

## Cambodia – Pat Arrowsmith

Although I love to travel “anywhere, anytime” my passion is for Asia so when I saw a trip to Cambodia with Kuoni I was packed in record time! Cambodia, for a lot of people, no doubt conjures up images from the media of the atrocities committed under the Khmer Rouge regime with Pol Pot but the country has moved on very successfully and has a great deal to offer.

To get there, I flew Eva Air to Bangkok and was extremely fortunate to travel in premium economy, a very affordable and worthwhile upgrade option. One very short night was spent at the beautiful deluxe Sukhotai hotel, set in 6 acres of flower gardens and lotus ponds and very deservedly a member of the Leading Hotels of the World. A very early flight took us to Siem Reap and the start of our tour in this fascinating country. Our first afternoon was spent on the Tonle Sap Great Lake cruising through the floating houses where little children paddled out in oversized washing up bowls to see if a sweet or a dollar would be forthcoming! sometimes bringing a baby crocodile or snake as an added attraction! We were there at the end of the rainy season but shortly the villagers would move their “houses” further into the lake as the water levels receded.



Before visiting Angkor Wat a visit was made to Ankor Thom, where the highlight for me was to approach the South Gate, over 75 feet high and topped with a four faced head, by elephant and on to visit the Bayan Temple. This is one of the most impressive and mysterious temples, emerging from the jungle as an incredible forest of heads, dominated by 200 gigantic stone faces facing north, south, east and west adorning 54 towers.

Then on to Angkor Wat itself. Cambodia’s ancient temple city is one of the wonders of the Oriental world and was truly awe inspiring. A unique opportunity to chat to three young monks

learning about their way of life was for me a wonderful experience, with the challenge of photographing the “Tomb Raiders” doorway without capturing 50 Japanese tourists all wanting to be in the picture being the other extreme!. The grand finale to this superb day was to go up at sunset in a fixed hot air balloon – absolute magic!

A two hour journey on rough roads through villages stopping to talk to the local villagers where their houses are built on stilts took us to Beng Mealea. This sprawling jungle temple covers over a square kilometre and is largely overrun by vegetation and has huge trees growing from the temple walls with enormous roots journeying downwards. I felt like an extra in a Indiana Jones movie wading through water, walking along vine covered ledges and clambering through stone chambers to reach various parts of the temple. The isolated serenity here made this one of my favourite temples.





A short flight took us to Phnom Penh and a tour was made by cyclo, a brilliant if a little scary experience in this very traffic busy city, including a visit to the Royal Palace, similar in beauty to Bangkok though a lot smaller. A very leisurely sunset cruise was taken from the promenade round to join the Mekong river passing the Vietnamese boat people as we sailed.

In Royal Oudong, an ancient capital from the latter stages of the Khmer Empire, we visited a Buddhist temple. A young lad was leaving the Monastery that day and we were lucky enough to watch his leaving “cleansing” ceremony which consisted of having numerous

buckets of water poured over him. Then it was our turn to receive a spiritual cleansing after which any bad thoughts or deeds would immediately fade away. I think it worked!

Our final morning was spent at Tuol Sleng and the museum of Genocidal Crimes, used by the Khmer Rouge as a detention and torture centre in the late 70’s. Today the building houses exhibits, paintings and photographs of the many victims. It is a stark introduction to recent Cambodian history but a very worthwhile experience. I would recommend that this was done at the beginning of a visit to Cambodia so that the final memories would be of the beautiful temples, countryside and friendly people and not the horror that happened in this amazing country.

To me, a five or six day stay would be the perfect addition to a visit to Thailand, Laos or Vietnam. The culture here is to show great respect for others and especially to their elders and for once I enjoyed being the eldest of the group. I was helped up and down steps, through doors and into lifts whether I wanted to go or not!! I cannot wait to return!

