

CAMBODIA

10 – 17 July, 2013



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What is the relation between Kampuchea and Cambodia? I asked the guide. “They are the same,” he replied. Cambodia, or Cambodge under the French, became Kampuchea from 1975 to 1979 under Pol Pot. Just shift the stress from 2nd to 3rd syllable.

Today Cambodia, has a population today of 15.1 million. The heart of the country is Tonle Sap Lake, which between wet and dry season varies in area from 10,000 sq Km to 3,000 sq km in the dry. The lake will shrink even more if 17 new dams on the Mekong by China and Laos are built, at the expense of the livelihoods of 6 million people along the Mekong and Tonle Sap Lake.

Most of the land is flat, but north along the Thai and Laotian borders and west, there are well forested mountains, with sandalwood and ironwood, which is logged ruthlessly and often illegally, as happens throughout SE Asia, most ruthlessly of all perhaps by Ta Ann in Sarawak – and who now are exporting their skills to account for some of Tasmania’s old growth forest.

We entered Cambodia from the Vietnamese border on the Mekong River. Whereas I had looked forward to seeing Vietnam in order to enrich my existing knowledge, particularly that pertaining to the American War, I came to Cambodia almost *tabula rasa*, apart from wanting to see what lay behind the veil of horror that was embroidered with the name of Pol Pot.



Phnom Penh

We cruised up the Mekong passing small fishing villages, little different from those in Vietnam,



perhaps smaller, more rustic even. The river gradually broadened and there was Phnom Penh, a modern city. We docked at a large wharf beside modern buildings. Founded in 1434, Phnom Penh now has a population of 2 million. The oldest, largest and wealthiest city in Cambodia, it is the capital of the country. Under French colonisation it was known as the Pearl of the Orient. Chris Koch in *Highways to a War* writes of Phnom Penh in

the sixties as a peaceful refuge from the turmoil raging in neighbouring Vietnam, lovely French buildings with orange-tiled roofs, broad boulevards and excellent restaurants. When we arrive, we see the mix of the broad streeeted French legacy, areas of extreme poverty contrasting with areas of ultra-modern development, including a Bunny Bar.



The traffic was not nearly as chaotic as in Vietnamese cities, much fewer cars, mainly those all-purpose scooters. We are driven through the streets in a bus on our way to the Royal Palace, built under French colonisation in the 1870s with a distinctive Cambodian style of gilt roofing and ornamental spires. We saw this style all over the country, even in small towns. The Royal Palace is set in a large park with several stupas and other buildings, including a temple-like structure that is



actually a fashion museum. There is a Buddha made of pure gold and studded with 2,086 diamonds, but we could only gaze from afar, and no photos were permitted inside.

The King of Cambodia is rather like the British Queen in that he now has only symbolic power. King Norodom Sihanook rather spoiled the royal image for he has served the world's greatest variety of political offices: two terms as king, two as sovereign prince, one as president, two as prime minister, as well as numerous positions as leader of various governments-in-exile. He was just as profligate in his sex life, was a whizz on the saxophone and ran a jazz band. He served as puppet head of state for the Khmer Rouge government in 1975–1976. Sihanook's varied political ups and downs reflects Cambodian politics generally. The Windsors are such stick-in-the-muds by comparison.



As we drive back to the ship, we are held up by a demonstration by Hun Sen's Cambodian Peoples' Party, which paid people \$2.60 to demonstrate. It is election time. There are three parties: The Cambodian people's party (CPP), the hopefully named Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP) led by Sam Rainsy, and the royalist Funcinpec Party.



Hun Sen along with other disaffected Cambodians went to Vietnam when Pol Pot started his murderous reign in 1975. The Ba Chuc massacres in Vietnam, referred to in my "Vietnam" paper, fired Vietnamese outrage against Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge so that Hun Sen returned in 1979 with Vietnamese help to depose the Pol Pot government. Cambodia was in effect a Vietnamese colony once again.

In October 1991 the UN signed the Paris Peace Accord to bring civil war to an end, and instituted democratic elections. But while Prince Norodom Ranariddh's Royalist Funcinpec Party won 45% of the vote, and Hun Sen's Cambodian Peoples' Party only 38%, Hun Sen refused defeat and an uneasy coalition was formed with Norodom as PM and Hun Sen as deputy, a situation that couldn't last and didn't. One way or another, Hun Sen has been leader of the country for the last 28 years.

That evening we rode in a tuk tuk to take us from the ship to Malis, one of the top Cambodian restaurants. We bargained US \$15 for the 20 minute ride and back, the driver saying he would wait for us, his grin telling us he'd made a killing. On the way passed through the CBD where we ran into a political demonstration of shouting thousands, detoured into a scruffy lot of side streets, anxiety levels rising, when like a pearl in a smelly oyster we were at Malis: an open courtyard guarded by a



large smiling Buddha under a palm tree. We had a table by the pool. We chose Cambodian kebabs, pork chicken and beef stuffed with chopped vegetable and with a deep flavor, beef fried rice, which had an interesting curry flavor, with very tender lumps of tamarind soaked beef, pork ribs slow

cooked again with tamarind and a grilled snapper in tamarind sauce. The fish was rolled into coils and wrapped with seaweed, with a strange tamarind based sauce on the side. If that's Cambodian cooking then it is indeed different from Vietnamese, more spicy, with deep flavours I didn't recognize. Tucking into that fare while our tuk tuk driver waited, I felt a bit like Dostoevsky's countess at the Bolshoi theatre crying at the tragedy on stage, while her coachman froze to death waiting outside in the snow. Not that freezing to death was likely for our tuk tuk driver.



On our return nearly two hours later the demonstration was noisier still. The rent-a-crowd seemed a waste of money as Hun Sen was obviously going to win with Sam Rainsy in exile escaping criminal charges but that dramatically changed when the King pardoned Rainsy. The elections were held on 28 July. Rainsy alleged that up to a million voters had been disenfranchised and that his National rescue Party had won 63 seats out of 123 seats, Hun Sen claiming he had won 68 seats. Finally, Hun Sen was awarded victory yet again and there things stand.

While we were in Phnom Penh we visited one of the killing fields and the Genocide museum, which raised much more disturbing aspects of recent Cambodian history.

The Killing Fields: Pol Pot



Cambodia has had a violent past going back a long way. Until the 15th century the Khmer people occupied the great majority of Indochina, the big flowering around the 12th century when Angkor Wat was built, which we visit later. Originally the Khmers have occupied a large portion of Indo China, including what is now Southern Vietnam but since 1200 or so, the Vietnamese moved steadily South, displacing the Khmer. Unfortunately the French favoured the Vietnamese during their occupancy of Cambodia, thus reinforcing Cambodian hatred for their age old enemy, the Vietnamese.

This age old backdrop of violence surfaces today. Karen Coates writes in *Cambodia Now* (2007) that theft, violence and rape are endemic, laws practically nonexistent. *Buak* is gang rape by young men as a bonding ritual in 30% of middle class males, and in an amazing 60% of university students, whereas in Australia *buak* is more common amongst professional footballers. *Bong thom*, Big Brothers, capture children and train them in street violence, their method of control is cutting the shaven heads of the children. All this seems hard to square with the smiles and friendliness that we experienced. Chris Koch describes the Cambodian people as lively, funny and friendly, yet somehow secretive, as if they were sitting on something they didn't want to admit. Is this violent streak what Koch was referring to?

Pol Pot himself was born into a well-educated middle class family. He bitterly resented French colonialism and like Ho Chi Minh, went to Paris where he joined Ho Chi Minh's Indo-Chinese Communist party. They saw communism as helpful for the poor people, but their interest was not in communism as an end, but as a means of opposing the French and setting up their own independent

nations. Here the similarity between Ho Chi Minh and Pol Pot ends: they later became bitter enemies.

The Viet Cong during the American War crossed the border into Cambodia through which much of the Ho Chi Minh Trail ran (or rather several trails, comprising 1,000s of km) to supply their troops in Southern Vietnam. Nixon's decision to send in the B-52s to saturation bomb presumed VC locations destroyed Cambodian villages with massive civilian casualties, half a million at one estimate, which almost certainly provided a catalyst for Pol Pot's rise to power.

Whereas Phnom Penh was a peaceful haven from the Vietnam war in the sixties, by the early 70s Pol



Pot, In an extraordinary deal with Sihanouk, let loose his black suited storm troopers. Sihanouk called them the Khmer Rouge but ordinary Cambodians called them the more sinister The Other. Pol Pot managed to transform rural peasants who had little contact with the outside world into psychopathic killers. They had a look, as Koch describes it in *Highways to a War* (p. 330): " ... their eyes seemed to shine with anger at something: something they didn't understand; something which made them all the more hostile because they didn't understand it. It was as

though something larger than themselves had taken possession of their spirits, filling them with malice. They reminded me of a street gang: the sort of street gang you have to fear."

In 1975 Phnom Penh was "liberated" but after a few days, Pol Pot's agenda became clear. His aim was to stamp out corruption but his reasoning went like this: corruption was mainly in the cities, so people had to be evacuated from the cities to the country where the peasants had the right idea about self-sufficiency and hard work. Pol Pot saw his ideal Khmer society in a mistaken reading of the culture that built the temples at Angkor Wat. Anyone who disagreed with this was branded a CIA agent, a KGB agent, or a Viet Cong. Pol Pot said his war would be won if each Khmer killed 30 Vietnamese, their traditional enemies, but it meant more than that. The Khmer word for Vietnamese is *yuon*, which refers to an enemy of whatever ethnicity.

Pol Pot purged the country of people who did not share his vision. He established a series of "killing fields" in which some 3-4 million killed, nearly half the population, when the total population at the beginning of 1975 was nearly 8 million. Pol Pot was searching for KGB or CIA or Viet agents, first among the men, then when no one confessed under extreme torture, he turned on women and then on babies, who were the "worm in the flesh". He argued that if babies weren't agents now they would be in future. Mao our guide, lost 52 members of his extended family including his mother, father, two brothers and two sisters; his brothers were 7 and 9 at the time. His father was a high government official, an intellectual and therefore a threat to the state. Mao told us about some of the atrocities, how babies were snatched from their mothers thrown in the air and caught on bayonets. One member of our group, a staunch catholic, shouted "Yes, we do that in Australia too. We murder 20,000 babies a year, but we call it Women's Rights," he thundered. That got the group going, and he was quickly



browbeaten into a sullen silence. Mao our guide was clearly struggling to make sense of the interesting proposition that modern Australia was no better than Pol Pot when it comes to murdering babies.

We visited one such killing field at Chueung Ek just 15 km from the Phnom Penh CBD. These horror stories seemed out of place in the park with elegant buildings, including an imposing tower with glass windows – it's when you looked in the windows and saw the piles of skulls that the horror hit home. Further one was a mass grave of 450 victims, an enclosure containing items of their clothing in remembrance.



We next visited S21 prison and the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum: Tuol Sleng means “Hill of the Poisonous Trees”. Once a high school, for 4 years it was a torture chamber and prison. About 20,000 people passed through here in 4 years, their mug shots adorning the walls of a series of rooms.



Prisoners were repeatedly tortured into naming family members or anyone else who in turn were tortured and killed. All this brought home the Cambodian light and dark, how Pol Pot managed to stay in power when killing nearly half the population from 1975 to 1979. Even more extraordinary is that both the UK and the US provided aid and political support to the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot when they were in exile in Thailand: the Khmer Rouge were anti-Vietnam, you see.

Yet despite the terrible tortures and killings, the Cambodians today, as we had found with the Vietnamese, didn't seem to be angry or bitter: “We look ahead” they said.

That evening we see the completely other side to Cambodia: a group of children come on board to dance for us. They are street children, who have been trained for years to dance, with flexible use of hands to symbolize, growth, leaves, a tree, almost anything. The children earn money by their dancing to support their families. Here is the dance of the Monkey King who falls in love with a Mermaid and amazingly she reciprocates the Monkey King's unsubtle advances.



Koh Chen



We go a few km up the Mekong to Ko Chen, a small village that specializes in copper work. As usual, we are greeted by excited children, urging us to buy silver, said to be of sterling silver standard 92.5%, but when you pick it up it is light, surely hollow. An artist is making an elaborate copper bowl in front of our eyes. We see the manufacture of a sterling silver plate. A plate is dipped into a

silver nitrate solution, and in a minute *voila* a silver plate. Another trick is to brush carefully with black boot polish, which gives a nice aged effect. We walk through the village, where a woman proudly shows off her baby with grandma in the back ground. We walk through the village, and as happens in English villages, an elaborate church appears: in this case a



Buddhist temple, with stupas in the churchyard. On many walls we see the ubiquitous naga or multi-headed snake: here with five heads, some with seven, in the shape of a cobra. The five headed naga symbolises five levels of being.



School is in progress, and the teacher is happy to introduce us to his Grade 5 students, ranging in age from 9 to 15. Prior to the French colonization, education was in the hands of monks for boys, teaching them religion and didactic poems and folk tales. Girls stayed at home and were taught crafts and home duties by their mothers. The French introduced a lycée high school in 1903 and the Royal University in 1963, but such education is available only to the few. Norodom Sihanouk beefed up the education system partly to educate the people against the French. That system was totally destroyed in 1975-9 under Pol Pot, to whom education was evil, run by corrupting intellectuals. Education under Pol Pot was to follow these rules: Rice fields are the books and hoes the pencils; Do as I say and not say what I do; Don't ask, just do what you are told; Disobey and you die.



After 1979, there were attempts to revive education, using different slogans: Those who know more teach those who know less; those who know little teach those who know nothing. Rather different from our: Those who can do, those who can't teach – to which I as a onetime teacher educator add: And those who can't teach, teach teachers. Today in Cambodia, there are 6 years of primary schooling, 3 years junior high and 3 years senior high to grade 12. Parents have to pay for supplies and uniform. 85% of children complete primary but only 44% complete grade 9 and 16% grade 12. Parents from rural areas, the majority, need their children's labor and can least afford to pay for supplies. We were told to give the children pencils never money for that eases the family budget. Schools run into shifts but under the same teacher, who is paid \$65 a month, high school teachers \$90 and university teachers \$135. Australian and Japan are the main contributors to educational aid. Under Sihanouk education was 6% of GDP, about the same as many Western countries, but now it is now down to 1.6% of GDP.



new born baby.

Oudong: a Buddhist Study Centre

Oudong was once the former royal capital until 1866, when it was moved to Phnom Penh. Now the most important monument in Oudong is the Buddhist Meditation Centre, set up in 1998 to provide psychological help for sufferers, 40% of the population,



who were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of Pol Pot's murderous regime. The Centre is run by Buddhists in a beautiful setting, with a massive meditation centre and monasteries for 88 monks and 44 nuns: the latter mostly being women whose husbands and sons had been killed and who had no means of support.

We crowd into the main hall where we are blessed in a ceremony by three monks.

Kom Pong Tralach



Kom Pong Tralach is a small village along a dusty road, where all 100 of us were piled onto oxcarts and taken about 2-3 kms to meet the ship. It was quite uncomfortable, lurching along, with no back support in pitiless heat. But the discomfort was offset by two children who ran behind our cart for the whole way. They presented us each with a palm flower they had made themselves. We gave them pencils, being instructed to give them that rather than money. They talked to us in basic English, and

sang a song for us: "If you want to be happy, clap your hands..." They chatted and sang as they followed us in the carts: we were stunned by the heat but these children trotted behind the cart, keeping up with us, never out of breath, not sweating. We passed their houses, where the smaller girl's brother joined us. We got off the carts where our boat is tied up. They flock to the landing to see us off.

Both in Cambodia and in Vietnam, but especially I think in Cambodia, we came across these happy, friendly, giving children. It was a heartwarming experience, but at the same time I had misgivings. Would Australian children react like that to visiting Asians? I fear not. Perhaps they might if the Asians gave Australian children money – or even pencils. But there was also a hint that we were being treated as somehow superior, not only economically, and that I found disturbing.



Kampong Chnang

Kampong Chnang Province is a large area on the southern edge of Tonle Sap Lake, through which several branches of the Tonle Sap River flow, making it a very fertile and productive area for rice, fish, fruit and vegetables.



The floating village of Kampong Chnang is populated by Vietnamese refugees who fled here after the fall of Saigon in 1975, even though it was enemy country. They were persecuted in the past and even

today they have no citizenship or government assistance; they don't pay tax. They survive by fishing and trading with the Cambodian land village people.



As we land, children again come running and shouting “hello, hello”, waving their hands. The village itself comprises very poor Cambodians and very rich Chinese, as is evident in their different houses. It is market day and we see the major French legacy to Cambodian eating, baguettes; an iron foundry, blacksmithing ingots of iron melted down from defused bombs; pitch for the boats made of resin, sand and palm sugar, and Vietnamese iced coffee, a sickly brew made of thick coffee and condensed milk and



ice – but the ice is made from heavily polluted river water and we are warned: don't drink it! 9% of river children have tetanus, caused by cutting the umbilical cord with unsterilized instruments: the children get the shakes and die early, but people say that is all right as they are joining their mother. Few people boil the water; mostly it is taken from the river and allowed to settle for a few days to become clear, in the belief the water is now decontaminated.

In the wet season, the boat goes along the way up Tonle Sap Lake to Siem Reap, but we have to disembark upstream from Kampong Chhnang as the water becomes too shallow. Further upriver, passing fishing boats, villages and vegetable gardens, we have to change to a bus to take us to Siem Reap. We catch our bus at a market where unusual protein is available. We now see the countryside from the land, passing through villages that haven't changed for centuries, with huts built high to beat the rainy season, rice stacks piled in front of the house to feed the animals. But always a surprise, a strangely modern statue of a man and a woman in a town square.



Siem Reap

We are greeted by a band of musicians in the foyer of our Siem Reap hotel. The name Siem Reap means “the defeat of Siam”, which captures the spirit of centuries of fighting between Cambodia and Thailand just across the border. Siem Reap was a village when the French arrived, but after they discovered Angkor Wat at the turn of last century the tourists flocked in, including Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Kennedy. But in 1975, Pol Pot put a stop to that: all Siem Reap's inhabitants were sent to the countryside to learn by hard work, humility and obedience to his goons. It wasn't until the 1990s that the present tourist boom took place, many luxury hotels like our own being built.



On our last night in the hotel, Cambodian dancers entertain us, like the dancing we had seen on board the Amalotus. The music is largely percussion, a bamboo zylophone, drums, flute and an instrument like the yee wu, the Chinese 2-string cello. Unlike Chinese music, however, this music is repetitive with minimum variation as it unwinds, like a re-orchestrated Philip Glass on downers. Likewise the dancing is repetitive, with a strong resemblance to Thai dancing with the hand and foot movements and spiked colourful headdress although in fact Cambodian dancing came first, Cambodian culture predating

Thai culture. As learned when we visited Angkor Wat the Cambodian dancers or *apsaras* carved in stone danced topless. Evidently the Thais decided to cover up.

A quirky end to our stay in the Siem Reap hotel: A friendly Russian women with two small children asked us about the tour we belonged to. "I notice you are all so old. Why is that?" I suppose that's because we've been born for a longer time.

The Siem Reap Orphanage

Mr Leng was 9 years old when he saw Pol Pot's thugs kill his father, he also lost his mother and sister. His sole hope was his only surviving relative, an impoverished uncle who lived 100 km away in Phnom Penh. He walked to his uncle's house where he was welcomed as a son. His uncle scraped and saved so that Leng could obtain an education.



Leng then swore he would do to others what his uncle had done for him. When he was a teacher he and his wife Sry On took in orphans, founding the organization ODA: Orphans and Disabled Arts Association. They now have 32 in their family. They teach them English, basic subjects, dancing and painting, instilling a strong sense of work ethic. The children sell their paintings to support the orphanage: there is no government assistance. Two of their children have gone on to university. In addition Leng and his wife run 6 night centres teaching English in the belief that that is the most effective way of breaking the poverty cycle.

We were asked in advance to bring things like pencils and school supplies. We did, but an enterprising member of our group organized a whip-around that after hard bargaining in the market realized 200 kg of rice, while her husband busily collected soap, shampoo and combs from each hotel room they had occupied. The children danced for us, and then a child attached himself or herself to a tourist to show them around, their sleeping quarters, their art room. Perry a 14 year old boy, with very good English and wonderful manners, showed us his paintings.



As we leave, two girls with lovely smiles wave us off.

Angkor Wat.



The Angkor temples cover an enormous area, 100s of square kms. They began to be built around the 9th century and building ceased in the 16th century. Recently, just before we arrived, an Australian expedition using helicopters discovered large areas containing ruins of canals, roads and hitherto undiscovered temples, suggesting that the city was even larger and densely populated than previously thought. The Khmer culture has been described as the most extensive and sophisticated of

any in SE Asia.

Until the 9th century, the Khmer tribes built fortified city states, often at war amongst themselves, Trade was with China and India particularly. Cambodians have some resemblance to Indians and there were strong Hindu influences at first; later Buddhism took over, frequently alongside Hindu worship: Angkor Wat has clear examples of both influences. In the 9th century a strong ruler unified

the country, Jayavarman I who in 802 called himself, “world emperor”. There were two main periods of growth of the temples we know as the Angkor Wat complex. The most widely known are Angkor Wat built by Suryavarman II between 1101-50 and after a period of unrest, his son Jayavarman VII, a strong Buddhist, built even more extensively 1181 to c. 1220, the Angkor Thom and Bayon temples. There are many temples in the complex, but tourists usually focus on three: Angkor Wat itself, the Bayon temple in the Ankor Thom complex, and Ta Phrom, possibly the most remembered for the way in which the jungle is reclaiming the temple.



What happened to this mighty empire? The Thais, pushed by Ghengis Khan from the north, attacked the Khmer empire but they were eventually pushed back to Siam. However, these wars led the Khmers to neglect the moats and waterways, which became choked with silt and weeds; this was then followed by a 32 year drought. Buddhism then became predominant, and Buddhists were happy to let nature take charge, as it did for the next 5 centuries until rediscovered and publicized by the French in early 20th century. They did a lot of restoration, but as the place became known, Khmer statuary became the in thing and massive looting took place. Heads of statues were hacked off and sold to private collectors in Europe and America. That’s possibly where the face of the last apsara on the right ended up. All the restoration of the French was undone by Pol Pot who destroyed the paper work and scattered all the assembled numbered stonework that was ready to be replaced.

Let’s start with Angkor Wat itself, meaning ‘city of temples’. The ogival towers surround one larger central tower, all in the shape of lotus buds. The total complex is almost 200 ha. The design is supposed to be a representation of Mt. Meru, home of the Hindu deities, the five towers representing the mountain peaks and the moat the rivers and ocean. At the time it was built in the 12th century, Europeans were building cathedrals with large open spaces for people to come and worship: the design here on the other hand is for the gods to reside.



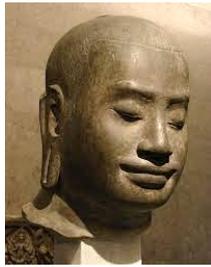
Angkor Wat comprises 181million tons stone and there are 1800 other temples, all constructed of laterite stone brought from Mount Kulen 40 kms away. The stone were floated down Tonle Sap lake and then transported by elephant to the site. It is estimated that it would take 300 years to complete Angkor Wat today, yet the monument was begun soon after Suryavarman came to the throne and was finished shortly after his death, no more than 40 years.



We first went to Angkor Wat at dawn to see the sun rise over the temples, said to be an essential experience of Angkor Wat. However it turned out to be a disappointment as it was dull and cloudy. We returned later and got our bearings on the back of an elephant who walked us around the complex, on the way seeing a couple of shrines.

The mahout sat in front of us. On his back was a bag, with a large notice ordering “Tips here”. Duly obeying, we dismount and enter the complex on foot over the western causeway, built a century later than Angkor Wat itself, over the moat. We pass a small temple and then we are inside. We pass some wall carvings, a battle, and several apsaras or dancing maidens. We come to a steep staircase that leads to the central tower; it is like climbing a mountain, as it was intended to be. There is a corridor around the complex on the inside, with a central large basin where we get a close up view of one of the smaller towers. We look down on the complex and in the distance is the tethered balloon that gives an aerial view of the complex (but we chose the elephant’s eye view).

The Angkor Thom complex was built by King Jayavarman VII over many years starting from 1200. It is



the largest of all Khmer cities and was the capital until around the 17th century. We visit the Bayon temple in the centre of this complex, which is a mass of towers rising to form a mountain of ascending peaks, the sides of each tower adorned with a massive face, thought to be a mixture of the faces of Buddha and of Jayavarman himself. Bas reliefs show



cooking, a riotous party, a battle, a boat on Tonle Sap Lake, a man being taken by a crocodile and a cockfight, all giving insights into the Khmer way of life – and of death. Bayon we were told meant banyan tree and the Bayon temples was so named with reference to Buddha, but the tree under which Gautama Buddha found enlightenment was the bodhi or bo tree. Not sure what the answer to that is. Nearby is Elephant Terrace also built by Jayavarman. At the end a game of polo is in full swing. Some modern fully clothed apsaras form part of the scenery.



The third temple complex we visit (there are many many more) is Ta Phrom and its message: nature



will win the end. At the entrance is a group of musicians, crippled largely by land mines during the troubles, perhaps that has its own message too. As we enter we see large trees growing out of the rock, there are two main kinds, silk cottonwood and strangler fig. As we go further inside, the trees become part of the design, strangler figs weaving an intricate filigree around the stone work. The temple is an intricate pattern of corridors as if trying to escape the invaders. The invasion was due to neglect. The shift in religious emphasis was from Hinduism to Buddhism, and in the latter philosophy has



every right to reclaim her own and live alongside the handiwork of man. There is another natural puzzle here which is rather hard to solve. Around the walls of the temples are panels of carvings of animals: monkeys, goats, and what looks awfully like a stegosaurus. But the stegosaurus died out 150 million years ago. We have something to think about as we return to our tuk tuk drivers who are patiently waiting for us.

The whole complex at Angkor Wat is a surprise. We had seen photos before of course but they did not convey the hugeness of it, or the sophistication of the people who built it.

Cambodian Food.



Cambodian food is one of the world's oldest living cuisines, Wikipedia says, with an emphasis on simplicity, freshness, seasonality and regionalism. Hmm, could be anywhere. It is influenced by the French, but not as much as Vietnamese cuisine. The Cambodian food on board the boat was not particularly distinguishable from Vietnamese apart from the absence of lemongrass. The French legacy is mainly crème caramel, a ubiquitous and excellent dessert and baguettes, said to have crispier crusts and fluffier insides than French baguettes: I say "said" because we didn't actually sample street baguettes. The baguette sandwich with a spicy beef filling is lunch to die for tourists blogs say, so in that sense it's a pity we are still alive.

Another feature of Cambodian cuisine the wide range of protein: sparrows, rats, frogs, insects,



tarantulas wok fried with chilli and garlic. Many of these protein sources were nutritious, high in protein and low in fat and therefore vital during the Pol Pot regime but people found they were also tasty, as our guide happily demonstrates. A word of warning to those thinking of eating tarantulas. There are two varieties: the black which is harmless, and the paler kind which is deadly. Mao our guide is happily munching a black one.



As for the people I hadn't realized how different they were from Vietnamese. They are darker



skinned than the Vietnamese, some almost Indian looking, with curly hair and large eyes. Chris Koch saw this difference and appreciated it. Yet as In Vietnam, the people seemed happy, unfazed by poverty, not today I think secretive in the mysterious way Koch refers to. On the left



is a girl dancer showing hand movements, on the right Perry our guide in the Siem Reap Orphanage.

I sensed that Cambodia is where Vietnam was about 20 years ago. There are stark contrasts between rich and poor in both countries, but the gap is greater in Cambodia, with much catching up to do. It is silly trying to capture what a country and its people are like on the basis of a few weeks tour within the luxurious cocoon of an up market travel firm. What it does do, as we have discovered in this and other tours, is that it sensitizes you to items on the news, or to people you meet. There is much more to it than the smug: 'I've been there!' when there is a news item about the Cambodian elections, or when Silvio Revere's Global Village is about the women wrestlers of La Paz.