



A Disturbing But Exhilarating Trip to Cambodia

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Cambodia TESOL

I decided to attend the 2009 Cambodian TESOL Conference after a colleague who'd gone the year before recommended it. Since I've had a long time interest in Cambodia, I planned enough time to explore the country after the conference.

Gazing at carvings of exotic *apsara* dancers and meandering around the jungle-surrounded ruins of Ankor Wat were experiences that I had dreamed of since my elementary school when I pored over *National Geographic* magazine pictures of dusty elephants and ancient temples with huge smiling faces. Years later, as an adult teaching Indochinese refugees in America, I learned of the massacre of millions by the Pol Pot regime, and met refugees who had experienced hell-like conditions, yet they were friendly, giving people who turned that teaching job into the most rewarding position I have yet experienced.

Socially and professionally, the conference was wonderful. I enjoy meeting people when I travel, and I thrive on professional development. Teachers from Vietnam, Thailand, Ireland, the U.S., Australia, and, of course, Cambodia shared food, smiles, and experiences with me. Many Cambodian teachers could not afford to attend this conference in their own country. Attendees from other countries were offered the option to sponsor local teachers. According to a local Cambodian magazine, the salaries of Cambodian high school teachers are equivalent to 25 U.S. dollars a month or the approximate price of my hotel room.

Conference Presentations

The Cambodian teachers led the most practical, informative sessions; these lacked the bells and whistles of PowerPoint presentations, which many foreign teachers struggled with. The electrical facilities in many rooms were inadequate for powering both a computer and the fans that cooled the sweating foreigners. When a fan was turned on, the projectors would sigh and take a break.

One Cambodian teacher told me that many of the foreigners' presentations were interesting but the topics were too abstract to be practical, and he lacked teaching resources. He and I work in completely different environments. My Japanese college has an abundance of superfluous materials and equipment. One classroom in my college has three projectors and three large screens at the front. Only one screen is necessary, and there are school equipment and

computer functions that no one in my college ever uses or even comprehends. His school did not have any English language resources other than the textbook that he used with his students, so I later mailed him a large box of textbooks and magazines from Japan.

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum

The conference ended with the 1,207 attendees going their own ways. The following day a small group of us went to visit the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, a former high school used as a torture center by the Pol Pot regime. From 1975 until 1979, approximately 20,000 people were forced to sign confessions for alleged treason. Few lived long after signing. One survivor painted pictures of the hell that he experienced, and his pictures are exhibited.

Being there was a powerfully disturbing educational experience. Torturers took photos of the inmates whose ages ranged from toddlers to senior citizens. The shock and pain in their eyes are concise testimony to lives that were cruelly ended. Rows of these unbelievable, but true, photos are displayed. Some of the old concrete walls and floors are still marked with blood. Classrooms that were turned into torture cells still have iron beds and torture equipment on display beneath pictures of men and women who passed away there. Skulls are also kept in one room.

Almost a year has passed since I saw the introductory video, walked those halls, stood mute in those rooms, and contemplated the extreme cruelty of the human race, and when I remember that building, my breath slows. I experience a mental impact like a body feels in a car crash.

My ancestors were Jewish, and all the members of my family in Europe except for one were killed in concentration camps. My remaining relative survived because of her beauty; she was forced to be a prostitute for the German SS. Perhaps, because of my family history, I feel compelled to attempt to understand the part of humanity that causes people to hurt others, and I want to educate my friends, family, and students about both the darkness and the light of humanity.

Sihanoukville

The day after visiting the museum, we took a bus to the seaside resort of Sihanoukville where we enjoyed such delicacies as fresh barbecued fish, juicy pineapples, and spicy Thai and Cambodian dishes. The sand on the main beach was golden, and the sea refreshing. Small open-air restaurants lined the curving beach, where

begging landmine victims of many ages limped or crawled and impoverished children shuttled between sun-bathing Westerners and rich Asian tourists adorned with gold jewelry. I saw children running to eat and drink leftovers off restaurant tables.

Street Children and Volunteer Work

My wife and I discussed whether we should give money to begging children, distribute food, or buy some of the trinkets that some were selling. A brochure from an aid agency recommended not giving or buying anything. The explanation was that their parents or other adults were using the children who would be better off in school instead of begging and selling items. Unsuccessful begging children would be returned to school. I am sure that there is some truth to those claims, but when I saw destitute families sleeping on the streets, I thought that the immediate need for food and shelter was more important than going to school. I vacillated. Sometimes I gave money or food, but I turned my back at other times.

A walk from the main beach brought us to plastic-laden beaches where we hesitated to walk barefoot because of the broken glass and bags with rotten substances. Back on the main road, we came across a scuba shop promoting an underwater cleanup activity by divers. We signed up.

The next day with other divers from a variety of countries we ate lunch on a remote island where the dive shop deposited us. Colorful chickens and ducks walked freely on the golden sand streets and smiling dark-skinned children swam naked or half naked in a blue sea in front of their homes. These islanders appeared to have a simple life, which includes no garbage disposal services. Out in the sea, amidst colorful coral and fish, we discovered, then hauled away bicycle tires, motorcycle parts, bottles, cans, and other non-biodegradable trash.

For travelers who want to do volunteer work in Cambodia, a tremendous variety of choices exist all across the country. These opportunities are advertised in guidebooks, on the walls of many small hotels, and by word of mouth. Some of the volunteer activities include cleaning up garbage, building homes, donating blood, helping in hospitals, and planting trees in

deforested areas.

Visiting Ankor Wat

The last days of this fascinating trip were spent in and around the northern city of Siam Riep. Siam Riep is a lively town centered on tourists who come to visit the nearby UNESCO 1992 designated World Heritage Site, the Temples of Ankor. There are so many ancient buildings entwined with huge trees, intricate religious and sexual carvings on riverbeds and cliffs, and communities of people whose cultures are so fascinating that the five days we spent there were insufficient. This is where I went to see the awe-inspiring temple called Ankor Wat whose pictures had stimulated me as a child.

The temples and other ruins exposed me to the history of a highly sophisticated civilization that produced cultural artifacts worthy of being protected for all of humanity. However, for me, the most interesting cultural experiences were observing how residents of that area live next to these sites. Young couples in their finest Cambodian silk clothes have wedding photos taken at Ankor Wat. Around many of the world heritage sites are moats or ponds where residents were washing clothes or casting nets to catch fish, just like some of the wall reliefs showed people doing hundreds of years ago. Outside one temple, I was captivated by the music of a group of landmine victims playing instruments that had not changed in hundreds of years.

To be able to walk amidst the various temples that had captivated me as a young child peering into exotic travel magazines was an epiphany for me now in my late forties. Traveling in Cambodia was a disturbing but exhilarating experience that on a personal level reminded me of just how spoiled I am, how much I have left to discover in this world, and how much I need to learn about the family of humanity. As a teacher of global issues, it reminded me of the inequalities that exist on the Earth and stimulated my desire to do a better job of teaching about them.

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The World Around Us



Wendy Royal
Christine Hoppenrath

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