



Cambodia

A land rich in history, spirit, culture

Photos by Colleen Caputo & Nickayla Myers-Garner

by COLLEEN CAPUTO

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Cambodia is not on many American's "must-see" list.

After seven years in Germany I have checked-off many sites on that list and knew it was time to go a bit farther afield and expand my view of the world beyond western culture.

The little we hear about this country in the media has led many Americans to perceive Cambodia as a very rugged, poor country ravaged by war and danger, so when my friend and I traveled to Cambodia for spring break we were unsure of what to expect. We planned our trip using the travel agency About Asia, www.asiatravel-cambodia.com.

What we found over our five-day trip was a safe country rich in culture, history and spirit.

Attractions

We visited 18 temples, met a local honey harvester, experienced local markets, food, a floating village, a fishing village and were graciously welcomed by local people.

Our vacation was full of explorations

and surprises throughout the north of Cambodia in Siem Reap which proved to be a life changing experience.

Upon arrival into Siem Reap, we paid a visa fee of 25 U.S. dollars.

Our trip to Siem Reap, the capital of Siem Reap Province, included hotel, private guide and driver, entrance into temples, a boat trip, and many other extras for less than \$500.

Our guide and driver were waiting with friendly smiles to greet us at the airport. They took us to La Maison d'Angkor, a French-owned hotel more charming and intimate than the other large-scale hotels in the surrounding area that featured bungalows, private pool and jacuzzi.

The first day in Siem Reap we visited Angkor Wat, a temple built in A.D. 113.

This temple has been a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1992 which has given the Cambodian government an incentive to preserve the temple.

Angkor Wat rises out of the lush jungle with towers, a moat and bas-reliefs depicting the Devantas, or dancing ladies of the court. This is a large tourist attraction, but the walls

and monks dressed in saffron colored robes gives you a sense of this temple's majestic appearance and purpose.

Tonle Sap Lake

Our second day we traveled by boat through the Tonle Sap Lake.

During the rainy season, this is the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia and produces a huge fish crop.

In the distance, the floating village appears like little wooden houses and boats bobbing up and down.

Our boat snaked its way along the tributary past a floating school, including a floating basketball court. Cruising along the lake for 45 minutes, the tree trunks and leaves extend high to compensate for the swelling of the lake during the rainy season.

After walking on one of the floating shops/restaurants, we traveled to the fishing village Kampong Pluk.

High on stilts, this village depends on the fish and shrimp crop for survival.

The towns have homes built on both sides of a main dirt road. During the rainy season you can float down the main street.

The town was full of life with locals getting haircuts, kids playing various games, dogs and chickens running about and the smell of drying shrimp filling the air.

Though poor by U.S. standards, the people who live there exude happiness.

They were very welcoming, asking us questions and even letting us into their homes. Simple pastimes, such as talking with neighbors and playing volleyball had all the locals smiling and laughing.

This experience put the importance of material possessions into perspective.

Ta Prohm Temple

The next day we arrived at Ta Prohm, a temple left un-restored in the dense jungle.

Taken over by massive fig, banyan and kapok trees, the tentacle-like roots have strangled the temple's stonework.

The sheer size and scale of the trees' roots as they tower over the temple create a feeling that nature has claimed Ta Prohm for itself.

This temple is also well known as the "Tomb Raider Temple" where Angela Jolie filmed the first of these series of films.

While walking through ruins we saw monks dressed in saffron robes and children sketching the carvings in the stone walls.

Though temples are a big part of experiencing Cambodia, the local trades are fascinating to experience.

We spent some time in a silk factory where locals continue to

use traditional means for growing silk worms, collecting and weaving the silk.

We were also fortunate to meet a local bee harvester and experience a honey harvest in the forest. We were only inches from the hive and watched as the Africanized honey bees swarmed around us in a cloud of smoke.

After being swarmed by thousands of bees we went for a walk through the bogs searching for wild orchids and insect eating plants.

Though much of Cambodia is full of beauty and life, millions of landmines, originally placed during wartime, still exist throughout country.

Now, during peace time, there is a mission to recover and defuse landmines that maim and kill many Cambodians, many of them children.

This is a slow and tedious job, but with international funding and local determination the amount of landmines still existing within Cambodia has significantly decreased. These efforts have been documented in many landmine museums, which are an important stop on any tourist's Cambodian visit.

Hidden treasures

While crossing the countryside visiting temples and villages, any traveler is going to get hungry.

Some of Cambodia's culinary treasures can be found in local markets such as the Psa Leu market that is constantly buzzing with the sounds of locals shopping and stall-owners chatting.

Locals sell fresh fish, chicken, salted eggs, dried fish, piles of brightly colored fruits and vegetables and large bags of dried spices and sauces from stalls in a large, barn-like structure.

We were fortunate to try one of the local dishes, a snake-head fish stew cooked inside of a coconut.

This delicious dish is made using this special fish cooked with vegetables, coconut milk and spices. Eating hot food out of a coconut was an adventure in itself in addition to eating the delicious stew inside.

Things to remember

Anyone planning a trip to Cambodia should remember a few key things.

The climate in Cambodia is very hot and humid. Pack light clothing, a hat and comfortable walking shoes as the steps at most temples are steep and narrow.

Avoid drinking the water and eating raw vegetables. Bottled water and sodas are readily available to purchase. Our travel agent, About Asia, provided us with bottled water and cool towels in our van which was an added convenience.

It is wise to bring travel rolls of toilet paper, wipes and hand sanitizer in the event that they are unavailable.

The children love to talk and ask questions. When visiting the villages, bring along pencils, pens, stickers or small notepads as a token for the children.

Candy is not recommended as the Cambodians do not have local dental care. There has been a rise in dental problems in children due to the candy provided by tourists.

Cambodia is an exciting place to visit, full of local flavor and flare that enhances one's view of the world and of another culture's priorities.

Many Americans would be astounded at the Cambodian way of life upon arrival and would leave as an admirer of this very unique and rich culture.



A monk stands at the Angkor Wat temple, one of many attractions in Cambodia.



The Angkor Wat a temple, built in A.D. 113, was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1992.