



NEW DAY IN A TROUBLED LAND: Cambodia Rising

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I was thumbing through a travel magazine in the dentist's office a few weeks ago when an article on Cambodia caught my eye. It said that Cambodia had recently become one of the new "hot spots" for world travel. It also said that they were expecting more than two million tourists to visit the magnificent temple complex of Angkor Wat, located in the northern part of the country. Two million tourists! That got me thinking back to the trip I took to Cambodia more than ten years ago. Things have certainly changed a lot since I first visited that fascinating country in 1999.

I had wanted to see the ancient city of Angkor and its myriad temple complexes ever since I was a kid, when I saw a picture of Jackie Kennedy (She wasn't "Jackie Kennedy Onassis" back then) on the cover of *Life Magazine* strolling through the jungle ruins there followed by her entourage. But that was 1967, I was twelve, and Caseville was about as far away as I got that summer.

I still have a copy of that issue of *Life* (I found a copy at a garage sale several years later and bought it), and when I look at the pictures of the former First Lady, smiling and gazing in wonder at the timeless temples, it's very hard to believe that such a serene, pastoral land was soon to be subjected to a series

of events that would engulf its people in a decades-long nightmare of pain, misery and death.

First came the war in Vietnam, which brought devastating effects to neighboring Cambodia, and immediately following that conflict, the brutal Khmer Rouge seized power, with their forced marches and killing fields. To learn about that sad period of Cambodian history, one need only watch the movie “The Killing Fields,” which depicts Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot’s devastating “experiment in social restructuring” that led to an estimated two million deaths—a quarter of the national population—in the years 1975–1978. During those three years the Khmer Rouge imposed such an oppressive reign of terror on their fellow citizens that when the Vietnamese finally invaded the country in 1979 (goaded on by Pol Pot’s repeated threats to “reclaim” ancient Khmer lands from Vietnam “through force”), the Cambodians welcomed their “occupiers” as both liberators and heroes. Today, a very beautiful “Friendship Monument,” commemorating the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge and dedicated with gratitude to their Vietnamese neighbors, stands prominently in the city centre of the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh.

Even though most Cambodians had welcomed the invading Vietnamese with open arms in 1979, the invasion had still been “illegal,” technically speaking, in the eyes of the world. And when the Vietnamese finally withdrew some ten years later in 1989, the power vacuum created caused political instability to return quickly to plague the fragile nation; various political groups—including the deposed, but still viable, Khmer Rouge—jockeyed for power. In addition to numerous violent skirmishes and political assassinations, the killing took an even more ominous turn when the principals in the conflict began planting land mines—millions of them—in farm fields and forests throughout the Cambodian countryside. Finally, the United Nations, fearing that the country was on the brink of anarchy, decided to send in a contingent of peacekeepers from member nations around the world in hopes of bringing about a stable government and the semblance of fair elections.

For almost a decade, those peacekeepers were the only force helping to rebuild the infrastructure of the country and preventing Cambodia from slipping back into social, political and economic chaos.

I never really lost my own early desire to visit Cambodia and Angkor Wat. If anything, my wish just grew stronger. Then, one day in December 1998, as I was driving home after teaching my last Spanish class of the day, I heard an announcement on the radio that gave me a glimmer of hope; a delegation from Cambodia had just been seated, after an absence of several decades, in the General Assembly of the United Nations, which meant, at least as far as the U.N. was concerned, that a “stable government” had finally been re-established in Phnom Penh. Up until that time tourists had been warned to avoid traveling to Cambodia at all costs, and Americans had been especially cautioned by the U.S. State Department to stay away due to the ruthless fighting between the various political factions as well as the millions of land mines that had been buried just waiting in ambush to maim or to kill. But the announcement I heard on the radio that day most definitely inspired me to plan a trip there, and so in February 1999, I took off for Phnom Penh via Thai Airways from Bangkok. I opted for a three day tour of Cambodia that allowed me to travel on my own, but that would set me up in advance with a guide in each city I was to visit and a hotel to stay in—the hotel room was very important to secure before leaving the U.S. since at that time there was very little infrastructure allowing tourists to make reservations on their own ahead of time.

As my plane landed at Pochentong airport, I was struck by the amount of old rusty equipment pushed off to the sides of the runway—hulks of old helicopters, and heaps of rusting vehicles. It occurred to me that since the country had been so long without a stable government there had really been no resources or any governmental agency or infrastructure to clear such remains away—not even from the main runway of its international airport.

And as the plane taxied to a stop, I asked myself in an intense moment of panic if I was really sure I wanted to be doing this—traveling more or less alone on my own in a country where a relatively shaky peace had just recently been established. It certainly didn't help when I and the other passengers who stepped off the plane were greeted by a cadre of armed soldiers, police, and other "military types" demanding to see our passports. None of these armed officials, by the way, appeared to be out of their teens. Cambodians tend to be quite small in stature, and many look younger than they really are. Their youthful appearance notwithstanding, it was still somewhat disconcerting at the customs booth to have several large rifles held on me by soldiers who looked like they had only just recently (like maybe last week!?) hit puberty. One of the things of which I soon became aware on this visit, although at first only subconsciously, was the unsettling absence of middle-aged and elderly people in Cambodia. It finally dawned on me, with horror, that this lack of older people was the direct result of the Khmer Rouge years in power. Most of the people I encountered on this trip had been born during the 1960's and 1970's, making them, as my guide later pointed out, former Khmer Rouge themselves. In his words, "If you're alive and my age today, then you were probably Khmer Rouge when you were young. It was the only way for us to survive."

I was very fortunate to get this particular guide. As I describe below, he did not open up to me immediately, but once he did, I learned an amazing amount from him. He not only possessed encyclopedic knowledge of Cambodia, but he had also lived through and witnessed the bloody Khmer Rouge years and their aftermath. Many of his special insights were tragic—but all were quite fascinating. He explained to me that one of the first things Pol Pot did when he took power was to rename the country Kampuchea since he believed "Cambodia" to be a western corruption of the ancient name. In fact, if you slow down the pronunciation, change the tonic syllable, and apply a more "Khmer pronunciation" to the consonants, "cam-bó-di-a" in fact becomes "Kam-pu-ché-a."

The first place my guide brought me, directly from the airport, was what he called a “genocide site.” As I got out of the car I realized that we were at one of the most infamous places in the entire country—Choeung Ek, the most notorious killing field of the Khmer Rouge era. The site covers several acres and is composed of numerous large holes—unmarked graves really—perhaps fifty to a hundred yards across and about ten to fifteen feet deep, into which thousands of bodies of the people slaughtered by the Khmer Rouge were tossed. When the Vietnamese troops invaded the country, they were shocked to see what the Khmer Rouge had done to their own people and left a large plaque detailing the horrors of the site as they found it. Until the Vietnamese invaded in 1979, the outside world had been only vaguely aware of what was going on in Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge years. One of the most distinguishing traits of the Khmer Rouge was their fanatical insistence on hermetic isolation within their own borders. During the late 1970’s, the only ways the rest of the world had of knowing what was going on under Pol Pot’s “social restructuring” were the incredible reports of deprivation, starvation and murder recounted sporadically by refugees fleeing the regime into Thailand. When stability finally did return, Cambodians made a firm decision to leave the mass graves of Choeung Ek exposed for the world to see, and in honor of the thousands who were murdered there, a Buddhist monument, or “stupa” was built rising several stories into the air. Whereas one sees thousands of stupas throughout Asia and the Orient, there is no other one like this—covered with glass so that from the inside, thousands of skulls of the people murdered on the site peer down on the visitors, seeming to implore that the great evil done to them here never be allowed to happen again.

My visit to Cambodia was a “whirlwind” trip. I flew from Bangkok in the morning about 8:00 A.M., arrived at the airport in Phnom Penh, and was immediately given the tour to Choeung Ek described above. My guide told me that we only had a few hours to tour Phnom Penh since my plane to Angkor (only one flight a day back then—and seats almost impossible to

come by) was scheduled to leave that very afternoon. So we quickly drove into Phnom Penh so I could get a quick taste of the city itself. I found Phnom Penh to be a very strange and evocative place, with a constant twinge of sadness in the air. Anyone who knows Cambodian history, or for that matter, anyone who has seen the film *The Killing Fields* already mentioned, knows that as a major part of their radical program of “social restructuring,” one of the first things Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge did upon seizing power in 1975 was force the million plus inhabitants of the city to completely abandon it. The Khmer Rouge were determined to build an agrarian society, dedicated to stamping out any vestiges of modernity in general and Western influence in particular. Thus within a few days of taking the capital, the Khmer Rouge forced the entire population of over a million citizens—doctors, lawyers, upper class, middle, class, lower class, and everyone else—to leave. They left behind an empty shell of a city, which wasn’t to be inhabited, or especially to thrive again for decades. The former city dwellers were to work in the fields to establish Kampuchea, a “new Cambodia,” reminiscent of its ancient agrarian past. And anyone associated with the West or who had had dealings with westerners, including the highly educated, were often the first candidates for the killing fields. The Khmer Rouge were so determined to remain sealed off from the outside world that even the embassies of the few countries with whom they (reluctantly) established relations, such as China, were allowed only a small compound in Phnom Penh. And even China most probably wouldn’t have been allowed in but for the fact that it was one of Cambodia’s few sources of trade—especially in weapons—during this time. So restrictive were the Khmer Rouge regulations—even with their so-called allies—that the Chinese were not even permitted to leave their embassy compound in Phnom Penh. I remember reading an article published during that time in which one Chinese embassy official remarked rather sardonically, “Even if I just want to take a walk around the block, I have to fly back to Beijing to do it.”

After our visit to Choeng Ek, we headed into Phnom

Penh about ten miles away, and my guide, who was bouncing around up in the front seat next to the driver (the roads tended to be “more pothole than road” in Cambodia, a country so poor that it could barely afford to build roads at all) turned around to chat with me. We hadn’t really spoken too much up until then. At Choeung Ek, he had let me wander through the open graves wrapped in my own thoughts. But now as we started to get to know each other, one of the first things he discovered about me to his delight was that I was a Spanish professor. It turned out that he had been assigned the previous year to a UN peacekeeping group from Uruguay for nine months, and he had taught himself Spanish to serve as their guide. His Spanish, in fact, was excellent. But since the peacekeepers had left the country the previous year, he explained, his greatest worry had been that he would lose the Spanish he had worked so hard to learn. So from that point on, at his delighted insistence, we spoke only in Spanish. We finally arrived at the outskirts of Phnom Penh, and as we drove through the streets of the capital, I was curious to see what a city with such tragic history would look like. I found Phnom Penh both sad and intriguing. Sad because the poor were almost everywhere one looked, either begging or street vending whatever they could. But it was also an intriguingly beautiful city in its own mysterious way. One of the remarkable ironies of the Khmer Rouge seizure of power is that because they completely emptied the city by force, Phnom Penh became a veritable “ghost town” for several years, preserved almost as if in amber, and when I was there, it still had the ethereal feel of an exotic former French colony. Many of the buildings sported an aspect of “fin de siècle” gentility, and the steamy mists that drifted off the Ton Le Sap and Mekong Rivers merging nearby imbued the city with a somnambulant ambiance—giving it the mystical, almost mythic quality of a city once condemned to die that was granted a miraculous last minute reprieve.

The second place we were going to visit, my guide informed me, was “a genocide museum.” I have to admit I was still somewhat gloomy from our morning trip to the killing fields, but

since I was “in his hands,” I simply followed where he led. It turned out that he had decided to take me to Tuol Sleng, the infamous former high school built during the French colonial days, which the Khmer Rouge had converted during their infamous regime into an interrogation and torture center. As we entered, we found ourselves in a row of cells (former classrooms), where instruments of torture, such as electric beds, water buckets, racks for the stretching of torsos and limbs, were to be found. The Vietnamese liberators who discovered these hideous tools had made sure to preserve the site as they found it, just as they had done at Choeung Ek, for the outside world to see.

Since my guide and I had still only known each other a few hours, I had not broached the subject of the Khmer Rouge with him. Truth be told, I was dying to ask him what, if any, his own experiences had been during that that tragic time, but I was “treading lightly” because I knew that the entire issue of the Khmer years were still an open wound for many Cambodians, and I didn’t want to risk offending him. Besides, there was still a multiplicity of active political factions still vying for power in a very tense, sometimes violent, political atmosphere. As it turned out, it was my guide who finally opened the subject of the Khmer Rouge years. As we walked through the halls of this “museum,” which had witnessed such great atrocities, we saw thousands of snapshots on the walls—the vast majority of which were of the torture victims, whom the regime had very meticulously documented and photographed before transporting them to the killing fields to be executed for “crimes against the state.” The photo that had particularly caught my attention was not of one of the victims, but it depicted a rather strange scene. In it, a young man in military attire, who looked to be about twenty years old, was lying on his side, apparently asleep. And surrounding him, forming a type of ring around his body, were six small children (I guessed to be about seven or eight years old), also lying on their sides and also apparently asleep. What made the picture strange was the fact that each child had one hand placed somewhere on the man’s body—on

his legs, or his chest, or arms. To me it looked like a mother caterpillar surrounded by six baby caterpillars (though I know this analogy is more metaphoric than accurate). As I continued to scrutinize the photo, still trying to figure out what it was, my guide came up quietly behind me and said, “That is how Angkar made us sleep when we were young.” “Angkar,” he then explained, was the all encompassing word for the Khmer Rouge, its rulers and its ruling system—somewhat similar, I came to understand, to the concept of “Big Brother.” The way the Cambodians pronounce it, it sounds like “ahn-kah,” with the accent on the first syllable. The closest word we have to it in English is “The Organization,” and, as my guide explained, absolute subservience to Angkar was demanded by the regime at all times. He explained, “Angkar clothed us, fed us, educated us. Our families were broken up, many times our parents were killed or taken away, but we were told that Angkar was now our father and mother. They put six of us children together in a squad, and each squad was assigned an older squad leader who then became our Angkar authority. And when we slept, in order to show our allegiance to Angkar, we had to keep one hand on our squad leader. He was with us night and day. We could eat only when he said we could, and only what he said we could; we could sleep only when he told us to sleep. He marched us everyday into the fields, where we worked without food or water, from morning until late afternoon. Then every night after we ate, we had to attend a drill session before we went to bed. We had to stand up at the drill sessions and denounce our parents, our families; we had to denounce our friends. We had to swear that Angkar was our only family and that Angkar was our only friend. Anyone who complained was beaten or marched away. Our squad leader used to tell us, ‘Each one of you dead is one less mouth Angkar has to feed.’”

After that, I realized that my guide was willing to open up to me about those painful Khmer Rouge years, and he was pleasantly surprised that I was eager to listen to all he had to say. But suddenly, as we continued our walk through the “museum,” an incredibly loud gunshot rang out in the street just

the other side of the wall where we were standing. We heard a murmuring crowd quickly gather in the street (and although there was a wall that prevented us from seeing out, there was a window above our heads through which we could hear), so my guide cocked his ear to find out what “it” was all about. That gunshot, still reverberating, shook me up pretty good, believe me!, but I almost had to laugh when my guide flashed me a relieved smile and said, “It’s OK—no problem!—only a robbery.” It was his obvious relief that this had been “only a robbery (an armed one at that!) that really brought home to me just how much insecurity and menace this young man and his fellow Cambodians must have had to live with on a daily basis as they were growing up.

After our visit to Tuol Sleng, we only had enough time for a quick lunch before we had to get me back to the airport to catch my plane for Angkor. We ended up at a rather famous watering hole that I had even heard of back when the United States was still fighting the war in neighboring Vietnam. This particular bistro, called the Foreign Correspondents’ Club, was open to the public despite its name, and historically, it had been the “place to meet, to see and be seen” in Phnom Penh, where journalists and politicians had been gathering since French colonial times. It was a buzzing, vibrant hive of activity overlooking a street full of traffic along the Tonle Sap River. We climbed the stairs to the second floor where there was a merciful breeze coming off the river to cool the noon sun and carry some of the dense traffic fumes away. What a place this Correspondents’ Club was! Cambodia had only very recently opened its doors to the outside world and this bar/restaurant was a veritable microcosm of Phnom Penh itself at that time—a raucous mix of opportunists, ex-politicos, reporters, and military types, entrepreneurs of all persuasion hoping to make a quick buck—some legitimate and some obviously not so legitimate. The noisy patrons were a truly mesmerizing mix of characters—like something you might see in the movies—at Rick’s Café in *Casablanca*, or better yet, in the bar scene in *Star Wars*. My guide and I both ordered a sandwich and a coffee,

and as we ate we continued to chatter away about Cambodia, its history, and its politics. But after about five or ten minutes, still deep in our conversation, I slowly became aware of the fact that the noise that the other patrons had been making had died down, and I also suddenly realized that several of them were staring at us! It suddenly occurred to me how strange it must have looked to have an American chattering away in Spanish with an obviously Khmer-speaking young man. Maybe they thought we were up to something sinister ourselves—planning a coup, an arms shipment, or some other clandestine intrigue. Even as we were leaving, I noticed severed pairs of baffled eyes following us out the door. I had to love it—myself as an Indiana Jones! Bespectacled O.U. professor one day—“international man of mystery” the next . . . !

Since Cambodia back then had only just recently opened up to tourists, there was only one flight a day from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap, the gateway city to Angkor. And tickets were at a premium, which is why I was glad that my travel agent had bought mine for me long ahead of time. Originally, in the planning stages of the trip back in the States, I had seriously considered taking the bus the two hundred miles to Angkor from Phnom Penh to save a little money. But the more I read, the more I decided against that. The travel journals said that what was supposed to be a five hour trip quite often turned into an excruciating “two-dayer” due to a combination of poor road conditions and mechanical problems. I had also read a communiqué sent from the U.S. State Department warning tourists not to try and travel to Angkor Wat by road since many of the violent factions, who had agreed during the UN occupation to lay down their weapons against each other, were opting instead to block the roads and “troll” for the occasional tour bus to come along, then forcing the passengers to pony up rather large “tolls” in order to be allowed to continue on their way. Apparently no one was willing to argue the legitimacy of those “tolls” with men holding big guns.

Anyway, the plane on which I was to fly up to Angkor finally rolled—or more accurately, hobbled—over to the gate. It was

on the small side, could carry about twenty five to thirty people, and it was the most rickety rust bucket of aviation nuts and bolts I had ever seen—or even imagined for that matter! The name painted in faded letters on the side said, “Royal Cambodian Airlines” which made me realize I was about to board a plane that pre-dated the Khmer Rouge takeover in the 1970’s! It reminded me of the planes you used to see on the Flintstones—where the passengers all have to flap their arms to take off and use their heels to land and skid to a stop.

I said good-bye to my guide and as I went to get on the plane, he handed me a package and asked if I would please give it to the guide who would meet me in Siem Reap. I hesitated, having flown for years in the U.S. and long grown accustomed to the admonition not to accept packages from strangers. But from the looks of the “plane” I was about to board, I figured there was a pretty good chance we would crash and burn on take-off anyway, so I ceased worrying about the package in my hand, and turned my thoughts to what awaited me at Angkor—in the unlikely event that the plane ever got us there! The flight north to Siem Reap only took about an hour, and while it’s true that we did not have to flap our arms to take off, I swear the plane never really did get any higher off the ground than a few hundred feet. I think it was a safety precaution just in case—at least the trees just below might be able to break our fall!

But in the end, the vicissitudes of the flight were well worth it, and Angkor Wat did not disappoint. I had wanted to see it for so long, and I had built it up so much in my mind that I was afraid it might not meet my expectations. But I needn’t have worried. The reality was every bit as beautiful, if not more so, than I had ever imagined. I arrived in Siem Reap about three in the afternoon. My guide was waiting at the airport for me, and took me immediately to my hotel. It was a brand new hotel, I believe one of the first to be built after the long decades of fighting, and, again, due to the lack of tourism at the time, I was the only guest in the whole place. It was down a long country road about three miles from what the local peo-

ple called the “city centre.” I didn’t really see a “city centre” per se, in Siem Reap, but the French during the colonial days long decades before had built an exclusive hotel there, and a post office and a few other buildings had simply grown up around them. Needless to say, I was chafing at the bit to get to the Ankor temples about six or seven miles away, but my guide suggested that I eat first, so we could sightsee for a few hours that evening and see the sunset over Angkor Wat that night. He said that he’d be back to pick me up after I ate.

I was pretty famished by then and looking forward to a good meal. Unfortunately, as I sat down at the table that they had prepared for me in the dining room, my eyes came to rest on a heaping bowl of the grossest, slimiest fare I had ever seen in my life. In front of me and awaiting my tender taste buds was an extremely large soup bowl—filled to the brim—with a steaming mass of tangled, translucent baby eels, each about the size and length of a pencil. And since they were transparent I could see their little eel entrails (at least I supposed that’s what they were!) stretching the entire length of their flaccid little bodies. And to top it all off, each dead little eel had two tiny black eyes that seemed to peer up at me reproachfully, as if to somehow blame me for the sorry state they were in. I actually gave a half-hearted attempt to pick a few up with my chop sticks, but the closer I brought them to my mouth the better I could smell them—and that wasn’t a good thing! It reminded me of the fish fly die-off they have every summer evening around Lake St. Clair in late June, where millions of dead fish flies rot in the sun the following morning. And so, in an unusually rare gesture on my part, I declined to eat those tantalizing little feasts for the eyes, mumbling something about having an upset stomach from the plane flight (which was no lie), so my hotel hosts would not be offended by my turning down what was evidently to them, a delicacy. I then headed upstairs to my room where, waiting for me in my suitcase were several glorious granola bars and cheap little plastic crackers and cheese snacks I had packed away for just such an occasion. I had learned long ago in my travels that these would indeed come in handy (along

with the absolutely essential little plastic packets of Kleenex) should I find myself in some exotic locale and 1) be unable to eat the native cuisine, 2) get queasy having eaten the native cuisine, or, worst of all, or 3) come down with lower track distress having ingested the native cuisine with some amount of gusto. The little packets of Kleenex come in particularly handy in those exotic locales where, based on its complete utter lack of availability in many a bathroom I have frequented abroad, they don't seem to have figured out any handy hygienic uses for it.

We left after “supper” for Angkor ruins. I was first taken to Ta Prohm, by my guide while it was still light enough for us to walk around and do some exploring in the twilight. Ta Prohm is quite amazing. It's a set of ancient temples and archways which the French, when they first excavated the entire Angkor complex, determined to leave exactly as they found—with huge jungle roots growing out of ruins that they also decided to leave half-buried and un-restored, so that visitors in later years could see the overgrown jungle condition in which Angkor had been originally discovered. These ruins seemed to be right out of an Indiana Jones movie—covered in vegetation with deep recesses that looked as though they might lead to hidden doors, secret stairways, or buried treasures. It was all the more beguiling because my guide and I had the massive complex to ourselves that steamy late afternoon. But we couldn't linger there too long because the prize of the evening was still ahead of us. So we then quickly drove the few miles to the Angkor Wat itself, the largest of all the temples, to watch the sunset bathe the building with its massive towers in an otherworldly golden glow that slowly faded to pink, and then violet and then into blue shadows.

Angkor covers a huge area, and when it was built nearly a thousand years ago, it was the largest religious complex in the world, a city/state composed of temples and palaces, moats and reflecting pools. When my guide and I returned the next day, we saw everything that I had hoped to see since those times long ago when that cover of *Life Magazine* had so inspired

me. In the main temple, we saw the marvelous bas-relief carvings depicting the myth of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk. We then went to visit another temple that reminded me of the Mayan pyramids at Uxmal and Chichén Itzá. We ended our visit by touring the Bayon complex with its elegant sculptures of the Buddha carved hundreds of times into the four facets of the towers that crown the main building. I cannot really praise Angkor enough; I'll leave that to others more eloquent than myself who have already done so in both poetry and prose. All I really have to say is: "Thank you, Jackie Kennedy! Thank you!"

I flew back to Phnom Penh that night on the same thrill ride of a plane, but I wasn't as nervous as before. Basking in the glow of achieving one of my fondest life goals, I was so utterly satisfied that even the sputtering of that rickety old plane could not faze me.

As it turned out, completely unbeknownst to me, one of the most impressive tours still awaited me the next morning back in Phnom Penh. We had about three hours before I was to catch my plane back to Bangkok, so I was taken on a tour by another guide who met me at the gates of the Royal Palace grounds. And once again, since I had beaten the droves of tourists to Cambodia by several years, my guide and I had the entire palace complex almost completely to ourselves that morning. My guide was a wonderful young woman who chatted away non-stop in her broken English about the history of the Royal Family and all the details concerning the Royal Palace compound. I learned that she had also suffered through the Khmer Rouge nightmare. For three years, she had been forced to work in the fields, not knowing whether her parents or siblings were alive or dead. It was only after the Vietnamese invasion toppled the Khmer Rouge that she learned that her parents had survived the terror but that she had lost a younger brother and a sister. As we ended the tour, she pointed to a small tree growing near the exit gate and said in her heavily accented English, "Fruit of that tree ruin my stomach. When I work for Khmer Rouge in fields, it very hot, but

they not allow us drink water. So sometimes I sneak off and eat berries from tree like that. And now, many year later, my stomach no good. Stomach ache now every day from berries I eat when I young girl.” It reminded me once again of the strength and the resilience of these people who had suffered so much, and it also gave a possible explanation for the small stature of so many of the Cambodians I was meeting—they had been malnourished!—especially during their younger formative growing years.

The Royal Palace compound was for me breathtakingly beautiful, comprised as it is of acres of beautiful manicured gardens and imposing buildings, all painted in the rich but delicate royal colors of yellow and orange, with dazzling green trim. And the breezes from the nearby Ton Le Sap and Mekong Rivers infused the entire palace complex with the sweet fragrances of the flowers that grow in great profusion wherever you look. But sadly, my tour of the palace grounds finally came to an end, which meant that my time in Cambodia was also at an end—it was time for me to catch my plane back to Bangkok. But I promised myself, right then and there, as I passed through the gates leaving the palace grounds, that someday I would return to Phnom Penh. And five years later I did. But that’s another story.