

Cambodian Comeback

It is 5 AM. It is still dark outside and the sun will not rise for another hour. The metallic whir of a refurbished Honda Wave scooter slowly increases in volume. The driver, a young 22-year old Cambodian man named Pran, is dressed in a fashionable white button-down shirt halfway tucked into dark charcoal trousers. Pran comes into view on the pot-holed dirt road—he is carrying a well-heeled European tourist behind him. They slow down for the curve and then hurriedly speed up, disappearing into the horizon. Pran is a local guide and is taking the tourist to the renowned Angkor Wat temple to catch the sunrise.

Just three years ago, this simple scene would have been impossible. The Angkor temple complex was littered with thousands of lethal mines, and the Khmer Rouge was using Angkor as a military base of operations in its war of attrition against the Cambodian government. For the curious tourist, visiting Angkor would have been a potentially deadly exercise. But in a sign of the remarkable transformation that Cambodia is undergoing, Angkor is open for business. An incessant boom of construction rocks the city as new hotels sprout up at an ever-increasing rate. Roads are being paved, the airport is being expanded and the hot topic on the streets these days is not safety from Khmer Rouge violence (the last remnants of that organization turned themselves in earlier this year), but the going rate for hiring guides in order to visit the magnificent Khmer temples.

As tragic histories go, Cambodia's has been among the worst. The 1950's represented the height of modern Cambodian society, when the country was relatively at

peace, having thrown off the mantle of French colonial rule and still being a decade away from American wartime intervention. Prince Norodom Sihanouk was able to consolidate a stable government and keep Cambodia relatively neutral in the increasingly fragile climate of Southeast Asia. But things soon deteriorated for Cambodia. The North Vietnamese government began using the country as a supply route for its Viet Cong brethren. The United States retaliated by assuming a “secret” bombing campaign. Then the Khmer Rouge, a Chinese-backed ultra-leftist organization, came into power in 1975. For the next five years, Cambodia descended into sheer hell as the Khmer Rouge systematically purged and redistributed the entire population of the country. The result was the estimated deaths of one to two million people—approximately one-eighth of the 1975 population. Terms such as “killing fields,” “reeducation” and ultimately “genocide” became synonymous with the country, and the international community mostly left it for dead.

For the most part, the 1990’s represented a series of dashed hopes. The United Nations entered the country with much fanfare in order to institute “free and fair” elections and an eventual democratic government. The organization’s effect was marginal at best. The UN came to be known as much for the corruption of its peacekeepers (many of whom were found to have spent an equal amount of time “peacekeeping” as philandering in whorehouses) as protectors of a liberal democratic system. As recently as 1997, a violent coup was precipitated in Phnom Penh that led to the destruction of its international airport and further gloom in what appeared to be a cursed country. But since that low point things have been looking up. Decidedly up.

Earlier this year, a new coalition government was formed. Prime Minister Hun Sen, the instigator of the 1997 coup, decided to make amends with the opposition, spearheaded by Sihanouk's son, Prince Ranariddh. Subsequently, Cambodia was admitted into the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), a fledging regional economic bloc that many believe is crucial to the region's prosperity. In real economic terms, Cambodia's GDP is expected to top 4% this year and expand by 5.5% next year. A visit to Phnom Penh will attest to the fact that decades of violence and misery seem to have been placed firmly in the past. New restaurants, new shops and a burgeoning nightlife are all indicators of a shift in the populace's focus from basic survival to economic enhancement.

For the Young at Heart...

For those immediately out of college, unique experiences abound. By far the most popular occupation for the adventuresome traveler is teaching English (education is big business in a place where schooling once was officially banned). The funny (or sad) thing about teaching English in the country is the fact that because of a dearth of qualified instructors, schools are desperate to hire anyone who can prove they have a basic speaking ability of the language. In the book Off the Rails in Phnom Penh, the author, Amit Gilboa (equally revered and ridiculed), relates an anecdote told to him by an expatriate English teacher—"I couldn't believe it. Apparently, white skin and the ability to string together a few words in basic English are the only criteria, and I've just got a job." A certain wild-west frontier attitude manifests itself in Phnom Penh. Some have described it as hyper-entrepreneurship, where almost any sort of fantasy can be indulged,

including firing rockets at a local artillery range. For those searching for a little adventure, Cambodia is certainly an enticing destination. Particularly because an English teacher's salary can easily cover any possible expense the recently-graduated student could wish for.

On a Larger Note

Aside from student expats striving to educate a needy populace, economic opportunities abound. So far, the Malaysians have been the quickest off the draw to take advantage of a flourishing economy that has the potential to transform into immense profits (as well as the potential to implode into fiery red debt). One of the most prominent foreign investments is the floating Naga casino. It is moored on the central Tonle Sap River, adjacent to another major foreign venture, the Hotel Sofitel Cambodia. At night, the casino is lit up by a string of brilliant lights that conjures up emotions ranging from the depressed to the hopeful. At once, it is an ideal analogy for the Cambodian situation in general. Not quite legitimate, a little off-putting, but better than nothing and certainly a step forward. All around the streets, the trappings of commerce are forcing themselves to be heard. Laid-off government soldiers (the war is officially over now) fiercely peddle pirated Radiohead CDs and motorcycle rides. Old grandmothers push silver elephants and wooden necklaces into passerbys' hands. The delicious smell of coconut curries and steaming fish compete with nauseating fumes from polluted waterways and a decaying sewer system. Everywhere though, there is hope. From the 16-year old parentless girl peddling scarves who tenderly believes in her future, to the trilingual five-year olds who can sell postcards in Japanese, English and Cambodian.

The NGO Route

An end result of the constant warfare that Cambodia has experienced has been the exponential proliferation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have infiltrated into the country. Many university graduates find themselves working for one of a number of organizational acronyms such as the UN, HALO or COFRAS. One of the most pressing concerns in Cambodia is the multitude of unexploded land mines. Cambodia has an estimated 4 to 8 million mines and correspondingly the highest per capita mine incapacitation rate in the world: one injury for every 246 people. The UN estimates that the minimum lifetime cost for rehabilitating a mine victim is \$3,000. Multiplying the approximately 35,000 mine victims leads to a total cost of \$105 million. The government lacks the funds to adequately treat the injured victims, so the NGOs have helped to pick up the slack. Another pressing concern is clearing the mines themselves. Groups such as the Hazardous Team Life (Support) Organization (HALO), a British-based mine clearance NGO, or the Cambodian Mine Action Center (CMAC) are integral parts of the Cambodian rebuilding process. They offer sobering insights into the Cambodian tragedy and are excellent ways to obtain a genuine understanding of the tragic effects of conflict. Clearing up landmines is but a small facet of the immense task that NGOs face in Cambodia. They are involved in everything from reconstruction and renovation work in Angkor, improving a horrendous health care system and advising an unsure government on issues from free market economics to human rights abuses.

So pack your bags and get on the plane...

New ground is being broken in almost every area and discipline in Cambodia. From television factories and oil refineries, to the consolidation of a working democratic government, the country is undergoing a major redefinition of what it stands for and where it is heading. Every day brings another potentially divisive issue and needed solutions. Should the top leaders of the Khmer Rouge be ruthlessly prosecuted, or will that serve to tear apart the country just as it is cobbling itself together? Should the ranks of the army be halved in order to conserve needed funds, or should financial stability be sacrificed in order to prevent unemployed soldiers from marauding around the country? Should citizens be allowed to farm known mined land at their own risk, or does the government have a responsibility to continue to enforce a ban on those areas? Cambodia is slowly emerging from the darkness, but the path is slow, tortuous and filled with uncertainties. Corruption and frustration are endemic staples of Cambodia, but never is there a dull moment.