

Far from the tourist buses, Cambodia's real beauty is re-emerging

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The long, wooden motorboat sputters to a stop in the middle of the river, and the driver scrambles to grab hold of a tree branch to tie off the bow. Thus secured, we settle in to wait.

The sun is low in the sky over the dense jungle, but the afternoon is as sticky and oppressive as ever. Lighted by the sunset, the Mekong River takes on the look of stained glass, streaked with opalescent shades of orange, yellow, and even purple. We've come this far upriver in hopes of sighting rare fresh-water dolphins. But even without a single fin in sight, the sunset -- in a sky larger than our entire world often seems back home -- is worth the long trip from Phnom Penh.

Just then our driver, a thin boy, points at the water a hundred yards away, and we catch the sleek black form of something sinking under the current. Moments later, another appears, gliding up to take a breath and then silently disappearing into the water. We sit watching for another few minutes, missing the dolphins almost as much as we see them. Each time one breaks the surface, the boy points it out -- but we rarely catch more than a glimpse by the time we turn our heads. As often as he has taken tourists to the site, the boy still seems as excited as we are, flashing us big smiles when we just miss a sighting. The Irrawaddy dolphins, as they are known, are an endangered species; only about 300 of them still exist. They live in the fresh-water delta of the Irrawaddy River in Myanmar, in the river islands of Laos farther up the Mekong, and here, in the bend of the river just north of Kratie, in rural eastern Cambodia.

The boy guides the boat in nearer, and it isn't long before we catch our first up-close view. It's hard to tell how many there are -- maybe a half-dozen, maybe two dozen. At one thrilling moment, six come up in the same spot, one after another in the space of a few seconds. Otherwise, it's hard to predict where they'll rise next. The boy keeps pointing them out, and then laughing when we are too slow with the camera, as if pleased by the fact that no matter how many tourists come to his river hamlet, this is something they can't take with them.

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We're getting used to beauty here. And like the rippling bodies of the Irrawaddy, it's a beauty that seems always to be just under the surface. During this week in Cambodia, we've seen ancient temples with smiling Buddha faces masked by jungle trees, immaculate golden monasteries rising from the riverbanks, and electric-green rice paddies with top-heavy palm trees bending in the breezes. Even more beguiling are the genuine smiles we've gotten from almost everyone we've spoken with.

Whoever named this the "Land of a Thousand Smiles" vastly underestimated a population of 13 million people. With their country open to the tourists for the first time in years, Cambodia's people are finally beginning to feel the prosperity of the rest of Southeast Asia, and seem as captivated by the sudden hordes as the guests are entranced by their country.

The last remnants of the Khmer Rouge guerrillas came out of the jungle to sue for peace in 1998, when their genocidal leader Pol Pot died under mysterious circumstances. As a result, tourists have started flocking to the temples at Angkor, of which the most famous -- Angkor Wat -- is a bona fide wonder of the world. And Siem Reap, a once sedate provincial capital just a few miles from the ruins, has turned into a boomtown. In our cab from the airport into town, we pass the construction sites for one resort after another, klieg lights burning in the tropical air and steel frames reaching upward into the hot night.

Once the capital of the Khmer empire, Angkor ruled over an area that at its height sprawled from Burma to Vietnam, mixing Hindu and Buddhist cosmology. In the 12th century, its first great king, Suryavarman II, set out to create his vision of heaven on earth in Angkor Wat, a breathtaking temple complex topped with five soaring spires that have become the symbol of modern Cambodia.

But at the end of our first day of guided temple-hopping, it becomes clear that the two days we've allotted aren't enough to take in even a fraction of them. Foothsore, we strategize at a dark but friendly French-Cambodian bistro, Le Gecko Mayonnaise. Over cocktails and steaming plates of tender frog legs in peanut sauce, we decide to explore some of the lesser-known temples. We aren't disappointed: Unlike historical sites in other countries, no rope separates visitors from most of the carvings. We have to fight an irresistible urge to rub our fingers along the toes of a Buddha statue and even to climb on top of some of the walls.

At least the security has improved to the point where the looting has stopped. Eerie headless Buddhas stand as testament to the bad old days, when Khmer Rouge guerrillas defaced statues to sell the artifacts for guns on the black market. On the way back to town on our second day, our driver points out a graveyard of white-pointed Buddhist stupas, a monument to a nearby killing field. Even on Angkor Wat there are bullet holes left by a machine gun, where government troops tried to roust communist troops who had taken refuge there.

Less apparent are the scars on the people themselves. Our guide Sok Kheang tells us his memories from childhood, when along with the rest of the population, he was forced from the city to work in the rice fields -- an experience he thinks was even worse than depicted in the 1986 Oscar-winning film "The Killing Fields." He can't go into the countryside without feeling afraid, Kheang says. "The younger generation has no memory," he says. "I will never forget."

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The Khmer Rouge rolled into Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital, in 1975, and forced the educated class into camps in the countryside, where almost 2 million people died from overwork and mass executions. By the time survivors returned four years later, the city had been practically leveled. After a decade of occupation by the Vietnamese, United Nations peacekeepers installed in the 1990s were unable to keep profiteering corporations from stripping the country of its resources.

Today, the capital is one of the poorest cities on the planet, a backwater plowed by cyclo-rickshaws and rattling motorbikes. The airport has five gates -- which is enough, since only Vietnam Airlines and Thai Airways fly there. Cambodia's own international airline folded months ago, its downtown offices boarded up and covered with signs that implored the country's corrupt prime minister, Hun Sen, to save it.

The city itself has been untouched by the Southeast Asian tiger that lifted Bangkok and Ho Chi Minh City to bustling metropolises even before the most recent currency crash. Outside a few wealthy enclaves, the bulk of Phnom Penh is a mess of foot traffic jams and moped fumes, homeless children, enterprising touts, overeager taxi drivers, and refuse-strewn sidewalks. What is left is a city just waking up to the fact that tourism is its greatest hope of economic and cultural recovery.

As the world begins to feel its lure, the hotels, city guides, taxis, museums, and West-friendly restaurants are reaping the benefits. But the real city lies just beyond all of those tourist services, and we arrive from Siem Reap determined to find it.

Past the National Museum, crammed with hundreds of intact statues and treasures carried from the Angkor temples before they could be snatched by looters, the marketplace is a sprawling puzzle of stalls. Piles of cold Angkor Beer cans and bottled water in coolers, chickens hung by their feet, and a karaoke machine welcome us at one. Hundreds of mopeds slide by; many hold families of four and five -- one includes two undressed babies, and is trailed by a mesh bag filled with bright balloons. There are plenty of wide eyes and grins from bikers, but no one bothers us or offers to sell us anything. We sip water in chairs at the sidewalk's edge and trade jumbled Cambodian idioms with the owners' denim-clad children as they bop back and forth to the music.

Hours later at Ponlok, a traditional Khmer restaurant with a balcony overlooking the Mekong, we eat dinner: flash-fried river fish smothered in chili-laden mango and cucumber slaw. Its briny, translucent center is sweet against the crisp batter coating. No less than six young waiters and waitresses tend to us, asking questions about America, our travels, jobs, and families. When we've finished our entree, they crowd around us, speaking broken English and smiling. The oldest boy, with a sweet expression and crooked teeth, presents a plate of fruit -- short, fat green bananas, velvety papaya, pineapple, and coconut custard wrapped in long banana leaves. "I see you today earlier today, eating fruit in the market," he said, referring to our karaoke water stop. "This fruit is free for you."

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Despite improvements to its international image, and the booming tourist trade around Angkor Wat, prices in Cambodia are much steeper than in richer neighbors Thailand or Vietnam. It doesn't take us long to see why: Much of the country remains isolated on virtually impassable back roads, and it takes enormous effort to move goods anywhere. On our ride upriver from Phnom Penh to Kratie on an upscale "bullet boat" we are crammed into tiny seats with luggage stuffed in all around us. From there, it is a 10-mile road via a small clunky motorbike to see the dolphins, on the way dodging potholes, bicycles, bullock cars, and small children who run into the street to scream "hello" as we pass.

That ride is nothing, however, compared to our next. The morning after our dolphin encounter, we find ourselves braving craters bigger than a car tire and seemingly impenetrable clouds of dense red dust in a squeaking Toyota Camry. Buoyed by our success in finding the Irrawaddy, we awoke early at the Santepheap Hotel in central Kratie ready to press on to Senmonorom, the provincial capital of Cambodia's "Wild East," where we'd heard that it's possible to go on an elephant safari to remote hill tribe villages. The only problem is getting there. At two separate points our car is stopped by a roadblock when vehicles ahead of us founder in the muddy river, and we have to wait for them to be pulled out with a rope. At one stop we meet members of a work crew who are helping to repair the road with a Chinese contractor and an \$80 million grant from the Asian Development Bank, one of many concrete signs that the country is changing.

By the time we reach a town called Snoul situated between Kratie and Senmonorom, we realize our driver expects us to get out and secure another ride the rest of the way. And just as we're becoming fully aware of our surroundings -- a village of dilapidated market stalls and piles of garbage ringing a dirt plateau -- we realize we won't be going anywhere anytime soon. Our newfound driver, one of about 20 teenagers clustered on the dusty ground blasting year-old American pop tunes, seems intent on waiting to pack the back of his pickup truck with as many bodies as possible.

At one point, a fistfight breaks out among several drivers over who will take more passengers. To make things even more interesting, we're informed that one of us will be sharing two seats in the truck's front with a mother, her husband, and their infant. We have visions of a four-hour ride like that over potholes, and of a similar (or even worse) journey on the way back. Every good traveler knows when they have reached their threshold, and we decide together that we've found ours. We hop out of the truck and into the first cargo we can find making the return trip to Kratie. The hot drive begins again and we relax into our plastic seats, as disappointed to abort our journey as we are relieved to put Snoul behind us.

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As we've come to find in Cambodia, however, hardship is never far from grace. Three hours later we're back in Kratie, and something in the town has changed -- and not simply because of our relief to have survived the road trip. As we collapse at the riverside Mekong Restaurant with two of the most beautiful beers we've ever seen, we realize that the main drag up on the riverbank has come alive. Mister Boon, the eternally smiling boy who had rented us the moped we'd ridden to the dolphins the evening before, strides up to our table. "You came back!" he says. "Are you going to the festival?"

"What festival?" we ask.

"The Mekong river festival, of course!"

Within an hour, teenage boys and girls are zooming back and forth on motorbikes piled with friends, and the riverbank is bustling with street stalls and clusters of laughing adults. For miles along the river, monks from neighboring monasteries have set up platforms on the water, from which they are lighting candles affixed to paper boats they are sending down the river. As the sky darkens from violet to indigo, these lights stand out in ghostly, bobbing lines of light on the river current.

Their simplicity and silence couldn't contrast more with the scene unfolding on the riverbank above, where adding to the commotion of the motorbikes, fireworks are suddenly exploding. Some go off in the middle of oblivious crowds where boys snicker and girls scream to jump out of the way. Others are shooting off into the river. We duck to avoid an errant missile as we trod down to the dock, where children are excitedly lighting off more fireworks, giggling, and closing in behind us in an impromptu game of follow-the-leader.

From this vantage, we catch a closer glimpse of the candles floating on the current. More points of light are emerging from the far bank and floating along in the hot breeze. We can't help but laugh at our abrupt reversal of fortune. Only a few hours ago we were cursing, stuck in the mud on the way back from Snoul. But if we had pushed onward to Senmonorom, we would have missed this outpouring of mirth.

It's the latest example in a series of contrasts we've encountered in the five days since we arrived in Cambodia -- bullet holes and Buddhas, urban squalor and hopeful children, treacherous roads and peaceful river dolphins, and now a simple festival of light in this rural backwater. We give a wide berth to the firecrackers crackling on the dock as we plunge back up the hill, delighted, into the spirited chaos unfolding in the town above.

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