

Another Bloody Day in Paradise

Part 3

Our First Peace Of Angkor Villa



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 Peace Of Angkor Villa 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 we arrived in Siem Reap and our quest for our home which became something of a Fawlty Towers Experience

Flight and Arrival in Siem Reap

Sok collected us from the; piling up our luggage on the front seat of his tuk tuk. We climbed aboard as Sok began to push it away from the pavement. We had an uneasy feeling as the front end began to rise as our heavy load unbalanced the machine. A potential disaster averted by Sok who acted quickly. We were soon struggling up Sissowath Quay. The 100cc motorbike and trailer was being tested to its limits this morning.

The drive to the airport was exceptionally busy with motorbikes and trucks passing us as we could barely keep up with the traffic. It was the Phnom Penh morning rush hour. The six lane highway was a mass of vehicles. One moto had a huge block of ice dripping from his rear carrier, another had basket of piglets on the back of a bike and a lady pedalling a rickshaw with lady piled up with fruit. All these things are quite normal here. Occasionally the odd lorry passed belching choking exhaust fumes. Many of the moto drivers wear face masks, to protect them from the pollution.

True to his estimate, Sok got us to the airport in 30 minutes exactly. The small clean airport was very pleasant. We had seriously exceeded the 10 kg limit so were expecting to pay \$1 for every kilo. Thankfully there were only a couple of dozen on the plane so the staff didn't ask for excess baggage charge. Coll thought that the simple baggage handling, whole process of boarding was very casual and much unlike Heathrow. The luggage was just piled up on a hand truck and wheeled to the small turboprop ATR aircraft of Siem Reap Airways, on the tarmac.

The flight to Siem Reap was a very pleasant one and the fabulous views of the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers were spectacular. We flew the entire length of the 160 km great lake with its fishing nets and floating villages clearly seen below.

A choppy descent made Coll feel a little queasy, but we were soon on the tarmac of Siem Reap International Airport, which was little more than a single airstrip with some thinly disguised sheds as airport buildings. We took a car to Siem Reap from the Taxi Service office. The driver was pushing us to take temple tours with him. We explained that we were not tourists but moving to Siem Reap.

Not so Regal at the Royal

We chose the The Royal Villa. It was not as grand as its name suggested; but was quite nice. It was approached through a thatched restaurant along one side of the yard. We found a nice pleasant wood panelled room for \$15. Coll looked into the wardrobe; only to find that there was only one wire coat hanger, so I asked for some more. One of the lads returned with a tangled mass of coloured wire. A few minutes of straitening and we had 8 coloured wire hangers!

The lady who runs the Royal Villa Hotel was an Australian Khmer. Dressed in teddy bear baby doll pyjama's, she didn't exactly look the part of a hotel manager. Without prompting from us, she told us that she wanted to return to Australia.

The place was up for rent and the landlord would want approximately \$1500 per month. For 27 rooms, this must be a bargain, but it was far too big for our needs and would be a maintenance liability. She was very helpful and had a couple

of teenage lads who were very attentive. Leaping to attention at any request from us it was almost embarrassing at times.

At dinner at the Royal Hotel, the entertainment was a horror movie with a huge spider attacking humans. Full of gore and dismembered corpses it wasn't good for eating to.

It must have taken nearly an hour to get served here and when the food did arrive, there was only one meal. Coll had to wait for an age more for hers. The story at breakfast was little better, we had to wait for ages and by this time we decided that we should move on.

Maung Maung and the Mandalay Inn

We had looked at the advertising guide and found the Mandalay Inn just up Sivatha Boulevard. With a pleasant bar and open air restaurant they served good value food. The rooms were big with rattan covered walls and ornate plastered ceilings.

Maung Maung (Momo) and his wife looked to be good hosts and were very accommodating, organising a writing table, fridge and extension lead or the laptop for us. At \$12 per night, we could ask for little more for the price.

Maung Maung was incredibly helpful. We told him of our plans to set up a guest house. His advice was valuable as he had been through a similar process we had. He had only been in Siem Reap a year before we did and did not want to see us make the same mistakes he did. That was so kind considering we could have been operating in competition with his Mandalay Inn.

Siem Reap Town, first impressions

Old Siem Reap is very charming and relaxed. The open balconied restaurants and colonial shop houses have a real flavour of an old French town. The covered market is a fascinating place, outwardly claustrophobic and chaotic, but inside a shoppers paradise, with tiny stalls crammed with every conceivable food and grocery item. At its core, the vegetable, meat and fish market had good quality fresh produce. The meat and fish market can be a bit smelly though!

The river with its shady parks, stone bridges and road signs is a joy to wander; though at this time of year though the river was low and quite muddy. The wood workshops by the river made hardwood beds, chairs and chests. It was fascinating watching the work going on as we passed.

Along the river were a number of new animal sculptures a group of children on a couple of concrete elephants attracted the attention of my lens. The kids here and adults two just love to have their photos taken, with none of the demands for payment in some third world countries.

The new Post Office was quite impressive. Set in palm-shaded grounds, it looked at first glance to be a hotel. Inside the squeaky clean and high ceilinged lobby, a large open counter with friendly English speaking staff greeted us. We asked about a PO box, which was arranged on the spot with minimal form filling. The cost of air mail to UK here is quite high. Our large pile of letters and cards cost over \$20 to send.

Next to the PO is the Foreign Correspondents Club of Cambodia FCCC. Like the one on Phnom Penh, this was a haven of peace and tranquillity; though in such a tranquil place like SR it is less needed. Reflected in a glassy ornamental, pool this place has style. The airy upper bar without glazed windows was a cool place for lunch, sinking into the grey leather armchairs under the spinning fans, quaffing iced coffee. It was a lovely place to be

The Mister Men & Sang Kimleng

Looking around the town we were frequently asked for lifts from moto trailer drivers. These are smaller than those in Phnom Penh . The cute little wagons resemble pony traps and are bolted to the rear seats of little thru 50 or 125cc motos. They have little or no acceleration but are a lovely way to get around. We saw a few of the old pedal powered versions but they were not generally for hire.

The moto trailer drivers are identified as Mr on their trailers, Mr Van, Mr Vong Mr Phi, Mr Leng and the skinny Mr Phat, among others. They have cute slogans like “Have a Sweetly Trip”.

We were looking to get in touch with Mr Leng who drove when we were here in November. Coll thought she saw him on the way in from the airport. We thought that in a small town like Siem Reap we would find him some time. One man, Mr Vong attracted out attention; he chatted to us outside a restaurant and was such a nice guy that we booked him for the following day. I said that it wouldn't it be funny if we found Mr Leng just now.

Coll called to me a minute later as we passed a group of moto drivers Mr Leng was right by us talking with his friend Vanna. I was thrilled to bits to see him. We introduced ourselves and he recognised me immediately and he remembered that Coll hadn't been well when we were here. He was genuinely excited to see us. We stood at the street talking and laughing. Sang's infectious laugh and broad toothy grin was a joy. We asked Sang Kimleng to drive us later that week, explaining that we had booked Mr Vong the following day.

A temporary home

The Mandalay Inn was nice; but a coffee stop led to change of accommodation. Coll and I were wandering around Wat Damnak looking for somewhere for a drink. We spotted a sign to the "Linkei Hotel" The splendid new building set within large grounds was the home of Heinz, a Swiss and his Khmer Family. We chatted with Heinz over a coffee. We told him we were looking for accommodation. The Linkei Hotel had several apartments on the top floor. We looked at a neat studio with a balcony overlooking the gardens. This was ideal as Heinz was only able to rent the flat for a short period.

The Linkei was a splendid place with an impressive lobby which extended through 2 floors with grand staircase and ornate balustrades. There was a Restaurant but was hardly open as they had only a few guests. In any case it was only a short walk into town so we ate out mostly and had some meals in the small kitchen of our studio.

Food choices for westerners were extremely limited. There was only one convenience store on the corner of Sivatha

Boulevard and what became known as Pub St. Run by Raj an Indian, the shop had a reasonable selection of Western tinned goodies and drinks, as well as UHT milk and cereals.

Looking for a home with CARE

Shortly after arriving, we were becoming keen to find a little more about villas to rent. The information we obtained in Phnom Penh wasn't exactly comprehensive; one attractive 8 bedroomed villa and a couple of hotels to rent, was all we had to go on. We met Sang Kimleng one afternoon and we had a chat about what we were planning to do here. Sang offered to make enquiries on our behalf.

We used a company called Cambodia Angkor Real Estate. C.A.R.E. The only one in town. Tucked away in a gloomy office at the back of a travel agency and Internet café, There were a few photos of properties on the walls and some printed information. There were very few decent sized properties to rent. We were offered some hotels and there were some charming small houses but only a few of any reasonable size.

The enthusiastic Khoun Veasna took us out in the company Camry car and showed us some of the properties on his books. We looked at a few villas but none were suitable or of a reasonable price. Many of the places were nice; some were overpriced and not very clean, others were new; to the point of being only partially finished, others were far too big and expensive.

Sela Angkor Villa

One, possible home, Sela Angkor Villa, was described as a house with 12 bedrooms. Approached by a narrow sandy lane

it was well off the main road. Surrounded by old wooden bungalows and palm trees, it was in a nice semi rural location. From the front, it appeared to be made of pale cream concrete with a nice balcony. The interior was lovely and upstairs revealed its original teak construction with wooden floors and a lovely turned wood staircase. The vast airy landing and passage must have been at least 2.5metres (10 ft) wide

This traditional wood Khmer house would have been originally on stilts as many of the rural homes are. The extended front and ground floor would have been a recent addition. Only round the back could we see the old part with its wood shuttered windows.

For the price of \$500 per month this place was quite amazing value. Most of the rooms had en suite shower rooms with western loos and some had air conditioning. The furniture was to be included.

Asking where the kitchen was revealed one of the cultural differences between the SE Asians and Westerners. The Khmers traditionally cook outside and the kitchen of this place was just a crude wood and tin shelter out in the dusty yard. The owners were prepared to let us build a new kitchen and pointed to the large metal construction to the right which was big enough to house a small covered restaurant.

Renting a house here is quite straightforward, with lease forms and inventory in English and Khmer. The contract was a simple standard Government form with a hand written inventory which we checked just before moving. The only oddity was to fingerprint the forms as signatures as some

locals couldn't write. The rental deposit was held until the end of the tenancy. We would then live there 'free' of any further payment until we moved out or renewed.

Kimleng, Crock-ery and Police Chief

Before making the final decision on Sela Angkor Villa we heard of another place for rent. It was a nice big guest house with an attached restaurant. We looked at it, but wanted to rent the house without the restaurant as it was too much for us to manage. The owners son showed us round, explaining that his father had a smaller place to rent if this was not suitable. He phoned his father and we were taken to his office.

Now he just happened to be the Police Chief of Siem Reap province. He looked very imposing sitting on his high chair, dressed in his military style uniform and regalia with pictures on the king and queen behind him. It was a very surreal experience negotiating terms with him in his office. With Kimleng our driver was interpreting.

Kimleng handled it well though he did admit that he was rather overawed. Coll sat quietly in the corner while I cross examined the Police chief asking questions on the house and trying to persuade him that we were only interested in the 10 roomed guest house, and not the adjoining 120 place restaurant with Karaoke stage. He wouldn't compromise, but he did offer us the chance of looking at an 8 roomed house that he owned.

We were taken to his lovely old wooden house which was quite interesting; though needed some work. We had to be diplomatic as we soon realised it was his own home. We met his wife and family and out of his uniform he appeared to be

a pleasant man. There was an enormous, if gloomy, living room on the upper floor with 4 bedrooms upstairs. And another four downstairs which he was reluctant to show us at first. All rooms needed decorating and the kitchen was a mess, but the downstairs rooms were obviously not used for many years.

The house had some unusual garden features!

After looking round the house, Coll and I were discussing the house with the him, with our driver interpreting. I heard a noise from a large tiled tank outside the kitchen door. Coll went white and looked mortified. We were standing next to a tank full of crocodiles! They were only small ones, but out in the garden was a pit the size of a swimming pool with around a dozen 3 metre long man eating primeval monsters basking in the sun.

Jesus I thought, why can't they keep dogs like anyone else!

The police chief did assure us with a crocodilian smile, that his animals would be removed if we decided to move in!

Outside in the front garden was a circular water feature: was it a fountain; no, it was a blue tiled crocodile pool, with a strong wire mesh to cover it.

We decided against this property as there would have been too much work to get it up to a high enough standard and what would we do with three redundant crocodile pools? Also in the event of any disagreement with the landlord I wonder who would win??

Photographing The Temples

In-between the house hunting and other work, Coll and I took the opportunity to visit Angkor with Kimleng as our

driver. Having a set of digital images were essential so I could show Angkor at it best on the future website which was to be an impotent part of our marketing.

Angkor was so beautiful at that time; with few tourists to get in the way.

With my new Fuji S2 Pro DSLR and Nikon lenses I was keen to get digital images of Angkor and around. The Rainy Season proved great for photography as the combination of grey stone and the lush green vegetation made for atmospheric images. Due to Coll's illness in 2002 it was the first time she had ever seen the temples of Angkor. Coll enjoyed the days there and was helpful in pointing things out while I had my eye to the viewfinder.



We met the monk that showed me around the Angkor South Pagoda the previous November. He took us around the pagoda and monastic School. I got some good shots of monks

as a result. He was learning English, Studying at the school and wanted English Books to help him. We promised that we would get him something and visit later. I asked him “what do you want to do when you finished your study?” “I want to be a moto driver” was his surprising response.

Kimleng was able to take us to many of the outlying temples that I had no time to visit in the 3 days the previous year. A weeks temple pass of \$60 was well used. Coll did not come out every day with me; so I was able to make detailed photo studies of the temples.

On one occasion I was resting in a quiet corner of Preah Khan with a digital audio recorder listening to the sounds of birdsong and cicadas. A European sat next to me, silently absorbing the Atmosphere. My cellphone shattered the peace . “Mobile phones in the Jungle” the guy said indignantly. It was Coll, asking me when I was returning for dinner.

A villa and an name

After deciding against the crocodile house we looked at “Sela Angkor Villa” a second time. It seemed near perfect for our needs except for the kitchen. The owner, Cheruk a nice woman in her forties, had made a lot of improvements to the villa and contracted to have the drains connected to the main sewer before we moved in.

She left a lot of the furniture and some bedding. Cheruk had been supportive in our requests for improvements and repairs. We were able to do more or less what we want with the place. Any improvements have been approved without question.

The contract allowed us to remove any equipment we have fitted at the end of the tenancy.

We had set a budget before we left England and we were hoping for around 5 or 6 bedrooms. For the price, this place was quite amazing value. Most furniture was included. The building had been re-plumbed and rewired.

We now had a home but we still needed a name. Sela Angkor (Salt of Angkor) did not really suit, so while at the Linkei we threw a few ideas around. We were looking for a name that reflected the history of Cambodia and the tranquility after the decades of war.

I still don't recall whether it was Coll or myself who hit on the name Peace Of Angkor. We just said it in conversation and a light bulb lit up. "Peace Of Angkor Villa" How perfect was that! Because we wanted to use the internet for our business I checked to see if the 'peaceofangkor.com' was available.

Once that was established, we had a name. However we needed to register it first. We visited the Ministry of Commerce to register the name Peace Of Angkor Villa. The officer told that it was not usual for foreigners to use the word Angkor in a business name: but they would check whether we could use this name.

There were other meetings we had to do to get our business legal. We could have paid a fixer to get the Business Licence but I was insistent that I would do it myself. That proved time consuming and frustrating. Kimleng proved to be an excellent translator as only a few officials could speak English and most documentation was in Khmer with some English

translations. Meetings were long with frustrating delays in the dowdy government offices. Timings were as best loose and sometimes we had to wait for an hour or two for the office to return from lunch.

Moving to our Villa

On 27th June we moved into Peace Of Angkor Villa. Heinz at the Linki helped us with our move by driving us in his pickup truck to the villa. First hurdle! the road to the villa had been dug up to lay new drainage and had not been completed . Heinz drove carefully straddling the ditch and we were able to settle down in our new home .

The L shaped garden was mostly paved with a dusty area and wooden shelter to one side. Our neighbours to the front lived in a wooden shack with a minivan probably worth more than their home. Behind us we had a muddy stream and many more simple wooden dwellings. A coffin workshop behind a waterlogged plot of land was to the left and a small palm grove to the right.

Downstairs we had a glazed lobby with a passage and 6 bedrooms with a steep stairs to a balcony with wooden sofa set and TV. A long passage with another six rooms to either side and a door with a shower room outside. The kitchen had not been completed as the roof was to be erected the following day. We had this large empty space under the shelter which was to be our restaurant area, enough for half a dozen table sets and a bar area. The small bedrooms had basic furniture and shower rooms. We chose a downstairs room for our bedroom cum office and a wooden room upstairs for our sitting room and my office.

Procurement

Having spent several years in the OS Procurement department. That should have given me some help in buying stuff. The language problem meant that we always needed someone to translate. Few shop owners could speak English, but Kimleng came to the rescue so many times and gave valuable assistance. The markets had an abundance of basic essentials. Cooking pots, kitchen utensils hardware but it was hard to get even a knife, fork and spoon set.

Phony Sony TVs and second hand hi fi gear from the 1970s were usually wrapped in plastic film in open electric shops. The only lounge suites available, were heavy, hard wooden sofas which almost every home had. We has a set in our lobby; but could not find any comfortable western style sofas then.

We did find a rattan furniture shop. We had to order rattan tables and chairs for our dining area, with chairs and dressers for the bedrooms. The prices were cheap, the quality for some items were good, but the tacky looking rattan dressing tables were a disappointment. We did get them all in time for the move to our villa .

A drain on our Resources

The drainage works were still to be completed, so a couple of days after moving work commenced. Cheruk the owner paid for this work to be done and to link several more houses to the main drain.

- First they laid a new main drain 50 metres to the road. This involved the total disruption of the single track road with a 1.5 metre deep trench left for days.

- 2 days later they dug it up again as the sewerage wouldn't flow up hill!! They left an open man hole protected by a few palm leaves covering it (no Health & safety rules here)
- Kimleng put a plank over the hole so he could drive his motorbike and trailer over it. This worked a few times until the sides caved in pitching his trailer down the hole on a dark rainy night. I went out with him to extricate his machine from the muddy ditch. After some pushing and shoving he asked me to drive it out with him pushing. I had always wanted to drive a tuk tuk but I hadn't expected my first experience of driving a tuk tuk, piloting Kimleng's machine as he pushed it from the rear.
- After several more days, we were hit by a lot of rain and the walk round the back turned into a quagmire. We had the choice of a long walk through oozing mud or balancing along the line of concrete pipes at the edge of the ditch.
- Eventually they finished the work. Except they forgot to link our villa to the system; so they dug it up again.
- Then the following day when they tested it, the water still didn't flow.
- So they dug it up and laid it again
- This didn't work either, so after another week, we went frantic after finding the road outside the drive dug up a fourth time.

- After calls to the agent and remonstrations from the owner, the boss admitted he didn't know how to deal with it as he had no experience!
- Eventually after our protests; we had a small army of around 20 workmen trying to repair it in one days. Well if 20 were actually working then they may have had a slim chance. As only around one in ten were actually doing anything; the rest we're just looking. Anyway several days later it was eventually completed.



While the work was in progress, we had no vehicle access, or to any of the houses on the lane for several days. We had ordered a whole load of furniture and equipment and building materials to be delivered to the house; so a lot of it had to be carried by hand through the narrow alleys round the back. A deluge of biblical proportions caused flooding to the house opposite as piles of sand blocked the natural drainage.

We liked the owner Cheruk a lot; She could not speak English, but her sons can. Her family have been very helpful. Mostly Khmers are very placid people but she was very angry about the bad workmanship of the drainage and apologetic to us.

Not a holiday any more

However there was plenty of custom so we had decided early on to market our place to English as we were the only English run guest house in the town.

We had work to do to finish the kitchen extension; which I drew up, to fit in the space between the rear of the villa and the back yard wall. This was done within a few weeks of us gaining occupancy at the end of June. With no planning regulations it was a relatively simple process to find a builder to do it.

The extension was built of brick rendered in concrete. The interior was tiled. The kitchen units were of concrete and tiled to match the walls. The builder misunderstood the dimensions of the units which were too narrow for the Fridge Freezer to go in. This needed to be broken down and rebuilt to my specification. I also had to show the builder working on the corrugated roof how to use a spirit level as the end of the roof was at an incorrect angle.

When we had our fridge delivered we had an unwelcome surprise when the box was opened. Dozens of cockroaches escaped and scattered all over the dining area! We installed an automatic Washing Machine. These were rare sight at that time. Most Khmer women used large plastic bowls for that purpose. We put in extra Air Conditioning and water heaters.

This was quite a big job taking several days. The first problem was that the water supply wasn't strong enough to supply the water heaters so it would be impossible to fit the water heaters until that was sorted.

Water woes and power play

The water supply to the villa consisted of an electric pump in the garden taking water below ground and controlled by a cistern switch on the roof tank. The previous tenant had installed a water pump which they removed after they left and replaced the unit with plastic pipe. This reduced the poor water flow to a trickle in some rooms.

This took four attempts to fix as the newly installed pump had an intermittent fault. i.e it would stopped working when we wanted a shower, resulting with Kimleng and I climbing up on the roof in a tropical downpour laying in a pool of water under the tank, trying to find out what was wrong. And of course the following morning when the engineer was called it worked perfectly!

The house has modern plastic pipe work, which we assumed to be OK. However the first time that the water supply failed I called Khoun Veasna our much suffering Estate agent. He knows us very well now and while he can be slimy, he does try though. Coll called him the Rat due to his small stature, furtive appearance and long nose, which goes everywhere. Veasna turned up in his moto with a plastic bag of coffee hanging from the handlebars of his motorbike. We let him have his drink then I explained to Veasna that the water supply failed.

The water was working when he arrived; but I did explain that one of the basin taps wasn't working properly. He ferreted under the sink in one of the bathrooms and the pipe broke. Veasna got the full force of Niagara Falls in the chest and I got soaked to the skin in the fallout. The resultant flood could have made the Noah feel as home, so while the rat stuck his finger in the hole I climbed up on the roof again to turn the tap off. Veasna run off on his moto to get a replacement tap while I waited for the engineer to call.

Once the water supply was sorted out we called in the man from Phnom Penh to fit water heaters and reconditioned air con units. The electrician did a test on the electrical system. This looked modern with circuit breakers and separate meters to each room. Unfortunately the line from the street meter was not adequate, so we had to have an additional power circuit installed.

Cheruk our landlady paid for half this work round \$400. She had no obligation under the lease to do this; but we persuaded her that it would be in her interest to do so. This was a good job too as the electricity company charge foreigners double the local rate for power and improvements. Cambodia has very high electricity costs (double that in UK) so we have to be careful about lights left on and use low energy light bulbs.

Water Heaters

Once power supply was complete, the water heaters and air con units were installed. While this was being done Coll went into our bedroom to find a hole in the ceiling and plaster scattered everywhere

“What the f@”£%\$ is this mess “she exclaimed!

“Coll dear” I explained. “One of the electricians has just fallen through the ceiling!”

It was a wonder he didn’t injure himself, as the ceilings are nearly 12 ft high!

As if this wasn’t enough for one day we had been out while the workmen were installing the water heater in the kitchen and returned to find an anxious Srey Toch, our cleaner, saying something bad had happened in the kitchen.

We opened the door to see water everywhere and no workmen. Coll was not happy. We found out a few minutes later that one of the electricians had tested the electric heater forgetting to fill it with water. The heater overheated melting the plastic water pipe and spraying the hapless man with scalding water. He was taken to hospital. Thankfully he was not too seriously hurt and was working the following day.

Not all westerners are tourists

Another thing about life back in those days as a foreigners in Cambodia is the idea that all westerners are tourists. When we had our permanent address here we had some difficulty in persuading the bank staff that! When we wrote Peace of Angkor Villa as our permanent address, it was assumed that we had filled in the bank forms incorrectly and that our permanent address was in UK.

Puzzlement also prevailed when I went to Chun Reth Mouny Hardware House nearby. It was a large shed of a place and appears to be totally disorganised. The front was OK with roof tiles, bricks and large pots of paint outside. Inside the shambolic mess I had trouble finding things within dark

interior. Adept with drawing I frequently called in with diagrams of what I wanted.

One time I was sitting on a new toilet in the middle of the store; sorting out nails from a tray of rusty fittings. I just had an attack of the giggles thinking about what it may look like for the folks back home in England.

Furniture was not easy either; I had to design a number of things not available off the shelf that includes rattan chairs and tables, wooden desks and lampshades which were unobtainable. Phnom Penh had better choice but was 9 hours by bus on a terrible dusty road.

Four months into the adventure I could not wait to tell my friends back home of the stories. The realisation that I would not be back for another eight months hit me “This is not a holiday any more”.

Bugs and other creatures

Our arrival in Siem Reap coincided with some unwelcome visitors; crickets, millions of them. It was a biblical plague of small dark brown flying bugs. They were harmless; were but all over the place. In the air, on the roads and sidewalks. We had to pick them out of our hair and tread on them on the street. As most restaurants were outside, we had to be careful not to have extra protein in our meals. The plague lasted for weeks. We were beginning to wonder why we were getting into.

I kept a table tennis bat on the balcony for some sport and exercise batting the bugs out while we were watching TV on the balcony. We had to struggle to hear the TV anyway due to the cacophony of frog calls and cicadas, which were louder

after rain. We also saw rats running along the electric cables in to the roof space after dark. We could sometimes hear them scuttling around above the ceilings in the upper floors. We had two resident geckos, takeo's as the locals referred to them due to their call 'takeo, takeo' repeatedly. Coll named the large grey takeo with red spots and bulging eyes Boris. The other one, smaller, with brown markings hid amongst the rafters was unnamed. Boris had a spot by a wall lamp so as to consume any flies or crickets attracted by the light. We had dozens of smaller wall lizards that chirped frequently after dark. They was all useful to keep the bugs at bay.

The Peace of Angkor Crew



*Pumpkin, Ta,Hun, Coll, Savin, Me, Phanna, Reaksmy,
Diamond, Small Girl*

We had to find staff in readiness for our opening on 1st August. With no employment agency, we had to use word of mouth or put a sign up outside on the street. Word of mouth worked best as our friends always had family members who needed work. We found a few more staff through Mr Chicken Han, one of our tuk tuk drivers who acted as an impromptu employment agency.

Kimleng

Sang Kimleng, our driver became a close friend. He tirelessly worked translating with officials and helping us in every way. Although he only had a tuk-tuk he had a full driver licence having worked as a car and truck driver in the past.

Kimleng was capable of turning his hand to almost anything; from helping me plumb in a washing machine, finding staff, carrying the shopping and translating for us while negotiating with Government officials over our Business licence.

Without Kimleng we could never have made as good progress we have. He was reluctant and sometimes embarrassed to accept payment for helping us. He has said that he would do anything except rob or steal for us. He became our No1 Tuk Tuk driver for our guests.

Savin

We also had a nice lad Savin, a friend of Kimleng who became our night security and helped around the garden. We interviewed Savin in the magnificent lobby of the Linkei shortly before we moved into our villa. I recall him being overwhelmed by the grand environment of the ornate lobby of the hotel.

Savin a small shy lad who could not speak English; was hardly a perfect choice for a Security Guard, but was a legal requirement. Savin seemed able to be trusted; so as only token presence was needed, we offered him the job at \$50 per month with accommodation in our semi open shed in the Villa grounds.

Small Girl, Srey Toch

We employed Srey Toch (Small Girl) a very pretty 19 year old as a cleaner. This was our second attempt, as our first cleaner lasted only a day as she could not cope with our newly installed washing machine. Small Girl was happy to use the top loading washing machine kept upstairs next to a communal shower room.

Pumpkin, Srey Pouve

We found our cook through the French 'Blue Pumpkin Cafe'. Waitress, Diamond (Srey Pich) saw us coming in regularly and asked us what we were doing in Siem Reap. We told her we were here to set up a guest house. She told us of her sister Srey Pauve (Pumpkin) who was looking for a job as a cook. We interviewed her and took her on as a cook within a few days of us moving in.

Pumpkin cooked Khmer, Chinese Thai and Western. She loved to try out her dishes on us. She gave us such huge portions and masses of fresh fruit. We ate well and healthily, as the fresh vegetables and meat were very good quality. Pumpkin had an amazing ability to carve vegetables and fruit; carrots into flowers and melons with intricate patterns. Her talent was shared with other members of her family who made stone sculptures from their house in the town.

Diamond, Srey Pich

Shortly after Pumpkin joined us, she told us that her sister Srey Pich (Diamond) was looking for a job and was keen to join us. Up to then we had no guests, so had no need for a receptionist but Diamond came to us at a perfect time; her English was good and she was a pleasant personality. We had to pay her a good salary as she was earning over \$100 a month at the Blue Pumpkin. Coll started to train her up as receptionist and hope she would be good enough to take an Assistant Manager role.

We had a good relationship with Diamond and Pumpkin and their family. Their father Papa Mongkol and his wife visited us They were happy to have us employ his children “I want you to be a second Mother and Father to My children” That appeared to be an honour. We were proud to have made such friends. Coll embraced the idea of having an instant Khmer family as she never had children of her own.

Reaksmey, Sunshine

Reaksmey (Sunshine) came to the rescue as housekeeper; she was efficient and a good cleaner. Her family lived in a large crocodile farm. Their house was set amongst dozens of high concrete walls separating the crocodile enclosures. I visited there once and could not stand the smell.

Cultural Learning Curve

Our staff had been good, though language problems can be frustrating at times. Sometimes when we say ‘not to do something’ it is interpreted as “ do it” we had a problem with Srey Toch who refused to wash Pumpkins clothing. I remonstrated with her. “Pumpkin cooks your food so You will

wash her clothes!” Srey Toch was not happy at all and did not turn up the following day. I mentioned this to Kimleng who informed me that as a Khmer tradition a woman would not wash the clothes of another women. I could not understand this at all. We did let her back however her career was not a long one.

A few days later, I returned to the villa to see Srey Toch cutting down plants in the garden. Not just any plants but the huge Elephant Ear plants; some over 2 meters high. I went ballistic I loved those plants and was angry that they were cut down without my permission. I sacked her on the spot.

The next day Kimleng told me that Cheruk had told Srey Toch to cut them down. I was mortified! How could I have been so angry and stupid not to have thought of that. With no chance of getting her back; We had to look for another housekeeper.

A hurdle Over

The final process to get the business licence was been given approval. We are now an official business, registered with the Ministry of Tourism. Our name “Peace of Angkor Villa” has been registered with Ministry of Commerce and could not be used by anyone else in Cambodia.

We had been told that names with Angkor in the title had not been used by foreigners; so we can consider ourselves fortunate. There are a number of foreign owned businesses here in Siem Reap but so far as I’m was aware, only a few British owned businesses here.

Putting up our ‘Peace Of Angkor Villa’ signs was an exciting development. We watched the old sign come down and our

new one put up in the road and above the balcony. This symbol gave us a sense of pride and ownership.

Weathering the storms

The weather was hot; It averaged out around 32oC at this time of year. We are in the rainy season and the weather had been varied. After a few drenching's when we first arrived here, the weather settled down to sunshine and the occasional spectacular thunderstorms mainly in the evenings and night. The rain hardly affected us at all.

One week saw some serious rain, the like of which we have never experienced. The sheer volume of rain can be spectacular. Roads turn to rivers and life almost stops for the duration of these amazing storms. They rarely last for long, but they can dump several inches in less than an hour. It had certainly cooled down; down to 25oC in those last few days and the locals reach for their sweaters.

Unfortunately our covered restaurant became inundated and resembled a shallow swimming pool with ourselves brushing the water away and rearranging the tables and chairs. We have resisted the temptation to name the restaurant after a certain ship that hit an iceberg; however it was a Titanic! struggle with all of us clearing the decks .

We asked Cheruk if we could put holes in base of our boundary wall to drain water out of our restaurant area. She told us that property owners were not allowed to divert water off to adjoining properties.

Hammocks

I don't get on too well with hammocks. We bought one of the Vietnamese free standing ones with a metal frame. The first

time I used it I wanted to relax with an ice cream I sat on it and moved back for more. The bloody thing tipped backwards with me lying on my back among the collapsed blue metal poles and string hammock. Pumpkin thought it was hilarious!

Doing It Ourselves

Somehow the sense of adventure of being in the mysterious east doesn't quite seem very overpowering when I'm filling walls, painting and putting in electrical power points round the house. Also dismantling a large chipboard wardrobe, which was too heavy to shift after we decided to move our bedroom upstairs. The heat and humidity on that day was debilitating. I lay on the tiled floor attempting to reassemble the base. I ended up doing a snail impression sliding around, leaving a trail of sweat on the floor and was unable to grip the screwdriver as my hands had turned to jelly!

The ironing and washing also has to be done. Coll had been showing the girls how to use our modern washing machine. The girls still prefer to do their washing the hard way in a large bowl in the yard!

It is not at all like home

Living here as opposed to being a tourist had been a real eye opener. The area we lived in, whilst only a short way from the road, had a very rural feel with small rustic wooden houses surrounding us. A short wander up the track behind us takes us to small farmsteads with rice fields and buffalo grazing. The sounds of chickens and ducks during the day and cicadas and frogs especially after rain at night, drowned out the TV on the balcony.

Coll was amused when chicken flew over the metre high wall and ended up in our garden we chased it out on the track outside rather than have a chicken dinner. One evening a large fruit bat flew into the balcony and up the passage Coll was not too impressed; nor was the bat, as it became confused and bounced into the walls and eventually got out after we opened the back door.



Colleen at our reception desk

Pub Street and Siem Reap Bars

Although we were busy we still had time to get out to socialise. We used to eat and drink regularly in The Tell Bar. It was run by German Thilo Krueger. He became one of our first expat friends. Thilo would usually chat to us over lunch or while we were having a beer on his terrace.

There were a many bars and restaurants in the Old Market and what later became Pub Street. The Red Piano was one of the first expat run bars on the corner, opposite the Lotus Restaurant, a grand French style villa. We ate occasionally at

Molly Malones Irish Pub, run by Theiry Magdalo from the Cameroons, with Eamer his Irish wife. For reading matter, we used the Lazy Mango bookshop owned by American Donald Gilisland.

Thilo Kruger and the condom party

When Coll and I first arrived in Siem Reap we ate regularly at the Tell Bar. With a Bavarian theme this steak house was a change from Khmer food. we got on well with Thilo and enjoyed the food. He offered a lot of advice in those early days as well as amusing conversations.

In August, Coll and I were invited to a party at the Tell Bar. It was our first social meeting with some of the expats in Siem Reap. In those days, most of the expats in Siem Reap would fill up Thilo's bar.

The guys who ran the Angkor Wat Bar and Gerry of the famous Red Piano Bar were there among others whose names I cannot recall. Gerry's party piece was blowing up a condom and putting it over his head. Lots of Angkor beer were consumed. Gerry's party piece, blowing up a condom and putting it over his head was memorable.

Near to home was the Freedom Hotel. The owner owned a black 1960 Cadillac; reputed to have been owned by King Sihanouk. We dropped in there for a meal occasionally; but service was slow as most of the staff were family members, who were more interested in watching TV than serving customers.

A notable news event in December 2003 attracted our attention. Saddam Hussain the Iraqi leader who had escaped after the Iraq war was captured by the Americans. He was

shown on TV being extracted from his hideout on the dirty hole. We saw him lose his freedom in the Freedom!

Music

Siem Reap in 2003 was a very different place than today Temple Town had a small expat community, but little in the way of entertainment other than Khmer dance shows and Doctor Beat Richner Cello concerts. Worthy yes, but not what you would have wanted to see more than once. The only big event at the time was an expensive opera concert with Jose Carreas at Angkor Wat at \$600.

Molly Malone's was the only live venue, with the odd visiting band and a country and western duo Tony and Muriel who ran CPS Plumbing. Thilo organised 'Rock at Angkor Wat' at an open air restaurant in town. It was a refreshing change but not great with some average expat bands and an awful punk rock group which didn't not encourage us to stay long.

Phnom Penh and Spiderville

During our setting up time we had several trips to Phnom Penh to buy supplies. Siem Reap being a small town, had limited availability of western goodies or anything other than basic equipment. The usual way down there was an 9 hour bus trip. The first 18ms towards Rolous on good tarmac, beyond that was had to endure 200 kilometres of what was the worst highway known to mankind.

The bumpy ride on Narin Transport Bus was not a lot of fun. Red dust covered all the roadside buildings and vegetation as we made slow progress. We stopped at Kompong Thom for half an hour where we had the chance to have lunch at the

Arunras Restaurant, a grand 6 floor hotel in the centre of the town.

A couple of hours later we arrived for a break at the dusty town of Skun. It had notoriety for the habit of locals eating deep fried Tarantulas. On exit we saw ladies carrying trays of the fried arachnids. Coll saw these but was unfazed until a girl offered her a live one to play with. Coll made a quick exit to the toilet at this point.



Juicy deep fried tarantulas

Rising Sun and Bright Lotus

When in Phnom Penh, we would frequent the Rising Sun Pub near the river. The bar was a popular expat hangout; with walls decorated with English rock and film posters. The Rising Sun was the place in Phnom Penh for pies chips and other western comfort food, Run by Clive Scutt, was a typical expat bar owner, preferring to be on the customer side of the bar. We had many long chats and met many others on our visits. His Vietnamese wife did most of the work. When we first arrived in Phnom Penh we asked Clive if he had rooms, he did not, however he recommended the Bright Lotus next

door. This was a good clean and friendly place to stay. The location opposite the National Museum was perfect and was only a block away from the Tonle Sap river.

Our first days at the Villa

July was the build up to the Cambodian national elections. The CPP Cambodian Peoples Party under Hun Sen had been in power since the liberation by the Vietnamese in 1979. Parades of pickups and vans with Cambodia Peoples Party Posters ran along Route 6 to Political Rallies in town. I did not take too much of an interest then as it was a Cambodian thing. One morning we had an unwelcome wake up call. Our near neighbours set up a loudspeaker on a pole near our boundary wall. We had to endure hours of electioneering speeches and music at ear splitting volume all day for several days!

Our shipment Arrived



Colleen and our shipment with Diamond & Pumpkin

By August, 3 months on into our adventure, our worldly goods from England arrived safely. In spite of the dark thoughts about having half our gear ripped off of a banana boat, or spending happy hours with some evil customs man trying to extort money from us.

Our shipment arrived more or less on time and without any hassle or problems. We paid a JVK movers to transport our possessions from Phnom Penh by road and handle the customs clearance for us. We reckon that the price paid was well worth it as everything arrived intact without damage in the crate it was shipped out in.

We now had to shoehorn the contents of 35 boxes and a bicycle into our residence! Suddenly our study cum living room has become a little crowded. Colleen threatened to move bedrooms for a third time ho ho!!

Clocking in!

One item Coll wanted to ship was the cuckoo clock we bought in Austria a few years earlier. This was retrieved and put up in a prominent place in the lobby. None of our Cambodian staff had ever seen one before. So the cuckoo popping out on the hour and quarter hour caused some amusement.

At around this time Kimsan who worked in the Kitchen, had a habit of turning up late. We warned her that if she turned up late we would dock her wages. I don't think we ever did as we told her that she had to be in work by the time the cuckoo called at 8am. So we used to watch her run breathlessly into the villa just in time for the Cuckoo!

Internet

When we first arrived the only internet option was internet cafes in town. That was not a practical situation for us long term. We arranged for a wireless internet system to be installed. A ten meter high aerial was delivered in Khmer Style, on a trailer attached to a cycle, otherwise known as a remorque. These cyclo remorque's have been superseded by larger ones of a similar style pulled by a moto.

This high tech Internet solution for Cambodia was expensive, with limited bandwidth. We had a system which was little more than dial up speed. The internet was OK at first; but as more users linked up, the speed slowed down to the extent that trying to update the website was a pain. Sometimes it was quicker to go to an internet cafe.

Our first Guests

Mid August we had our first customers. Not tourists, but Khmer doctors who are accompanying a large group of 100 disabled Khmers on a sponsored visit to the Angkor Temples. The American organiser wanted us to book 6 rooms for the Digital Divide group. We earnestly got the rooms ready for the action.

On the day of arrival nothing happened until late afternoon when the organiser came up to apologise for the lack of visitors. She told us that when the group of 100 in 3 buses arrived the guests she had promised us were hijacked by other guest houses in the chaos. She offered us 2 Khmer doctors; which gave us something at least.

Sadly any financial gain from this was totally wiped out when one of the new water heaters blew up due to faulty

wiring. Thankfully the guests were unharmed. The following day the kitchen heater failed. We called in CPS a plumbing company. The cost of over \$120 wiped out any chance of an income for August.

CPS was run by a very affable Australian, Tony Stockhiem and his wife Muriel. We recognised them as the two musicians who played in the Tell Bar one Sunday Lunch time.

Peace Of Angkor Website

In 2003 only a few hotels in Siem Reap had websites. We were one of only a few European owned Guest Houses in Siem Reap. It was important to get a website up and running as soon as possible. The website had to be simple, as we had only a poor dial up Internet connection. Most of time I had to get to an Internet Café to upload the site. By today's standards it was a simple affair. With a brief details of our new home with photos of the villa and some descriptions and photos of the Angkor Temples.

The Lucky Gecko and an unguarded moment

By early September I had the Peace Of Angkor website up and running. At dinner one night out in our covered restaurant a large Gecko (takeo) cried takeo takeo repeatedly. Usually the cries stop after half a dozen times. Pumpkin Emerged from the Kitchen

“Mummy, Daddy very lucky the gecko cried 13 times”

“Oh” stated Coll in a sarcastic tone “I will check our emails to see if we have a booking”

I sat at the table supping an Angkor beer while Coll went to our ground floor bedroom which doubled as our office.

“Dave Dave! We have a Booking” Coll called from our room.

I rushed over to see “What have we got”

“A booking from a group of 10 students”

“Where from?” I asked

“A university from Bangkok “

“ How brilliant; When are they coming”

“10th to 17th October” Coll Replied’

“Oh Wow that will fill all our rooms; not bad for a first booking”

That was encouraging news especially as I had only uploaded the site a week earlier. We were going to have to work hard to make sure we are ready for this group.

An unguarded moment!

A few weeks later; the Thai students were due to arrive. We had no idea how they were going to arrive; so in the evening we sent Kimleng out to the bus stations to see if he could find them. By about 10:30 we decided to go to bed; giving Savin instructions as to where to put the guests.

“Dave Wake up the door bell is ringing”

“Ugh cant Savin deal with it” was my reply.

“The bells been ringing for ages” Coll replied.

I heard a car horn “Bugger I’d better get up to see what’s happening”

I got out of bed grabbed my shorts and a tee shirt and went outside.

I could see a minivan outside the gates; but no sign of Savin.
I walked to the Gate to see a driver guide.

“Can you let us in please? Asked the guide.

“Sorry about this; We cannot see our security guard and he has the keys; We are looking for him; he must be inside ”

“Coll have you seen Savin” I called.

“No! he is not round the back of the Villa”

I walked towards the darkened restaurant area and called for Savin.

With no response I went back to the 3 metre high gates. I said in my best Basil Fawlty voice.

“ I’m sorry but we seem to have lost our security guard”

“We can climb over the gate” stated one of the students.

“That’s not necessary; we will call our tuk tuk driver who can let you in”

A quick phone call had Kimleng back in minutes.

With the gate unlocked the students were able to get in. I turned round to see a bleary eyed Savin.

“Where the bloody hell were you?”

“I was asleep!” replied Savin.

My only words were “Savin you are fired”.

“Don’t you think you are a bit hard on Savin” Coll remarked while were back in bed.

“Bloody hell no! We have a sleeping guard who nearly lost us our first guests; the sooner we get a decent security the better”

“Come on Dave He is such a nice lad. You like him I’m sure we can use him”

“Not as a security guard; can we talk about this tomorrow”

After some discussion the following day, we agreed to give Savin a chance as a gardener and odd job man. This was good for us all as I needed some assistance. We had now to get another security guard.

We found a young guy within a few days. Sadly after finding a trail of used beer cans round the villa; we realised our new security guard was a drunk. He lasted less than a week after wanting time off to go to a wedding without getting us notice. Our third security guard prove a lot better so we were able to settle down into some kind of routine.

Pay Peanuts and what do you get?

We were not the only expats in Siem Reap with staffing problems. Maung Maung our Burmese friend complained to me about the lack of staff motivation

“I have been having so many problems with staff. They keep leaving and are not motivated”

“sorry to hear that” I replied

“You have good staff” Yes, they have been great”

“ How much do you pay them?”

I told him. “\$50 for part time cleaners and up to \$120 for full time staff”

“ Oh! My wife would not pay them that much”

I did not say it, but thought ‘Pay peanuts and you get monkeys’

Shortly afterwards Thilo phoned me. He was seriously upset about his staff problems in the Tell Bar too. He lost his cook at a bad time and wanted any ideas from me. It seems that staff were being poached by rivals.

Chhor Elit otherwise known as Ta

While the Thai Students were staying at the villa, I took the chance to meet their guide Mr Chhor Elit. He was keen to meet and discuss idea. Known as Ta, or Old Man, his name derived from his poor health as a child in Phnom Penh; his family who wanted him to have a healthy life into old age.

Our meeting was fruitful; we connected immediately. Ta had a good knowledge of the temples and history. His command of English was excellent having an American private tutor so picked up a bit of transatlantic accent. Ta had been working as an Angkor guide for several years. He was interested in my ideas to visit remote temple sites as well as the local temples.

Ta had an old compact film camera so had a casual interest in Photography. Ta was very keen on the idea of helping set up tours to the remote temples. The idea of doing photo tours was exciting to him We discussed a lot of the sites we could go; like Beng Mealea and Koulén Mountain. Ta told me about Rattanakiri. This place is really special, almost totally undeveloped with stunning mountain scenery on the border of Laos it has some very remote hill tribes.

Power cuts

One of the least satisfactory aspects of living in Cambodia was the unreliable electric supply. Power outages were common but sporadic. Sometimes we could go a few weeks without any power cuts; then we might have several in a week.

The same week that we had the Thai students; we had another Fawltly Towers moment.

Lying in a peaceful slumber I was woken by Coll

“ we have a power cut, the fans off”.

“Ugh Not again” was my reply. “This is the third time today and 7th this week and it is only Wednesday”.

Anyway we got off to sleep again.

3 Am “ Dave , Wake up, The powers still off and its been over 2 hours now”

“Ok” was my bleary reply That is a long time; we haven’t had cuts that long” “Dave what about the food in the fridge?”

“that should be OK as it is not too hot now. I hope that the problem is sorted soon as we have a house full of guests”

”What are you gong to do if the power is not restored?”

“We will be in deep poo as we will not have any water as the electric pump wasn’t working.”

The next hour was a worrying one. By 4:45 am the power was still not on I got up to give one of the guests an alarm call, a torch and an apology about the power.

Walking down to the road to check the street meter could see that many lights were on. The trip switch looked OK So I returned to the house assuming that the power was very localised. Calls to Electricite De Cambodge EDC, The French owned power company; proved fruitless as the office was closed.

The Thai students were now waking up to no electric and no water. I apologised and with the help of Savin brought up a

couple of 25 litre purified water bottles for hem do their ablutions. I called in an electric company Komin Khmer; they were round in a few minutes and established that there were no problems in the Villa but the problem was in the meter. With the help of Kimleng, we called EDC. Kimleng's voice raised and I could see he was not happy. Nor was I when I found out he was told that we had been cut off as we hadn't paid the electric bill!

“ Coll, you aren't going to like this, but sang has been told that we have been cut off as they think the bill hasn't been paid.”

Coll's reply could not be repeated!

Off we dashed in Kimleng's tuk tuk, in seriously angry mood to give EDC hell for this cock up as we had definitely paid. On the way Kimleng's phone rang. He was told there was an engineer at the meter trying to repair it. We did a speedy U turn and returned to the meter, where the engineer explained that there was a problem with our recently installed meter.

It was a relief that we hadn't been cut off, but the man told us that we would have to wait a few days for it to be fixed. Another explosion of hot air from ourselves became white hot when I was told that if we paid for the parts he could do it now for us.

We were being held with a metaphorical gun at our head for poor workmanship by the Electric Company. Of course we had no choice, as we originally had the new meter installed on the QT by our landlord. We would have to have paid an extra \$200 as the Foreigner rate if we had the job done officially. In the end it only cost us \$35 as it was a switch

which was at fault. We never got an explanation why EDC told us we had been cut off ; but they must have checked before they sent the engineer.

New Security guard

After the debacle with Savin and the drunken security guard we had to find yet another replacement night security guard. Chicken' Han who worked as tuk tuk and car driver, at the Freedom hotel dropped in, with a man who had a lot of experience in the Army and as a security guard. We interviewed him and offered him a job starting Saturday night.

We joked with Han that he is a mobile employment agency as he knows so many people looking for jobs! 2 days later Han drops in with another security guard telling us that the previous guard went to Phnom penh and would not be starting Friday. So we interview Chandrun who is a very pleasant, spoke English and appeared to know his stuff so we agree to him starting immediately.

The Mongkol Family

One Friday afternoon; Pumpkins Father and young brother turned up unexpectedly. At lunch we were talking about the family's stone carving work. We wanted to see some of his work and maybe sell some for him at the villa. They had a bag of stone carvings wrapped in the bubble wrap we gave them after our stuff from England arrived.

We just sat open mouthed as the most exquisite stone work was laid out before us. This family are so amazingly talented and their carving must be among the finest in Cambodia. I bought Coll a birthday present of a beautiful group of Apsara

dancers which shouted Buy me! Buy me! Louder than a gecko call!

Saturday morning was Colls Birthday. I spent some time photographing these pieces. With the help of Pumpkin and Kimleng holding large white boards as reflectors. I wanted to show these sculptures at there best to be showcased on our web site.

We had been invited to Pumpkins family home on the way to Angkor. We had met quite a few of them. Papa and their older brother a policeman, were regular visitors here when they took Pumpkin home.

Their single story brick house was only part finished with bare plastered walls with earth floors and rough brick outside. With three rooms and a kitchen for his family; it had little space. We felt immediately at home here. The menfolk worked in the front porch making high quality stone sculptures in cramped conditions. We were impressed by their work.. The whole family are involved in stone carving. Their youngest a precocious 12 year old can speak English fluently; his favourite subject at school being mathematics.

Tales of Asia and Gordon Sharpless

The “Tales of Asia” TOA website run by American photojournalist Gordon Sharpness, had much information; useful for expats and those wanting to set up businesses in Cambodia. Much of our information for living here was gained through TOA and the forum. His site had listings and reviews of hotels and guest houses.

We met Gordon in town on our first visit to the Angkor What Bar. The slogan “Promoting Irresponsible Drinking since

1998' sums up the atmosphere of the place. He was seriously drunk, and mouthy, neither myself or Coll were impressed. As result of our brief discussion, he was able to remember us and called into Peace Of Angkor few days later.

He looked at our guest house and we discussed terms of advertising. He looked at some of my photos. He thought a couple of my newest digital prints were good. He reckoned that my prints will sell well. So as a result we had exposure in Talesofasia.com, one of the most popular websites for travellers and photographers in Cambodia at that time.

In his listings page he described Peace Of Angkor Villa as:

'New cozy guesthouse in a peaceful setting. Owner is quite a photographer. Good place for the like-minded'.

This was a great endorsement and with our advertising on Tales Of Asia became a good source of promotion.

Andy Brouwer

Andy Brouwer had a forum too, which was well read at the time. We used it for research into our first trip to Cambodia. Andy had been visiting Cambodia since the dark days of the 1990s. He had many stories of his adventures in Cambodia while the Civil War was still going on and was an expert in remote temples.

We were excited to have a booking from him. Andy was on one of his many Cambodia moto adventures . It was quite an honour to be able to host his short visit. Andy was impressed with our accommodation. He forgave Pumpkin's poor attempt at frying chips. Andy gave us a good recommendation on his website; which was great promotion for us.

Janos the Hungarian Barbarian

Shortly after getting set up at Peace of Angkor I noted a posting on the Tales of Asia website from a guy wanting advice on setting up a guest-house business in Siem Reap. I offered some advice in a personal message.

“You need the patience of saint , the hide of a rhinoceros and sense of humour to run business here” That struck a chord with Janos who was keen to meet us when he came to Cambodia later in the year.

We had a few messages from ‘John’ who was at that time in New York, after some years running a tour agency there.

In September I was with Coll at an internet cafe updating the website. A stranger walked up to us and introduce himself as Janos. He had seen our pictures on our newly set up website. I had no idea at first who he was; but we soon connected.

We invited him over to Peace of Angkor Villa to meet the staff and give as much help as we could. As a result we became good friends.

Cambodia Cultural Village

In early September Coll and I visited a new attraction in Siem Reap; “The Cambodia Culture Village” the huge partially complete site; housed museums of history, contemporary Khmer life, models of monuments and staged entertainments. Ignoring the entry rules, banning professional photography; I took many pictures and within a day or two I had a page on the Peace Of Angkor website.

For a while anyone searching for the Cambodia Culture Village would find Peace Of Angkor as the the Cambodia

Culture Village had no website. Our website was the only one for this major tourist attraction; so those who searched for it got the Peace Of Angkor Villa website instead. That gave us lots more website hits and no doubt extra interest in our Villa.

Camera Problems

Just before Christmas 2003, My Fuji S2 Pro camera developed a fault. Trying to get it fixed in Cambodia was not possible. Few people had digital cameras and DSLRs were virtually unknown. The only photographer I knew using a DSLR was John McDermott who I met in the Grand Hotel, where he exhibited his infra red images of Angkor.

I managed to get in touch with the Fuji HQ in Bangkok. A helpful Warin, was able arrange to look at the camera and change the imaging sensor, which was under recall. Sending it by DHL Proved difficult as I would have to pay customs duty on it as a new camera if it was to be re-imported.

Thankfully Don Gilliland who ran the Lazy Mango bookshop in Siem Reap, was able to take the camera to Bangkok and send it on from there.

This meant that I did not have a digital camera to use over Christmas and New Year. It was frustrating having only an old Pentax film camera and print film to use. Slide film could be bought but processing could only be done out of the country.

Mekong Express boat in Phnom Penh

Going down the shops in Cambodia was not like home. Siem Reap was not a good place for shops; so we had regular visits to the capital city. Just before Christmas we took the new luxury Mekong Express Ferry to Phnom Penh. The double

decked Mekong Express was comfortable and fast, taking less time than the bus. It was so much better than those ageing ex Malaysian death trap boats.

The activities among the floating villages leaving the Chong Khneas boat port had me shooting almost continuously. I used up a roll of 36 exposures in only a few minutes. Oh I wished for my digital camera! We arrived in Phnom Penh after a comfortable journey and checked in to the Bright Lotus Guest House.

Soria Mall and a VIP

A new shopping centre had just opened in Phnom Penh. The Soria Mall was a revelation. Six floors of shopping with the first escalators in Cambodia. We had seen nothing like it since we arrived. The K Four Electronic store had hundreds of domestic appliances TVs and Hi Fi systems. We bought a Panasonic TV as a Xmas present for ourselves. As we left, the area outside had been cordoned off. We phoned Sok our driver. He could get anywhere near the building. I carried the TV outside to where a Mercedes limo had VIPs exiting. It was the Vietnamese Prime Minister and his entourage on a promotional visit.

We hired a Camry to Siem Reap make it easier to get our new TV home; we had other presents for our friends too. The cost was a reasonable \$30 for the single journey; the same price for two tickets on the Mekong Express Boat.

Christmas 2003

As we were living in a country that has no celebration of Christmas, we were not expecting much to happen. A few days before Christmas Savin took me into town on his moto.

On the way back I spotted a lady on the road selling inflatable Santas. I stopped Savin and bought an inflated one for an inflated price of \$1 more than the \$3 for the flat ones. I sat behind Savin with the Inflatable Santa on my lap, waving at people as we passed. Coll laughed hysterically as I entered the villa gates.

The Santa was positioned on the Reception Desk.

I don't recall much about our first Christmas, other than it was spent with our new Cambodian family of staff. Savin wanted to try some of my whisky. I gave him a small glass. He downed in one go. His explosive reaction and expression "Oh My god that so Strong" made us all laugh!

2004 A turning point

Up to Christmas we had only a few guests; barely enough to break even. That was to be expected as we were new on the scene. By January bookings were on the up! Almost too many. We were running out of rooms and had to turn guest away on occasions.

We had a group booking from Cameron from Melbourne. He wanted to reserve the entire villa for several days. Having our first Aussie group I made sure we had plenty of beer stocks. When they arrived they all asked for soft drinks and sodas as they were teetotal Methodists! Oh Well the Angkor Beers were not going to be wasted!

Hun Huy

At the beginning of January we were looking for an assistant receptionist and waiter, to cover when Diamond was off. We put a hand-written ad on a card out on the street to see if we

could get any response. We had an enquiry from Hun Huy, who had no job and was living in Wat Bo Pagoda with the monks. Hun had a good knowledge of English but was a bit shy. We liked him and reckoned he would gain confidence by working for us.

A few days after he arrived he was covering reception for Diamond. Coll and I went out shopping on Kimleng's tuk tuk.

“ You go out?” Asked Hun

“Yes we are going shopping? Replied Coll

Hun looked worried “ You leaving me on My own?”

“Yes, we will be back in a couple of hours” Coll replied

“Oh!” exclaimed Hun “ I don't know what to do”

“ You will better learn; that's your job” was my response.

That was not a good start to Hun's Career. Sadly that was a taste of what to come. Hun was useless as a receptionist. He lacked confidence and struggled to remember a thing. We gave him a month to see if he would improve.

Hun's home

Early in January, I went to see Hun's home in the Pagoda. He had lived there for several years as his family could not afford to educate him. His home was a communal wooden dormitory decorated with non Buddhist posters and sectioned off with orange monks robes. He introduce me to some of his monk friends. He took me to see Phan Thear the Abbot who allowed me to take photos of him. He was a good model and I obtained a lovely shot of him with natural side light and a serene expression.

Huns time at the Pagoda was numbered. Once he had a job with us, and an income, he had to move out and find a place of his own. We let him stay at the Villa with Savin, who slept in a hammock the small house in the villa grounds.

Photo Fun with Hun

Hun did take an interest in what I was doing with my photo editing and asked a lot of questions. As he appeared keen, I let him have a go at simple editing. Hun enjoyed the process and picked up a lot of skill remarkably quickly. I was impressed; so after his first month as an ineffective receptionist, I gave him the chance to work for me as my photo assistant. Hun was thrilled to bits at this opportunity, He was a good student and was soon doing much of my file management and simple editing jobs, I gave him tuition on how to use a camera. He proved to be a good asset.

As part of his training I showed him how to manipulate images. We took a photo of Savin and gave him bulging eyes and big pointed ears, This was done in secret but Hun giggled incessantly as we did this. I printed out the result and showed it to Coll and the staff. We all laughed hysterically as did Savin, Pumpkin laughed the most; so I selected an image of her in the Kitchen. Up in my office I works on the picture. Now Pumpkin was not so well endowed in the breast department so I enlarged her breasts. She came upstairs to see if I wanted a coffee.

She saw the Picture

“Ooh very nice daddy” I showed her what I was doing

“Bigger bigger make me bigger” she asked .

Well from being petite. Pumpkin took the appearance of a large busty matron with her apron.

“ Can I have a picture please I want to show it to Papa”
This was done and Papa Mongkol thought it really funny when I showed him.

Blessed by Monks

Shortly after Hun Joined us, he suggested that we had our villa blessed by the buddhist Monks from Wat Bo Pagoda. He arranged for the senior elder Phan Thear and two young monks to come to the villa for the Buddhist celebration.

The girls prepared a breakfast for the monks with cans of Fanta for refreshment. The monks seated on the balcony chanting and praying. One of our new guests arrived to witness the ritual, a nice start to his Cambodian holiday. Phan Thear took holy water, liberally anointing much of the building and grounds.

Peace Of Angkor Tours begin

By January 2004 Ta Elit and myself we were developing a programme of tours round Angkor and beyond. Ta proved to be brilliant as a guide. He had so many contacts for transport and knew many other guides that we could call upon when necessary.

We started working on our tours to remote sites like Beng Mealea, Kbal Spean, Banteay Srey and Tonle Sap Lake. I did not go on many tours at first as I left that to our expert guides around Angkor.

We were getting enquiries from photographers for remote and lake tours which I was keen to get involved in. Back in 2003

Digital SLRs were uncommon and expensive. My Fuji S2 Pro DSLR was quite a novelty at the time.

Up to 2004 the photo tours were almost a hobby, did not make much money but was giving us valuable experience; myself with the locations and Ta's understanding about the needs of photographers. Ta had a film camera and took keen interest; though left the photography to me. Ta and myself went on research trips to remote temple complexes. These were real adventures. Most of these were challenging destinations on bad roads and tracks.

So 2004 proved to be a turning point for the tours; we had our guest house base, which we were marketing to photographers. It was a unique setup where we were providing services to photographers; giving advice, selling Prints and CD downloads, (memory cards were tiny then). We were at the cutting edge tourism in Cambodia with many spectacular adventures to places few had visited or heard of. Our slogan changed to

“We take you to places normal tours do not go”

Photo Permissions around Angkor

In January we had an enquiry from a professional photographer Michael Lee who was coming to Cambodia on vacation and wanted to know about any restrictions on photography. I told him that if he as not shooting commercially that should be OK , but I would check with the Apsara Authority.

Michael was the first pro we had on tour, so I was keen to make sure that he had no problems.

I visited the Apsara Authority to enquire about the issue of permits. I asked about the notice at the temples saying “Professional photography is forbidden”

“I have a professional photographer visiting Angkor, he wants to take photos around the temples, how do we get permission”

“The official is not here but he will need to have shooting schedule and equipment list ”

“Can you find out how to apply?”

“It is not my department” Was his reply.

“OK” I thought of a different angle to make life simple

“The photographer is on a personal tour and not shooting commercially’ So will that be alright?”

“Does he have a professional equipment?”

“How do you define professional equipment”

“A big camera and camera stand”

Big camera is bit vague I thought. I’d been using a professional digital camera for months without issue so I guess he was using a similar camera he should be Ok

“I will have to ask the photographer”

I left the office none the wiser really, so emailed Michael to ask what he was using. Michael replied by return saying he was using a Nikon D100 Digital and a Pentax medium format film camera. I warned him that although professional photography was not allowed he should not have problems

with his D100 but would have to be discrete with his Pentax film camera and tripod.

After his first shoot around Angkor he told me had been challenged by a temple guard who told him he could not shoot with his professional camera. He had to leave and go to a different temple. That was a cause for concern.

Kong Cheng Lee and a new project

At the end of 2003 I met Kong Cheng Lee who was the Marketing Manager for the Angkor Hotels Association. He was gaining information for the new Angkor Hotels Association website. Up to then, there were few hotels with websites, Booking com or Trip Advisor did not exist then. So having a website dedicated to Cambodia with online booking was new innovation. Our website could not take online bookings either so having the Angkor Hotels Organisation was gimping to be useful as a marketing tool.

Chheng Lee called in one day and asked me if I could teach him Photoshop. I agreed a price which his company would pay. We had several weekly sessions. Chheng Lee asked me if I was interested in developing websites for hotels and other organisations. We soon started working on websites for hotels. Lee's Khmer marketing background, my photo skills and web knowledge were a great match. I was enjoying photographing hotels as change from temples.

I was now working as a professional and gaining a good reputation. Hun was invaluable with his editing skills leaving me time to work on the web Projects. Having a Digital SLR was still a novelty, few people could afford the \$3000 for a digital DSLR Camera and choice was limited.

The photography tied in well with the Web design as I could plan and visualise the Site. Using Microsoft Front Page had limitations but I had used the program at the Ordnance Survey in my past life and was able to experiment with ideas on our own site.

One of the better projects was a site for The Angkor Guides Association, With Chheng Lees communicating skill in English and his native Khmer skills and important contacts. Chheng Lee was an excellent networker and a joy to work with.

Rotha Angkor Villa

Chheng Lee took me to a lovely villa in Slokram, ‘Rotha Angkor Villa’ this was a gorgeous new villa owned by Narith and his wife. They wanted a website design for their villa which had been previously used as the hotel training school and admin offices for the newly built 5 Star Victoria Angkor Hotel. The building had a large lobby, 8 bedrooms and a big garden with a small fish pond on the front patio. I took the photos, Lee provided the text and information and I developed an attractive website.

This was the last web we did before we departed for England, the income was useful as the low season approached, as we only had a few guests.

Chheng Lee’s story

Lee told me a little about his past life and how he became such a good communicator. He was reluctant to say much at first, however he told me how after an appalling tragedy in his village, he escaped from the Khmer Rouge to Thailand. As a 15 year old youth he was not given any assistance.

However he became involved in an NGO helping elderly refugees move the border in Thailand. To cut a long story short Chheng Lee's efforts were noted and he got a job with The United Nations. This led to him being a negotiator with the UN being directly involved in the cease fire at the end of the Khmer Rouge Civil War after Pol Pot died in Preah Vihear.

Guides and Drivers

Ta Elit was our main guide from the start; he had encyclopaedic knowledge, excellent command of English and many contacts in tourism. We worked together well and our guests loved him. That became obvious to me even more when I joined him on remote and Lake tours.

TA (Mr fix it) could do almost anything for us. I had a request from a German group who wanted to hire a military helicopter from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap. That seemed like an impossible task, but Ta had a contact in the army who could get us a Russian helicopter at a price. The \$2,000 dollars was too much for the Germans, but At least we know it could be done.

We needed more guides, so Ta had plenty of guide friends to call on. Sorn Ke Nit and Sophea were among the first in those early days. Later on we got to know many more. Our first minivan driver Phum Deth had a good Toyota Hi Ace which we used for nearly all our small group tours. Deth has excellent English and a good sense of humour. Kimleng was our main tuk tuk driver with Savay and Mr Han. By Christmas Savin squired a tuk tuk as well, so we had a full compliment of drivers. Ta could always get cars for our

guests , Mr Thy was a regular car driver and if we needed a 4WD Chher had a decent Mitsubishi Pajero.

Family and staff issues

As the season progressed Pumpkin needed help in the kitchen. We took on Tensovan Savy to help out. Savy was keen as mustard and good natured. She fitted in well and was liked by us, She had an eye problem; caused by her brother hitting her eye with a stone from a catapult. Although she only had one eye, this did not affect her work, her broad smile and engaging personalty endeared her to us all.

Phanna who joined us as assistant manager for a few months. He left us at short notice I cannot recall the reason why now. We needed another waiter and found Kim Sophath a young and enthusiastic 21 year old, who we thought would fit in well at Peace of Angkor. We employed him as waiter and a part time Receptionist.

Yet another security guard left, so we had to find another. Papa Mongkol had a son who needed a job, so we employed him. I was not comfortable about having too many from the same family.

A few weeks previously we had a problem where Pumpkin was disciplined and walked out on us because Coll had a justifiable complaint against her. We called in Papa who mediated and persuaded her to return.

As result I was concerned about having too many from the same family working for us. In the event of a problem or a family celebration, there was a possibility of all the family being unavailable, or in the worse case desert us. I had heard from expat friends, of incidents when that happened.

I was not so enthusiastic about too cosy a relationship with our staff. Coll loved being Mummy to our girls and boys. I felt that our judgement would become blinded by our relationships. I did not want to create any problems with Colleen either, so I just accepted being Daddy to the girls at least. I never felt comfortable about being called Daddy by the guys, or in front of our guests in the reception area.

However we thought our relationship with the Mongkol family was sound. After all we were providing a good income and helping them make and sell their sculpture work. We employed their son as security in any case, as we were due to go back to England soon and wanted stability while we were away. With Papa present I hoped he would keep a fatherly eye on his offspring.

Off to Bangkok for supplies

In the early days of Peace Of Angkor I had to go on trips outside of Siem Reap to obtain supplies not available in the town. The journey to Phnom Penh was a painfully slow 9 hours by bus on the bumpy dusty excuse for a main road Route 6.

I went to Bangkok overland in February without a camera. My Fuji S2 SLR had been developed a fault in January and was taken by Don Gilliland for a warranty repair in Bangkok. I did not want to go to Bangkok just for that purpose. However DHL informed me that the Cambodian Customs would charge import duty on the \$3000+ value of the camera if I had it sent back. I decided to go to Bangkok anyway as it would be an interesting weekend away from 'the jungle' and see some city life.

Taking the pee at Poipet

I took a bus to the Poipet border heading to Bangkok. The legendary Road 6 had not improved much since 2003, with some roadwork in progress. It was taking around 4 to 5 hours for the 180 kilometre drive. I had a large bottle of water to drink on the way. It was flimsy plastic with a top, which was impossible to put back on. I sat with this wobbly litre bottle, spilling out over my lap as we hit the bumps. I drank it all at one go.

That was not such a smart idea. I soon needed to pee. The motion was not helping. I sat for an hour until I was almost wetting myself. I went to the front of the bus and gestured to the driver's assistant by holding my crotch and saying, "pee pee" in an anxious tone. The assistant laughed, could speak English anyway, and pointed me to the rear of the bus where there was a WC!

The border was still the Wild West but less so for those traveling out of Cambodia. The courier gave us all stick on badged and instructions to look for the Thai staff at the other side of the border. The queues at the Thai immigration were long. It was hot out in the sun, but a brief shower, the first rain since October, barely wet the parched ground.

I was bursting for a pee again. With nowhere to go I suffered to the point of pain for nearly an hour. Nearing the building I took the chance to relieve myself behind the row of concrete tank traps. In full flow a woman carrying shopping bags walked right towards me oops!

Once the border formalities were over, I took m the sort walk the Thai Bus at Ronkhla Market. The bus was full with many

Cambodians. The bus stopped at a police post. Immigration officers boarded the bus, checked all the papers of the Khmers, ignoring the handful of westerners on the bus.

I recall it took about 3 to 4 hours to arrive at the destination, Khao San Road. This is a lively and noisy backpackers area. I looked for some accommodation, finding a cheap guesthouse down an alley or Soi just off the main drag. I expected it to be quieter here.

Camera Repair

It was unusually cool that morning; I really needed a sweater when I ate breakfast in an outdoor café. The awful traffic and pollution, takes an age to get anywhere due to the traffic jams. My priority for the morning was to get to the Fuji head office to collect my repaired camera. The Fuji office in a large black glass office block, well away from the city centre where I was staying. It was near to the Skytrain line so not hard to find. I met Warin, who was dealing with my repair. He informed me that Fuji had replaced the sensor free of charge as it was subject to a recall.

Train to the Cambodia Border

I had a sleepless night at the Station Hotel. There was so much traffic noise and the walls were not sealed against noise from the passageways. It was also rather chilly and 2 thin blankets were enough. Apparently the temps got down to 13oC a record low for a tropical city that is usually around 25oC at night and 32+ by day even in the cool season.

The train journey proved enjoyable; thought the 5:55 am departure was pain. I found it fairly comfortable on the wooden sets for the 6-hour train ride. It is a lot more

interesting than the bus; so I'd happily do it again. I was through the border without problems with visas as I had my multi entry Cambodia Visa. The Poipet border had been cleaned up a bit so the touts were less active and it was easy to get a car for the 3 ½ hour drive home.

BBC interest on our return to England

On the 1st May 2004 we returned to England for 4 weeks. We stayed in Romsey with Coll's Family for most of our time in England. I hired a small Peugeot car to get around. We had a good time catching up with old friends in the Southampton area and a reunion at the Old Thatch in Shirley. Peter Woods, Geoff Carrington Phil Aldridge and some members of the OS Photo Club too.

It was good to see Colls Sister Maureen and Rob in Hythe. We visited Clive Parker over in Hedge End as well. We had a weekend in London staying with David and Clare in Putney; meeting up with Cliff and his new Latvian wife Ilana.

Phil Aldridge, who had been doing world and blues music shows on BBC radio, suggested we got in touch with his contacts at the BBC to tell our story. I went to the BBC studios for an interview for BBC Radio Solent.

This all went well; the talk show host was keen to hear the story of what was an unusual thing to do in a country known for genocide and civil war. I explained a few stories of our life and some 'Basil Fawlty moments in our Cambodian Fawlty Towers. The show had an audience throughout the South Of England. I was asked for a follow up interview when we returned to Siem Reap.

Visiting Andy Brouwer

We had a Short trip to Gloucestershire to meet Andy Brouwer who stayed with us in 2003. I loaned him some prints for an exhibition on Cambodia he was hosting. Andy was working in a bank and had a family, living a comfortable suburban existence.

Andy had an obsession for Cambodia starting with his first visit in the mid 1990s. His Cambodia Forum was a useful source on information on Cambodia. His wife had no interest at all in SE Asia. Coll tried to persuade her about the joys of Cambodia, but Andy told us on the quiet that she would never go and if she did; she would not be able to do the kind of adventures on motorbike that he liked to do.

Wallet woes

A few days before our scheduled departure I lost my wallet while shopping. Panic mode set in as we were going to fly back in a few days. I cancelled my bank cards without checking my emails. As soon as I checked my email I had one from John Lanaghan our neighbour. He had a phone call from a man who had picked up my wallet on the street. He saw a post it note with Johns phone number. That was a relief; however I had just cancelled my bank card minutes before Aaarrh!

The following day I went to St Mary's Street and met the Pakistani family who were having a party. My cards, diving licence and £50 cash were in there. I gave the cash to the father who was reluctant to accept it at first. I said it will be a good donation for the birthday party and he accepted it as a thanks for his honesty.

I had to order new Visa cards; but I did have my UK Driving Licence and was able to get money in cash here with our Cambodian Bank. We will just have to wait a few weeks for the replacement cards to be delivered.

Gulf Air to Cambodia

I really do not like being cocooned in a long metal tube with several hundred people with only two working toilets; tasteless food and having to be double jointed to eat with plastic cutlery which is likely to snap with the slightest downward pressure.

Having to sit for hours watching naff movies with headphones of such a crap design that any attempt at getting any reasonable sound involves a vice like grip with both hands making eating or doing anything else impossible and looking pretty silly as well! So the best course of action is to either watch silently or look out the window; which is usually clouds over as soon as anything of interest comes into view.

So I decide to read only to find that the intransigent Arab woman in front; who insisted; in spite of my protests; to lie fully reclined for most of the journey. I had my chin virtually embedded in the seat back and no chance of either a read or look at movie screen which had be viewed from such an acute angle that the LCD screen was virtually black and un-watchable.

The only relief being when I asked the cabin crew to tell her to move it so I could have dinner; she reluctantly un-reclined a few notches; then returned to her position without warning with me narrowly avoiding having a plastic cup of tepid coffee in my lap! Her baby screamed for an age at such a piercing and ear splitting volume that he drowned out the noise of the engines until the Air Nanny calmed him down. Still I managed to survive this without a screaming fit as Air Rage is only allowed by those under 5 years old.

The three and a half hour wait at Bahrain Airport was a chance to stretch our legs. Of all the airports I have ever been Bahrain must be the duller both architecturally and of the dreary facilities on offer. The only nice area was the duty free where there were no seats and prices, which rival those at Thieffrow! The catering facilities were basic though clean and a burger was the most exotic offering available.

The rest of the journey with Gulf Air was quite pleasant as I managed to get some sleep. Well Coll thought so, as she had snoring from me and an English gent on her right. Gulf Air do serve decent wine and ice cream; though the meals are nowhere near as good as Emirates or Thai airways.

As Bangkok approached Coll was concerned that there would not be a repeat of our baggage not arriving (as in London on the outward journey) I tried to reassure her that it was unlikely to happen twice. We entered the empty terminal at Don Muang Airport and speedily passed through Immigration Control. Any worries were soon dispelled when we saw our baggage on the carousel within seconds. Quite amazingly, we were in a taxi within 30 mins of touchdown.

Bangkok

For those who have never been to Bangkok it is a city of quite stupendous ugliness and totally lacking in charm. Its a mega metropolis of 14 million people most living in tawdry tenements and high-rise apartment blocks. Between these blocks lie a twisted mass of concrete flyovers and elevated highways and incredible traffic, which clogs very artery in the city.

It is not all bad though; as the historic centre and fabulous Grand Palace and Wats are quite fantastic and very beautiful. Some of the new modern architecture is very spectacular and the shopping! Bangkok is a shoppers paradise.

Shopping

Panthip Plaza was our 1st stop. This six floor shopping mall is dedicated to Technology and computers. Imagine 6 PC worlds stacked up on top of one another surrounding a vast atrium and maybe a hundred or more other smaller shops selling PCs Cameras and Hi fi. Prices are much lower than anywhere in Europe; I saved £150 on a wide-angle lens alone. So I suggest that anyone planning to buy camera equipment for a SE Asia trip to look here!

We spent several hours at the Central Department Store. Seven Stories of luxury shopping with everything less than one roof; including Marks and Spencers. Our glasses were replaced in the posh Eye Lab with free eye test 40% off frames and lenses at a fraction of UK prices.

The bookshop is vast and has a remarkable selection of English Language magazines and books; so much so, that it was hard to appreciate that we have travelled 7000 miles to get here! The Hi-Tec Food Loft with its panoramic views of the city was a lovely place to have dinner with the glittering lights of downtown Bangkok.

Cambodia Here We Come

Moving on to Cambodia involved a 5 hour bus journey and another 3 hours by taxi. The journey was fine. On the bus we were in the close company of Mira an English lady who sat in front of us. She was relieved to hear our English voices and

introduced herself. She was working for the VSO and was interested in our life in Cambodia. Mira had been there late April and enjoyed her visits to the temples and her stay at Sweet Dreams GH. She didn't enjoy the 20 hours on the Boat from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap though! Surprisingly; Mira had a home in Bursledon so knew Southampton Well.

The Border

It was hot at 12 pm as we arrived at Aranyaprathet We took a tuk tuk to the border where Coll hailed a cart to take our baggage. The Thai immigration was crammed with Thais waiting for day passes to use the casinos, which line the border area in Cambodia.

This mini Las Vegas looks totally out of place in the scruffy border town of Poipet. Seedy as it is; Poipet is very much improved on the disgusting hole of a place it was only a couple of years ago.

The Police have cleaned up the old taxi mafia; by being part of it themselves, setting prices and demanding cash from drivers to line their pockets. We did not have to work too hard to negotiate the (standard) fare of 1000 Baht for a car to Siem Reap. The Police involvement does seem to have avoided the worst of the rip offs now..

The Road to Siem Reap

Any Tourist Seeing Route 6 to Siem Reap for the first time could Be forgiven for thinking it is still the worst highway in The World. As seasoned travellers along this route we know that Route 6 is vastly better than it was. The rutted, dusty, pot holed mess beyond Sissophon is a reminder of what the old road was like. Certainly the recent rains with heavy traffic

had destroyed a lot of the surface. The endless corrugations turning the road into a high speed roller coaster with our driver piloting the bucking Toyota Camry and taking wild turns to avoid the worst ruts. It was not a comfortable journey!



A boy standing at a steel bridge beckoned us to stop. One of the metal plates were missing leaving a gaping hole where our wheels could have dropped into. The boy demanded cash from our driver who gave him 20Baht He demanded another 20 before we moved on. Should I be so cynical as to suggest that the boy and his mates removed the plate themselves?

So why do we love this place so much? Well Coll's euphoric Phone calls to Diamond, Sang and Savin; the excitement in their voices and our feelings of being on our way home were far more important than the discomfort of the journey. There is nothing familiar here! The dusty villages with rough thatched dwellings, the street life and chaos are like nothing

in Europe. The Welcome when we arrived at Peace of Angkor Villa was overwhelming and the friends we have made here are such a joy to know.

We feel so happy to be home in this strange and distant land.

Return to Siem Reap and an unpleasant revelation

After a good month in England, we were happy to return to our Southeast Asian Home. We had a fantastic welcome and all appeared normal. However things were not as they seemed.

Papa Mongkol had an older son who I didn't like much. He had just bought a Toyota Camry. Papa informed me that his son needed somewhere to park his car and wanted us to keep it on the villa premises and be our driver. We already had a team of good drivers who could speak English and could trust. His older son could not speak English so would not be good for our guests.

I did not want to cause any friction between our established drivers. So I refused Papa's request. This had a bad reaction. Papa was angry with me and walked out taking his family with him. Colleen was in tears at the loss of her 'family' I felt terrible about the consequences in our own relationship. It was a horrible way to end what we thought to be a solid Cambodian friendship.

New Staff and Sophath Kim

With the loss of most of our experience staff we were in deep poo. I was gutted about the situation and felt responsible. I knew deep down that what I did was in our best interest as I had a feeling the Mongkol Family were taking over. Coll was not going to forgive me for this for a long time unless I did something about it.

Sophath was incredibly supportive and helpful. We needed a cook urgently. He knew of a mature cook Bunnet who we

saw the following day. Coll had regained her composure enough to interview her. There were communication issues, but with Sophath translating, we at least had a cook for the guests who could start immediately.

Over the next few days I was able to piece together some of the events that occurred during our month away. Sophath was more forthcoming about the problems, so I had a fair bit of information from him. Savy and Reaksmy had been harassed by Pumpkin. Diamond went away for days, leaving the reception unmanned. Papa Mongkol appeared to be complicit in this as his son was trying to dominate with his taxi service. All those outside of the family were being pressured and the atmosphere was strained.

My assertion of a Mongkol family Mafia style takeover was unfortunately correct. Colleen came to terms with the situation and realised that the unpleasantness was over and we could move on, with Sophath as Reception Manager and Bunnet working happily with Savy in the kitchen.

Life at the villa returns to normal

With a new set of happy staff we were in the beginning of the low season. Bookings were tailing off but we still had enough guests. The main problem was our rooms. They were OK as a budget accommodation, basic and with tiny en-suite shower rooms. Our guests were booking in spite of our accommodation rather than because of it. We only had a few air-con rooms and a couple only had shared bathrooms. So we had to turn away guests because we did not have enough air-con rooms.

I got in touch with Chheng Lee to see if there were more Websites to be done. Chheng Lee had been in his homeland Battambang and going through a complicated divorce. This was taking attention away from work. We had to put a hold on any web work for a while. I was going out on tours from time to time, Beng Mealea was a favoured destination and with a new tour to the remote Temple city of Koh. Ker and the Tonle Sap Lake tours to Kompong Phluk it was the beginning of exiting times.

The Rat and the search for a new villa

We had an interesting booking from a BBC cameraman and his wife; he wanted a number of tours for the week they were to be with us. We gave them a wooden en suite room; our largest. All went Ok when they arrived but in the morning they were not happy. A large rat gnawed a hole in the plywood wall, dropped down onto the dressing table. They woke up to see the huge rodent chewing at the mans watch strap. They were in consolable. We could not offer any other rooms as we had no AC ones available. They left unhappy and we lost our credibility and the tours.

After the rat incident and a lot of thought, we realised that our villa was not the best for the quality guests we were attracting. We really had to think about moving at the end of our 2 year lease. We had an email from Janos in July asking us to look out for a guest house for him as he was planning to return to Siem Reap in September. Janos was looking for a place similar in size to our Peace of Angkor Villa. We were excited at the prospect of Janos back here again.

I set about looking for a suitable place for him. We enquired at Cambodia Angkor Real Estate and looked through the listings. A large villa caught my attention. It was the Rotha Angkor Villa. The place which we had done the web site for easier in the year. This was confirmed by the agent so we made an appointment to see it.

An irresistible thought crossed my mind when we looked. Janos was looking for a small villa similar to ours and we had outgrown ours. Would Janos be interested in taking over our lease on Peace Of Angkor Villa?

New villa and negotiations

We visited the Rotha Angkor first to see whether it would be suitable. At \$1000 per month the rent was double what we were paying; so we needed to be sure that it was going to be viable. The garden was roughly 40 metres square. That is approx 130 feet or the length of a Boeing 727 Jet airliner. It was situated on a narrow cut de sac not far from the Siem Reap Catholic Church. Owner Narith had started to build an extension to one side. It was just a framework with concrete floors and roof. This gave some potential.

The building was offset to the rear with a large concrete space out front with two gates and plenty of parking. Niroth had planted trees and palms with flower beds and a small fish pond by the entrance patio. To the right hand side there was a large open area and an attractive pagoda style shelter out front.

Coll was thrilled to see it and impressed at the interior space. The big L shaped lobby was empty apart from a long boardroom table and chairs. The grand stairs made of

expensive hardwood, led to the upper floor. The kitchen was not that big but was luxurious by Cambodian standards with hardwood cabinets. I could see a great gallery space the spacious upper lobby, which had double doors leading to a big balcony overlooking the garden. The bedrooms were good with some basic furniture.

This was too good an opportunity to miss; however we had to discuss the extension building work. Initially Niroth wanted us to fund all the work which he estimate to be approx \$20,000 or about £12,000 at the current exchange rates (\$1.70 to £1). I was not prepared to do this; however I proposed a compromise. Its usual for renters to pay a large deposit, which can be as much as 1 years rent in advance. The usual practice is for the landlord to pay the deposit back in lieu of rent.

I suggested I pay \$10,000 as a deposit for a five year lease. This would cover half the cost of the extension. We would have the income from the rooms and at the end of the tenancy we would live rent free for 10 months. Niroth agreed after some discussion with the agent and his wife.

We had a sticking point in the Negotiations, Niroth was insistent that we would use the name Rotha Angkor Villa. The reason behind that was because if we left after the period, the business name would never to his family. That would not be acceptable to us as we needed our Peace of Angkor name. The problem was resolved as we were not going to compromise on that.

Niroth insisted on his building contractor to do the work. We did not have any objections provide he would accept our

plans for the extension which was just a framework with concrete floors and roof. So we had more or less a clean sheet to work on. Niroth asked us to take on his security and gardener Seth, who had been reliable and would otherwise be out of a job. We were happy to do this.

Signing of the Contract & Banking Woes

We had a meeting with the Agent and Niroth to sign the Contract. Niroth wanted us to go outside in the Pagoda or Small house in the garden. It was hot and the fan cooled us a bit. I handed over half the deposit of \$5000 to the agent who began to count the money. The breeze from the fan sent a confetti of hundred dollar bills out of the small house and into the garden. We rushed out and chased the fluttering notes onto the hard standing and into the flower beds Oops!

The balance of the \$10,000 deposit was a lot to find at once. Most of my money was in my UK account. I had half of the cash in our Cambodian Bank; but I had to get a transfer from UK. so I had to organise transfer from the Nationwide Building Society. Nationwide were not good for international transfers as they were a savings bank rather than a full service bank. To Transfer money from Nationwide, I had to download the form, fill it out and send by post.

That was not going to work as we need the money in days. The building society agreed to accept a Fax Request. I sent the Fax but after several days the money was not in my account. The agent and Niroth wanted the money. but I had to explain about the bank transfer problem. Nationwide lost my FAX request; so after a second attempt the money finally arrived.

I set to work designing 3 deluxe rooms upstairs with a staff bedroom, a tour office for me and Management office for Colleen With 15 rooms plus a studio room for myself and Coll behind the offices. That arrangement would be perfect for our needs. This was agreed by Mr Niroth so work was able to start with an estimated completion date of September; just in time for the main season. I made a further site visit at the beginning of August. Work had started; but there was not a lot to be seen

As soon as we had agreement, I Emailed Janos straight away with a proposal to offer him to take over the lease of Peace of Angkor Villa; so we could move to a bigger place. We had an immediate reply, Yes he was dead keen on it. It was ideal for his purpose as a backpackers lodge.

Injuries and Dengue Fever

August was a bad year for Dengue Fever and Malaria. Kimleng caught malaria out in the rice fields while helping out on his family's farm. We looked after him as best we could in an air-conditioned room to reduce the effects of his severe fever He recovered well.

We had an Italian guest staying. On check in I gave him a welcome drink of juice. The glass slipped out of my hand bounced and smashed on the floor sending a shard of glass into his shin. We gave him a bandage but the cut was serious. We sent him to the Naga Clinic a small medical facility on Route 6 and the best doctors surgery in Town. Thankfully he recovered with stitches in his leg and we did not get sued!

Canadian Photographer Ricky Friedlander booked with us for over a week. He spent his time around the temples. At the

start of his visit, Ricky took a tumble, cutting his leg badly on rocks in Ta Prohm Temple. We arranged to take him to the Naga Clinic. Ricky came back pissed off that he had to rest up for a week. He ignored the doctors advice and went out anyway. A few days later his leg was seriously inflamed. He returned to the Naga Clinic and was informed that his leg had signs of gangrene. He was put on the next plane to a hospital in Bangkok as there was no treatment available in Siem Reap. At the same time we had 3 more Canadians staying for a few days before heading off to the Cambodian coast. They asked me if Sihanoukville was a safe place to visit. I told them based on our own experience that it was fine and would be quiet that this time of year.

Dengue Fever

A day to two later, I fell ill. I was sweating, felt dizzy and nauseous. I got out of bed and collapsed on the floor. Coll was obviously worried and arranged for me to see a doctor. I was taken to the Naga Clinic.

Operated by mainly Thai staff. It was the only quality doctors surgery in town suitable for foreigners. I was taken to a room for tests. It was not certain whether I had Malaria or Dengue Fever. The symptoms were similar, but treatment and diagnosis was critical.

I spent the night there. The test report confirmed I had Dengue Haemorrhaging Fever; the worst kind to have. I was kept in for another night. In the morning I fainted on the toilet and smashed my head on the edge of the tiled shower base.

The Naga clinic arranged for a Bangkok Airways flight for myself a nurse and Colleen. Unknown to me Coll and the

Staff were negotiating over payment upfront by visa card. I was taken in an ambulance to the Airport tarmac and lifted on a stretcher up the stairs to the rear of the ATR aircraft. Is at the rear with Coll and the nurse. I don't recall much about the flight other than a bumpy one wheel landing but we got done safely and I was put in an ambulance with Coll and the nurse.

Bangkok Hospital and an unpleasant coincidence

Although I was very sick I do recall the slick appearance of the Bangkok Hospital. I was taken to Intensive care, my memory was hazy but after a day of blood transfusion and other tests I was taken to a private room. This room would not look out of place in a luxury hotel; with a large screen TV and a single sofa bed for Coll to use if she wished. Coll had booked into a nearby hotel; but spent most of her time with me.

The period in the ward was uncomfortable. I had a severe body rash and I found out why Dengue is called Break Bone Fever, My joints were painful. Every time I moved, my back ached so I could not lay still for long. Sleep was near impossible and the time passed agonisingly slowly. I know now what it's like to be severely arthritic. I don't want to go through that again! Another side effect of Dengue was the effect on taste or lack of.

Coll spent a lot of time with me which helped me a lot. I was amazed to learn from her that Ricky Friedlander was on the same floor and the 3 Canadiens had been attacked in Sihanoukville while trying to resist a robbery. One girl was so badly injured in the knife attack that she had to be evacuated

by helicopter to Bangkok with her other friends, one was also badly injured. Ricky called into see me a couple of times before he was sent home. The TV was good to have; but most programmes were in Thai. I was able to get the Bangkok Post to read and Coll provided me with some reading matter and snacks. After a few more days I was in a fit enough state to travel. In a wheelchair this time, for the scheduled flight to Siem Reap.

Progress on our new villa

After my return to Siem Reap, I was confined to bed for a week or two. I had a mosquito net and a neurosis about those insects that I had previously ignored. Dengue fever had different strains and if I was bitten by a different mosquito that could cause a severe reaction; so I did not want to go through that again. Every time I heard a mosquito it seemed life threatening. I used a lot of Raid insect repellent spray at the time. It was so frustrating being confined to bed.

I was keen to see progress on the new villa . When I did get out to see it I had a bit of a shock. The builders had ignored my room dimensions and most of the walls and doors were in the wrong places. My office space was narrowed; our living accommodation room was smaller than planned, but the staff room at the back was bigger. Upstairs the extension rooms were more or less OK, but the position of the doors made a little difficulty in our furniture plan. The work otherwise was of decent quality and we were able to work round the changes. I just wish I had been there in the early stages to supervise. By September 27th the New Peace of Angkor Villa was ready for occupation

Part 4

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