











FINDING

A GLIMPSE INTO THE LIFE OF ONE UNASSUMING BUT INSPIRATIONAL

	CONSIDER ASIA AS A DESTINATION		
		ON THIS JOURNEY	
	OUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF STILTED WOODEN BUILDINGS		GET OUT OF THE CITY
THE OBJECT OF MUCH INTRIGUE		OFF THE BEATEN TRACK	

CAMBODIA

YOUNG MAN WITH THE INVITING SMILE

Text Elaine Crebo Photos Elaine Crebo and Tim MacLeod



jungle trek in northern Thailand, we chose to spend a precious full week in Cambodia, new ground and a new adventure for us both.

Our first impressions of Phnom Penh were not stellar to say the least. A tourist map received upon our arrival declared that sex with children is a crime and set the tone for the next twenty four hours as we were faced with devastating poverty, accosted by the maimed and wounded and surrounded by mothers begging with their naked children.

A disturbing introduction—and we hadn't yet been to the Killing Fields. I had naively anticipated that a generation later, there would be hope springing forth from the legacy of the Khmer Rouge but we saw only the harsh reality of the desperate. This was a bleak contrast to the waterfront claimed by the local expat and tourist community and to which we had gravitated. Somehow, it just didn't feel right.

And then, we met "Post It".

The young man with the inviting smile had been soliciting our business as we walked along the bustling night street, hoping to make a few bucks by giving us a ride home on his motorized tuk tuk. We gave him perfunctory vague assurances and, surprised to find him dutifully waiting outside our restaurant several hours later, felt obligated to reward him for his patience. As Post It (coined for the corporate logo on his T-shirt), dropped us off at our hotel,

A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT ADVENTURE

In July of 2007 I left an eight year tenure in Hong Kong and with mixed emotions, kissed good-bye by the bedazzlement of city life and the blurred pace that accompanied it. In repatriating to Canada, I was also bidding farewell to the proximity of South East Asia and the memories that had been created over the years.

Fourteen months into the next chapter of my life and settled into the relatively tame environs of central British Columbia, I found myself convincing my Canadian fiancée to consider Asia as a destination for a whirlwind two-week vacation. Fortunately for me, Tim is a trooper and found nothing unusual in traipsing across the world to glimpse that which had created such an indelible impression on me. And so the adventure began.... after a blinding 2 ½ day visit to Hong Kong in which I played tour guide in fast forward mode—followed by the requisite

Finding Cambodia



CAMBODIA
COME ALIVE

we engaged in a brief conversation and inspired by his excellent English and enthusiasm to converse, booked him for the following day. What transpired was a glimpse into the life of one unassuming but inspirational Cambodian!

The next evening we found ourselves sitting around a folding metal table in an abandoned parking lot along the

river, with a half a dozen off-duty tuk tuk drivers. With one guitar and a set of spoons as instrumentals, we grooved along to the rhythm of Khmer folk songs, delivered in harmony by men who banded together during the evening when business was slow. Sprawled on blankets on the grassy area around us were another dozen or so drivers, smoking, chatting playing cards; fortified by 'coconut palm' splashed from recycled soft drink bottles and munching on crispy fried frog. Kudos to Tim for making the most of the experience by snacking on this amphibian, with (yuk) all its body parts intact and washing it down with the local moonshine. When not humming along with the make-shift choir, we chatted with our evening's host. We learned that Post It had a wife and a six

A MOMENT OF A
CAMBODIA



year old son whom he saw once every few months when he would make the four hour journey home to the countryside. He spoke with pride about his village and how as the only man who owned a tuk tuk, he was looked up to by the local community. Back at our hotel that night to discuss the following day's plans, Tim and I had the same idea and the next morning when Post It came to pick us up for our outing. We told him that we wanted to see the "real Cambodia", to get out of the city and meet people in the countryside—preferably about four hours away from Phnom Penh! He looked at us in amazement but agreed to take us on this journey—uncertain as to our motive for this unusual request but grateful for the full day's employment.

And thus began a completely different Cambodian adventure as we clambered onto the padded seat behind the man whom we entrusted with our lives, as he careened down the highway and through the country side. Windblown, sucking fumes and with a ground level perspective, Tim and I grinned in amazement as we shared in the simple pleasures of observing Cambodia come alive; laughing children jumping from a bridge into the river below, women selling dried fish on the side of the road, a beautiful young girl riding a buffalo in a rice paddy, a construction worker taking a nap in a hammock strung under his truck, an amazing assortment of vehicles carrying outlandish loads of goods and passengers, a group of women selling baskets of fried scorpions, market stalls with garish collections of severed

pigs heads and a motorcycle weighted down with a gaggle of live ducks.

Several hours later while stopping for a break in a local coffee shop, we learned more about our new friend as he spoke with candour and pride about his rise from poverty. We were humbled by his journey. Post It was born and raised in a small village in Southern Cambodia, the son of rice farmers. Like most village children, he quit school after the 3rd grade to help support his family; from catching frogs for dinner to tending the water buffalo and planting and harvesting rice. When as a teenager he discovered his mother was expecting another baby, he made the decision to journey to Phnom Penh to earn a better living. The first day he tried unsuccessfully to sell his only possession, a T-shirt, to buy food. Hungry, he begged in the local market, one of hundreds of pilgrims who come to the city to eke out a living. He observed the "garbage children" scurrying about and the next day followed them, anxious to learn their trade. For the next five years, Post It scavenged and sold garbage, eventually working his way up to selling newspapers and paperback books on the street. He plied his wares to foreign tourists for several more years, receiving his education in language and commerce through these interactions. When he became too old to be considered cute and thus a less profitable commodity, he moved on to driving a taxi.

From there he hired himself out to the owner of a fleet of tuk tuks, and when he finally reached the pinnacle of work-



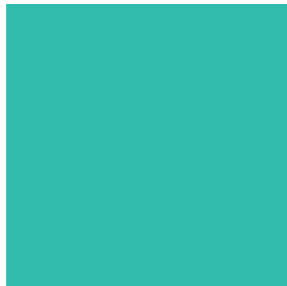
WE SHARED IN
THE SIMPLE
PLEASURES OF
THE SIGHT OF
CHILDREN



ENVELOPED
IN THE
WELCOME OF
STRANGERS

WITH ONE GUITAR AND A SET OF SPOONS AS
INSTRUMENTALS, WE GROOVED ALONG TO
THE RHYTHM OF KHMER FOLK SONGS...

Finding Cambodia



WE LEARNED MORE
ABOUT OUR NEW
FRIEND AS HE SPOKE
WITH CANDOUR AND
PRIDE ABOUT HIS RISE
FROM POVERTY.

ing towards owning his own unit, felt it was time to take a wife. His was an arranged marriage to a young woman whom he told us with pride was “the most beautiful girl in the village”. He recounted how his mother had bargained down the US \$110 dowry and his irritation at this act of fiscal prudence, imploring his mother to recognise that this was his intended wife, not a goat at the market! For fifteen years now, Post it has been commuting from Phonm Phen, spending one to two days in the village with his wife, son and extended family. He is optimistic that in another fifteen years, he will be in a position to move back farm to his own land. When asked his age, Post It responded that he wasn't exactly sure of either his own or his family's ages and birthdates, but that he could check their government ID and let us know!

It was with this introduction to his life that Tim and I were driven down a tree lined path several hours later, proudly escorted by the only man in the district to own his own motor transportation. As we pulled up to his homestead that consisted of a cluster of stilted wooden buildings, a young woman with a boy by her side shyly greeted him, the glow in her cheeks and the sparkle in her

eyes betraying her excitement. They were followed by a shorn, older woman in local garb, several other adults and an assortment of children. The news that Post It was bringing foreign guests had spread through the village and we found ourselves the object of much intrigue. Post It's sister and brother-in-law who lived in the house next door were bursting to show off their recent acquisition of “gas powered energy”, obtained from the collection of cow dung that had been fermented in a concrete tank and released through rubber tubing—providing gas for cooking and light.

Wanting to give our host time with his family, Tim and I wandered off on our own and were greeted along the dusty road by the sight of children cutting and gathering grass to feed the livestock, elderly women crouched on their haunches and groups of mothers and their young eager to have a glimpse of us, the “freak people”, given our pale skin and light eyes. Armed with a digital camera, we regaled our captive audiences with visions of their profiles on our three inch screen, prompting looks of amazement and followed by bursts of laughter. It was a true joy to share in their delight. Meandering off the beaten track, we were guided back through

the dense foliage to Post It's home by successive bands of groupies, everyone aware of who we were and where we were going. We returned to find an expanded greeting committee, some lined up, others crowded into Post It's tuk tuk—and even the odd cow wandering about!

And so we found ourselves sitting under a palm tree somewhere in southern Cambodia, enveloped in the welcome of strangers. We looked over at Post It, a man surrounded by his home, family and friends, washed in contentment. Strong, warm, resilient and determined. We couldn't have found a more perfect place to have shared in a moment of a Cambodia and her people.

Post Script

The story doesn't end here. Tim and Elaine have remained in contact with 'Post It' and have been invited back to his family home where 'Post It' assures them, they are always welcome. They look forward to returning to Cambodia with their children and introducing them to their new friend; a man who survived against all odds and through hard work and sheer determination, found honour, success and pride. For now, they have continued their friendship through email—where they discovered Post It's name is Chen Sokhan! 📧