

Chapter 21. The Ugly Side of Humanity

January 2 – January 9

Cambodia

Cambodia shook us. We had seen abject poverty in Tanzania and the Chinese countryside, but it did little to prepare us for what we would experience in Cambodia. Months after we left, I still couldn't get the images out of my head.

It is tempting to compare Cambodia to, say, Tanzania. In terms of per-capita income they are roughly equal. Before arriving, we braced ourselves for the high-crime and aggressive beggars that we had associated with people living on the edge of desperation. We needn't have.

“Lonely Planet says don't take the bus. They state this most emphatically,” I said.

“Why? How else are we going to get Siem Reap?” September asked.

“Fly. The roads are supposed to be horrid.”

“Well,” September said, “Lonely Planet can just pay for our plane tickets. We've survived bad roads before.”

We found a bus company operating at the main train station in Bangkok that could take us to Siem Reap. The ticket agent assured us, “It is only three hours to the Thai/Cambodian border, then another four hours to Siem Reap. You'll enjoy the ride in our air-conditioned Mercedes-Benz bus.”

As promised, we started our trip in style, but once we arrived at the Thai/Cambodian border we would never see that bus again. Our driver simply pointed vaguely in the direction of the border, “Someone will meet you on the other side and take you the rest of the way.”

Three hours and 300 meters of sidewalk and 300 meters of red tape later, we were in Cambodia and completely bewildered about where to go, how to get there, and could someone please show us the way to Siem Reap?

“So now what happens?” I asked September.

“I guess we wait.”

So we did. We waited with a group of Europeans who had crossed the border with us, and talked amongst ourselves.

“Anyone know who we are waiting for?” “Any idea how long we need to wait?” “Does anyone have any documentation, like a travel voucher?”

All of these were valid questions, but no one knew the answers. Even though we had all paid for a full bus ticket onward to Siem Reap, many people ultimately hired private taxis for what was believed to be a four-hour drive. More than an hour later we were herded into the back of a dual-axle cattle truck with 27 other passengers.

From where I was perched in the truck I could easily see the road ahead. We approached a bridge that went over a small river. As the bridge came into focus, I grabbed the sides of the truck in a panic, braced myself for a collision, and let out an expletive.

“Watch your language!” September demanded.

“Did you see that? There were planks missing on that bridge wide enough to swallow a tire! The driver didn’t even slow down!”

We were following a river and switching banks every so often. Eventually we became desensitized to the bridges with the tire-sized gaps. But everyone in the truck was on the alert, watching in disbelief.

Then the driver zipped over a bridge that was nothing more than two wooden planks, each just wide enough to accommodate a tire; I wouldn't have walked across it for fear of falling off. All passengers collectively held their breath for a brief moment, but the driver zipped over the bridge as if nothing were amiss. Halfway across the bridge I found that I had unconsciously lifted my feet off of the floor as if it would somehow make me lighter.

Katrina and Jordan took this journey stoically, having had several months' experience with uncomfortable travel. Granny, on the other hand, was having the time of her life. My mother-in-law has traveled extensively around the world, often alone on a bicycle; her favorite destination being rural Yemen. The dust, heat and noise, and non-stop near death bridge crossings seemed to provide exhilaration such that she commented several times, "I'm so glad we didn't fly!" Fourteen hours after leaving Bangkok, in the wee hours of the morning, heads buzzing, we made it to Siem Reap, Cambodia.

Siem Reap, literally translated, means *Siam Defeated*, in honor of the Khmer defeating the Thai in a bygone era. It is now a town of 70,000 people with an international airport and an endless row of glitzy hotels with rooms pushing \$500. For \$13 per night we landed in a clean, comfortable guesthouse with (much needed) A.C.

I paid close attention when school was in session that first morning. September explained, "In Khmer, a *wat* is a temple. The entire area surrounding this town is known as Angkor Wat and it was built during the height of the ancient Khmer civilization, which lasted from the ninth through the fifteenth centuries. It is often cited as the largest

religious complex in the world. Being so deep in the jungle of Cambodia it was unknown to the outside world until the 1860's when Europeans colonized the area.”

After the history lesson we found ourselves walking down the main street that is lined with restaurants and gift shops, all catering to western tourists. One place caught our eye because it advertised fruit smoothies made with “commercial” ice, meaning the ice was clean. It was stifling hot and humid, even though it was well before noon. An ice-cold drink sounded wonderful. We walked into the open-air restaurant and all ordered a smoothie, along with breakfast.

I always finishing eating first, having grown up in a large family. Enjoying that contented full stomach sensation, I leaned back in my chair. I watched a truck pull up in front of the restaurant. The driver hopped out and brought in a massive block of commercially made ice. He shooed away the feral dogs that were resting in the shade on the floor of the restaurant and placed the ice on the floor in the same shade occupied by the dogs a moment earlier. He began to hack away at the ice with an axe. Every few whacks a large chunk of ice would break off and go skidding across the concrete floor; his assistant would chase after the ice chips and place them in an ice chest.

Suddenly my fruit smoothie wasn't so refreshing.

Something I had read in *Lonely Planet Cambodia* suddenly took on a fresh perspective: “If you see anything being done incompetently, remember that all the educated people in the country either fled or were exterminated in the late 1970's.”

That thought rattled around in my head for a while. It left me hungry to know more about the historical reason for this.

We took a “tuk-tuk” to the ruins of Angkor Wat; in Cambodia a taxi is known as a tuk-tuks, which is a trailer pulled by a Chinese Honda Trail 90 knock-off. I had a Honda Trail 90 as a kid and put a few thousand miles on it zooming all over the desert and mountains of southern California before I even got my first zit. Now, as the five of us piled into a trailer behind one tiny motorcycle, I hoped that the brake system had been upgraded since the original 1960’s era original. And off we pattered.

The site of the massive stone buildings of Angkor Wat rising out of the jungle is stunning. Enormous pagodas top every shrine, and the incredible ornate detail etched into every square millimeter of stone is mind-boggling. Individual temples are spread over several square miles; the sheer vastness of the complex cannot all be absorbed in a few days. Angkor Wat is simply too big.

My first reaction was that the temples of Angkor Wat look like something out of an Indiana Jones movie. We hired a tour guide to take us around the various structures, and he had an important factoid for us. Angkor Wat is where *Lara Croft - Tomb Raider* was filmed. So my Indiana Jones impression wasn’t too far off. Our guide was a young guy who was clearly smitten with the movie’s heroine, Angelina Jolie, as he knew every little detail about her and what she did while filming in the area.

Unfortunately, the Tomb Raider trivia dried up and we were left with an endless stream of data about what all the stone carvings meant. And as reported previously, the place is vast and every square millimeter is covered with a storyboard carved right into the stone. Think France’s Bayeux Tapestry on an exponential scale.

To make matters worse, my mother-in-law, curse her wretched Mensa cranium, has an infinite capacity for just this kind of mind-numbing detail. By the time I had heard

the umpteenth story of how this elephant-headed goddess had a tug of war with a seven-headed serpent and landed in a bath of milk and sealed her power for eternity, I knew it was our turn to make up a story.

The walls of the temples are covered in carvings that tell a story. It has been my life ambition to create my own enduring urban legend and be immortalized on www.urbanlegends.com. Whoever came up with one about the blind date that went bad where the guy wakes up in a tub of ice with one of his kidneys missing is a genius. Now that we were in Angkor Wat, I realized my opportunity was before me.

While Granny was entertaining our tour guide, the rest of us came up with a plan to carve into stone our own legend. We would place it out of sight in some obscure temple to be miraculously “discovered.” But what story to tell?

After much discussion we settled on a storyboard carving that has a flying saucer piloted by a man in the likeness of Bill Gates, and to make the point clear, we would put the Microsoft Windows logo on one side of the flying saucer and the number 666 on the other. Then we’d show legions of people bowing down to the flying saucer and worshipping it. We would have to somehow pass our stone storyboard through a goat so that it would have that “aged look.”

Too bad our stone carving skills weren’t up to snuff; our carving’s discovery would have made a great news story. It may yet. I may not know about stone carving, but I can use Photoshop.

The *Bill from Outer-Space* story helped us pass the sweltering afternoon, but the tour guide and Granny both had more stamina than we did.

The tour guide was detailing one of the storyboards and Katrina and Jordan took refuge in the shade; a monkey approached Katrina and started grooming itself. Katrina sat really still and smiled at the monkey. The monkey responded by showing Katrina its many teeth. I didn't know if the monkey was threatening Katrina or simply returning the smile. Then I realized that monkeys probably don't have the social pattern of smiling.

I thought, "Oops. One wrong move on Katrina's part and that monkey is going to use those teeth and take a divot out of her arm."

What happened next was either sheer brilliance on Katrina's part or dumb-luck, but Katrina responded by simply raising her eyebrows. The monkey responded by raising its eyebrows. Slowly, the monkey came right up to Katrina and started to brush its hand on Katrina's thigh.

It took me a minute to realize what the monkey was doing. It was grooming Katrina for lice. This monkey must have thought that Katrina had a terrible case of the mange and lost all of her fur. The monkey started to inspect the (very fine) hair on Katrina's thigh. It then proceeded to pinch the little hairs and pluck them out, one at a time, and then eat them.

Katrina tried very hard not to scream out in pain. Always with my children's best interests in mind, I told her to stay still so I could take pictures. After a minute or two, just as suddenly as the monkey started to "groom" Katrina, it turned its back to her and pointed to its back as if to say, "OK, I did you. Your turn to do me."

So, Katrina dutifully started to brush through the monkey's fur. Every time Katrina tried to stop and get up and walk away, the monkey would look up at Katrina disdainfully and point to another area it wanted groomed. I don't think Katrina found any

lice. And I really doubt she would have eaten any if she had. Katrina quickly decided it was time to start shaving her legs to avoid being mistaken for needing a good lice grooming in the future.

Katrina's Journal, January 3

Today we went to Angkor Wat. It was pretty neat. It was these big, one or two story stone buildings. Inside, there were a lot of corridors connected to the outside. Everything was raised off the ground. On the walls there were carvings of gods and stuff, and on the big walls, stories told by carvings. Our guide told us the stories. After a while, we came to this tall temple, with the steepest stairs you have ever seen leading up to it. Jordan and I crawled up the stairs, so we wouldn't tumble down. Our guide said a 9-year-old boy had died by falling down those stairs not too long ago. At the top there were a lot of great views over the jungle because we were so high up.

After walking around a bit, we saw a monkey. The monkey apparently liked me, because when I sat by it to have my picture taken, it started grooming my leg and plucking out the hairs. It really hurt, but it was funny, too. After that, the monkey apparently wanted me to groom it, so I just picked through the fur, because I don't know how to groom a monkey. It was pretty weird.

We started to become more and more comfortable with the temples and the surrounding jungle. We came across some landmine survivors playing music at the entrance of one temple, with a donation box prominently displayed. The lesson of seeing a group of amputees was not lost on Jordan who from this point forward, soberly

reminded us all to stay on the path every time one of our toes happened to so much as touch a blade of grass.

No sooner than we were reminded of the dangers of the landmines, Katrina found a snakeskin that had been recently shed. It was intact in every detail, so that its eyes and mouth could be clearly seen. Suddenly we all became a little more careful where we placed our hands as we climbed the steep stone steps, or where we stepped if we entered a darkened chamber.

Our tuk-tuk driver became an honorary member of the family, taking us almost everywhere we went. On the back of his tuk-tuk was posted an advertisement for a restaurant. Prominently displayed on the ad was the internationally recognized symbol for on-line addicts to get a quick fix – Wi-Fi.

Our driver asked where we wanted to go, and I pointed to the advertisement on the back of his tuk-tuk.

“I would like to go here,” I said.

He said, “No, you don’t want to go there. I can take you to a nice place. You will like it.”

He didn’t understand. I needed an e-mail fix. I said, “I want to use their wireless network” and I pointed to the Wi-Fi logo to make my point. He had good English skills, but I know native English speakers who don’t know what a wireless network is.

He said, “Wee Fee? You want Wee Fee?”

Wee Fee sounded close enough to me, so I said nodded enthusiastically. We all piled into the tuk-tuk and were on our way to get Wee Fee. The others might be going to get food, but I had but one goal.

At the restaurant we were shown in by the maître d'. I was logging into their network before we crossed the threshold of the door.

"I'm in! I'm in! I'm in!" I did a little dance.

September said, "We are all in."

The maître d' showed us a seat in the waiting area.

"No, no, no. Their network. It is wide open and fast." I settled into a plush armchair and was downloading e-mail and looking at CNN.com – the world was mine and I could go anywhere I pleased.

September commented, "This is an interesting place."

I glanced around quickly, not wanting to take my eyes off my 2-inch by 3-inch screen. "Looks nice to me. Kind of fancy for Cambodia, though." The purpose of the soft light with the reddish glow hadn't sunk in yet.

Granny said, "Interesting artwork on the walls. What kind of place have you taken me to, John?"

I glanced up for a moment at a painting. "Hmmm. It's a neo-expressionist nude. Big deal."

"I see you learned something about art while at the Louvre," Granny continued, "But what will your children think?"

I knew she was goading me. Didn't she know I was mainlining a steady stream of 1's and 0's? Without looking up I said, "Not much. You can't swing a dead cat in

Europe without hitting a painting of a bare breast. In the Vatican Museum, statues of naked men missing penises are all the rage.”

The maître d’ brought us a menu. Annoyed that I had to stop what I was doing, I quickly looked through the menu and picked something out. I proceeded to go back to reading about important world events such the scandal in Orlando when a bunch of high school boys on a Disney World field trip were put in the same hotel with a swingers club. Just then Katrina and Jordan started snickering and pointing their fingers at the artwork.

“Pointing isn’t polite – what’s so funny, anyway?” I then looked at what they were pointing at. The nude was Rock Hudson: his feather boa strategically covered his anatomy. Across the room from Rock Hudson was Chairman Mao with earrings and red lipstick. Another wall sported a painting of a very overweight guy wearing a tutu, a smile and little else. His hairy chest would have made Bigfoot jealous.

I looked over at September. She gave me a wicked sneer and said, “Nice restaurant.”

It isn’t as though I wanted to raise Katrina and Jordan in a hermetically sealed mayonnaise jar, but the restaurant’s décor was a little over the top. In less time than it takes to explain it, I realized that my own eccentricities entitled me to a lifetime of teasing for my restaurant selection. But while my eccentricities may have been learned, September’s are genetic. A couple of weeks traveling with my mother-in-law made me realize that. Regardless, the deck was stacked against Katrina and Jordan, as they were losing out on both sides of the nature-nurture thing.

For a moment I considered leaving, but hey, we had already ordered, and the restaurant had a big serving of Wee Fee. I said, “Yeah, I like it, too.”

I *was* careful to sit next to September throughout dinner and to put my arm around her. As the walls were plastered with paintings of men in high heels and corsets, there was no sense in giving anyone the wrong idea. Through dinner I contemplated the bigger of picture of Cambodia's recent history and what it meant to be able to display a painting of Chairman Mao in drag in a public place. I think Cambodia will not only survive, it will thrive.

We had considered taking a boat down the Mekong River to Phnom Penh until we learned that one full of Western tourists recently capsized, *Wasa* style. It seems that tickets for seats on the boats are for Western tourists, and the locals are put up on the roof. My best guess is that the captain keeps taking passengers and loads them onto the roof until water starts lapping over the edge of the sides of the boat. I resisted the urge to have a science moment with the kids about inverted pendulums, as I recalled what happened last time we talked about capsizing boats after the *Wasa* museum in Stockholm.

To get to Phnom Penh, we took the bus instead and met a nice Australian family who was spending a few months traveling around Southeast Asia. They had come to Siem Reap the day before we had via the same route from Bangkok.

I asked, "So, how about those bridges? It must not have been too bad or you wouldn't be here now."

"When we came through, one bridge was totally out and had apparently collapsed only minutes before we arrived," the father said, "We were stuck for hours until it could be repaired, and then all the crew did was lay wood planks across the river. The planks were no wider than the width of a tire."

“Ah, yes. I think our driver hit that bridge at 40 MPH. I nearly wet myself. And yet, here we are doing it again.”

“Well, a fair measure of crazy is doing the same thing twice and expecting a different outcome,” my new friend snorted, “But I suppose you need to be a bit crazy to be on a walkabout for an entire year with your kids.”

I had either been insulted or praised. Perhaps both.

Once in Phnom Penh, all the horrid traffic we had previously witnessed worldwide suddenly seemed sedate and orderly. In China we observed that the fanciest car seemed to have the right of way at intersections. In Phnom Penh this was no longer subtle, putting the average person at an incredible disadvantage, because the average person was on a moped. Rather, the average family was on a moped. At the same time. I never knew that a 50cc moped could carry a family of four and their shopping all at once, but I have the pictures to prove that not only can it be done, it is common.

I don't think anyone could ever really be prepared for Phnom Penh. From the insane traffic to the child beggars sans clothes and sans the occasional limb, it is not for the faint of heart. It is also a city full of beautiful people.

On one particular Sunday we meet Prak. He had very good English skills and became our guide around Phnom Penh. We learned a lot about Cambodia and its people from Prak. “My wife is very lucky,” he said. “She has a good job making clothes in a factory owned by the Chinese.”

So the Chinese were outsourcing their manufacturing to Cambodia, and the jobs were considered high paying work. That put a lot of things into perspective.

While still in Siem Reap I had purchased a biography, *Stay Alive My Son*, from a young amputee who was about seven years old and going from restaurant to restaurant and table to table selling books. Over the next several days I read Pin Yathay describe his experience of the brutal Khmer Rouge genocide in the latter half of the 1970's. It was captivating in a horrific sort of way. Now I had the opportunity to ask Prak about this period. He matter-of-factly itemized the number of family members he had lost in those years.

I grew up watching the Vietnam War unfold on TV with Walter Cronkite. About the time I was worried about things like getting my driver's license, Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, fell to a Communist-inspired faction called the Khmer Rouge. I had of course heard about the Khmer Rouge's leader, Pol Pot, and had heard that atrocities had been committed at a place called the Killing Fields, but I understood little about them until I visited Phnom Penh, spoke with Prak and read Pin Yathay's story of how he lost first his parents, then his siblings, his children, and finally his wife.

Prak summarized, "No one was immune to the horrors of that period. Everyone over 30 years old has many family members who died." The juxtaposition of being in a non-threatening environment, say a bustling marketplace, and gazing into someone's eyes and having them calmly discuss their harrowing experiences with openness and frankness was very unsettling.

What I learned was that the Khmer Rouge tried to establish a purely agrarian society. To accomplish this, they tried to eradicate all traces of modern life. In a matter of days after the fall of Phnom Penh, all cities nationwide were permanently evacuated at

gunpoint and the people herded into the countryside. With no planning or infrastructure in place for such a dramatic change, the resulting chaos and famine were inevitable.

To control the population, the Khmer Rouge marked anyone with an education as an enemy, as educated citizens were the most capable of overthrowing the new government. The Khmer Rouge cannibalized its own citizens by systematically exterminating doctors, engineers, teachers, skilled technicians, and the like. Some escaped into neighboring countries, but most were ruthlessly killed, often by starvation, as it was the most economical method. In the most extreme examples, simply carrying a pencil was proof enough that one possessed an education and hence the carrier was sentenced to “re-education,” which often meant being quietly taken out into the jungle and bludgeoned to death, another economical method of execution.

The net result was that during their reign, the Khmer Rouge took a functioning and prosperous society and thrust it back to the Stone Age, destroying an entire culture in the process. By some estimates, during the Khmer Rouge years of 1975 through 1979, approximately one-third of the population of Cambodia was exterminated or died of starvation or disease.

For me, the experience of visiting the sites of the Khmer Rouge killing machine around Phnom Penh was a world apart from other places we visited where misery and death had been inflicted on a mass scale, such as Poland’s Auschwitz or Japan’s Hiroshima. I think that in part this is because time has erased the visible wounds in Europe and Japan. Time has not yet been able to work its magic in Cambodia.

For example, we visited Phnom Penh’s Genocide Museum, which is housed in the site of the former High School 21; this school was converted into a prison and torture

facility during the Khmer Rouge years and was referred to as simply “S21.” As we approached the gate of the S21 compound where the Khmer Rouge coerced “confessions” from its enemies, we were greeted by a beggar. This was not an ordinary beggar, but a survivor of the compound we were visiting. He had been tortured by having acid thrown in his face, and his crooked arms and legs looked as if they had been broken but had never properly healed. His horribly disfigured face was little more than dislocated clumps of flesh and his eyes were vacant windows of milky white scar tissue; you simply could not look into his face and not gasp out loud.

Because of the magnitude of the horrors that occurred in Cambodia many believe it could take several generations for time to erase the visible wounds. I suspect this is correct, and there are two primary reasons.

First, since the educated population in large part was exterminated or fled the country, the skills most needed to rebuild the country once the Khmer Rouge were defeated are in short supply or simply not available.

Second, although Pol Pot and his ilk were overthrown by the Vietnamese over 20 years ago, tens of millions of landmines laid from the late 1960’s through the late 1970’s are still buried in the soil. Since landmines are designed to maim rather than kill, the result is that Cambodia is burdened with a large population of amputees; they are an unnervingly common site. Three people are injured by a landmine each and every day, even though it has been over two decades since the end of open hostilities. Mine clearing is ongoing, but at the current rate it will take over 100 years to free the country of this scourge.

So while the country would like to move forward, it is crippled by the enormous problem of a workforce that is disproportionately uneducated and disabled. Even tourism, a significant source of revenue for many developing countries, can never really take off in Cambodia because it is not safe to walk in many areas because of the landmines.

All that notwithstanding, perhaps the most disturbing fact for me is the lack of understanding of this history by the average guy on the street.

There have been books written and a few movies made about what happened in Cambodia, but somehow the gravity of what is being told in those stories has not crept into Western culture in the same way as what happened in Nazi Germany or in Hiroshima, or even the Stalinist Gulag. For example, anyone who epitomizes evil can be casually labeled a “Nazi” with virtually everyone in the West understanding the meaning. Labeling someone a “Khmer Rouge” would just result in quizzical looks.

At the S21 Genocide Museum we spent time in classrooms that had been converted to places of torture. Graphic photographs hung on the walls were yellow and fading, but enough detail remained to communicate the intent. A sign on the wall read “Endure your punishment well.”

Looking at the faded yellow photos and documents, I couldn't help but compare the experience to going to the Peace Memorial Museum at Hiroshima – a huge and impressive multimedia complex that does justice to a story that needs to be told. All of the displays at S21 are indoors, but given that few of the windows are still intact, the building provides only nominal protection from the sun and rain, and there is nothing to protect the photographs on display from the humid tropical environment. A poster

soliciting funds to build a proper museum was displayed, making a plea so the thousands of historical documents could be preserved. Without investment of some kind, in another decade I doubt there will be anything left to preserve.

It was the same situation at the Killing Fields. To see the Killing Fields, you must hire a tuk-tuk and drive for a half-hour down a rutted, muddy dirt road through a neighborhood of squatter's hovels, and when you arrive you pay a couple of dollars to a man sitting in a small wooden shack built with all the structural integrity of a child's lemonade stand. In the center of the site is a pagoda housing a few skeletal remains, but mostly the Killings Fields is simply an open space. Supposedly the human remains in the mass graves have been exhumed and the site is simply the location where bodies once lay. However, when we visited human bones and bits of clothing were protruding from hard-packed dirt trails through the fields that were the graves of thousands of victims. The many feet that have walked through have worn off the top-most layer of soil, exposing underneath the remnants of those who perished.

I am not sure if a proper museum at S21 and the Killing Fields would help get the story of what happened in Cambodia out to the world, but at least it would ensure that there would be something to show the world in future generations. A bit of money and some marketing could do wonders for the preservation of this story, and more importantly having the story heard. Unfortunately, money and marketing for the sake of history are luxuries of the developed world.

Katrina's Journal, January 7

.... after that, our tuk-tuk driver took us down a very dusty and bouncy road to The Killing Fields. First, we went inside a small room with a very high

ceiling, where there were skulls lined upon shelves that went up, up, up. I was sad to see that so many people were killed. Once outside, we walked on a path that went by lots of empty graves. Dad soon realized that on the path there were human bones showing in the packed-down earth. They were all over. Not just one here, one there, but the bones were as common as rocks.

I overheard Jordan saying to Katrina a few days after we left Cambodia, “You know that man we saw at the museum who had acid thrown in his face? Some things you remember even though you wish you didn’t have to.”