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Cambodia: Past Imperfect

By Jennifer Reeder

Buntha, my Cambodian moto driver, pointed to a large, industrial-faced building and said, "That is the orphanage where I grew up. There are four more here in Phnom Penh." His parents were two of the approximately two million people murdered by Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime between 1975 and 1979. In an attempt to form a peasant society, anyone with an education, or who wore glasses, or spoke a foreign language, or was foreign, or a monk, or a doctor, or a teacher, and so on, was tortured to death by the regime - usually by hand to avoid wasting bullets.

Cambodia is a country in flux, struggling to recover from its painful recent history by taking pride in the stunning accomplishments of its ancestors. The monuments of Ankor are deserving of this pride, and three famous towers are featured on the Cambodian flag, national currency, uniforms...even the local beer is called Angkor. When my boyfriend, Bryan, first entered Angkor, he remarked in awe, "It makes the Incas look like they were playing with blocks."

It does. The monuments, which are sprinkled over 120 square miles (310 km), were built over a 400-year period between the 9th and 13th centuries. Tourists cover this area over several days either by minivans, or on the back of a moto. The cost of hiring a young guy with a moto is \$6 a day, and is the cheapest way to get around the mandatory hire of a guide to visit the park. They'll take you anywhere at any time. Our "guide" was thrilled that we were lazy and didn't want to be picked up before sunrise the first day (we did the next day though - it's beautiful and also a great way to beat the afternoon heat). As we zipped towards Angkor, we sped through lush foliage with monkeys, past lakes these ancient people had dug, and over sculpted bridges lined with serpent-clutching demons. On our approach to Bayon, I saw gray stones rising up towards the sky. No big deal, I thought, until the faces surged out at me.

All of the 54 towers wear gigantic carved faces on four sides, facing north, south, east, and west. Each slightly different face bears an expression that has a Mona Lisa effect; I couldn't put my finger on the weird sensation those serene smiles and coy eyes created within me. Just as I began to feel holy, a blind beggar with slash marks where his eyes should have been lurched out with a cup - a quick reminder that I was still in Cambodia.

Of course, this is impossible to forget just 200 miles south in Phnom Penh, a stark contrast to the continued splendor of Ankor. We arrived there overland from the Vietnamese border at Moc Bai, where the border gate is crowned with replicas of the chedis at Angkor Wat, and bounced through potholes as big as the van. Along the unpaved, dusty road, we passed mine sweepers and small impoverished villages for hours until we reached the city.

Site-seeing in Phnom Penh is a somber experience, as most of the major tourist destinations are places where mass genocide occurred - two million people out of a population of only seven million were killed. For example, S-21 is a former high school that the Khmer Rouge transformed into the country's largest detention and torture center. At one point, 100 people were tortured to death here every day.

First you walk into one of many small rooms with instruments of torture placed on a bed frame. Then you look up at a photo on the wall and realize that the bludgeoned, bloody body is pictured on the very bed in the very room in which you stand. Later you enter rooms with picture upon picture of the prisoners who were awaiting execution, and depicting torture techniques. It horrified me, and later, made me feel incredibly lucky not to have been born in Cambodia.

Many of the people killed at S-21 were taken to Choeung Ek, or the Killing Fields, where thousands of people were murdered and dumped into mass graves. A huge stupa, or religious tower, is filled with 8000 of the skulls found here. It was on my way to Choeung Ek that Buntha pointed out his orphanage to me. He doesn't know for certain if his parents were deposited there.

A wander around the grounds of the Royal Palace at Wat Preah Keo can help restore hope that a prosperous future for Cambodia looms near. The fabulous Buddhist architecture and abundant flowers reminded me of Cambodia's heritage of great builders. The Silver Pagoda has a floor laid entirely with silver tiles, but I found the smaller temples playing twangy Khmer music even more uplifting. The majority of Buddhist temples were destroyed by Pol Pot's regime, so it's inspiring to see people free to worship once again in such a beautiful environment.

Naturally, the entrances to tourist sites are surrounded by beggars who exemplify the horrors this country has witnessed. I have seen landmine victims gesture for donations from culturally sensitive tourists wearing a horrid T-shirt that features a skull and crossbones and reads, "Danger! Landmines! Holiday in Cambodia." Real cool.

With all these depressing and infuriating stimuli, many visitors to Cambodia find it necessary to soothe their spirits with some sort of substance abuse. I am one of those people. Happy Herb's Bistro, by the waterfront at 345 Preah Sisowath, is a great place to start. The pizza is possibly the best in Southeast Asia, and if you order it "happy," you'll have a pretty mellow evening. Just don't freak out when the elephant walks by. A few doors down is a rip-off Hard Rock Cafe, which is surprisingly empty despite having free pool, free peanuts, and 90-cent Angkor beer.

But the true escape from reality is just a boat ride away (avoid the truck ride unless you're really strapped for cash) in Siem Reap, jumping off point for the ancient world's Disneyland: Angkor. For three days, Hindu and Buddhist mythology became our reality. Day 1: "Look - that's a dragon!" Day 2: "No, it's not a dragon; it's a naga." Day 3: "Why look! It's Mucilinda the Serpent God - the seven heads are perfect for sheltering the Buddha during his meditative trance under the Bodhi tree..."

It's not just the incredibly well preserved and detailed engravings, called bas-reliefs, depicting mythology that make Angkor so amazing and unique. But it's also not the sheer size and complexity of the structures built for the glory of gods and god-kings, or the diversity between the different temples, or the magnitude of the undertaking, or the beauty of the encroaching forest, or the perfection of the human-sized carved characters, or...

It's impossible to ascertain the precise reason why the monuments of Angkor left me feeling that this was possibly the greatest ancient civilization to ever have existed on earth, but they did.

Of course, this admiration brought me full-circle round to the pain of this great people's recent history, which unfortunately endures. The government of Cambodia is

still extremely corrupt. It is widespread belief that the last elections for Prime Minister were fixed and that the King is also corrupt and excessively tolerant of former Khmer Rouge. Many members are now in the government (remember Hun Sen?). As I passed this new information onto Bryan, the local who had been talking to me said, "Please! Do not tell! I am afraid the police will take me to prison! I tell only you!"

In addition, despite pricey admission fees to Angkor (three-day pass: \$40), the guards there are paid only \$10 a month. They are so poor that several tried to sell Bryan their badge for \$5, and will let tourists fire their guns for \$1 a round. Therefore, a bribe of a few thousand dollars is an obvious incentive to look away while poachers steal heads and engravings to sell on the black market. I saw many headless and torsoless figures during our tour of Angkor, and heads continue to vanish.

Clearly, Cambodia still has a long road to recovery ahead of it, and tourism could be a key to this comeback. There is about to be a massive tourist boom to be sure.

When I arrived at the traveler mecca of Khao San Road in Bangkok, there was little buzz about Cambodia. Upon my return three months later, I found every travel agency on the Road was advertising Angkor Wat package deals and truck trips, and there was a new disco called The Bayon.

The roads are still bad enough to weed out travelers accustomed to comfort, but the influx is still inevitable. My hope is that backpackers won't flood Cambodia so that they can buy a landmine shirt and brag about going to a place that's still considered fairly unstable and dangerous. But as our tourist dollars help feed the local economies in this time of transition and we learn the lessons of Cambodia, maybe our awareness can spread and help stop and prevent such atrocities in all parts of the globe.