to his best rooms as to block out any natural light. Sadly there were no useful planning regulations to prevent this kind of thing.

Simon and Rachael ran Rosy's for many years. It was a hangout for many of my expat friends. The pub quizzes were fun and the meat pies were a legend.

Gordon Sharpless and Two Dragons

American, Gordon Sharpless set up Two Dragons in 2004 to complement his Tales Of Asia website. Coll and I visited there from time to time and enjoyed the food and chats with Gordon. I enjoyed the banter at the bar. Maylin the assistant manger and the

staff were a joy. Gordon had a few issues with them which we sometimes discussed. It was a bit of irony that sometimes Gordon would ask me for advice.

On one occasion Gordon was to spend an extended period in Thailand with his Thai wife. His new manageress resigned suddenly days before they were due to leave. The manageress fell for one of the guests and ran away with him! He was frustrated about having to be in Cambodia all the time; so was stressed out at times. Coll used to refer to him as Grumpy Gordon.

Fred Sigman & measuring the height of the temples

We had a booking from American photographer and film maker Fred Sigman in October 2005. He was a photographer, historian and videographer. He gave the impression of a serious guy that I would be keen to meet.

Here are some of his communications

“Dear Dave,

Thank you for the lengthy email response to some of my concerns about photographing in Cambodia. My trip there is part of a larger journey which will take me to Borobudur, Indonesia, the Ellora Caves in India, Sukhothai in Thailand and Bagan in Myanmar. I have traveled to some of these places before but this will be my first trip with a large format camera. It is a field camera with a compact tripod, easy to maneuver but still attracts attention.

What interests me as I travel is how once sacred sites are secularized by tourism but then made sacred again by a new type of modern tourist. Well, we can talk about all of that when we meet and I will be interested on your take.”

This all seems intellectual so I was expecting a serious Fred Sigman to stay at our Villa. The realty was a man of good humour and

humility who liked a beer or two. He was like a magic mushroom, a Fun-guy to be with!

“Dear Fred

Thanks for your booking at Peace Of Angkor. We have been attracting a lot of photographers both Amateur and Professional here. It is a great place to meet other archeology enthusiasts, travellers and photographers.

The chances of getting 8x10 sheet film developed here is virtually zero. The few quality commercial labs have now converted to Digital and those that are left I wouldn't trust to wash laundry let alone cope with valuable sheet film. Phnom Penh is no better as digital has virtually taken over from film.”

Large cameras and tripods are a potential problem in the major sites like Angkor Wat; Bayon Etc . If you look like a tourist then no one will notice. The difficulty with 10x8 cameras, as you know; are their physical size. The Apsara Authority see Professional Photographers as people with ”BIG” cameras; that is 6x6 or larger. It has nothing to do whether you are acting commercially or not.

Getting an official photo permit is expensive and impractical (takes at least 5 days) costs between \$100 and \$300. I would not waste time and money going down that road unless you were operating commercially. Large Tripods are not allowed!! There are always a number of 3 legged cameras at dawn at Angkor and no problems from the guards. I have used my full size tripod and Pro SLR at most temples of Angkor and have never been challenged.

It will help if you have a Khmer speaking guide especially around Angkor”.

Fred used Kimleng for his Angkor tours. He set up 10x8 his view camera on his tripod at the Bayon Temple. Almost immediately he was challenged by a temple guard. He asked Fred for his Photography permit. Kimleng told the guard that his camera was a surveying instrument and he was measuring the height of the temple. Fred showed the guard the gridded screen under his dark cloth light shield. The guard, non plussed, left Fred and Kimleng. So Fred was able to measure the temples without hassle.

Later on Fred visited the jungle temple of Beng Mealea. He was surprised that one of the police guards helped him carry some of his heavy equipment! For a tip of course.

John Bush and happy pizzas

At Christmas 2005 we had a booking from John Bush for a month. A Londoner from Harrow on the Hill, he was taking time off from the Inland Revenue Tax office to volunteer as an English Teacher at a School near Roluos 18 kms away. We got on well and had a lot of travel tales to swap over Angkor beers on the balcony.

John went out for a meal with another guest, Ray, an American banker. Lets say they has an eventful night! A culinary delight of Siem Reap was Happy or Ecstatic Pizzas laced with happy herbs. You need a certain amount of caution, as the strong ones can have a bad effect. I speak from experience! Ray had not tried weed before and erroneously ordered a super happy ecstatic one. Ray was totally high and giggled embarrassingly. He became paranoid and totally out of control. John managed to get him back to the villa safely. Ray was out of action for the rest of the following day.

John was a regular visitor for several years. He became a great friend. We did a few adventure tours together and shared many beers. John was involved in the Campaign For Real Ale CAMRA in

London. So John is something of a beer expert. Back in those days good beers were almost unheard of in Cambodia. The craft beer explosion in the west had not reached SE Asia yet.

Sopheak

John met Sopheak as a result of his work with Savongs School at Roluos, Sopheak was a doctor working for the Lake Clinic which had a boat which toured the Tonle Sap lake giving medical treatment to the boat people and villagers around Cambodias Great Lake. I had not realised that John had an ulterior motive for his regular visits to Siem Reap. John disclosed to me his marriage plans in 2014 when we met up in Kathmandu. John asked me to keep his marriage plans a secret.

After John's return to Siem Reap he had a few visits to Phnom Penh to see Sopheak's relatives. The bar room speculation about Johns forays to the Capital involved questions to me. I had to keep quiet about that until the Marriage was formally announced.

After they were married in Hong Kong, John and Sopheak moved to the family home in Lancashire after both of Johns parent died. They lived there for several years before moving to Cambodia in 2019 after John retired from his Tax Office job.

Craig Soden & a conspiracy against photographers

At the same time of Johns visit we had a booking from Craig Soden. He was with us for a month. Savin drive him around for the duration. Craig was an Australian amateur photographer, passionate about the Angkor temples. He was shooting film on that visit. Savin remarked to me after their first day that He had spent all day at the Bayon!

Craig returned to Siem Reap several times usually at Christmas time. On his next visit he noticed big changes with many temples

under renovation with the beginnings of ramps, steps and wooden walkways. He wanted to re shoot his film shots in digital.

Craig coined the term “A Conspiracy against Photographers” a tag line I used later when writing for the Phnom Penh Post years later.

One Christmas party he met Chhantha Vann who was working for me as a kitchen assistant. Craig, like John was spending more time in Siem Reap. He had failed for Chhantha in a big way. They married and after a beurocratic struggle, Chhantha eventually moved to Melbourne to be with Craig, a year after they were married. I visited them in Melbourne in 2015 and had a great time there with the family.

Bernard Huggins the oldest swinger in Town

In 2006 or 2007 we had a new neighbour, Bernard who lived across the road. He regularly came into the villa for dinner and got on well with all the Peace Of Angkor Crew. At 77 he was the life and soul of any party and sometimes went to late night Karaoke sessions with the POA crew.

The Funky Monkey bar had regular pub quizzes which Bernard was always attending. As a retired nuclear physicist he was great for the science questions. Bernard was one of the few survivors from the atom bomb tests in Maralinga in South Australia which he witnessed in the 1950s.

It was not uncommon for me to join him for late night drinking sessions after the pub quizzes, getting home at after 2am. Miss Wongs Cocktail Bar was a favoured venue which had good whiskey and sometimes bottled beer from New Zealand.

Bernard spent around 6 months of the year teaching English at the Catholic Church School and when at home in Brighton he was a volunteer to help the homeless. He rented one of our apartments one

year, after he had to vacate his small bungalow across the road. Bernard went on a few of my adventure tours too.

His last adventure with me was in 2012 to Kompong Thom and Sambor Pre Kuk temple complex. It was the day after a truck crash on route 6 brought down 11 power poles. This was the main electricity source from Thailand and disrupted power for 5 days at the middle of the hot season. We were OK as we were staying at a villa hotel in Kompong Thom, which had electricity and a swimming pool. 3 nights became 5 as we waited for the news of the power supply being restored.

On this trip Bernard was not his usual self. He had been having stomach problems and was not eating well. In December of that year we were expecting him to arrive in Siem Reap in time for our Xmas party. I was upset to find that he had died just before Christmas. That was very sad news “Bernard hit the buffers” as he joked one evening at Rosy’s about his demise.

Doug Lorber and the Golden Orange

Soon after we moved in we had a new neighbour, Doug who was running the Golden Orange Hotel with his Vietnamese wife. I used to go there regularly for steak dinners and banter with Doug and the guests.

Doug asked me to supply framed photo prints for his rooms. With over 20 rooms it was my best photo sale so far. He selected the images he wanted, to include many orange robed monk pictures. The pictures were delivered and Doug was really happy with them. However there was a problem. Some of his Khmer guests did not like to see monks looking at them while they were in the bedroom! So a number of the prints were replaced.

A few years later Doug was having marital problems. He turned to drinking heavily. Sometimes I would come to his bar for a meal and beer to see Doug totally inebriated. His conversations were incoherent and at times aggressive. I stopped going there, but on the odd occasions I did see him in Siem Reap Bars he was usually sloshed, even early in the evening.

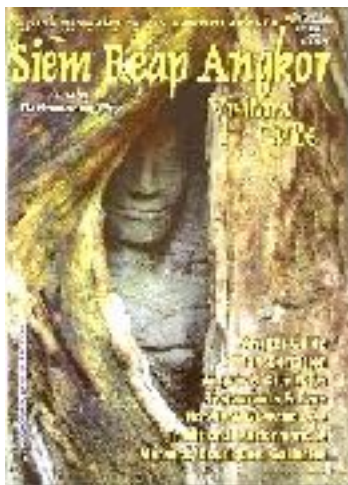
I heard from Simon at Rosy's that Doug had a moto accident. He was drunk after a night in the Zanzibar and not wearing a crash helmet. He was in a coma for months and never recovered.

Ken Kramer and The Siem Reap Angkor Visitors Guides

I had been regularly advertising in the Siem Reap Angkor Visitors Guide. I had a good relationship with the publisher Ken Kramer and Eng Ly Pheng, Ken's Khmer Marketing man. We often met up either in Siem Reap or I would call in to see Ken in his office in Phnom. Penh. I occasionally would let Ken know if I found any map errors.

On one of his visits to me, we talked about my remote temple and lake tours. Ken had heard of Kompong Khleang but knew nothing about it. He wanted to know more. I also showed him my map and guide of Koh Ker which I had just produced for sale. Ken offered to give me money for the map so as to put in the Guide with some images of the Tonle Sap Lake. He was looking for cover images for the publication, liked my work so thus started my contributions to the Siem Reap Angkor Guides. I produced around 50% of all the cover images for about 5 years. The image below is the cover from the October 2008 version. The image shows a small deity partially hidden in Ta Prohm. Few people were aware of it until this was published. Ken Kramer was inundated with requests for the location

of it. Perhaps I might have been responsible for the queues of



people with guides trying to take a look at it in subsequent years.

A cover Image for the Siem Reap Angkor Visitors Guide

Sadly several years later Ken had a tragic accident in Phnom Penh. He slipped off a gangplank coming off a restaurant boat and drowned.

Kimheng and his 8 legged pet

Returning to the villa after going into town one day I noticed Kimheng with one of the guests out in the car park by his tuktuk. They had a plastic bag and a large tarantula spider.

“What are you doing with that?” I asked

“I found it yesterday while out in the country catching frogs” was Kimhengs reply

“Oh! Where do you keep it?”

“In the bag in my tuktuk”

“Do you realise that if Colleen found out you would not see your next Birthday”

“Why?”

“Coll would kill you if she knew it was at the villa. What are you going to do with it?”

Well I will eat it later ” replied Kimleng.

Malaysia and Singapore August 2005

One of the things I missed most about living in Cambodia was Live Music. Apart from the disabled musicians Apsara dance shows and rare gigs at Molly Malones, Siem Reap was a musical desert.

Having been to many folk, and world music festivals in England, I took the opportunity in the low season to have a holiday in Malaysia and Singapore for the WOMAD World Of Music And Dance festival. Coll did not come with me as she had already been back to UK earlier in the year and wanted to look after villa and get some additional staff.

To leave rustic Siem Reap and visit the ultra modern, cities of Kuala Lumpur of Singapore was an eye opener. The WOMAD festival lived up to expectations. A big disappointment to me was having to miss the Wedding of Janos and Sophie.

Raden a new member of Peace Of Angkor Staff.

We were in need of anew Waiter and Reception Assistant. So while I was away Coll got in touch with the new Tany employment agency Coll emailed me to say she had interviewed a really good person for the job. His name was Doun Raden; an intelligent young man who had very good English. Coll asked me if We could employ him before I returned As she did not want to lose him. I agreed as I trusted Colls judgement totally.

When I returned to the Villa I met Doun Raden for the first time. He was 19 years old but looked closer to 16. Colleens assessment of him was spot on. Very intelligent, polite and with a good command of English. He had already got on well with the rest of the Peace of Angkor Crew. He would make a good receptionist and hopefully stay a long time.

That was very true, Raden was a big asset to the Peace Of Angkor Crew. His English language skills were excellent. He was taught by Peter Franks a British expat who left teaching to run the Warehouse Bar in Siem Reap. After a year or two Raden was running the Villa and became Tours Manager, in 2008. leaving me to go out on Photo Adventure Tours.

Cameras For Cambodia with Elizabeth Briel

In October 2005 I had a meeting with Elizabeth Briel an artist and photographer working in Siem Reap. She was starting a charity Cameras for Cambodia. The Idea was to get donations of old cameras so that poor kids would be given the chance to show their creative talents by the use of photography.

At that time Digital was too expensive to expect donations of Digital Cameras. So Elizabeth had donations of usable film cameras for kids to use. Needless to say I was keen to be involved so on our first session with the kids; we took them to have some fun photographing Angkor In Miniature. This was an installation of models made by Dy Proeng in his garden round the corner from our villa. The kids loved it and showed enthusiasm and creativity from a Childs perspective.

Angkor Disabled Association

Back In 2002 we met Dara the wheelchair bound man who was begging at the Killing Fields. He was a man of some intelligence

and was such a shame that he would be reduced to begging to make a living. When I returned home, I made a compilation image “Victim of a Revolution” of the man combined with shots from the Toul Sleng Extermination camp. I wondered what I could do with this image, or help those land mine victims. In some way. Less than a year later I found the answer.

While walking around town in the first weeks of our great Cambodia adventure, we met a legless man selling books around the Old Market. Sem Savantha was raising funds for his new organisation Angkor Association for the Disabled. The organisation was supporting Land Mine Victims. Some are seen around the Old Market begging as their meagre pensions.

My memory of the “Victim of A Revolution” opened up an opportunity. Sovantha told us he was having difficulty raising funds for his organisation. He had to get a business licence from the government and set the Angkor Disabled Association as a Non Governmental Organisation NGO. This required a payment which that did not have . We made a donation to pay for the AAD business Licence and continued for a few years giving some assistance.

A Surprise Reunion

Fast forward to November 2005; we had an English couple Mr and Mrs Shackleton booked for a week at our Villa I emailed Keith Shackleton giving advice of tours and transport around Angkor. I was in my office in the afternoon and saw a car draw up in the car park and noticed a couple get out and walk to the villa. I carried on with my work and got a phone call from Coll,

“The Shackleton's have arrived and have a present for you we are on the balcony”

“ Ok Coll I'll get up as soon as I finish what I am doing”

I ambled into the lobby; up the stairs to see Colleen with the couple looking out of the balcony with their backs towards me. They were wearing T shirts with the Slogan
“Long Distance Drinking Club
Kinlochleven branch.
Cambodia Laos Tour 2005”



I read this and it just did not compute for a few seconds. Long Distance Drinking Club, Kinlochleven; this did not make sense ??? Then as the woman began to turn I recognise a face from the past that had me totally amazed. It was Marion Casson and Keith Owens! I can't recall what I said; but to see those old friends from Scotland in Cambodia at Peace Of Angkor was an incredible surprise!

They had booked under a false name (the Shackleton was the survey ship Keith had been working on). Coll had been secretly arranging this without my knowledge for months. She did not give me a clue of their visit.

It was a fantastic and emotional reunion from my two friends who were the most sceptical of our move to Cambodia in 2003. Both would complain about the heat when they visited Southampton in summer. Ta Elit was also in on this deception too. I had planned to be away on a remote temple tour so would not have been around when they arrived. Ta managed to persuade me not to run that tour without giving the game away.

Keith and I had a history of playing practical jokes on each other. Keith arrives on Crutches as He had a football injury just before their departure for Cambodia. His injury almost cost him the trip. But he was able to get here! It was close to my birthday; so it was a fantastic excuse for a party!

I had the idea of some appropriate entertainment. I got in touch with Sem Sovantha; now director of the Angkor Disabled Association. I asked him if we could have the disabled musicians playing at our villa? We would ask our guests to join and make donations. This would be an appropriate entertainment for my temporarily disabled friend Keith.

Sovantha called in to see me and spotted my “Victim Of A Revolution” print in the Lobby. He knew the man, Teng Dara, who was now living in Siem Reap. Wow I thought. How amazing if I could meet him.

So on the 14th November 2005 we had a party for Keith Marion, Janos, the Hungarian Barbarian, his friend Karoly and the guests. To my amazements Teng Dara, the man I had photographed exactly 2 years before arrived. I gave Dara a print and he told Coll and I that he moved to Siem Reap to be with his family. He lived by making souvenirs to sell in the markets. He was also looking after a homeless and otherwise destitute girl. That story shows just how

much kindness and humanity in Khmer Culture that someone who had so little could still give to those in need.



This was the first of many concerts that we put on to benefit the Angkor Disabled Association. They played at all our Christmas Parties at the villa until we moved out in 2009. The traditional music was well appreciated by our guests and the Khmer interpretation of Jingle Bells. They knew the tune; but had no idea of the significance until I told them.

It was so fantastic to see Kieth and Marion who enjoyed their time in Siem Reap before flying off to Laos. They flew into Phnom Penh a week later and were staying at the FCCC Phnom Penh. I surprised them at the Foreign Correspondence Club Bar. We had a lot of whiskeys that evening!

A Nasty Shock from England

A normal day in early December 2005, I checked my emails as usual in the morning and got a shocking email from my UK Letting

Agency. There had been a fire at my house in Shirley Park Road! The information was sketchy. All the Agent could tell me was the Fire Brigade were called and substantial damage had been caused. Reeling with shock I went to see Coll.

“Wats the Matter Dave”

“I’ve just had an email from Leaders Agents to say my house has burned down”

Coll could not believe what In was saying either. It was unreal and every landlords Nightmare! Coll calmed me down with words of reassurance, but I needed more information or I’d go out of my mind with worry. I phoned Leaders the agent as soon as I could . They were going to investigate ASAP and let me know. I had to wait until the following morning so had a sleepless night worrying about it.

I had not been happy with the agent anyway. A few weeks before they had relet my house without informing me. The tenants we a group of Italian Restaurant workers who had only been in the house for a few weeks.

By the following day the agent informed me that the damage was extensive. The pictures they emailed showed my living room totally burned out, windows blown out and the house interior blackened. All furniture was likely to have been ruined but it appears the house structure was not apparently damaged. It appeared the the fire started in the living room while the tenants were at work, from the photos the rest of the fire was around the TV Cabinet.

All this happened a few days before a tour for the Australian Kemp Family to Ratankiri. Not only was my house was gutted by fire; but I was also gutted that I had to cancel the tour I had so much looked forward to.

I got in touch with Ta to see if he could run the tour. Ta had other tour commitments, but he was really keen to do this, so was able to re-schedule other guides for his pre booked tour work. That saved the tour as we needed someone with good experience to run it.

All this on top of the busiest time we had ever had. I needed to fly back to Southampton as soon as possible but I could not desert all the arrangements. We had a tour organised for 35 Pepy Riders. They were cyclists who were funding the School at Sophath's home village, They were coming just after Christmas. That was our most complex arrangements we had ever been involved in.

I needed to deal with the insurance company, letting agent and anything else related to the fire. I was assured by my insurers that they would handle all the arrangements for repairs etc.

It was worrying time. My insurers reckoned not a lot would be done until January. In the mean time the insurers would remove all the remaining contents and make the building secure. So I decided to live as normal and keep working to take my mind off the fire problem.

At the end of January I had to fly to freezing Britain to look at the damage to my home and sort out the insurance claim. My insurers were to repair the fire damage. I could claim for the cost of furniture and fittings and for 6 months loss of rent.

It was with some trepidation that I visited my house to see the damage for myself. The living room was totally burned out and broken windows boarded up. Both floors were blackened by smoke. It was a depressing sight. The furniture had been removed to a store.

I went to the store to look at the remnants of both my furniture and the personal effects of the tenants who were not insured. All of it were burnt or blackened by smoke and a total write off. My

insurance covered my furniture and fittings but not those of the occupiers. The insurance assessor told me the fire was likely caused by a Sony Playstation. He had experienced the results of fires caused by the Sony batteries spontaneously combusting.

My few weeks in Southampton were dominated by arranging for additional building work beyond what was to be completed by the insurance company. I was to get the bathroom refurbished, replacement patio doors and double glazed windows. I did take time to meet up friends before flying home to Cambodia.

Back home in Cambodia

Life in the villa continued as normal. I was soon back at work organising and running tours. We were using minivans and the occasional 4WD driven by Leng Chhay. We had amazing adventures in those years, visiting places well off the normal tourist trail. Much of this will be in a further journal.

Exploratory trips to Koh Ker, Prasat Bakan (Preah Khan Kompong Svay) Kulen Mountain, Banteay Chhmar were remote and exciting. We were at the cutting edge of tourism and had many adventures.

I was wanting a vehicle for myself. I missed driving and reckoned that I had learned a lot from my tours. I started out looking for a vehicle for myself and the tours.

Driving in Cambodia

On October 2006 I found a Mitsubishi Pajero which I purchased from an expat in Phnom Penh. I completed the transaction at a bank just off Monivong Boulevard and was given simple directions from the Swiss ex owner how to get out of the city. That was simple really, as Monivong Bvd extends south to north ending up at the Friendship Bridge. It would be easy to pick up the Route 6 to Siem Reap from there.

For my sins I decided it was easier to drive through a market which the old owner suggested would be messy. It looked OK to me and easier than turning across the teeming mass of vehicular mayhem that is Monivong Boulevard. I turned instead into a mass of bicycles, rickshaws and motos all coming at me from all directions. I was now very conscious of the size of my 4x4 and the fragility of those that surrounded me. Having driven nothing bigger than a bicycle in Cambodia; I was aware of the traffic scattering before me.

I had always felt vulnerable as a bicyclist and at the bottom of the motoring food chain; so seeing Camrys and motos giving me room (mostly) was a revelation. It had always amazed me how traffic moves in this city of intersections and only a few traffic lights.

Once I had found my way back onto the divided Monivong Boulevard it seemed too easy. So easy that after 5 minutes I came to the realisation that I was travelling south and not north, Being very English I resisted the temptation to go against the No U turn, so found a side road to turn in.

Maybe it was quieter than usual; but I found the traffic going north a lot less trouble. It was the traffic going south on the same lanes against the flow of traffic which was the most worrying. In recent years Monivong had a concrete dividing strip which means that even more motos and tuk-tuks go the wrong way between intersections.

Crossing the Friendship bridge and heading out of the city, I had to dispense with the British reluctance to use the horn. In Britain it is considered somewhat impolite and an invitation to road rage. In Cambodia, road rage is a rare thing and horn is a matter of survival! There are so many potential disasters waiting to happen.

Signposting on Route 6 is fairly good so it is not easy to get lost, There were times when the flooded landscape looked so unfamiliar that I thought for a moment I was on the wrong road to Kompong Chhang. The roads are relatively free of cars but thousands of bicycling children in blue and white uniforms lined the road shoulder. In Britain I was using the horn rarely; here on this road at times; it was once every few seconds. I really felt as though I was doing something a bit naughty.

Some of the loads on motos are always of picturesque interest; but having to avoid moto trailers with anything from huge loads of wicker furniture to mattresses piled high. Any kind of wood, poles or stacked up across the rear seats making some of them 2 or more metres wide. Not so good when you consider that these transports have to pass kids 3 abreast on bikes or oxcarts. There is not much spare space on the 2 lane road when a convoy of trucks are passing in the opposite direction! The animals on the road are a serious hazard; death wish dogs, and kamazi cattle

If driving by day has problems the late departure and early sunset with the rapidly darkening sky was worse. The bugs that spattered the windscreen and my attempt to use the screen wash just made things worse. Every smear seemed life threatening and the oncoming cars and blinding trucks and buses make driving after dark no fun at all. With the unlit bicycles, heavily laden oxcarts as well as lightless motos made me need to have 120% concentration. What white lines there are on the road NW of Kompong Thom are pretty well worn with no reflective cat's-eyes or road edge markers. An error of judgement would be catastrophic with the deep flooding either side of the causeway. Sometimes a speeding Camry or Landcruiser passed; so I was able to put my foot down and follow

for a short while before good sense prevailed. I had around one hour before assistance in the form of a purple bus. It was going at around 80 to 100 kph clearing everything away from its path and shielding my eyes from the oncoming lights.

I kept a reasonable distance behind and as the road improved beyond Kompong Kdei, traffic lessened. Route 6 from there is the closest to a western style highway out here. With proper road markings, reflecting signs, speed limits and some monster speed humps around Damdek ; one could almost get the illusion you are driving in Europe!

I was in Siem Reap only 5 minutes later than my 8pm estimate. What more I survived!

The Mitsubishi Masturbater

I kept the Pajero for over a year. It was good off road and easy to drive on road but the replacement turbo diesel engine installed before I bought the vehicle in 2006 was not exactly quiet or smooth and the ride quality was not too good.

I had some problems with the vehicle transmission and drive shafts. I found out from the Mitsubishi Owners Club website that Pajero meant wanker in Spanish. This meant that the Pajero was sold as a Shogun in Europe and Montero in the Americas. It amused me when I saw Khmers driving around proudly displaying the name of their Mitsubishi Masturbater in large letters on the sides extending over two doors!

After what was a patchy reliability record I decided that I would sell the ageing Pajero. I put the feelers out a long time before hoping to get a decent Land Rover. My Khmer friends suggested that I should get a Land Cruiser. I looked at some before the Pajero; but all that I saw were imports which were too expensive, had auto gears and

like most cars here had left hand steering which was a compromise I wouldn't make.

A new Toy and SETI Garage Phnom Penh

A got in touch with SETI Garage Phnom Penh; a professional outfit that service cars and act as broker to buy and sell vehicles. They found me my Pajero in 2006 and were able to fix the transmission faults before I was able to sell it

SETI Garage was run by a knowledgeable but eccentric Frenchman, François Château. He has the uncanny ability to make the simplest question into a confusing complex verbal barrage of Anglo French technical details, so by the time he has finished his answer, I had been so confused by his answer that I have to look really dumb and ask the same question again?

They found a possible vehicle; a 1997 Landcruiser which looked to be suitable and affordable. I went down to Phnom Penh to see it. Ta's brother Aung came with me to the garage to give me his second opinion. The 1997 cruiser looked good drove well and everything appeared to work OK. It had been owned by UNDP and appeared well looked after. Being basic, it lacked the leather upholstery and other electronic gadgetry; but still had electric windows rear wiper CD Stereo; push button 4WD selection as well as a serious set of new Michelin XML off road tyres. The 4.2 litre 6 cylinder diesel was smooth as silk and ride quality a huge leap in quality over the Pajero.

My plan was to kit the vehicle out as a serious expedition vehicle. A roof rack, bull bars with driving lights, a winch for removing felled trees and getting our of difficult situations and snorkel system to prevent water and reduce dust getting into the engine. I decided to add some new alloy wheels; more for appearance than for any

practical purpose. The carpets were to go; replaced by hardwearing rubber matting as well as a heavy-duty set of seat covers. Most of the above equipment and the full servicing and overhaul of the braking system was carried out in Phnom Penh by SETI.

As the Landcruiser had been owned by an NGO no purchase tax had been paid on the vehicle. As it was now privately owned I had to pay several thousand US dollars in import tax. This was significantly less as a used vehicle than the 125% on a new one. Francois and Nasy the secretary and female mechanic, handled all the paperwork for me. The vehicle had to be reregistered. The process would take a couple of months; so I had a yellow temporary registration attached to the windscreen.

I drove the Landcruiser back from Phnom Penh after a delay of a week, getting it fitted out properly for expedition use. Before I drove away, Francois told me that I will need to fuel up soon, as the fuel level was low. As I prepared to drive away he noticed that the front bull bars were not installed correctly. Time was getting on and the he kept me discussing this for a few minutes. I decided to continue as the parts were not going to fall off.

I began to drive off again; got 30 metres and run out of bloody diesel. I was in sight of the garage and next to the main sewerage canal for Phnom Penh. I caused minor traffic chaos until Nasy the secretary and garage staff came over and helped push the vehicle to the side of the road!.

I nearly keeled over with the stench and 90oC heat. Thankfully they brought over some fuel and I was on my way within 15mins. Thankfully I managed to keep my sense of humour. I phoned Coll From a filing station. She had a good laugh! Well if nothing else; the story will give someone some amusement!

The worlds worst criminal!

A year later I took the Landcruiser back for the annual service. I entered the office to see Nasy there.

“Is Francois here?” I asked.

“No something terrible has happened. Francois has been arrested”

“Why? What happened?”

“The police arrested him for robbing a bank ”

“What!” I exclaimed with incredulity

“The police say he had robbed the bank using the pistol he kept in a drawer in this office. It must be a scam. He would never do that”

Nasy was really upset. “ they say it was for less than \$200; his special Glock pistol was worth over \$2000”

I had always thought Francois was a bit of a character, but he has run his business since the mid 1990s the idea was incomprehensible and lacking in any motive.

I left the Landcruiser in the hands of the mechanics and used a tuktuk to get to the Bright Lotus where I usually stayed.

The following morning I saw the headline on the Cambodia Daily

“EXPAT ROBS CANADIA BANK”

The story unfolded!

Francois entered the bank; went up to the counter and pointed his gun at the cashier and demanded money. The frightened cashier handed over \$180 dollars. Francois counted the cash putting the pistol down on the counter, the cashier grabbed the gun and Francois fled. He ran into a plate glass door knocking himself out in the process. A security guard apprehended him and held him until the police came to arrest him.

I found out later that Francois had marital problems with his Khmer wife. There was a big argument and he totally lost control. It was speculated that he was high on drugs. It was not the kind of thing anytime in their right mind would do. As a result of this he was sentenced to 10 years in Cambodian jail! Thankfully Francois business partners were able to keep the SETI garage running.

More involvement by myself

Now I had my own 4WD I drove to many of the remote sites. Banteay Chhmar, Preah Vihear, Koh Ker, Kulen Mountain, Preah Khan of Kompong Svay were challenging destinations on bad roads and tracks.

I became more involved with the amazing trips to the Tonle Ad Lake villages of Kompong Phluk and Kompong Khleang where locals never saw tourists and would be curious to what we were doing.

These stories are in the next part of the Peace Of Angkor Adventures Saga !

Colleen and Family Problems

Colleen loved running the Villa, she loved our family of staff who respected her and worked tirelessly for us. Coll gave an amazing amount of support and training to the crew.

Just before we left for Cambodia Coll learned from her sister Maureen that Rob her Brother in Law was suffering from Huntington's disease; and only had a few years to live. Her father had a heart problem and her older brother Ricky had a stroke and had to go into a care home. This all happened within a year or two of our arrival. Being so far away from home made these problems even worse psychologically. Each Spring in the low season Coll

would go back to England and give what support she could to her family.

Rob's health deteriorated, her father and brother passed away. Being so far away caused unbearable stress for her. She did not have the kind of female support she would have had back home in England. Coll spent several months in England not returning until December. She was back to her old self again and partying like the rest of us. On the occasional karaoke sessions Coll was a much better singer than me.

During 2008 Coll became withdrawn and left me to deal with the guests as she could not pretend to be happy when she was with the guests. I was out on tours so much that even when back at the Villa I was dealing with tour clients in the evenings as well as during the days. I hit on the idea of renting a place away from the villa so we could get away from the villa. We did find a nice bungalow nearby and at the time of signing the lease on it she had an email from Maureen to say that Robs illness had worsened. That news focussed her attention on getting back to her family; so we abandoned the idea of renting the bungalow.

A New Home and Attempted Robbery

I decided to rent the Blue House which I saw when we were house hunting. This was typical Khmer and in a good location on St 25 near the river. It had a basic kitchen, shower room and a low ceilinged bedroom downstairs. A rustic staircase led to a large white painted living room, small bedroom and shower room upstairs.

Shortly after moving in I returned home to see the kitchen door ajar. My bedroom had been ransacked but so far as I could see, nothing had been taken. Strangely I saw a portable hard drive on the kitchen table and plugged into the mains. I phoned the Police but

when I told them nothing had been taken. They lost interest and would not take this any further. The hard drive was a total mystery which defied any explanation. All I had on it was photo files.

A day later I got out of my shower to see a young guy who had climbed over the fence and was attempting to break in. He saw me with a towel wrapped around me and fled. I was not dressed for a chase, but he was over the fence in seconds.

This was not the end of the story. A few days later I returned home in the afternoon to see my storage room door open and damage to the kitchen door. I called My landlord who lived next door to ask if he heard anything. There was noisy building work going on so he heard nothing. He went round the back of the house and a young guy ran out, followed by the landlord who chased him across the road and brought him down with a rugby style tackle. The young felon was taken to the cafe opposite. I crossed the road to see the robber tied to a chair shaking with fear, with a man pointing a pistol at him.

He looked like the guy I saw breaking in to my garden a few days before. The man with a gun asked me what I wanted to do with him? Not wanting a death in front of me I suggested the police should be called. At this moment the Khmer owner of the Butterfly Garden Restaurant next door, came over and told me that he had just lost his laptop to a thief who stole it from his office. There must have been a connection to the simultaneous robbery and attempt at my home. I left this in the hands of the Cambodians and Police.

Later I went to the Police Office to make a Statement and confirm that this was the young thief who got into my home earlier. There was no attempt to ask for money from me as might have been expected to investigate this crime. I did find out from My neighbour

that he police retrieved his stolen laptop. I did not ask what he paid the Police to retrieve it.

After this incident I requested my landlord to put up a higher fence. I did contribute to it, as I did not want any further break ins while I was away. Although my landlord was OK his wife and son was not. Almost every time I paid the rent she would give me sob stories about needing money and kept asking me for money to help. Her teenage son would play loud music from the tin shack the Landlord and his family lived in. That was an annoyance that made my life less than peaceful at times.

Colleen returned from England

Coll remained in England for many months but returned to an enthusiastic reception as we went in the van to meet her at the airport. Life got back to normal until just before Christmas 2008 when Coll's Sister asked her to come to England as Rob's health was deteriorating and it seemed that he would not see another Christmas. Rob made it beyond the New Year. Colleen remained in England getting a job in Social Services until October 2009 when she joined us again in Siem Reap.

Woz Tours

Towards the end of 2008 I was reading with interest the exploits and amusing stories of Woz on the Tales Of Asia forum as he traveled around the world. By December he was heading to Southeast Asia. He posted a message asking if anyone in Siem Reap was having a party he could crash? I invited him to our Peace Of Angkor Christmas Party. I was sure he would be entertaining! We got on well at the party at the villa. Warren Garber was spending a few months volunteering for an organisation making water filters for

villages that did not have a safe water supply. I offered him a room at the Blue House.

A few days after Woz moved in I came back home after dark and had some difficulty opening the solid metal gates. I rattled and banged the gates loudly to try and open them. While doing so I had a phone call from Woz telling me that “someone is trying to break in through the gate” “No you wazzock, its me: the gates have jammed shut can you help me get in?”

Woz remained at the Blue house until the rainy season in May. While I was on a remote tour we had flooding in Siem Reap. When I returned home I found the blue house and garden awash with water. The ground floor bedroom stank of mould. This was time to move back into Peace Of Angkor Villa.

In 2009 Woz moved back to Siem Reap and started to work with me, marketing Peace Of Angkor Tours. His marketing expertise transformed our website while I was away in Australia in early 2010. He worked tirelessly that year for us and spent time in Vietnam creating good contacts for tours there. This became a full time job for him eventually moving to Vietnam.

New Tour Office

After colleens departure from England in 2008 I had a decision to make about the lease of Peace Of Angkor Villa. The economic crash of 2008 had affected tourism and our bookings were down. The expense of running the villa was becoming unsustainable. Our lease was due to expire in September and our landlord Narith had informed us that he would put the rental cost up. I looked for an alternative.

I called into the real estate agent off Wat Bo St only to find the office, which was shared with a massage parlour, was closed and

Shuttered. A note on the door directed me to the new makeshift Estate Agency the back of a metal workshop. This was the family owned business of the estate office owner.

The ex office and massage parlour in Street 20 was up for rent. I thought this might be a useful base for a tour office as it was in a street with many guest houses and hotels. It was opposite the Two Dragons, run by my friend Gordon Sharpless.

I had a look at the building which had a mezzanine floor split at the rear with two rooms arranged on the floors at the rear. There were two upper floors arranged as basic studio apartments. The rent was cheap but the building needed refurbishment. I negotiated a ten year lease with the owner.

I decided to give the building a complete renovation turning the ground floor into a tour office and lobby with a new staircase leading to the mezzanine floor to give direct access to my tour office, which had an internal window overlooking the lobby.

Upstairs I redesigned the 4 small studios into larger apartments; one on each floor. I had both apartments fitted out with luxury wood kitchens and shower rooms. I put in full kitchen equipment and attractive furnishings and carpets.

The building work took 3 months and was done to a good standard after a few issues. The woodworkers made a the steps and upper gallery in a style similar to the rustic houses. I had a great place for a photo gallery in an area where many tourists would pass through; By August the new Tour Office was finished, It looked fabulous and it was a new start in preparation for our departure from the Villa in September and the 2009/10 tourist season.

Janos and Peace of Angkor Tours

Earlier in the Summer Janos wife Sophie and their child Natalie, moved back to Siem Reap. They had been in Europe after closing Hostel Geckos Nest. I offered them a home in Peace Of Angkor Villa which was underused as we only had a few guests.

Janos was keen to help me with the tours promotion. He worked hard to get links to other guest houses and hotels. We also looked around for an alternative to the Peace Of Angkor Villa. This was a long process which did not come to anything. We did see some nice places but most were either too expensive or unsuitable.

We had a bit of problem. Janos and I had similar skills but different ideas. His attempts to tie in with other hotels was not a success. Many Khmer run hotels already had guides and drivers; many were family, so were reluctant to take on a western run tour company. Other guest houses were entrenched with the taxi mafia who would bring guests from airport and elsewhere for commissions. They were dependant on this so would not want to risk any loss of custom.

After several months I could see this partnership with Janos was not working. We were not doing well financially and I could not afford to pay Janos a decent salary. Working with friend does not always end well. It was really important to keep my friendship with Janos. I used my best diplomacy with Janos and we agreed amicably to end the partnership and keep our long friendship.

The Third Peace Of Angkor Villa

Phil Hogg who ran a number of hotels businesses in Siem Reap, told me of a possible opening with Suki a Singaporean chef who wanted to run a small villa and needed a business partner. On the face of it I thought it was a good idea as we would have a new

smaller Peace Of Angkor Villa with a manger running it and keep many of our staff when we departed our existing villa.

The chosen villa was an attractive building with only 8 rooms. It seemed like a good partnership. We entered into an agreement to lease the property with Suki managing it and us supply the staff and marketing through our website. This tied in perfectly with our departure from our old Peace Of Angkor Villa. So we left the villa in August and set up the new villa in preparation for the new season. The Tour office became a temporary store for all the furniture which we removed from the old villa. Much of the excess was sold cheap or given away to our staff.

Rain and floods

September 2009 was incredibly wet. Rain and minor flooding was not unusual but the deluge and severe flooding caused some difficulties. Our tour office resembled a refugee camp for several of our staff who had their homes flooded out.

I went to see Phil Hogg at his 5 Star guest house along the river. The roads were awash with water lapping over the thresholds of many properties in the town. The Five Star Guest House was inundated. Phil's accommodation on the ground floor was in deep water. As we were deciding what to do, the water almost came up to knee level as we talked around the pool table. I offered to take Phill and a couple of guests to a safe refuge. I had to move fast as I did not want my land cruiser to turn into a boat.

Thankfully the Tour Office escaped the flood and the new villa was Ok. The flooded road works completely blocked the Sok San road. This made access difficult as I had to negotiate my vehicle through narrow lanes barely wider than the Land Cruiser.

On the day the we were to officially depart the old Peace Of Angkor Villa, I saw something that we had always wanted. The villa garden had a pool! The grounds were flooded, with the villa an island. The NGO suffered flooding days after moving in early.

I had a look around to collect odd items which had not been taken earlier. I had wanted the vertical blinds in the offices and curtains, but they were already going mouldy in the high humidity. I was shocked to find a large photo case hidden behind my office door. This contained many prints of mine which were totally ruined. I just had to bin the entire soggy contents.

David Bibbins. Kimleng and the Tropanier Villa

We advertised our new Villa on Sok San road as well as the Tropanier Villa, which was opened up by David Bibbins and run by Kimleng and his new wife at the same time we were finishing up our 2nd Peace of Angkor Villa.

Canadian David was another ex Peace Of Angkor guest from 2005. He fell in love with Cambodia and its people. His boutique villa was not far from Wat Bo street. It offered a touch of luxury being more upmarket than ours on Sok San Road. I was happy to help Kimleng, who left us before getting married in 2008. This arrangement was mutual as David was a photographer and he was keen for collaboration with us.

Colleens return and the House Across the Road

In early August Colleen returned from England to an enthusiastic reception and an opening party at our new villa. We had a few guests who joined in the fun which was followed by a crazy night at a Karaoke venue. This was owned by one of Ta's relatives. It was in a large building divided into soundproof windowless rooms with

good AV systems and an endless supply of drinks. It was a brilliant



return for Colleen.

Kean ,Sorn , Deth and Coll at her homecoming

Coll stayed in the Tour Centre where I was for a while . We needed more space so looked for another home. I saw a for rent sign for the house across the road. I had a look at the top floor apartment which was up for rent for \$180 per month. It had two bedrooms with attached shower rooms, a big tiled living room, small kitchen and a balcony. Sadly it was a disgusting mess, which I did not think Coll would consider.

We looked around but did not come up with anything nice or affordable. Coll Suggested having another look at the house across the road. It had been cleaned up a bit but needed re-decoration. Coll could see the potential. We took it on after Raden and his family redecorated it. It was a handy place, as we ran a high speed internet cable across the street and I had a covered space to park my Landcruiser.

In November, we moved in to the newly decorated two bedroom apartment. We tried to move furniture in, but the stairs were too narrow. We had to remove one of the upstairs windows and hauled the big stuff up by rope.

New Villa Woes

What started out as a perfect arrangement with Suki did not work out as planned. The villa was filling up with tour guests but we had problems with Suki. Although her food was good and well presented; breakfasts were taking far too long with guests being late for tours. Suki was constantly complaining about our staff. We had been very happy with them but Suki wanted to impose strict Singaporean standards on them. This caused tension within our otherwise happy staff some threatened to resign.

The road works in Sok San Road continued to cause chaos. The whole road was dug up to lay main drainage. No vehicles or tuktuks could pass. We were not getting any walk ins and some guests in taxis were unable to get to us. Guests had to negotiate an extremely muddy walk to the bars and restaurants in Siem Reap Town.

The last straw came only a month after full operation. Suki decided to take a short holiday just as we were full of guests. This left no one to manage the place. I was very angry about this. I sacked her & terminated our agreement. I found out from my staff what I already realised; Suki had been a terrible manager and upset almost all our staff. Coll and myself did not want to continue this villa so closed; it transferring our guests to the Tropanier. Thankfully we did not lose much money only the deposit and some minor renovation work.

Don't Bank on it

By December Coll returned to England to stay with Maureen who needed support as Robs health was deteriorating. She remained in Hythe with Maureen for many months. I continued running the tours which were taking more of my time. Colleen helped out from England collecting money from our Paypal Account. It was a useful way of collecting tour deposits and money. Paypal were not allowing payments to be made into a Cambodian bank account. This was a good solution as Coll could transfer money into our joint account and I could then wire it to our account in Cambodia.

This worked well until Colleen become unemployed. The UK Tax Authorities found out through HSBC bank that there were significant amounts of money in our Joint Account. She was called to account by the Fraud Authorities as to why she was claiming Unemployment Benefits with money in the bank account she had full access to. After her explanation that the money was not hers but were Peace Of Angkor Tour funds, we had to close this account to absolve Colleen of any repercussions for her Unemployment benefits.

Another Home

I lived at the house across the road for about two years. It was an OK place but the landlord who lived downstairs was not proactive in getting repairs or maintenance done. I also had to put up with cooking smells from the kitchen which was under the common stairwell. I do not do garlic in the mornings.

The landlord owned a shop selling truck and tractor tyres. This had no impact until he stored the huge tyres under the awning where the vehicles of myself and the landlord were parked. The lack of space made it increasingly difficult to park my Landcruiser. To get to my front door I had to thread my way through the piles of tractor tyres.

The odour of rubber was not pleasant and did not mix well with the cooking smells from the landlords cooking area

Water shame

The water supply in our area of Siem Reap became unreliable. It was causing water supply problems in the Peace Of Angkor office and apartments. We could not understand why until Raden climbed up and inspected the water tank in the roof. It was installed when the building work was done but was totally empty. The back up tank had not been connected to the water supply! So when the water pressure dropped we had no water for ourselves and the apartments.

I had no water at times in my flat either. This would often occur in the evenings and mornings when I needed a shower. I asked the landlord to install a water tank. He produced a stainless steel tank within days and expected me to get it installed at my expense!

The day afterwards, I was in the New Apsara Market and talked to George Mann a photographer who had previously stayed at our Villa. He was going to move back to Thailand. He was leaving his lovely apartment and he told me his landlord was the best.

I went down St 20 to meet Narin the landlord and take a look at the Apartment. The two bedroom apartment was fabulous. It had a massive lounge cum kitchen 2 en suite shower rooms and a toilet next to the Kitchen area. It was in new bock of four with a large garden area with plenty of parking space. It was absolutely perfect for me so I arranged to move in as soon as possible.

It did have some unusual neighbours. There was a crocodile farm round the back! I sent photos of the place to Coll who I was hoping to be back in Siem Reap as soon as she could. I added one of the crocodile pit with a 10 meter pool 4 metre high walls around the compound and around 30 full size crocodiles! “The Landlord has a

built a swimming pool; do you fancy a dip?" was my description. She was with Maureen when she opened my email. Their reaction must have been priceless; I wish I'd been there to see it!

Colleen's dream realised

Colleen was trying to get a job while she was in England and found one with social Services. She made the decision to stay in England and earn some money with the intention to return to Siem Reap. Now that we had no villa, running it would not be an option. Coll had this dream to work teaching children so while she was in England she went on online courses to learn how to teach English as a foreign language. TEFL This kept her busy for much of the year. I missed Coll very much and wanted to see her back in Cambodia. On my regular visits to Rosy Guest House I used to see Kevin Kenan a Welshman who had lived in Cambodia for many years. He was the head teacher of Smart Kids School.

One evening Kevin was expressing frustration at the lack of commitment of the young student teachers that were working at his school. They were only in Cambodia for a few months at a time. This did not give the continuity for the students that he considered necessary. I told Kevin that Coll had just passed here TEFL qualifications and wanted to return to Cambodia to teach children. Kevin was interested as and gave him Coll's email .

Coll and Kevin exchanged information about the School and Coll showed her enthusiasm and potential for the job. So a few weeks later in 2011 Coll returned to Siem Reap after nearly 2 years absence. We had a fabulous party in the apartment which Colleen loved (apart from the crocodilian neighbours) It was fantastic to see Coll after well over a year. She was so excited to be back with us all and meet all our Khmer Friends.

So Coll was soon doing her dream job teaching kindergarten children. She made a good impression and was also working with Mac Whitney another of Rosy Guest house drinkers. I had not seen Coll so happy and enthusiastic about life for a long time . We had such fun were often at Two Dragons re visit the temples and planning for the future. Savvy used to housekeep for us and cook us her lovely meals. Life was good and happy.

The Wedding of Raden and Srey Rin

The most important event for us was the wedding of Raden and Srey Rin. This was a traditional wedding ceremony. The First part was held at the brides family home, followed by a photo shoot in the park near the Grand Hotel D'Angkor Friend and pro photographer Alan Stuart-Watt was giving assistance to the official Khmer photographer, who was getting used to digital photography. The reception party had upwards of 600 guests. It was not unusual to get that many guests. Wedding halls can handle as many as 1000 in tables with DJs and Wedding bands. The food was excellent and no shortage of drinks provided. As in western weddings the cake was an important part of the proceedings. Later in the evening it was dancing to loud Khmer rock, funk and rap. It was a late night and one of the best weddings ever.



Black September in England

At the end August 2011 I had a long planned and overdue visit to England. It was the wedding of my Niece Kay and Gary who were getting married at the end of August. I was the wedding photographer and I bought over a Khmer style album for the prints. I had a long sleepless flight back to England and took the National Express Bus to Basingstoke where my sister Shiela and Tom collected me from the bus station. It was cool and wet; not a good introduction to English weather. We went out to a local pub for a family reunion and a taste of several English ales.

The Kay and Garys wedding was a contrast to to a Khmer one. The ceremony was held at a hotel in nearby Hook village that specialised in wedding parties. This was not a church wedding; the hotel had a dedicated wedding hall for the official ceremony. We wandered off with a few drinks before the ceremony. This was followed by the lunch and more beers. I managed to keep my camera steady for more photos outside in the gardens in the afternoon. By early evening and the wedding reception I photographed the cake cutting ceremony.

After that jet lag and an excess of alcohol made it hard to keep awake and fell asleep on a chair. The following morning I asked about the cake as I could not remember it. Shiela told me the staff dropped it in the kitchen while pre cutting it for the guests!

Treble tragedies

While I was in England I stayed for a week at the home of John Bush in north London. I found out on Facebook that Mac Witney had died suddenly of a suspected heart attack, he was only in his 40s. I also heard that there was severe flooding on Siem Reap. Much of the city was under water. It was the worst floods for

decades. Luckily the Peace Of Angkor Tours Centre escaped the inundation.

A few days later I had the tragic news from Colleen that Kevin had been drowned in the floods. From what I could understand Kevin had been at Rosy's for his usual Saturday night beers. He took a moto home but the floodwater was too deep. He had to wade home but was found dead the following morning in the Siem Reap River. This was such a shock. I really would have wanted to be there but I had a week or two before returning home. Alan Stuart-Watt was helpful driving Coll in my landcruiser through the floods and to Kevins Funeral at the Pagoda

I returned at the end of September to find the Siem Reap flooding has subsided. Colleen was upset about Kevins passing. The Khmer owner of Smart Kids had lost an important member of staff who had been running the school efficiently and making sure the teachers had good working conditions and decent salaries. According to Colleen, the School organisation fell into disarray but life at the school limped on.

We had a bit of a relief as a Ta and his wife had their first baby Phuti they had a good party at the family home. Delicacies on the menu were deep fried tarantula, and roasted crickets garnished with fire ants. Coll gave that a miss for something more edible. I have to say that arachnids and bugs are not to my taste either but I had to try.

Bad Timing

By mid November just before my birthday, I was flying to Laos for a photo Tour. On the evening before my departure Coll told me the Smart Kids director had called a meeting of a staff at 8am the following morning.

I departed for the Airport and was waiting at the Departure Gate for my flight to Luang Prabang. Coll phoned me in tears explain that half the western teachers had been made redundant. She had been given 4 weeks notice. This was devastating news and I was in a bad position to give her any support. I had tour clients waiting for me and was called onto the aircraft as I was on the phone, so there was no turning back at that stage.

After the successful tour I returned to Coll who had time to reflect on this disaster. She was still determined to find another teaching job .

Holiday on the Coast

I suggested we go away to the coast for a holiday in Kep. I drove straight down to Kep, 500kms away and we stayed at the Beach House. This was owned by the ex wife of the Australian Ambassador. I'd stayed there a few times before and always enjoyed her company as well as the location on the sandy beach. She was trying to sell it, but the price of a Million USD was a little out of our price range!

To be at that idyllic places with Coll was a real tonic for both of us. I suggested we go on a trip to Koh Tonsai. Otherwise known as Rabbit Island. Coll was not the best so far as small boat travel was concerned. I assured her that there was a proper pier to get on to the fishing boats for the half hour trip to the island.

The boat beached on the sand. I hopped off but Coll was not confident enough to drop down of the prow of the vessel. The boatman got a chair to help her. She stepped on it I held her for support but the chair toppled over and in spite of my efforts she fell backwards into the briny. The water was not deep but it was enough to soak her clothes and drown her bag containing her cellphone. The

tropical sun dried her clothes quickly but her phone was a write off. I promised to buy her another.

Colleen and her last return to England

Back in Siem Reap Coll tried every avenue to get a teaching Job. Her search proved more difficult as all the good paying schools required university degrees in teaching, her TEFL was not enough. This was a big blow for her. She decided to return to England for Christmas in the hope of getting another similar care job to the one she left earlier in the year. We kept in frequent contact through email. She never lost interest in Peace of Angkor and all the friends she had there.

Her attempts to get employment in England were difficult. No one was interested in taking her on. Ageism was against her and to make life more difficult she was affected in the changes of pension rules for women.

To equalise the pension ages on Men and Women (60 for women and 65 for men); Coll and those of a similar age, had to retire later. Coll had now to wait until her 64th birthday to claim her government pension, that she had contributed to while working in England. The unemployment office were putting pressure on her to get a job. She had to apply for jobs as a condition of gaining unemployment benefits. This caused her frustration and stress as once she was over 60 she was for all intents and purposes unemployable.

Coll desperately wanted to come back to Cambodia to see her friends again. When she did get her pension, she was trying hard to save for her flight. In 2016 she was diagnosed with Breast Cancer. She had treatment but had to forgo any travel plans. Coll appeared to make a recovery by 2017.

All the while Coll had kept me informed about her treatment, chemotherapy and her subsequent recovery. In the meantime I decided to return permanently to England. We were very much looking forward to seeing each other after such a long time.

My return to England and a bad shock

In May 2017, I flew back to England to my old home in Southampton. My house was empty now that my tenants who had moved out. I was preoccupied with getting furniture and things to live. After I arrived home I did not get any response from my emails txt messages or calls. Several days without communication from her was disappointing. With hindsight I should have been in contact with Colls sister Maureen; but I had lost her Phone No. I was in a supermarket nearby and got a phone call from John Bush. He told me the shocking news that he had just heard from Colls Sister that Colleen had passed away due to cancer. I was devastated; left my shopping and returned home in a state of shock.

John emailed me Maureens phone number. I called her immediately to find out what had happened. Maureen had not been aware that Colls cancer had returned. Coll called her over to her flat in Blackfield as she was in severe pain. Maureen called the doctor. He was unable to visit so told her to let Coll rest until the morning. The following morning Coll had passed away in her sleep.

The shock of this was almost too much to bear. Maureen was devastated, especially as she had been unaware of the severity of Colleens health problems. All our friends in Siem Reap were very sad too. The Funeral was held in the Catholic Church in Hythe. I arranged for the Funeral service to be streamed to Two Dragons where our Cambodian and expat friends were gathered.

The End

I hope you enjoyed these stories and are able to make a contribution to Cancer Relief UK through my Just Giving page

Colleen (Smiler) as I like to remember her

