

Four Days in Cambodia

We visited Cambodia for only the last four days of our 20 day tour of Indo China. Because our visit was at the end of this hectic tour, we were tired by the time we arrived in Siem Reap. Our tiredness was reflected in the group's requests to our guide to cut down the itinerary so that we could have a few hours off from sight-seeing. We'd already seen what seemed to be a lifetime's-worth of temples in Vietnam and Laos, and now here we are on the doorstep of the greatest collection of temples in the world.

Siem Reap, in the north west of the country, used to belong to one of the poorest region of Cambodia, but its fortunes have changed dramatically with the growth of tourism to Angkor Archeological Park. This area of 400 square kilometers, named as a World Heritage Site in 1992, contains the remains of many different capitals of the Kmer Empire dating from the 9th to the 15th century. It is one of the most important archeological sites in south east Asia, now accessible to all who are prepared to visit the region and pay 40 US dollars for a 3 day photo id pass. And there are plenty who are.

Angkor Wat, built as both a city and a temple is the largest religious complex in the world, and this was the first place we visited. Photographers should take care to pack their wide angle lenses to get the big picture, sadly I didn't. There's much to see here, the main temple is built on three levels. I managed to climb the 47 wooden steps from the second to the third tier to look out over the trees in the surrounding area. The views from up here are mostly good. They're spoilt only by the tethered balloon and basket about half a mile away which takes tourists up into the air to get a view over the site, albeit from a distance. Angkor Wat is the most famous site in the park, and for that reason, it's the most popular. It was certainly the most crowded of the four or five temples we visited over our two day stay in this area. The second most crowded site was Ta Promh. This temple used to be most famous for the giant trees growing intertwined between the ruins, but now it's equally well known because Angelina Jolie ran through here when filming Tomb Raider.

There's a lot to take in at Angkor Archeological site, including whether the temples were built as Buddhist or Hindu shrines, and what happened to the stone heads of statues when one religion took over the temple of anotherthey chopped them off. Recent Cambodian history is reflected at these ancient sites by bands of limbless musicians. Three of the sites we visited had such bands playing their local instruments on the pedestrian approach paths to the sites. These men had lost one or both of their legs from landmines planted in the 1970s. Nowadays they make whatever living they can from tourist donations. Our guide told us that so many land mines were planted during the war period in the 70s that there was more than one for every man, woman and child in the population of Cambodia. This prepared us for some of the gruesome sights we were to see next day.

We travelled by air to Phnom Penh, capital of Cambodia, met a new guide and within a couple of hours were taken to Tuol Sleng Security Prison 21. It was the main detention centre in Phnom Penh during the Pol Pot regime between 1975 and 1979. Prisoners were tortured here before being sent to a killing field for execution and burial. There were lot of places like

Tuol Sleng in Cambodia, and each one had its own killing field. In all, 17,000 men, women and children passed through this place on their way to execution at Choeung Ek. Of the 17,000 who were brought here, only 7 survived, of whom only two are still living. We met these two who now sell their books to visitors. We bought one of them, but as yet I haven't opened it. Having seen the barbed wire, the prison cell blocks, the prison cells and the instruments of torture, I'm not sure I need to know any more details of what happened here. The most remarkable thing is that all this cruelty happened only 40 years ago during my adult lifetime.

At the outset of the visit, our local guide tried to explain the politics of the period, and how the Pol Pot regime came to power when the Vietnam War ended. Like tourist guides the world over, he was telling us the current party line. He told us that many Vietnamese people were living under cover in Cambodia during the Vietnam war and that they played a part in the rise of Pol Pot. But I still don't understand the logic of what happened. It seems to me that, rightly or wrongly, the Vietnamese are blamed for a lot of Cambodia's ills.

Our last day in Cambodia started on a much brighter note. We set out at 8 o'clock on bicycle rickshaws, one for each member of our party, on a short tour through Phnom Penh to the Royal Palace. From our low down and exposed position we got a very alarming view of the interweaving paths of all road users. I guess the reason why there aren't as many road accidents as I would expect is that all road users seem to be highly skilled at weaving in and out between each other. Lorries, coaches, vans, cars, tuc tucs, motor cycles and bicycle rickshaws co-exist in chaos which seemingly works. Our destination was the former royal palace.

The royal palace is lavish in the extreme, built at the beginning of the 20th century it is immaculately maintained and boasts great wealth. The disabled and deformed beggars outside the palace offer stark contrast between rich and poor. We spent an hour admiring the various buildings in the compound including the silver pagoda, so called because it has 2,000 silver tiles within it, each weighing 1 kg. The whole place was very impressive, even the building which used to house the royal elephants. But light relief was short lived. Our next stop was the local Killing Field.

We travelled 14 kilometers south west of Phnom Penn to the Genocide Museum of Choeung Ek. Most of the 17,000 prisoners who had been tortured at Tuol Sleng where we were yesterday, were brought here for brutal execution. This killing field is one of 343 in Cambodia. There are 129 mass graves at this site alone. This Genocide Centre is maintained in remembrance of those who died. The original buildings on the site were demolished some years ago, but we could still see the large craters in the ground which were the mass graves. Our party toured the site mostly in silence, our guide explained the various horrors that had happened here not so long ago. It's estimated that 1.7 million Cambodian people died at the hands of the Kmer Rouge in the second half of the 1970s. Many of our party took lots of photographs, but I somehow didn't think it right. I couldn't see myself showing family and friends my holiday snaps and explaining that this is the tree against which babies were battered to death.

A modern memorial (stupa) contains more than 8,000 skulls retrieved from the mass graves on this site, many of them can be seen through the glass windows. We paid our respects by taking a few flowers and a joss stick to the base of the memorial.

This was the last site we visited in Cambodia before our return home. It provided both a sad note on which to end our visit, and a long lasting memory. Though our visits to the torture chambers and killing fields were harrowing, we have no regrets in seeing them. Our only real regret is that we didn't have longer to see how Cambodia has developed since the end of the genocide, and how the people have recovered from such terrible atrocities. It would be worth going back for a longer period to get a better impression of how things are now, but I don't suppose we ever will.

Max Black

15th January 2015