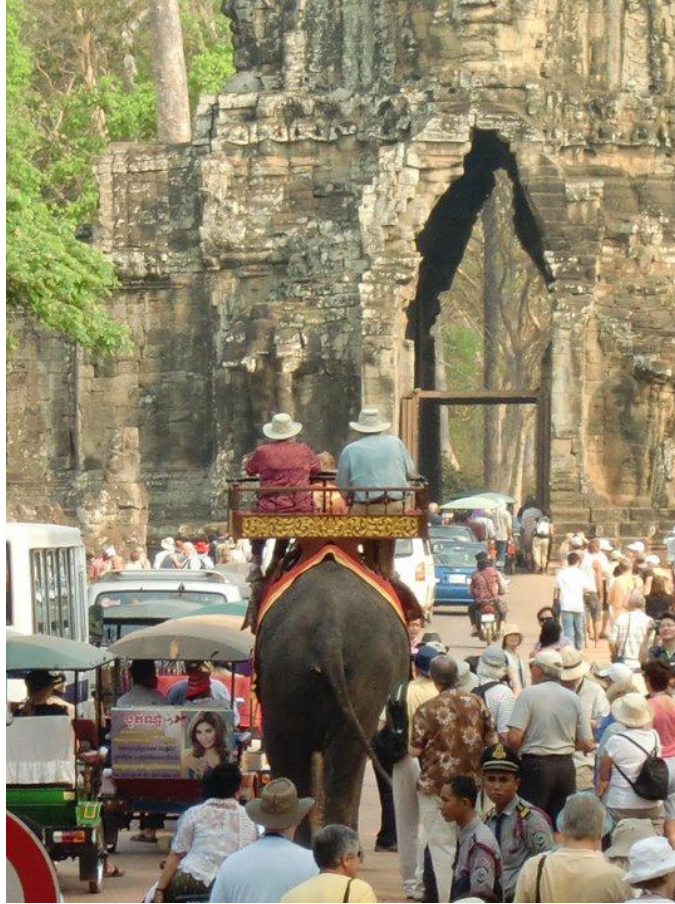


"Elephants and Tuk Tuks: A Journey through Cambodia"
by
Cheryl Dietrich



Riding an elephant through the crowd at Angkor Thom gate

She moves with massive grace, a slight wiggle from side to side like a big-bottomed woman in stiletto heels. My husband Lynn and I perch on a platform that rests on her shoulders, and sway with her. It's a soothing, reassuring motion, like she's rocking us, babes in a cradle.

The gate into the large complex known as Angkor Thom is narrow and ancient but extends high into the air, built in an age when elephants comprised the main mode of transportation. Other tourists crowd the gate in a panoply of vehicles which jockey for position to file through one at a time. We, however, grandly proceed ahead. The crowd parts to let us through, yielding the front of the line to us. Children wave, some adults too. Strangers rush ahead on foot to get a picture of us as we enter the ancient land of the Khmer god-kings. I feel so regal I give them the Queen Elizabeth wave. A group of Australians cheer wildly. Carved into the top of the gate, the face of god-king Jayavarman VII smiles beneficently upon us all.

The elephant is in charge of us, not we of her, so for half an hour we go where she takes us. She walks through the gate and off the paved road, onto a narrow path through ancient spung trees. Their roots

reach out above ground as if, like Tolkien's Ents, they could walk. Long-tailed monkeys scamper up and down, chatter, watch us carefully, not I think in fear but with the wild hope that we may offer them some of the bananas we've kept for our elephant.

We have a driver, what the Indians call a mahout, who straddles the elephant's neck. He is dressed in what appears to be traditional Cambodian garments: flowing, pajama-like trousers, a silk tunic. In his hand and pressed to his ear, however, he holds an undoubtedly twenty-first century device, a cell phone into which he speaks in rapid, low Cambodian throughout our ride.

As wonderful as it's been, I'm glad when we reach our destination. I'm no longer of an age when I can fold my legs beneath me to sit comfortably on a flat platform. Both Lynn and I have dangled our legs in the air long enough.

How do you get off an elephant? Erase all thoughts of bowing camels from your mind. Elephants bow to no one. Our elephant sways her way up to a small wooden landing atop a set of steps attached to a tree. She waits patiently while Lynn climbs out and helps me out. As soon as I am safely off, she moves away to make room in case another elephant's passengers need to disembark. As far as I can tell, she does this all herself, her mahout still indifferent to anything but his phone call.

The next elephant arrives a few minutes later with our friends Wann Near and his wife, Rebecca Robertson smiling down at us. They met here in Cambodia when Rebecca was working for an NGO (non-governmental organization) teaching marketable crafts to women. Seven years ago, they rode an elephant through the same gate and to the Phimeanakas temple, where they married in a Buddhist ceremony, climbing the narrow sandstone steps to the topmost gazebo.

So how did we come to be on the back of an elephant in a country literally halfway around the world from Asheville, North Carolina? Lynn and I both volunteer with the Literacy Council of Buncombe County as tutors of English as a Second Language. I volunteer because I have a passion for language, while Lynn's interest lies in helping immigrants become citizens. But the underlying reason is a shared, basic trait: we both love to experience foreign cultures, from the people to the food to the music and religion, not to mention scenery and things like elephant rides. We love the history of nations older than ours, their arts and distinctive architecture, the mystery of unknown words sometimes in scripts we can't decipher.

Besides Cambodia, between the two of us we have tutored adults from Brazil, China, Colombia, Czech Republic, El Salvador, France, Germany, Mexico, Panama, Puerto Rico, Russia, South Korea, and Ukraine. We've eaten their food, heard their music, listened entranced at their folk tales. They've given us little gifts from their countries and big gifts from their hearts. They've held a mirror up to us, shown us America through fresh eyes, shown us ourselves.

Lynn and Wann were a great tutor-student match. After three years of working together, in November 2009, Wann raised his right hand in a citizenship ceremony in Charlotte, while Lynn and Rebecca watched and beamed. Later that day, the four of us enjoyed a leisurely lunch. We toasted Wann over glasses of Chardonnay and presented him with an American flag folded inside a wooden triangle with a plaque commemorating the occasion and date. He began to cry when he saw it, cry and smile and laugh and speak so quickly we had to beg him to slow down. As the people at the next table left, they stopped to congratulate him.

"To our newest citizen," they said. He smiled and teared up again.

Lynn and Wann developed such a close relationship that when Wann and Rebecca planned a trip back to Cambodia this past winter, Lynn asked if we could join them. They've already been in Cambodia over a month when we arrive, jet-lagged, exhausted, and excited. Wann is now the teacher and guide, while we are his avid, curious students. We place ourselves entirely and trustingly in his and Rebecca's hands.

In Phnom Penh, we stay in a comfortable hotel less than a block from the riverfront and its wide walkway. This is a popular area for embassy personnel, as well as tourists. English and French are widely spoken. The restaurants cater to foreigners with a variety of cuisines.

The night we arrive, we stop for beers at an Irish pub. Our lunch the next day is of Spanish tapas. A few blocks from our hotel is the FCC, the Foreign Correspondents Club, where we have a wonderful veal ribeye from Australia one night and eye our neighboring diners, hoping to spot someone famous. Decades of French colonialism left their mark on the cuisine. For breakfast we get wonderful omelets, baguettes, croissants, and French-pressed café au lait.

Our favorite restaurant, however, offers traditional Cambodian food with a delicate flair and superb service. Ram Deng is run by an NGO whose main function is to take kids who might otherwise end up on the streets and train them for jobs in the hospitality industry. We are served by groups of young people, their t-shirts identifying their rank: supervisor, waiter, trainee.

Traditional food includes fried tarantulas, a huge plate of which is delivered to a rowdy bunch of young, blond tourists at the table next to ours one evening. They take turns posing with a spider raised to their lips while friends snap their pictures on cell phones. But they don't cheat. They all eat at least one tarantula, some squeamishly, some with enthusiasm. I pass up the opportunity to try one with no regrets.

From our hotel we can cross the busy roadway (my heart in my mouth each time) to walk a mile or more on a wide, pleasant riverfront walk next to the Mekong River. Mornings we have the walkway mainly to ourselves, but in the evenings, the pavement is full of people—families, lovers, tourists, beggars, saffron-clad Buddhist monks. Brightly lit ships advertizing dinner cruises make their way through the muddy water past low-lying, bamboo fishing boats. Aerobics instructors appear with boom boxes. People line up in front of them and exercise to modern, western dance music. Rebecca joins in while the three of us perch on the river wall and watch. She's a natural dancer and enters in with gusto. She tries to talk me into joining but my body feels stiff, clumsy, enervated by heat, humidity, and the Doxycyline I take to ward off malaria.

Along the riverside walkway we can stroll to the National Museum and the Royal Palace. In both we get a sense of the glory of the Khmer Empire. The statues of the ancients look familiar to me, and I wonder why—until I call Wann over and pose him next to one. They would be twins except for their dress and the bottle of cold water Wann holds in place of a spear.

To go further afield requires transportation and since there are four of us, we opt for a tuk tuk—a covered cart drawn by a motorcycle. I fall in love with the tuk tuks, whose open sides let a cooling breeze through while they're moving. Wann negotiates a day fee with a driver, who takes us all over the city.

At Wat Phnom, a low hill in the center of the city and the only green space I've seen so far, I find my first Cambodian elephant, chained, her head and trunk hanging listlessly. She is mainly there to provide parents a photo op for their children. I prefer to watch the monkeys, who wander all over the park here, so well-fed they're disdainful of the treats we offer.

Across the street I see a tree, dark as midnight even in the bright afternoon sun. Wann points out that the large dark pieces of fruit hanging from it are actually bats, fruit bats appropriately. As we watch, some inaudible signal wakens them, sends them all into the sky. There are hundreds of them above us turning the sky black until gradually they disperse.

All I knew of Cambodia before Wann was Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge and Angkor Wat—and not all that much about any of them. When we met Wann, he told us how the first two affected him as a child. His father had been killed by the Khmer Rouge. His mother dug holes in the jungle for her three sons to sleep in when the Khmer Rouge was on the rampage, looking for children to march ahead of them through mine fields. Under Pol Pot over twenty percent of the Cambodian population was massacred, while countless others died of malnutrition and diseases that ran rampant among people with no access to medical care.

In Phnom Penh Lynn and I are conflicted about going to the Genocide Museum. We think it might bother Wann. We wonder if we can handle it—or worse, if we’re just sensation-seeking tourists smacking our lips over other people’s agony. But Wann supports our going. I realize, as we go through it, that I need the Genocide Museum in order to turn the huge statistics into the faces of real people. Otherwise Cambodia’s modern history would be nothing to me but vague numbers and images from *The Killing Fields*, a movie I barely remember.

So-called “Security Camp-21” Tuol Sleng, had once been a school. The bland concrete architecture encircles a central courtyard where I can imagine children shrieking in laughter, playing during recess. Then I learn that the monkey bars had been perverted into makeshift racks. That the seesaw was used for water boarding. As long as you have ropes and wood and water, you can torture anyone. That was the purpose of Tuol Sleng and many others throughout the city: torture, the manic fascination for which hid beneath the pious pretenses of security. Interrogators accused women and children as well as grown men of treason. Under torture they were asked about their involvement as CIA agents, Vietnamese spies, Chinese puppets, Thai infiltrators, any of a list of often contradictory enemies. It didn’t matter what answer they gave—*yes, no, whatever you want me to say*—there was no reprieve from the torture, not even death until the body gave out on its own.

We walk through room after room, what had once been innocent schoolrooms. Now they hold hundreds, maybe thousands of pictures. Staring faces, frightened or stunned, look out into a world that abandoned them. The Khmer Rouge kept excellent records, which have helped condemn them—some of them; several are still involved at the highest level of government. In Tuol Sleng alone, over 25,000 prisoners were held. Only seven people survived the camp, of whom only three still live today. They take turns returning to the camp to bear witness.

We meet one of them, a small dignified man who stands quietly inviting questions. Mr. Chum Mey is the head of the Victims Association of Democratic Kampuchea, established to help survivors of the Khmer Rouge’s brutal regime, as well as the family members of those who didn’t survive. Wann translates but for much of what he says, it’s not necessary. Mr. Mey takes us to the tiny stall where he had been shackled to the floor. He shows the small rusty metal box in which he had to collect his urine and excrement, what little there was on a slow starvation diet. He worked all day in one of the “factories” set up in the camp, fueled by the handful of rice rationed out each day. Those were the good days, the ones that involved nothing more than slow starvation, humiliation, and cramping discomfort. He never knew

when they would choose him to torture, shouting their meaningless questions at him while pulling out his toenails or running wires into his ears and shocking him. Here he parts his thin, gray hair to point out the blackened patches on his skull.

When we climb back into the tuk tuk, our driver Dara looks at us curiously. He starts his motorcycle but hesitates before pulling away. He turns around and speaks to us, in English for the first time. "Is good you go here. People must see." With a brisk nod, he turns back to the front, revs up and zips away, letting a welcome breeze flow into the cart. But it doesn't whisk the Genocide Museum away; its memory darkens even the lightest moments of our trip.

The next day, we take a bus to the beach town of Sihanoukville, with the unspoken hope that the waves of the South China Sea could wash the blood out of the soil of Cambodia. From here we meet some of Wann's family. A tuk tuk puttens us out to a collection of small farms and huts, down a dirt road off the only paved highway between Phnom Penh and the coast. When I ask Wann what the name of the village is, he looks surprised, then amused. "Name? It doesn't have a name." This is the most foreign thing I've discovered here, the notion of living in a place that no one has named.

The driver parks his tuk tuk in the dirt outside Wann's brother's house and stretches out in the cart while we visit. Wann's sister-in-law slices the tops off coconuts, sticks a straw in each and hands them around, like we would pass a tray of glasses full of sweet tea. I try to persuade their two beautiful children to come to me. The oldest and boldest, a little girl of five or six approaches. Her name sounds like Dolly, so I sing quietly to her, "Hello, Dolly, well, hello, Dolly." She giggles and runs away.

We sit at a small table outside the house in the middle of a yard full of chickens, banana and coconut palms, what I think may be a cashew tree. The house is simple, two maybe three rooms with a metal roof, but it's obvious that most of the living takes place here in the yard, rich in sun and shade and plant life. Even the kitchen is outside, tucked under an overhang for the upcoming rainy season.

We smile a lot for half an hour while Wann and his brother Wi chat—manly chat, it sounds like, full of short statements punctuated with silence. Finally we rise, have the tuk tuk driver take a picture of us all together, Lynn and I looming over the others like elephants ourselves, even over Rebecca who is no taller than Wann. Then Wi leads us through narrow, rutted paths that run along the fields to Wann's mother's house. We pass other homes, replete with children and chickens and dogs, and in one case, piglets. People stare curiously to watch two of their own leading three foreigners in this out of the way place with no name. The children all wave and yell "hello" and then "bye bye"—the only English they all seem to know. One little princess blows a kiss our way. I blow one back.

They are all so beautiful, not only the children. The Cambodians have smooth brown complexions, straight black hair, and small, trim bodies. Most even have good teeth, a fact my very American mind is impressed with. They smile a lot, brilliant white smiles of cheerful humor. They dress simply, the women often in mismatched pajamas even in public, but they carry it off. They look cool, untouched by the constant heat.

Wann's mother Sreng is about my age but looks years younger. A slim, elegant woman with natural grace, she has dressed up for us, a long, narrow, red-flowered skirt topped with a black silk blouse with gold trim. Unlike Wi's home, but like many of the others we've seen, her house sits on stilts, and we climb a small ladder to her "living room," a large, open-air porch covered with a tin roof. Next to it is a rudimentary kitchen from which she cooks up incredible chicken. Wann eats it like a starving man, while

Sreng watches with obvious satisfaction. I'm convinced that no matter where you're from, no one cooks chicken as well as your own mother.

The only other part of Sreng's house is a large enclosed room off the porch. It's mainly bare with woven straw mats rolled up against the walls. A hammock hangs from one corner. Candles light a small Buddhist shrine. The only other piece of furniture stands in the middle of the room: a large TV Wann and Rebecca have bought for her.

We sit on mats on the porch. I try to keep my knees bent and my feet flat on the floor, because Cambodians consider it rude to show others the soles of your feet. I can't get comfortable, but I try hard not to squirm. Sreng must have noticed my difficulty. She says something to Wann, who translates it for me.

"She says you should stretch your legs out. It's okay." So I do, greatly relieved. I smile in gratitude to Sreng, who nods with a slight smile conveying all the graciousness of a queen in her palace. I take care though to keep my feet pointed toward Rebecca, who, I figure, won't mind.

Wann's aunt and uncle come to sit silently and watch us curiously. I've brought an envelope of long, postcard-style pictures of Western North Carolina to give to Wann's mother. Sreng and the aunt sit fascinated over photographs of mountains and waterfalls, autumn leaves floating on woodland streams with paths disappearing into the thick woods. They question Wann eagerly. At one point his mother asks him something, at which he just laughs.

He tells us, "They want to know if it is really so beautiful. When I said yes, my mother asked why I would leave such beauty to come back to Cambodia."

"You might tell her how cold and snowy the weather was when we left," I suggest.

That may have been what he said next to her, but I'll never know. He may have replied that he was missing it, that he was ready to go home. Home being Asheville. He and Rebecca will not fly back till almost two weeks after we do. But ever since we got here, he has talked about leaving early, about going back with us. He's restless. "We have things to do," he says.

They have a house to finish readying for sale. They're glass artists, but in this economy most of their income derives from the houses they buy and on which they perform a kind of Extreme Home Makeover Asheville Edition: tearing out walls, upgrading power sources, updating cabinets and appliances, adding decks and windows; turning musty, drab old houses into fresh, modern, livable dwellings with charm and personality. Best of all, they're affordable for middle class families, the kind of housing developers have long eschewed.

I know Wann is anxious to return to Asheville and their work there, but Rebecca reminds him they have work to do here too. After we leave, they plan a trip up north to the border—where Cambodia and Thailand have been fighting since we arrived. There they will visit another of Wann's uncles, a career Army officer. Among other things they want to meet and talk with a young cousin who at sixteen is still in school and performing well. If she seems serious about her studies, Wann and Rebecca will pay her way through the university.

"It's the best way I can help my family," Wann says. "We can send money, but better is to educate the children. They will get good jobs and help their parents and brothers and sisters."

He has the right idea. Thanks to the Khmer Rouge, whose massacres disrupted normal population growth, almost half of Cambodia's population today is under the age of eighteen. The competition for jobs in the future will be fierce. I know Wann's heart aches for the children we see, but helping them is

fraught with difficulties. The country is corrupt; money sent to provide scholarships or aid schools will almost certainly end up as bribes in some official's pocket.

I notice Sreng staring at me now, also the aunt, who, though dressed in loose, drab pajamas, is also attractive. The two of them look at me and exchange remarks. I feel clumsy and oafish next to these delicate-looking, strong-as-wire women. Rebecca, who understands quite a bit of Cambodian, sets me straight. "They're talking about how beautiful you are."

Me? With my face patchily sunburned and my perm an unmanageable frizz? Beautiful?

"It's the nose," Rebecca explains. "They love western noses. They think their noses are ugly." Most Cambodians have short noses splayed against their faces.

I wonder if Rebecca is just being nice, but later that day an old woman comes up to me and stares into my face. She reaches up to stroke my nose and says something. "Beautiful," Rebecca says. "She's saying your nose is beautiful." The woman repeats her word, touching her own nose with a sad frown, then pointing up at mine with a bright smile.

So I have a beautiful nose—who knew? Still it's not a feature one can go far on.

The last, longest part of our trip is spent in Siem Reap, about two hundred miles north of Phnom Penh. I like the scenery driving north better than south, where there had been little to see but long patches of dusty fields and litter, interspersed with dusty villages and litter. North of Phnom Penh, however, villages are larger and look more prosperous, perhaps enough to afford names. We pass lush farmlands and cashew groves and ponds covered with lotuses, some in blossom, cheery white and pink flowers.

Basically we're following the Tonle Sap River. At this time of year—February, which all the guidebooks refer to as the "cool, dry season" (presumably "cool" means high nineties and "dry" means humid but no rain)—the Tonle Sap heads south to run into the Mekong in Phnom Penh. Later, in the rainy season, this anomaly of nature will reverse its course to run north and replenish the large Tonle Sap Lake west of Siem Reap.

We stop at a rest area along the roadside. This is where all the tour buses and taxis and motorcyclists stop. There are public restrooms, cleaner than others I've seen though still your basic hole-in-the-floor type. There's a restaurant and a market. There are children, girls ten and up mostly. Beautiful girls whose dark eyes gleam warmly and whose smiles are almost irresistible. I do resist though. They are not beggars but an armada of young saleswomen. We find them at every stop and outside all the tourist favorites. They offer cold drinks, fresh pineapple, papaya, occasionally postcards and souvenirs. A canny bunch, they don't besiege us in a mob, but each seems to select one person to talk to, to pitch her product to. Everything costs one dollar. The dollar is more spendable in Cambodia than their own riel.

These girls speak English surprisingly well. One explains that she goes to Cambodian school for a few hours in the morning, then English-language class in the afternoon. "I pay for my classes by selling in the market." She flashes me a warm smile, opportunity gleaming in her eyes. "So, now you buy my pineapple?"

I laugh and turn her down, more for my delicate interior's sake than because her pineapple doesn't look fresh and appealing. I find Lynn eating pineapple in the center of a trio of chatting girls. "Is this your wife?" one asks, and Lynn owns up to me. "Oh, she is very beautiful." She seems to be unconscious of the fact that she reaches up to cover her own lovely little nose as she says it. "You beautiful man with beautiful wife." The other two repeat "beautiful" and nod agreement.

"Well, you're all beautiful girls," I say. One of them has a little brother by the hand, so I say to him, "And you are a very handsome young man."

I do not intend an English lesson, but the first girl pounces on the word. "Ah, yes. Handsome. Man handsome. Woman beautiful." She turns to Lynn. "You are handsome man with beautiful wife."

What impresses me isn't the repetition of how attractive we are—it's coming from a born saleswoman after all—but the girl's eagerness to immediately incorporate this usage into her conversation. I can see her locking "handsome" into her head.

Of all the images that linger most persistently of Cambodia, the strongest are the eager eyes of these children. There's not a trace of wistfulness in them, no attempt to make us feel sorry for them, just a cheery optimism. Even though I invariably turn them down, they stay to chat, to joke, to ask questions and learn. Almost all have a sly sense of humor that makes it worth listening to their patter. When I tell one girl that no, I don't want a soda, she pulls out a second can and says, "Oh, that means you want *two*!" And we both begin to laugh.

When I say I don't care for any pineapple now, another girl's eyes narrow with a "gotcha" shining out of them. "But if you change your mind, you will buy from me, right?" I promise, then later don't dare change my mind, because she's nowhere around but will be, I'm sure, as soon as I buy pineapple from another child.

They ask my name and tell me theirs: Susie, Laura, Mary. One admits cheerfully that she also has French, Japanese, and Chinese names. When I ask her Cambodian name, she says something I struggle to repeat. She laughs and says, "Call me Louise."

I want to take her home with me, her and all the other little girls so eager and hopeful now, but with so few options ahead of them.

At Siem Reap, we hire a tuk tuk driver who, for \$15 a day, will be at the hotel every morning ready to go when we are, wherever we want, all day and into the evening until we release him. (I am starting to understand how tempting the colonial lifestyle must have been to the Europeans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.) He's a pleasant-looking young man who speaks English well. His name is Tu. Rebecca and I look at one another when we hear it. Then we can't resist and one of us—who are sisters under the skin when it comes to bad puns—says, "So it's a Wann and a Tu and a three . . . of us."

Our first stop in this small, charming city is to the shrine of Ya Tep, which sits in the middle of a quiet, shady street, forming a small traffic circle. She is the guardian of the city, so it's good form to bid her hello and ask for her blessing. Rebecca is the one who wants to stop there; she believes in rituals as much as I do. Lynn follows along, but Wann stands and chats with Tu while we present flowers to Ya Tep.

We ride out to the ancient temple district in the midst of a lush jungle. Being close to the equator, means year-round sunrise at six, sunset at six. It's late afternoon, so we go to watch the light fade quietly from the Bayon, the best known temple of Angkor Thom. Here Jayavarman VII's face gazes at us from all directions. The fading light changes his expression from benign to amused to mysterious, but we feel at peace there under his protection. We have the site mainly to ourselves, most of the tourists already at happy hour in the bars and restaurants that line the narrow streets of downtown Siem Reap.

For Rebecca, being back among the temples seems to be a homecoming. Perhaps to Wann also, who walks among the ruins serenely and silently.



Wann Near at Angkor Wat

Angkor Wat's exotic sounding name means "great big temple," a simple but accurate description. It's one of the few manmade structures on Earth visible from outer space. We hire a guide to take us through. His name is Vandy, and he perches precariously on the back of Tu's motorcycle where the cart is hitched to it. He tells us in perfect English about having to study at the university in order to guide tourists through the temples and tell about Khmer history in its glory days from the ninth to the thirteenth century. Its mighty empire took in most of present day Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand.

When Paris's population numbered in the mere thousands, the area around Angkor Wat held three million. The god-kings all built their own temple-palace complexes, not content to inherit from their predecessors. Angkor Wat is the largest and most magnificent, its five towers a symbol of past glory gracing the Cambodian flag today. King Suryavarman II began building the temple in 1112 A.D. The "varman," which ends the names of the kings of the Khmer Empire means "protector." (The protection was more often than not of the modern-day mobster type.)

Vandy guides us over the causeway across the moat, wide as a football field, encircling the complex, almost three miles around. He assures us there are no longer crocodiles in the moat, just the naked children we see splashing in the shallows. At the end, we step onto the land of Angkor Wat and into the past. Here we are under the protection of the naga, the seven-headed cobra who guards the Hindu god-kings and later the Buddha. We stand under a carved stone version of one and perform the modern day ritual of having the guide take our pictures.

We pass then through a wall and onto another causeway leading us over sunken land, large ponds, small lakes, heading toward the main area. Vandy points out the libraries which held the crumbling, manuscript rolls of the day. As we approach the temple, he has us clamber down stone steps and onto the

ground where a small lake shimmers between us and the first tower. From here, we can get a picture of the whole temple along with its clear reflection in the lake.

Of all the pictures we take, my favorite is of Wann standing in front of the reflected temple and the real temple. He is the star of the shot, magnificent Angkor Wat nothing more than a backdrop. He looks like he belongs here, his black hair straight and smooth around his tan face—browner after two months in the equatorial sun. His face is round but high cheekbones give it definition. He has the Cambodian nose, but more importantly the cupid's-bow lips we see on the friezes and statues. They are slightly upturned at the ends in what we call the archaic smile in Greek art. The smile of Jayavarman VII, who gazed down upon us the previous evening.

What I like most about this picture is what Wann is wearing—the contrast between the mysterious past and the familiar present. He has on jeans and over them a long-sleeved tee shirt. From the other side of the world, its message advertises the Weaverville Art Safari. That's his world nowadays, and all that god-king blood running through him is anxious to get home, to start working on what he and Rebecca will display—and hopefully sell—in this fall's Art Safari.

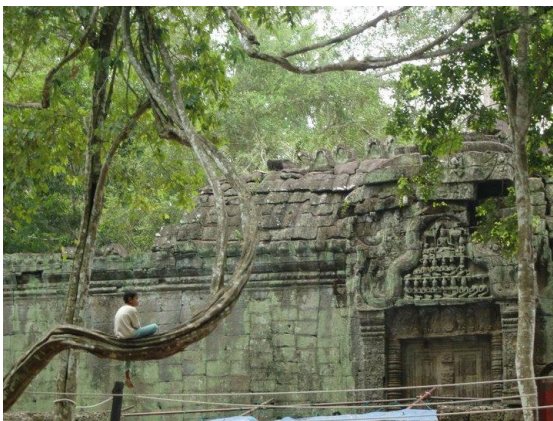
Wann's art stylings contain his Khmer roots in the symbols, the combinations of colors and textures, sometimes even the subject matter. After he became a US citizen, he gave Lynn an art hanging he made of glass, stone, and wood. An image of a temple dancer, he told us. Here in Angkor Wat we learn her real name. She is an apsara.

In Hindu legend, at the beginning of time the gods and demons sought an elixir which would give them immortality. In a cosmic tug-of-war, the two groups churned the sea of milk to create it. An unexpected by-product shimmered up in the sky from the flying drops of liquid: the apsaras, women who danced in the air, bringing grace and beauty into the world. They're carved into stone all over Angkor Wat. Strange how the heavy sandstone could be cut away with such finesse as to embody these delicate dancers.



Vandy shrewdly takes us through the complex in ways that allow us to avoid the crush of large tour groups. The temple is a confusing labyrinth of symmetry, long corridors stretching like a chain through the links of small open rooms. Everywhere we look we see ornate carvings, gods, demons, warriors, monkeys, elephants, and especially apsaras. It's dim inside the temple and cooler here surrounded by stone but brutal in the sun when we move out to the courtyards.

We keep climbing. There's always another level above us. The higher we go, the closer to heaven, it's believed. At one time only the god-kings were allowed at the top. But this is a more democratic age, and I get as close to heaven as I wish to at this stage in my life.



Of all the temples we see in Cambodia, none is as eerily evocative as Ta Prohm. Here the jungle has almost

taken the land back. Ta Prohm's crumbling buildings are collapsing into stone and eventually dirt. Ancient spung trees loom over the temple complex, their roots reaching out over the buildings like the rays of giant octopi. The trees are so thick here the air has a refreshing, well, not coolness exactly, but lack of oppressive heat. Their leaves and the creeping vines and the mold infuse the light with a green cast. Everything here is green or gray or light shades of muted brown, imbuing the temple with a sense of calm, antique mystery.

It's crowded unfortunately, the babble of tongues breaking the serene majesty of the site, where nature claims her kingdom back from man. But we manage to get as far away from the crowds as possible and wander in awed silence through the broken corridors. Jayavarman VII built this as well as the Bayon, one as a tribute to his father, the other to his mother. But few benign faces smile down from here. The winds and rains and vines have pulled them down, disfigured some, defaced the smiles, blinded the eyes.

As we approach the building's exit, we see a little boy. His back is to us, and he sits perched on a massive, curved vine in front of one of the crumbling walls. There is a mystical stillness to the scene. Rebecca takes a picture, then moves to get it from another angle. Her movement catches the boy's attention, and he turns. "One dollar," he says. And like that the spell is broken. Back to the real world.

Of all the god-kings only Jayavarman VII seemed to see himself as a true protector and not just against foreign enemies. Besides the massive temples, he also established a civil service, which did much to curb corruption throughout the empire. He built orphanages, hospitals, and free clinics. His spirit remains alive today in people like Swiss doctor Beat Richner, his spiritual if not ethnic heir.

Dr. Richner also goes by Beatocello, when he gives his free concerts twice a week at the children's hospital he established in Siem Reap. Performing in the auditorium of the gleaming new hospital, he sits alone on the stage, his cello between his knees and plays Bach and Vivaldi. Besides being a pediatrician, he's also a superb musician, hitting just the right tone of melancholy only the cello can achieve.

Between numbers he tells us about being a young doctor working in a hospital in Phnom Penh in the early seventies and having to flee with the other foreigners when the Khmer Rouge came into power. When he first arrived here with the Swiss Red Cross, there had been thousands of Cambodian doctors. But in 1991, when King Sihanouk asked him to return and establish a new children's hospital, there were fewer than fifty native doctors. In the peasant utopia Pol Pot had envisioned, the doctors and intelligentsia were among the first targeted.

The disproportionate number of children in Cambodia is matched by a large infant and childhood mortality rate. The country is a host to killers, most carried by mosquitoes and most also treatable with vaccines and medications—when the poor people of the country can get them. Tuberculosis is the biggest scourge now, and it aggravates the malaria, the Dengue fever, the Japanese encephalitis, the hepatitis, all of which are epidemic throughout the country.

Dr. Richner talks to us about the extreme corruption in Cambodia, in which big bribes are required to even get access to a doctor or a vaccine. He rages against the World Health Organization, which allows for an "acceptable" death rate in poor countries. This makes him a controversial figure to many. I understand his outrage but reflect sadly on the realities of a world in which need overwhelms supplies and hard choices have to be made.

The hospital in Siem Reap is the fifth he's established in Cambodia, primarily from private funds. "We exist on the generosity of the Swiss people and tourists like you," he says. From the young, he asks for blood. From the older, less healthy people, he asks for money. And from those in between, he cheerfully asks for both. He speaks mainly in flawless English, accented with the slur of a native German speaker. Occasionally he switches to French and Italian. Presumably he also speaks Khmer, but he has no need that evening. Wann is the only Cambodian I see in the auditorium.

His hospitals for children (and one for mothers with AIDS) are free to all comers. They're teaching hospitals too. He tells us that, although in the early days few members of the staff were Cambodian, "I am proud to say today there are only two foreigners at this hospital: myself and a French doctor. Oh, I should say three—this Italian lady."

With that he strokes his cello, picks up her bow, closes his eyes, and plays a solo so beautiful, I find myself smiling and crying at the same time.

The next day we pass the hospital as we drive out of town. Tu eases our tuk tuk through a crowd crossing one of the few zebra-striped walkways I've seen in Cambodia. Everywhere we look, women are carrying children, leading them by hand, pulling them in rusty wagons, a long line, snaking from across the street, down the sidewalks and into the hospital gate. Despite the numbers, there's no shouting, no shoving, just patient people taking their turn in line. Even the children are mainly silent, too many wan and listless. But I see a tinge of expression in many of the mothers' faces that may be hope.

We spend a week touring the antiquities near Siem Reap and could easily spend months. The Bakong with its giant elephant statues where most temples have lions. The giant puzzle that's the Bauphon, with its bas relief of the reclining Buddha. Preah Ko, which means (kind of) "Holy Cow." Preah Khan with its classical Greek-looking library. Neak Pean, a shrine in the middle of a lake, with a horse statue battling the waves. Preah Palillay, a small temple disappearing into the jungle like Ta Prohm, but blessedly empty of any tourists but us, quiet and peaceful. The Terrace of the Leper King with its carvings of garudas (half bird-half man). The Elephant Terrace with its friezes of elephants. Each so unlike anything I've experienced before, I feel like I'm walking around in someone else's dream—one of the god-kings' perhaps.

In the heat of the afternoons, we take naps or visit the modern air-conditioned archaeology museum in Siem Reap. Sometimes we go to our hotel's small swimming pool and stand in what passes for its deep end, listening to the young international crowd hit on one another. We also shop in Siem Reap. In the old market we can bargain, are expected to bargain. I timidly do just enough to be polite. Lynn turns out to be a natural at it, having perfected the art of wandering away. He has fun with it, teasing the charming young saleswomen. When one offers us two watches for \$50, he counters with \$25. Happily, she chirps, "Forty."

"Twenty-six," he says.

"I give you for thirty-five," she responds.

He switches tactics. "Twenty!"

"Thir—" she starts, then, "No, wait! You . . .? Okay, twenty-five." Both of them begin to laugh, like it's a joke they're sharing together.

One day when Rebecca and I come out of one of the trendier, no-bargaining shops, we find Wann and Lynn sitting on the sides of a large square tub on the sidewalk. Their pants legs are rolled up to their

knees and their lower legs dangle in the water, where tiny, greedy fish congregate to nibble the dead skin off their feet. A sign for the business says in English, "Please Feed Our Hungry Fish." It's been a slow afternoon so the proprietor has offered them both a "fish pedicure" for one dollar. Lynn grins. "It tickles," he says.

It's hard to reconcile all the cheerful, outgoing people we meet there with the larger than life god-kings, even harder with the brutal Khmer Rouge and with the current corrupt petty officials who keep them down. Siem Reap is growing. It even has a small airport now, and resort hotels are springing up in the area, developments owned by Japanese, Koreans, European companies. The Cambodians who work in them will be paid little, but they will still be grateful for the jobs and feel luckier than most of their countrymen.

We can't leave Cambodia without going to see some modern-day, real-life apsaras: dancers who still perform the classical style at one time intended only for the eyes of the kings. We sit at a low table on mats on the floor, with a hidden recess allowing accommodation for our awkward legs. Beautiful young women in flared trousers, cuffed at the bottom, and silk tunics bring course after course of exquisite Khmer cuisine, based mainly on the availability of freshly caught fish and seafood.

A small orchestra of antique wind and percussion instruments summons the dancers in, young women mainly who even perform the male roles. They take delicate, deliberate steps, their fingers and hands as much a part of the dance as their feet and legs. With slight, subtle movements they tell stories from the Reamker (creation myths better known by the Indian name Ramayana). They dance the primal story of a king's wife abducted by a demon, danced by a trim young woman in gold and red and wearing a goblin mask. A humorous monkey dances also. Afterwards they switch from the royal dances to a couple of folk dances, fisher boys wooing the mischievous girls they admire.

When the dancing and dinner are over, we head for the elegant Raffles Hotel. We sink into overstuffed chairs in its Elephant Bar and order frou-frou drinks heavy on the tropical juices as well as the alcohol. I look around at all the elephant pictures and artifacts, even the small table lamps in the shape of elephants, old-fashioned kitsch that now looks tasteful.

Wann also looks curiously around the room. I realize, as I've done at so many places along the trip but never vocalized, that except for the bartender and waiter, Wann is the only Cambodian in the room. I wonder if—I *hope* that, as tourism increases, the Cambodians will benefit from a stronger economy. That the university will educate doctors and lawyers and business people and teachers, the leaders they need so desperately and lost in places like Tuol Sleng.

Wann says, "All the years growing up here, I never saw this Cambodia. I never knew this side of my country. I never even knew it existed." He settles back, picks up his cocktail, and sighs. I can't tell if he's sad or happy or some combination of both.

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