

In the series

When West Marries East

Cambodia, personal perspectives

PART 1 Phnom Penh

Somewhere between the New Year according the Gregorian calendar and the Chinese New Year that is in tune with the Lunar Calendar heralding spring before equinox day, I usually patch up the bits and pieces written in the year gone by. Some of you who are familiar with my newsletters know that at least I tried to keep to the thread thru the 4 seasons, but otherwise I easily get carried away, drifting off into laborious schemes to confuse where I can't convince; that inertia is the worst of all evils and that however weak things do need stirring up if we ever want to leave this place better than we found it.

Cambodia of all places seems to be a better place now. I had doubts at first sight; that is flying out of Thailand where lush green is abound as far as the eye can see, the Cambodian barren dry landscape beneath was rather puzzling. It was the dry season all right and so rice fields are ochre in color indeed, but the vast areas between sparsely dotted green hills were surely not all rice paddies. Huge untapped resources may be? I didn't spot roads between villages far apart either. Distances felt like flying over Siberia, but before you knew it the 80+ seat passenger liner had its flaps and landing gear out. The Swiss pilot announced the iron bird's descent and put us nicely on the ground again, just a bit over an hour after take off.

The Phnom Penh airport had the feel of a South Pacific resort bungalow, all wood and straw, with luxuries abound: the iris of the eye scanning apparatus of the immigration in line with their e-visa application procedures over the Internet. I had little doubt that our hotel booking on line would be lost somewhere in cyber space.

This was not going to be another Manila experience where arriving at the hotel the receptionist had no recollection of my booking, my fax or telephone call, let alone the confirmation number. Nor was it going to be a Yangon in Myanmar where standard hotels can hardly be reached let alone booked from overseas. There it's a kind of go and find out after you arrive. Hiring the taxi however we had to do face to face. Braced with the knowledge of \$7 for the trip to anywhere in the city centre, there was no point haggling the price with the driver. Later we discovered that the locals paid less than half. The ride was comfortable in the black Toyota, a well maintained cab with a cabdriver that was talkative in a pleasant way. My travel buddy Robert did most of the conversation as he had worked in Phnom Penh 7 years before. I watched the dry ochre land dotted with sugar palms, the very characteristic of Cambodia's agricultural state of affairs. We both were pleased with the clean appearance of the Town View Hotel at the corner of 111th street and 232nd street. Most cities in Asia have a grid layout. Phnom Penh was no different maybe even more pronounced than Bangkok which developed along curved river banks; Phnom Penh along the straight stretch of the Sap River where with another tributary, the Bassac River, they join the Mekong. While doing the check-in paper work the receptionist, a young Khmer with the look of a university student asked: "Breakfast tomorrow Sir?"

I was very pleased with the Sir, the times have been changing!

We were not called Mister here and Mister there all the time, like it used to be. I was undecided and Robert inquired. At the price of 10,000 Riel or \$2.5 we were about to decline if I hadn't remembered our booking online stated included. I had to show evidence though which was no problem and we were taken to our rooms on the 3rd and 5th floor respectively. The restaurant was on the top floor, 6F it was marked in the elevator; that would be the 7th in Japan as ground floor is 1F there. My room had a window looking onto the street. A bit tight to slide open and close, but OK even with the wrought iron caging on the inside. Bed with hard mattress; the bathroom with shower had a toilet that was a bit wobbly on the floor, but otherwise the sanitary system as good as can be expected in a developing country. I expected no surprises like in Mandalay where I stood showering with cold water because the hot water tap didn't work and when the shampoo was off my face I saw stars in the pitch dark; the electricity had fallen out.

The first thing to do now was going out, and explore the neighborhood get a rental motor bike. Robert knew a place near the 'Capitol' and with some asking around we got there pretty soon. Above expectations actually, finding places usually meant having to walk around in circles for hours. On the way there I found the back streets relatively clean, dusty but paved, potholed sure enough and the wall enclosed houses in this residential area were neat, so all in all a pleasant first impression if one doesn't think much of the barbed wire on top of the walls. At the Capitol, the sort of terminal bus station restaurant, we shoveled a rudimentary rice curry down before going to rent our bikes around the corner. You can probably picture the kind of metal and tool workshop guilds in 3rd world countries, skinny boy blacksmiths hammering carbon steel pots and mechanics with eyes as only distinguishable from the grease colored everything, but that the matron of this workhouse, family run, speaks English and has a tight administrative security in place may be not. She was not satisfied with a photocopy of our passports but insisted on the real thing. Opening the drawer the big mama showed us her collection as if her bigger than life size appearance wouldn't have convinced us of her authority. Having mostly British passports, not French, some Japanese, my Danish one went in between the few Swedish passports. A proper driver's license was apparently not relevant; lucky me! We got a good bargain with our Honda 125cc at \$30 a day: electric ignition, manual transmission, even direction indicators; all well up to the heavy duty of our demanding expectations. Gasoline was sold just everywhere, like you find soft drink vending conveniences in Japan, on top of Mt Fuji included. With that difference that you wouldn't know for sure whether the 2.5 liter PET bottles sold along the main roads contained gasoline were not watered down with piss or other of the same color. We chose to fill up at a regular gasoline station. As I had married on the condition of not having a car, I had little idea of gas prices. Now here was a chance to find out. I assume that in terms of the cost of living locally it must cost a fortune. A full tank for 15\$ would last us more a day, but wasn't that the equivalent of 7 dinners or 15 coffees?

We drove the Norodom Boulevard down to the Independence Monument, half around the round about there and on to the river side, along the Sisowath Quai with its river promenade in search for the FCCC (Foreign Correspondents Club Café) made famous in the movie Killing Fields, but we only found it days later. I divided my attention between the traffic and the landmarks we speeded past. The traffic was dense, chaotic but I felt in my element, I simply loved it. We parked the bikes on the prop stand at the side of a stretch where coffee shops, restaurants with English menu boards on the terraces were a clear indication of welcome to the tourist area.

Vietnamese coffee, an extraordinary experience for ordinary addicts like me. Tasting more like a caffeine soup, the cloudy coffee tightened the bowstring so well, the 125cc arrow was surely going to fly well. Back at the hotel our bikes would be well looked after by the security guard issuing us a receipt slip. Could very well be that the government allocated special funds to safeguard the tourist industry and protect the source of hard currency with these uniformed security guards. They seemed to be stationed at most tourist hang outs, never asked to be paid or tipped, except at official parking lots of museums and the like where parking tickets varied in price a bit. Actually I never saw a single security guard with a patched uniform, so why be inquisitive or worse paranoia? But Robert told me police were the ones to look out for; foreigners with bikes were an easy target and the standard bribe for an alleged traffic violation was \$10 in cash! It still felt safer than in Manila where security guards were heavily armed door men at convenience stores and banks alike. In Yangon or Rangoon for Brits with Burma colonial time nostalgia, things looked even darker with military in charge and hardly visible. There it was mutual distrust when face to face. A happy smile face is the best defense mask all over Asia it is said, but the thing is though I can't talk while smiling. Have you westerner ever tried? We were in for a good night's sleep and hit the sack early.

Riding out to one of the Killing Fields, notorious part of Cambodia's history, had first priority today. I would find it hard to believe tourists skip a glimpse into the genocide that took place under the Khmer Rouge. Without accurate map we just set out on a ride in the right direction; some 15 km southwest of the city borders- take Monireth 8.5 km past the bridge at Street 271... Soon we were out of the city and away from two lane traffic rules. 8 to 12 wheelers, 40 ton trucks, motor cycles with 20 passenger trailers, whatever motorized vehicle took the middle of the potholed dust road giving way to oncoming traffic all according last second evaluation. Passing each other left or right -whichever was the faster rule- we quickly adapted and rode on and on. Country side road, to the tunes of "Take Me Home, Country Roads" goes the song in which John Denver sings the glory of bucolic West Virginia. I don't know whether dust in your nose also tastes of ochre sand there, but I surely felt like a motorized cowboy without the hat then that is. Road works ahead, the traffic down to a trickle, the dust cloud after each truck denser, cross the road ahead of the yellow dust plume in view was the trick now, but oh beware the ones that came from behind! A brief stop to ease the eyes with eye drops helped. Here we were some 20 km out, at a crossroad, lost? In the shade of trees a shack, a signboard: Police. Robert audacious as always went over and asked the policeman for the Killing Fields. I thought that was a kind of weird.

I could only see a man in a uniform that clearly showed signs of daily dusty duty, pointing to the way we had come. Back on the road under construction, how far back? We navigated the loose sand stretches as best we could, and speeded up where gravel allowed. Landscape and scenery lost their appeal, all that mattered now was to cover the distance back as fast as the track and tires sanctioned. My 500ml water supply had long been consumed, the empty PET bottle dangling in the Japanese sports drink holder at my belt. The small huts I saw for whatever shelter were nothing to resort to; then the first settlements came in view. At the intersection Robert on his toes again inquired while I was having only eyes for the big green coconuts on sale. The shop mama's son explained we had to go too far back and had to turn left at a road fork further up the road we had come from. I felt respect for the young man's ability in English, his friend stayed somewhat in the background. This would have been a different story in Japan. Here in the middle of nowhere we had a young man with a new Suzuki motor scooter; that would most likely be a new Sony PlayStation in Japan. Robert always asks for their names culturally correct. I showed my admiration for the high tech of his brand new machine and asked in between: "how much the coconut milk?" He asked his mother in the sanctity of his native language and without questioning if the price was a special price just for us tourists, I sign talked 2. Was I showing the correct gesture for 2 when using indicator finger and middle finger in a V with the back of my hand towards her? Many countries in Asia use the thumb and pointer for 2. But she was already chopping off the top of the second one and had no doubt scored double victory. She told her son to ride with us to the V fork and the whole world brightened up. Here we could fill up on coconut milk in the shade of a dusty dry canapé tree, a welcome respite before hitting the road again. Robert conversant with the lay of the land did a bit of small talk with them. Entertained people around watched us as we rode off the four of us. Coming to the fork, from here on all roads lead to the Killing Fields would have sounded ironically, misplaced. We begged our farewell in cordial manner, the young man and his friend as befitting educated youths responded likewise.

Further up, down a lane, there it was indicated: Choeung Ek, the pagoda in memory of the thousands found in mass graves they had to dig before being executed with a bullet at best, more common was the use of farming tools.

The pagoda, a 5 storied 50m high structure had no specific characteristic. It may have been meant that way, to reflect the many hundreds of anonymous skulls it contained. Some shelves held the 12- 16 year olds, others half crushed adult craniums. We followed the customary route, taking off our shoes, circumambulating the pagoda clockwise, taking a few photos. Relatively little incense was burning. We made a round through the fields around, plot after plot of land with simple signs: 64, 83, 107 skeletons dug out. A bigger sign board showing the mass graves found and numbered over the vast area around. Two more boards on two red brick walls, erected for this purpose, explained the historical facts and figures. The sheer number of people killed at this place alone 17.000 and there were plenty more around this area and all over the country. Reading this was enough to feel dazed in adding up without calculator. Genocide it was, and 1974 not so long ago, and after this Cambodian genocide how many more? Can the Ruanda genocide where the Hutus and Tutsis slaughtered be compared or measured in brutality and cruelty?

Could the Balkan one? or Darfur? What about Iraq then? Shall we move on? There is not much to stand still for here, no haunting ghosts to tangibly appease. No peaceful nature neither here. No place for pick nicks, not like in Japan where they hold peaceful drinking parties around the family tomb. We got on our bikes and rode back to the city. It was already after noon and maybe we could take the genocide museum Tuol Sleng S-21 Prison on the same petrol tank.

And for sake of historical context: Tuol Sleng according to the Khmer Buddhist dictionary means literally: a poisonous hill or mound to keep those who bear or supply guilt.

Getting there turned out even more of a challenge. Although this time we had an accurate location on the city map. The place, in southern Phnom Penh, was on the way back and not all that far from our hotel, we reckoned. We asked, drove around block after block, looked for street number signs, searched buildings visually, and got to this god forgotten place so hungry we gave it a day.

Finding places in a foreign city, everyone with some travel experience would agree on, can be daunting. Even with a travel guide well documented on places to stay, eat, shop and getting around, getting to a classy Vietnamese Restaurant took more time than anticipated. I was not in doubt that the motorbikes had an advantage over other alternatives, unless you had a black diplomat Nissan President sedan with Khmer chauffeur at your disposal. We parked the motorbikes under the banana trees in front of the Maxim Saigon and got a free security ticket from the guard who posed with me for a picture. I considered giving him a tip, but then again how much or better how little would not be offending and even then, would giving him a dollar not set a dangerous precedent for customary tipping by tourists later? Was there a moral issue in the first place? Could I justify getting away with it as long as it lasts, all that is over cheap or simply free? In rich countries like Japan, a second place world economy only the small luxuries are free, things like ball pens are hardly bought there are an abundance of them floating around. From tissue paper handed out at stations to forgotten umbrellas take for free at 7/11 convenience stores, cigarette lighters to TVs, and all other electric appliances. You could furnish an empty apartment after making a couple of rounds in the neighborhood on garbage collecting day, and that used to be furniture, refrigerators and other household appliances. Now it would include boxes of toiletries such as brand name deodorants never opened and never used bedding and linen. What am I talking about? 1\$? Once inside the restaurant all forgotten about, dinner was not quite so special after all. The fish dish recommended in the city guide was not available, but what the heck, weren't we all mortals seeking life sustaining nutrition? Listening to live music diverted my attention from the unsatisfactory food. The guitarist played music to our liking, Neil Young, Bob Dylan, John Lennon and other oldies from the sixties, mostly those songs that suited the soft texture of his voice. He had a repertoire that drew a short applause after each song. Accompanied by wife and two kids I thought for a moment his teen son was having a MIDI interface (Musical Instrument Digital Interface), or even DMC (Digital Mixing Console) software on his laptop computer but the kid was only playing games on line! The musician must have been well off then but

two mikes connected to a simple amplifier only, one in front of his acoustic guitar, the other on a boom to his voice and a small JSB speaker system was all he needed to perform professionally proficient.

You wouldn't have known he was partly disabled in his legs if he hadn't stood up from his chair centrally placed in the restaurant. Robert a guitar player himself suggested song requests. Several requests followed. He did very well apologizing in between sometimes for not remembering all of the lyrics. I took a couple of close ups before leaving. It was dark outside, the streets poorly lighted and forlorn; the restaurant was not in a night-life neighborhood so getting onto the first big road was the safe way to go. The ride back to the hotel was an adventurous undertaking, negotiating the Wild West traffic in dark shoddily lit streets, no rules for headlights, or for using the horn. Robert's motorbike had only the high beam functioning while I gladly switched to dipped-beam whenever other vehicles showed ahead; horns were much less used here than in India or Nepal, so less disorientation from a cacophony.

Next morning we had the same simple breakfast with that variation we chose scrambled eggs instead of fried eggs to go with the bacon. "Let's break the fast" Robert always said in a strongly accented British English before starting on the boring toast with coffee. He waived the waitress for fresh milk to the coffee. The waitress apologized. Did I see a glimpse of confusion in her eyes? Was she thinking the sweetened canned Carnation was about the best of western luxury they could offer in this part of the world or was it me reading my own thoughts in her eyes? Westerner customers in this place must be a bit difficult to satisfy with all their individual preferences. Robert the more talkative of us inquired about her work and we got to know that the restaurant on the 6th floor was run as a separate business. She was in charge and had to get up before sunset, do the morning household chores for her old father and brother before the errands for the restaurant to open at 7am. "Usually I work 12 hours" she said with a lump in her voice. "How much do you earn?" Robert asked straightforward. Her eyes went wet. "\$120 a month to support my family, I can just earn enough for my father's food and my brother's education," she replied apologetically "Western medicine I can't afford". Unexpectedly she complained that it took her up to 30 min commuting.

I promised her to leave some painkillers I'd probably not need, a back supporter and some joint supporters. After work she was waiting at the small information desk and gratefully accepted the pills. When I showed her the supporters that were beige in color, she hesitated. Did I appreciate correctly that they were not white as hospital stuff should look like? Or was it because they weren't wrapped and were visibly used? In the attempt to make her take it I said she could always give it to someone else. It made no sense, but she accepted the Japanese vinyl shopping bag. I had done my good deed of the day and reported back to Robert like the Boy Scout who proudly answered his leader's question: "Did you do your good deed today?" "Yes sir! I helped a blind man cross the street, but it was a kind of difficult, he didn't want to cross"

Getting to the Tuol Sleng S-21 Prison was easier this time. We paid the admission fee, parked the motorbikes on the prop stand and got our cameras out. The compound, a former high school converted to a premier security institution in 1976. That was the year after my wife Nongkie and I were gallivanting SE Asia. I frowned. The school fence had been enclosed with two folds of corrugated iron sheets, all covered with dense barbed wire, electrified in those days. The bare inner yard had some palm trees nicely lined up in front of each 3 storied buildings. Shade in these topical latitudes is like an oasis in the desert. I wondered why just there the bars for beating prisoners were set up. The first building we entered had all the signs of the quickest and cheapest fix to transform class rooms into dungeons. Cell walls just above a man's height, not long enough for me to lie stretched out but wide enough to turn to another side if I'd been able to sleep directly on the concrete floor with ankle shackles chained to the hollow brick wall. I could only get through the cell entrance sideways. Easier to pass through were the holes hammered out in the solid brick walls between classrooms, 7 in a row, numbered in roman numerals above the hole. Some cells had no windows, some had a window divided between 2 cells. Wondering who got what made no sense in this nonsensical system to extermination. Going up the bare concrete stairs to the second floor there were some rags in the corner of the mezzanine. Wouldn't believe they wanted to recreate the atmosphere, the cells had clean tiled floors and it was after all called a museum now, not a horror house show at a funfair. At the top of the stairs the long corridor in front of the classrooms had its balcony closed with barbed wire. The board said it was to prevent prisoners from committing suicide. Classrooms were also divided in cells and interconnected in much the same way as on the ground floor, holes hammered out in the walls between. Cells of similar measurements had wooden partitions though, an environment for bugs and other creep to thrive. The explanation said 'for prisoners staying longer than 2 months', meaning having survived the first two on ground floor? Luxury for the privileged ones who might have behaved well? Sarcasm misplaced even in thought, after all this was an extermination facility. Understandably for years no one once captured on alleged grounds of dissent and processed in this prison system ever came out alive, given the severe beatings for defecating wrongly into the small iron buckets in their cells. The top floors had one room, no partitions, used for mass incarceration. Victims were shackled to long pieces of iron bar designed for 4 prisoners. On the walls pictures of all those families whose sons and daughters had joined the revolution, some in good belief, some coerced, and some forcefully. Reading their short life stories one thing they had all in common, no matter how high position they had reached in their communist career, they had fallen from grace and left life without a trace. One can only imagine how they had fallen or dumped into mass graves. Involuntary I sank non existent saliva as the lump in my throat grew bigger. I had to stop reading after a dozen of saddening family stories; my sight increasingly blurred out. Dawdling I let picture by picture pass into somber shades of a past so many countries' history share the cruelty of. One, two more buildings to go, this wing had classrooms on the ground floor intact, spacious, each one with a big wide window, iron barred and covered with tangled barbed wire, pale ochre chalked walls, and grey and ochre yellow tiled floor, in the very centre an

iron bedstead with metal slats and an army lunchbox to defecate in, otherwise completely empty. The enlarged picture on the wall, yellow faded black and white, did not leave any doubt about the use of this bed. Torture! Each torture room had one, depicting a human shape on the beds' metal slats, shackled, skin over bones, in most inhumane positions on a bed! The pictures had been taken when the invading Vietnamese troops had found the decaying corpses still chained in the deserted prison. Having entered three of the rooms, peeking in the next ones was sufficient to keep us going. Up to the second floor! Here one room after the other was filled with rows of pictures of those interrogated, taken before and some afterwards. Young innocent looking men, beautiful young women in decent dresses, mothers with kids with somber dull eyes, educated men with the fear for death in their eyes, farmers and technicians, working class people with an expression of disbelief on their faces. Faces distorted of bewilderment, helplessness, madness in their eyes, serene surrender, gazing fate resigned faces, faces that had seen the beyond.

Whole families from bottom on up, including infants, all there to be exterminated en masse. A not destroyed archive of the Khmer Rouge found there shows a record of 10,499 not including 2000 children in the three year period from 1976-1978. Having app. 1500 prisoners at any time, the killing rate would be roughly 10 a day on average, 365 days a year for three years. There were 4 more of such slaughter houses elsewhere in the country. None of which I was attracted to visiting. Calculations and abstractions distance the reality these figures represent and in this brief account I did not mention anything about the prison guards, administration, or rules for prisoners to abide by. Who in the world could possibly be rationalizing such inhumane behaviour? Suffice to say that male and female children were among the 'general' workers in the management offices that comprised several units among those interrogation and medical units. Children ranging from 10-15 were of course untrained and probably started out as 'normal' before growing increasingly evil, turned out exceptionally cruel against prisoners and families with new born babies. I do not know the content of those kids' accounts when they gave it in their 40s and 50s at the time when several interviewers confronted and questioned their former torturers. I doubt I could muster enough interest in reading their story to come to a better understanding of it all. Few victims survived, Vann Nath one of them, exhibits his paintings of torture in the Tuol Sleng S-21 Prison of which I do not have the stomach for describing here. All I ever learned was to pray for all sentient beings welfare, not killing any let alone torture; not that I have never hurt anyone, but at least that was not intentional. How great must the motivation of Dith Pran have been, a Cambodian Genocide survivor whose character was portrayed in the movie 'Killing Fields'? And Rithy Panh another genocidal Khmer Rouge regime escapee who dedicated works of art to the suffering of his people and documented it in 'The Land of the Wandering Souls' and in his latest 2007 outcry against sexual exploitation and proliferation of sex addiction in 'Le Papier ne peut pas envelopper la braise (Paper Cannot Wrap Up Embers)' a film about prostitution in Cambodia. Too many great souls died in 2007, Hannah Nydahl, the Danish woman Buddhist translator not to forget. The blessing of her passing away stayed with me for three days and nights; all seen, heard and dreamed of were pleasing, the world looked like a better place.

I was ready for visiting temples; see how simple people offer all what they can afford to their figures of veneration, from a daily ration of food for the only main meal a day Hinayana monks live on, to incense, to gold for the supreme teachings of the Buddha.

I had better review the Six Paramitas or Roku Hara Mitsu(六波羅蜜)for Japanese adepts and other simple truths in Buddha's teachings like the Noble Eightfold Path.

Robert had some errands of his own so I planned to ride out to those places of interest. First on the list was the Watt Phnom Pagoda. The legend has it that Lady Penh fished a floating tree out of the river, it had four Buddha statues in it. She built a mount or Phnom (small hill) and placed them there. Hence the name Phnom Penh, founding place and Cambodia's nowadays capital. The Stupa, containing remains of a King from the Angkor era, is the biggest in the country, I read. Getting there the city map showed, was simple: the Norodom Boulevard straight, couldn't miss it and so it turned out, in the middle of a big round about, with some chaotic traffic in both clockwise and anti clockwise direction. I rode around twice, stopped at places to take a snap shot. One of them of two men haggling over the price of some fruit that looked like Durian but was smaller and had no sharp thorns, besides the Durian season is summer. The man in bucket hat with a load of it on the luggage carrier of his bicycle weighing some on a steelyard scale and the other, Pagoda visitor, holding some bills in a gesture of take it or leave it. For a moment I felt like getting off my machine and go over to ask or have a closer look at the fruit and then after having made personal contact take a picture. Would it have spoiled the spontaneity or gotten me a better pose? I'll never know.

I rode on. Saw a common sight at such places of worship, caged small birds that can be released for a small bill of Riel as Cambodian currency doesn't have coin denominations. After a zoom shot, again without interaction, time was in to find a place for the bike and stroll through the park surrounding the Stupa. There, just besides the main entrance where a poorly caparisoned elephant with wooden frame saddle atop –what used to be a royal mount from time immemorial- was a rent-a-ride attraction for kids today.

No security guards around this time, so chaining the bike to a pole was common sense. A pleasant place with plenty of shade this park was, lots of small parties picnicking, some local tourists, felt like being on a real holiday. A grandma coming into the park with her two grandchildren and a huge bunch of bananas, that's far too many for a picnic I observed, for selling perhaps I considered, remembering the man on the bicycle. It's a pity in a way that no banana fritters are sold here as would in all other parts of Asia. It turned out it was feed for the elephant! The mahout helped the kids to safely put them in the tusk of the elephant, which seemed more difficult than getting the timing right for a good close-up. A small wedding party passed by, they posed in front of the stairway leading up to the little impressive stupa on this minute mount, a seven head cobra snake at each side of the stairway billowing down and with the lions above having little resemblance to the Chinese ones more popularly known it was a perfect match for this little glamorous party. Here was much more Hindu influence than in Thailand. With little documentation to read up on the stupa's history I moved on. The road I chose to ride around Boeung Kak Lake passed by the railroad station and across there was a small stupa said to contain a relic of the historical Buddha Sakyamuni.

I thought that was worth to stop by. This northern part of the city with its wide avenues was great fun to pick up speed and within a couple of minutes I got to the place, a miniature of the previous one I felt it deserved more because of the relics, but then which stupa doesn't have any? Some of you may be familiar with religious stories to illustrate devotion, Buddhism has one with a tooth relic that turned out to be a dog's, but the didactic lesson was about devotion and it didn't matter whether the object of devotion was authenticated. Of course the Shroud of Turin's authentication matters when it hangs within sterile reach for devotees, doesn't it? And what about the Tutankhamen mummy? My friend Branden wrote: I have also been considering your question, regarding Tutankhamun, and whether he should be displayed. Spiritually, I believe that the body of the deceased should be respected and remain where it was entombed. Having said that, the great pharaohs of the New Kingdom, who were buried in the Valley of the Kings, were removed by the ancient Egyptians and placed together in a more humble tomb, near Hatshepsut's temple, to avoid grave robbers. For dead people, they certainly get around... Ramses I ended mysteriously at a sideshow museum at the Niagara Falls. He was finally returned to Egypt, and now resides at the Luxor Museum, after experts identified him. So, to answer your question.... Well, I love looking at the mummies of these incredible historical figures. For me, gazing upon the face of Ramses II, who was the instigator for such amazing sites as Abu Simbel and Luxor Temple... wow! Indeed, I think Ramses, whose ego for self promotion led to the construction of hundreds of giant statues of himself, would be perhaps delighted to know that his remains themselves, were drawing in thousands and thousands of spectators, after millennia. Now that is greatness!

I was happy to see young lovers crossing the road to the island in the traffic with some lotus flowers and took a zoom lens photo from my isolated observer seat.

Now a long stretch on the road to the airport came before a right turn to an up-class residential area. I kept on riding in the hope of finding an access road to the lake and had my eyes more to the right for that reason than to the left where high rises and new housing projects were under construction. All the cars and motorbikes on the road in this area of town were new and people neat nouveau-riches it occurred to me. That strange feeling came to an end arriving at Street 273. Another big artery in and out of the city, big trucks, and all that still could mechanically move on wheels threw up dust. Everybody in the open dressed accordingly: traditional Khmer headscarves with only the eyes uncovered, back to normal. The map showed that I had reached the northern side of the lake but I hadn't caught the faintest glimpse of it. There had been no side roads all this way, only a fence cordoning off the lakeside area for reasons beyond my comprehension. I was intent on taking the first side road and pursue it without turning back, but holy joly moly at an un-inviting rubble paved road I stood still for a minute. Where was my decidedness, my determination? What for these considerations and speculations about safety, risk of a flat tire riding on these broken bricks, gravel of rocks the size of a fist? Get going! At a walking pace I negotiated the bigger size obstacles and smiled left and right to the people living in shags and makeshift dwellings along the road. Dogs too came out for a welcome entertaining break. Barking up the wrong tree, I thought, but shouted "Yeah, yeah!"

A couple of times I felt I was a way off track, but this obstinate man does not hold convictions -they hold him, wherever the road leads and that was much to my surprise a big mosque! I stopped and checked on the map. Right, Street 93, that's the area where I had hoped to get close to the lakeside, but still no access. After digitalizing the golden dome through the gate with Arabic inscription at the top I rode on. Another revelation: information boards in English! Grand View Guest house 100 m, Lemon Grass Restaurant around the corner. I had arrived in the 60s early 70s again. I wasn't aware of the hippy trail still being trodden; at the T junction Neil Young's song 'Looking for a Heart of Gold' coming from the very restaurant in front of me, to the left and the right, lively signs of hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and coffee shops, lined up shop after shop. This was formerly the domain of drifters the region's drug-tainted past then. None of the establishments with customers though, too hot or just too soon past noon for these night ravens? The road at least flat trodden earth, no rocks, just bumpy dry and dusty, smelling like Assan Thole in Katmandu: a blend of dog shit, rotting kitchen waste, incense and ganja. Lake View Guesthouse, that's the way to go. With the engine in neuter I let the bike roll all the way to the dead end alley. "Room, Sir?" No I wasn't looking for a room, "Just looking for a view of the lake". "Not here, no passage, from room yes". "Thank you, but no thank you". Back up the alley, in first gear. Then why not have a bite at one of those places? They might have potatoes or some western style food. Up at the T junction, the one evocative of the 60s had just enough space for my bike in front of the terrace table, and was I lucky! They had mashed potatoes on the menu! The restaurant owner came over with a home PC printed version. I had made up my mind already, but had a look at the dishes and prices anyway. Mashed potatoes, vegetables and chicken it was. Not really cheap, but let's say at a regular price, just as the PET bottle with water was. Being the only customer was nothing special, but when the family man owner went shopping for all the items I had ordered, it makes you sense he had seen better times. A bearded foreigner on a motorbike in the 250cc class passed by, he had the look of one who had settled for life in this enclave. A young couple caught my eye. Both equally heavy packed, they must have hit the road long time ago, hardly sweating in this sweltering heat. She, trotting in his footsteps to the Lake View Guesthouse, checking out accommodation and prices no doubt. Not long after they reappeared, probably unsatisfied with either the price or the view from the room or both. When they then came straggling again, back down the alley, I recognized something in their cumbersome decision making process. My lunch was served; plenty of time to reflect on old time memories and mashed potatoes.

Hadn't I just looked into the mirror of my backpacker's hairy days? Nongkie sauntering behind me, going wherever I went, forward and backward if needed to be?

Even learning to ride a bicycle in Bali when I rented bicycles for both of us. Letting me pierce her earlobes for the earrings I felt would make her fall in tune with flower power. All the exotic local food we tried back then in 1975. She was the one who first asked for western food, after some days of lardy Chinese food in Hong Kong.

The mashed potatoes were definitely something of a change from the usual beans and curries. Carrots and a kind of green peas that had a nutty skin but splashed juice stuff when chewed open. I'd forgotten to refill my cigar tube so another cheap Cambodian fag

would have to do for desert. Time to get rolling! Still a way to go! Arriving at the junction onto an unknown main street, there, another western young couple; the guy paying a cabdriver in a squabble the girl trying to appease the row over the money to the entrance of this historical hippy enclave!

Next on my itinerary for the day were the major temples and the museum. I was now really getting accustomed to maneuvering through the traffic, and in no time I was back in the city center. Again it was a kind of disappointing not to see roofs of temples and peaks of stupas everywhere. Weren't there really not all that many? Later I realized that the smaller ones were hidden from my view behind the trees that lined many outer temple walls, nicely in their shadows of course. Along Preah Ang Makhak Vann a real street name for a change, but easier to remember as Street 178, many sculptors were chiseling Buddha statues in all sizes and positions and business seemed to flourish. The Japanese Embassy a stone's throw away, that is, depending on who throws the stone I suppose.

The Watt Saravoan temple gate across the biggest sculpture shop was open so I swung in and let the bike run its course. A young man sprinkling the flowering bushes with a hose connected to the water post across the wide inner yard lowered it when we made eye contact. In the chat that naturally followed my 'thanks for this', he opened with "My name is Sok Dara" I followed up, without wondering which one was family name and first name or if both sounds were one name, "Gerrit" would do. I learned he was a student and had had end of year exams, but did not know yet whether he had passed and could go onto university. He was from some place in a province that sounded far away to me knowing little of the geography of Cambodia. Pulling up my shoulders while blinking my eyes rapidly seemed enough language to make the cheerful smiling lad explain it was in the north of the country and that he was here in the temple's guest house for the yearend holidays. The north being poorer I assumed, I didn't inquire how he managed that financially. Then that dreaded question came, "Where you from sir?" Perhaps it was not the question but rather the answer that I dreaded. I said: "Europe, but I live in Japan" in a quick move to avert the topic of conversation turning to that old past part of the world. Hearing Japan his bright brown eyes sparkled. "I want I can go study Japan" he said. "Yeah, Japan is a great country but the written language with Chinese characters is difficult!" I replied. "How long stay?" he avoided comment. "Two more days here and then Siem Reap". "Angkor Watt" he confirmed. I nodded.

That brought me in line with the other short time tourists all right so I took out my camera and question gestured OK? "OK!" and he went back to his hose. I took a couple of shots from the duo seat of the Honda, waved him for a ball pen I had in my collection of souvenirs from meetings with Principals and Directors of International Students of New Zealand high schools and said "for you" with a "good luck", turned and rode off. How nice a feeling he left me with. In Japan I had never started a conversation in English like this. Perhaps there I did not come in situations with such opportunities, apart then from the cultural differences.

I rode past the Royal Palace for the xx time. It is a marvel to see such an Asian jewel amidst this poverty. Elegant from every angle, its uplifting roof curves on tall slender pillars, much in style with the temples and the Silver Pagoda clustered together in the area. Love at first sight, one would feel on honeymoon with the divine even knowing it wouldn't last. I'm not sure why I skipped going in, was marveling at it from the outside enough bliss that needn't be exalted? Was it to fend off confrontation with the realities inside; was the sight of streams of foreign group tours intimidating? I rode on, to the museum on the next block. The museum's distinctive architecture and colors much alike the Myanmar's deep rust-red earth painted walls, a kaleidoscope symmetrical complex. Immediately the overload of religious stone sculptures, lingams from the Angkoran era and other various artifacts were visible. The majority Hindu: Rama, Vishnu, Hanuman, some Dakinis and then the Leper King, I went relatively quickly through the first two rooms, took a bit longer for the early Buddhist period and for the post Angkorian era more statues, big and small, glass enclosed. Many dated 8-10 Century or 'period unknown'. In brief, all artifacts of the museum were either 4 - 5th Century, 8 - 10th Century or undated. One of the most interesting exhibits for me to study was a 19th century map of the country with all excavations sites. So many of them! And this museum was then supposed to hold and be the place of all places for national treasures? One small room only exhibited gongs and other bronze tools, no not of the bronze age, again 4th century. This era must have been the dawn of Khmer civilization then. Dedicated to King Sisowath in 1920, 5000 objects on display sounds impressive, but no scrolls, scriptures or paintings, no wooden artifacts, no textiles or garments of legendary kings when all royal roads lead to Angkor? There is more to sum up that was not to be found in a national museum than what I can report on seeing. But the inner yard should be noted as a Garden of Eden or Shangri-La for that sake. Can't remember seeing anything so idyllic since the inner yard of a guesthouse in Marrakesh. From a corner pillar I searched an optimal view of the garden in diagonal, and pushed the shutter button deep when a voice from behind whispered 'No Pictures Sir, \$10 fee' I turned, a short middle aged man in a faded grey blue uniform appeared to be a museum guard. Did he say fee and mean fine? \$10 isn't that the standard bribe, it flashed through my mind, remembering Robert's experience with the police, when I gestured in protest that there was no sign or icon 'No Photography' around; implying I was not going to pay, ignoring him, turning him away. He gently took my elbow and said 'Follow me, Sir'. Now I thought I was in for a bigger bribe and considered sticking him the bill he had asked for, but where the hell did I have exactly \$10? Sensing I was not quite convinced yet, he added 'to the entrance'. He's going to throw me out then crossed my mind. I followed and at the entrance counter for admission fees he pointed at a sign 'Photography \$10'. I thanked him and uttered: "no thank you". Leaving the museum for what I'd seen and experienced with a free picture for my admission fee of \$1.

On the Honda, whereto next? There were two more temples left; the south bound road down to the first one. This Preah Monivong Boulevard had a partition between the two lanes, how many times had I had to ride it up and down to find an intersection where I could cross? How many times had I violated the U-turn prohibition rule by just doing what everyone else was doing at such intersections? Who cares? I made my way to an entrance

of the Watt Koh temple that probably was the back entrance for food supplies to the adjunct monastery. I got the bike on its prop stand effortlessly now, chained it in a manner of routine while I noted the bikes next to mine had none. I walked passed some monks squatting in the porch to their quarters. They gave no heed to me taking an apparent unorthodox tour of their temple. I felt free to play tourist with my Canon IXY. One cannot deny the magic of glittering gold, the typical ornate to Khmer stupas. I entered its square yard mostly in the shadow of the main temple building. The historical Buddha Sakyamuni's life story in bas relief on the wall looked fresh in its still unpainted cement as did a row of smaller stupas. The taller one in the center wind and water weathered. A young couple, Chinese or Korean to see from their light complexion and wearing fashionable travel apparel unlike-Japanese also made their round. A young Khmer carrying a bucket of water passed by for the second time. Water! The PET bottle always dangling in the Japanese brand bag on my belt needed a refill and the obvious thing was to go to the source of where I saw the waterman coming from. The water post didn't tell whether the water was potable but well, I didn't ask either. It tasted heavenly.

A group of monks stood and watched on. The yard around the main temple was completely empty of people and I wondered whether I actually was at the temple described in the tourist guidebook. I couldn't care less. In Japan too, temples are pretty quiet places where nothing much is going on except on Matsuris or festivals. Then people turn out massively, to have fun, that's why you go to temples, happiness is the attraction, without questioning who created it, where it comes from or whether it will last in all eternity once delivered from evil. Somber contemplation during services of worship, that's reserved for the sending off deceased and even then it's basically sitting out the Bonze chanting Hanya Shingyo until it's time for the Sake rice wine Bacchus afterwards catching up on relatives, the main attraction. Aren't there more similarities than differences between cultures and religions? Aren't we all damned being born ignorant and shouldn't be condemned in addition for our soul's devilish craving to be happy; while reserving that happiness for the hereafter if you are a true believer. How do you bring about the Christ from within? By going to hang on a cross somewhere like some Filipinos do? I'd certainly receive a death fatwa for writing this if Christians had such for blasphemy. Now all joking set aside, this is serious stuff this temple where young monks voluntarily study and practice austerities, learn to pray instead of preying, raping or worse. I'd rather see a culture where that is the norm, even for a year or two after turning young adults, rather than a call up paper for military service disguised as patriotic moral duty.

Now having filled up on drinking water and my thirst quenched, back to square 1, the stupa. Passing the young lad now sweeping the square although I didn't see any leaves to sweep or concentric patterns to broom in the sand, I said: "Hello". Not for a moment did it come to mind that this scene would have made a good picture. He responded with a Choum Reap Sur (Hello) and added: "You want up, Sir?" I nodded in response, – Hai – the Japanese slipped out. "Your shoes" was enough to understand I had to take them off if I wanted to circle the inner walkway around the stupa. I gladly met the terms and even took my smelly socks off. It felt so nice stepping onto the gangway, touching the smooth stone

floor barefooted. The young lad slipped out of his slippers and tagged along, asking the usual questions and I responded likewise, mulishly yes, I was living in Japan. Something seemed to click, he suggested he'd go and get his uncle caretaker to open the stupa's entrance and let me inside. I gladly accepted. In no time he returned with his so called uncle, you never know whether uncle is used as a kind of honorific in these countries or if indeed it was a blood related uncle. A short sturdy built man with dowdy hair opened the small wrought iron gate and we crawled in. More candles were lit in addition to the one in front of a yellow breast clad Buddha statue already burning.

I made the usual three short prostrations routinely and without being prompted threw a Riel note in the offering bowl. I planted the incense sticks given me, sending the scent to mix with the odors of a cave, moldy and slightly rancid of warm wax, not as putrid as the smell of Tibetan butter tea leaves in caves but a vaguely familiar sensation nevertheless. I've never been a practitioner of Hatha, Kriya or any other Yoga with five niyamas, or disciplines, Shaucha practicing cleanliness and Bhakti Yogis aiming at the ultimate through devotion; all outlandish to me, but smelly dirt feels down to earth.

A devout Buddhist in perpetual turbulence at best, I did not mind to listen to the old man speaking through his young interpreter for a fee if that doesn't come for free. Especially not when he looked like the doctor whom I had as one-on-one weekly; English and German for 10 years. This man's broad face, his big ears and long earlobes, his flat nose and lean Mongoloid eyes that were shining black reflections in the candle light, most of all his hands with square palms and fingers, coarse skin and ruddy color, last but not least nails cut a bit too short reminded glaringly of Dr. Noguchi. I don't really like the Japanese Se-za style of sitting on your heels; knees bent to the extreme and fell in with Dr Noguchi's opinion that it was doing more harm than good to the legs habituating oneself to this position of formal sitting. Yet, here I didn't change position to a more comfortable one. Sitting there in front of the Buddha, this statue with its Asian modern age lights at both sides, neon colored lotus butts lamps, surreal, as if the real world was not already unreal enough to me; plastic fantastic would be the 60s term!

While the nameless uncle was chanting prayers in a soft withdrawn voice I listened only half to his interpreter's story; telling his uncle had kept the candle in front of the Buddha continually burning for whole his life, and before that his uncle and to the rudimentary teaching of the Buddha Sakyamuni. I was aware in the corner of my eyes that he performed some accompanying Mudrās or ritual gestures with the hands and fingers and if the hocus pocus worked for him, well then all the better. Before I had time to engage in other observations I was told that's it, and crawled backwards out. Exchanging eye contact, in synchronicity we both exchanged expressions of satisfaction, of having done what we wanted to do, no doubt, no regret. I begged farewell in a way that I have adopted as befitting my life in Asia, raising my right hand not quite in a western gesture of bye-bye with the palm outward but rather straight in front of me to the height of my face while bowing my head in respect slightly; sort of half and half marriage between west and east. Outside the sun shone brightly upon the golden stupa, a fine joy whelmed up, a light sensation of happiness and well being. So all encompassing I did not even mind being a little interrogative about it. Was this really part of me? I do not usually go around in such

a blissful state of mind. But hey why not enjoy the ride? My Honda machine was there to take me through the realities of traffic, out of the gate, a right swing and I nicely blended in with mainstream traffic at full throttle but opposite to the direction that I actually wanted to go! In search for a U turn again or veer off course and get to the parallel road along the river promenade, that would be a serious detour but what the heck, on this 125cc all was nearby and gasoline prices were affordable on this holiday. The sight of the riverfront Sisowath Quay was every time enhancing the feeling of a real holiday, lined with flags of the most known nations world wide, the ochre yellow and rusty red tiles of the promenade pavement, the rows of palm trees, people picnicking on a week day, kids playing with kites, all alluring to join the laid back lifestyle. I rode on to where the road swings away from the riverside. Why not take a break and see the sun setting on the Mekong River? Seeing another temple and cross it off the list?

A foreign tourist couple was stopped by police for cycling on the promenade belonged to the idyll that I was watching, nothing could disturb it. I walked up to the river embankment where two saffron clad monks were sitting, staring without much vitality on their face. I greeted Choum Reap Sur (Hello). They responded in English: "Hello sir". Isn't that nice? I sat down besides them and for a while no one said anything. To break the ice "I'm Gerrit" I said and without further I added: "How are you today?" That would at least circumvent the potential stumbling block with 'how do you do /pleased to meet you'. "Fine Sir, and you?" sounded like music to my ears, with a bright smile showing my nicotine stained teeth I said: "Happy, you? Both monks went blank&emem; one of them turned his face impassively to the river.

My name is Sambath Num, and this is my friend...?..I nodded without grasping his companion's name. "Gerrit" I reiterated, saluting with my hand rather than extending it for a handshake. Sambath Num invited me to sit between them. An exchange of the usual information followed. Again I failed to recognize the temple's location where Sambath Num was residing. 'Outside Phnom Penh' sounded enlightening enough to me. Ask me where Obama is located in Japan and I wouldn't let it confuse you with the US presidential candidate. His monk friend kept being absent from the conversation. Then Sambath Num asked "Please be my Godfather" Where had the 'sir' gone? I wasn't keen on being called Godfather! I had been called Uncle as an honorific title in Nepal before and I knew that middle aged men easily call younger women daughter in Japan, but Godfather? I didn't want to throw a flat 'No' into his face and felt that shaking my head in rejection with a friendly clap on his shoulder wouldn't do either; better be on the safe side, you never know what the convention of monks is in these Hinayana traditions. I put my hand intuitively on his and said while chasing the image of a Mafioso boss away, "Isn't that Christian? I'm not Christian". Then he turned his hand and lightly holding mine he retried: "father?" I smiled disarmingly: "You mean sponsor?" with a harsh undertone probably. He didn't insist, but kept holding my hand on his robed lap.

It felt so nice, so innocent, so genuine friendly. This sensation I had experienced first in 1975. I had left my then-not-yet wife in Bangkok and was receiving the teachings for the 3-year Nying-ma preliminary practices in Boudha-nath Nepal when I befriended with one of

the monks in the monastery were I started the so called Ngon-dro or translated from Tibetan 'preliminary practices'. We used to walk hand in hand on the evening "Khor-lo" or circumambulating the stupa clockwise, peacock proud parading among the crowds of worshippers, while I pondered about whose pride it was that I was experiencing. With Sambath Num it was a bit different, he confided his dilemma. He wanted to study the scriptures, but his family needed him for working. Should he study or go off to work? This dilemma many young monks must have had to deal with at one time or another. In fact it is a major point of debate in Buddhist circles of all traditions, reformed and old schools of thought, Mahayana and Hinayana alike.

H.H. the Dalai Lama addressed the issue and feels members of the clergy should engage in some sort of work other than chanting prayers. In Asia understandably a number of men and women would gladly join orders and congregations for finding security and guarantees of being fed and clothed, having shelter and spared for the hardships of poverty and survival. It is true however that the Buddhist in line with Hinduism's approach to salvation is to retreat from worldly activities that pertain the cycle of birth, old age and death; suffering throughout the impermanence inherent in all and everything, the human lifespan the most relevant to us. Now I'd better stop preaching in words as patent as the facts of Buddhism. It is after all not a missionary religion; quite on the contrary, you would have to seek answers to your questions at temples yourself.

So here is this monk telling me about his dilemma. I've never been in a position of mentor, but with the wise guy looks of my grey hair I proclaimed: "the better the education one gets the better one is able to help others", and if that sounded too much of a riddle I added that he was just doing the right thing, later he could make up his mind what the better thing to do was. A woman fashionably dressed in a mix of traditional and western attire had been watching us from a distance walking past and returning on her steps now stood still some paces away. I grabbed my camera, stood up and gestured her to come closer and take a picture of us three. She made a step closer and apologized in French accented English that she had to keep a certain distance from the monks. I was only too keen to continue in French, and said "Je comprend". I showed her where to push the button to the shutter, the TFT display on the back of the camera big enough a viewfinder to require further explanation. I went back to my place between the monks. Sambath Num asked his friend who had been watching the river all this time to turn around. He did so with the same lackadaisical attitude. I put up my best tourist face and two clicks later the lady handed me my camera back. "Merci, merci beaucoup", I checked and showed her the result on screen. "Je vais le montrer aux moines" -This was something the monks should see too, Sambath Num looked interested, his friend did not, that is at least how it appeared to me. Had they seen digital camera displays a hundred times before? Could be, and could I email it to them? Yes, of course! I looked in vain for a ball pen in my Nike belt bag; I had given it away to the student at the temple I had visited just before. The lady reached me one. I felt behaving very un-western like, sidelining a woman and giving the men more attention, monks notwithstanding. In my attempt of making restitution for my perceived shortcomings further confusion arose.

I handed her my name card. She, perplexed, opened her handbag again and said: "Excusez moi, je n'ai pas de carte de visite sur moi, mais ceci c'est ma carte d'indentité à

l'Ambassade de France". I looked at it and indeed Attaché to the French Embassy was beneath her name. Madame Bouchard-Chlangden even had an address in France she said and if I'd be in the neighborhood I'd be very welcome to stay, just as if I was one of those men of the world moving around in circles of higher society, meeting holiday makers on golf courses, casinos and ... the promenade in front of the Foreign Correspondence Club in Phnom Penh. She explained she was in town, on her way to a wedding in Siem Reap. Eh bien, ça alors! I was leaving for Siem Reap the day after tomorrow! She got a slip of paper gestured for the ball pen I was still holding and wrote the telephone number down while saying "Vous êtes le bien venue!" I accepted the invitation gracefully without kissing her hand. The monks had observed our lively conversation, probably shrugging off second thoughts about my courteous attention to the opposite sex. It caught my befuddled brain waves right away and we exchanged email addresses. The picture, a promise! I returned the ball pen, thanked the lady for the invitation again with my gesture of saying good bye, to which she responded in kind, bowing with her hands folded as they do in SE Asia. I followed suit shortly after, but to the monks then. Back on my bike, I realized the sun hadn't set yet!

I had to meet Robert and see what night life in Phnom Penh is all about. As Robert had been working there 7 years ago, he surely would know where ex-pats hang out, though things might have changed a bit. The tourist guidebook still mentioned Sharky Pub and Martini Pub. We tried our luck and drove off into the city after dark, and dark it was, poor street lighting, no bill boards with advertisements under spotlights. Robert was quite pleased to find the Sharky Pub still in business. I saw some people on the first floor's balcony first, bathing in green and red neon light, then in front of the entrance some bouncers who didn't bother to welcome us. They stood in small groups chatting about whatever the night might yield, I suppose; rather grim faces at first glance, some beanstalk tall, some short and sturdy. I thought they're not the guys you'd want trouble with so we ignored them and went up the stairs to the pub. Casting a quick look around, there were plenty of foreigners on stools at the round bar in the center, whereas most tables along the walls were empty, two billiard tables for pool, the doors and windows to the balcony open. It was hot in here, the ceiling fans were in motion at least. We ordered Cola and took stools at the bar. In no time we had company, not of ex-pats but of two hostesses, free lance I guess. Robert was luckier than I, his bar girl spoke some Thai, mine did not go much beyond Konnichiwa and Arigato. And body language doesn't work with me, in fact I felt rather annoyed. I ordered a drink for her, hoping that would keep her hands busy, it worked the opposite way. What was her name again? I sought a polite way out of this embarrassing situation. My eyes crossed a foreigner's gazing; looks a bit like mine I thought. "I've also been through the hippy times!" he said loudly from his seat a two three paces away. Rather astonished given the look of his age and appearance, mid thirties, short cropped hair, I responded "Oh, yeah?" "Yeah, dope and group sex and everything, but now I live in Alaska. I'm a fisherman, Tod's the name". "I'm Gerrit; you're a long way from home then Tod! Must be hot for you down here" I fished for hearing more. "Just passing through" he cut it short, leaving the bar with a local girl. Damn it, all I get from that mealy-mouthed hypocrite is platitudinous twaddle, I fumed.

They went out on the balcony; from behind she even looked smaller at his side, good two heads shorter. I turned to Robert who also had lost interest in having female company at this point. He suggested we circulate. Many of these girls are Vietnamese he explained. I didn't ask what they were doing in Cambodia. Probably living life, taking chances on passers by, may be they got lucky one day hooking a compassionate innocent foreigner and securing a future with a round stomach and more certain income.

"Play Pool?" Robert asked. Carom billiard, yes. With two cue balls and one object ball contacting three rail cushions in my view demands much more precise angle calculation than snooker or pool that to me looks more like taking a calculated shot at a lucky strike -not so- many of you more familiar with the latter will argue, but I had no confidence in trying pool here for the first time. I declined. More well-bred expats had come to congregate. Some guys played backgammon, but also that had not been appealing to me since Denmark. I had loved to see Robert play chess again, like in Yangon, Myanmar but that was on a street terrace, here in this shady pub with oldies from the 60s there was probably no chess board at hand. I didn't ask. We had almost come full circle around the bar, no way of starting small talk with anyone of the cliques at the tables either. Wondered what talk they were engaged in. The balcony was last chance. Some couples standing at the balustrade, guys chatting up chicks. The street below dark and desolate at either end looked more inviting to me. Shall we hit the road I was about to ask Robert when I saw him engaged in a conversation with another young woman. She had a really pretty doll like face, her long black hair done up. Robert called me to join. He introduced her, but I couldn't get her name right, I repeated it twice but gave up when the a-a-a sounds were still off beam in this tonal language. "Gerrit" I said. "Gary? nice to meet you". "Robert is quick eared", I said, "gets all foreign names right away and retains them too! Me? Kind of slow, you're Vietnamese?" "No, I'm from here, but my friend is from Vietnam. The young woman at her side greeted me in a way that I'm familiar with, slightly bowing as a matter of casual confirmation of being Asian in jeans but still... Hi! I greeted likewise, and was ready for going through the same set of small talk; where are you from when I was short circuited with her question "Having a good time?" "Yeah, good to be here", I replied diverting my look at Robert. "Do you like dancing?" she tried holding on. How could she possibly have guessed I do? At my age? "I do, yeah, I love dancing!" It had been ages; in Japan there is no way to suggest going dancing unless you're into disco and still wet behind your ears. Last time I danced was with my wife in Australia and that was like social slow dancing. "Let's go" she said decidedly. I looked at Robert again hoping he'd take the helm, all he said was "Brill", he always uses brilliant at times when they're exciting and asked whether they knew the 'Martini's' I could see on their stiffening faces they did. Had they understood Robert was home in the neighborhood? or did they have the InterContinental advertising live music in the guide book in mind?. "That's out of town!" Darea protested. Robert never taking an argument questioning his logic for granted, simply put them check mate saying "We'll take you there!" falling short of adding on our motorbikes. Sideways he slipped to me "let's move our asses" in a way that I knew was expressing his movie scenario script acting. I followed sheepishly, so did the girls. They had no doubt or question about taking the back seat, while Robert asked me: "Have you

ever done this before?" I wanted to reply i-ie, hajimete desu in Japanese so he could understand and at the same time hiding the fact that this was the first time to ride with a woman sitting sideways on a motorbike's back seat, but simply said "I'm OK!" Then at least the girls wouldn't know I was risking my passenger's life too. The young woman I found prettiest took Robert's back seat. "You've got some charisma attracting young pretty women!" I remarked honestly. He didn't seem to register having only eyes for Darea. We drove off slowly. Riding behind Robert was not all that difficult, negotiating the potholes, maneuvering in the traffic and I had not to fear being distracted by feeling breasts on my back. In no time we were at the outskirts of town and arrived at the Martini's without any hassle. You would never expect a place like this in a seemingly decent residential area. OK, I must admit it was after dark. The blue and red neon light made the big green banana tree leaves at the entrance look even bigger and plastic fantastic to use 60s lingo again. The first that caught my eye was the sign prohibiting to take cameras and ... guns inside; they had to be deposited against receipt. I have no objection against gun bans -was it fashionable to copy cat America's Wild West? but cameras? Were there indecent, morally despicable scenes, graphically disturbing or challenging views on display inside? I followed the rules, and saw my Canon IXY put in a locker on receipt against showing my Japanese ID card and went in without further ado. At the end of a short shopping arcade a sort of beer garden, sparsely occupied tables, up the stone paved stairway a bar overlooking the ritzy green tropical garden. We settled for another fizzy drink and observed a bunch of bastards from there. Some men had clearly traces of a rough lifestyle on their faces. Fatigues were fashion these days so that wouldn't necessarily indicate Vietnam vets. You could easily distinguish tourists from tugs, but no bongos passed on nor smoke smelling of marijuana whirled up, so who were these people? Angkor Watt Beer was at the order of the day and camouflaged women in this holy jemoly did not move from one well bred ex-pats' lap to another's, rather from table to table. A big 120" movie screen had a Hong Kong production movie with Khmer subtitles showing that few people were watching. All this time Robert had been well entertained from left and right, but hearing he had been around these latitudes for a while the competition flocking around quickly dismissed. "Where is the dance floor?" I asked. "There!" Darea pointed to a corner of the garden that I had completely overlooked. Seeing her finger I realized that her nails were polished modestly, she wore no rings, no bracelet. Sometimes it's nice to be ignorant, makes people feel good when they can come up with answers to your questions; innocence leading the way satisfies your every desirous whim. 'Ikkoh' I exclaimed in this ultramontane environment using Japanese for let's go. A narrow passage entirely covered with some palmate lobed juvenile leaves, sort of tropical Ivy with small black berries, lead us to a door that suddenly opened with a bang - literally; the end of drums ruffle, the orchestral power rock beat blasted two three drunken sailors out. We went in, ladies first. Eyes caught in the flashing strobe lights had to adjust to the crowded darkness a sec. "We can always 'feel' our way in" Robert joked. In contrast to the Garden of Eden outside, here were more women than men. "Torai-zu, four drinks, this one is on me" I shouted in decibels unequal to the adrenalin pumping disco beat. We send the two women onto the floor so we could watch them among all the others in slow voluptuous movements. Wasn't this what life is all about?

For everything there is a first time ! It was so hot in here, was there any air-conditioning working at all? Two westerners retreated from the floor soaked in sweat after a song they had erratically danced to. I had observed them for a moment earlier; badly coordinating their swinging arms while jumping up and down as monkeys, fitness club aficionados practicing squash would have done better. The women endlessly more elegant held out much longer at their own pace, making footwork double-time or the syncopated step backbeat, a step for every fourth beat in a 4/4 bar; that was the trick in this sweltering heat. None of the 90s funk or hip-hop I knew, but the music was unstoppably upbeat. The central square dance floor, fenced like a boxing ring but with wooden boards then, was flanked by rows of tables and seats in auditorium style. Flashing spot lights shooting their beams from above allowed only seeing the contours of the people at the tables.

A smoky smell hit the nicotine covered sensory parts in my nostrils with a sense of hey! I know this, it's blown over to the 90s then and beyond, but it's not just marijuana, this must be crack or some other nose sweets that whirl around. I mentioned it to Robert, he shrugged it off saying: "Look at her, isn't she moving her great body graciously?" I had to admit she was dancing like a pro performer, measured, in step, but withholding -like she was internalizing her moves to the music bars. I found her lady partner dancer even more elegant, cobra like and to judge from their glad rags they surely didn't look poor Khmer or cheap Vietnamese for that sake. For an instant I felt like I'd seen it all and with hopeful eyes I signaled Robert fresh air? Just at that time, I felt my shoulder tapped; taken by the elbow and pulled in unquestionable invitation to join Chowdee -or what was her name again- on the dance floor. Still overwhelmed by her getting physical, I stretched my other arm out to Robert hoping he'd come to my rescue but he went along with me to the small space made for us big guys. "I haven't danced for ages I started apologetic", recalling the last time in Brisbane, but Robert and I quickly picked up the beat and stepped out of tune just as quickly during the first track. I had little eye for my surroundings and adopted that internalized focus on rhythm, choreographing to the melody of whatever was still remaining from the 80s Michael Jackson in my body's chromosome bank. Robert the more outgoing of us was really classier in pair dancing. An affirmative nod and thumbs up at the abrupt end of the second track confirmed we had done well. 'You're the one' and 'Can you feel it?' are definitely lyrics to lure the luster out of a limper like me. I let myself go, moved and shook -shy of reaching orgasmic heights. Outperforming myself while other honeybees came swarming in the perimeter and as far as I could get my head around in this purple haze, the answer to the question what's the dirtiest part of your body? Is it your nose or your toes? Not Frank Zappa's answer: 'your mind' popped up; dirty dancing that's what it is, and I liked it a lot. Sweat drifted down, soaking my T-shirt and possibly with it a garlic stale smell that I thought needed taking care of. I slipped out of the sophomore sphere without notice, leaving Robert and the women in their own energy playing forte.

The toilet? That was outside of course. I grabbed my glass and gulped down the remainder on my way out. In the toilet the AXE deodorant I had carried since BKK did its job remarkably well, I guess even the person after me would come out completely refreshed. A refill for all the vaporized body liquids was also due. I went to the bar and got a fizz drink. Were the ice-cubes hygienically factory produced or going to flush my bowels tomorrow? No choice but to wait and see.

There, Robert with the two women coming up to the bar. "That was good fun!" "Yeah, what do we do next?" I looked at my watch, past 11pm. "We have the Vietnamese settlement to do tomorrow. May be we should call it a day", I frowned, always thinking time tables and schedules, habits from Japan... Before Robert could express his position the women were pulling his arm to get back to the disco inside. Now he was the first to enthusiastically oblige. We went in for half an hour more of supersonic sauna, I came out like a sailor setting foot on dry land after an eternity on high seas. And when the women suggested going to another disco somewhere downtown we were more than reluctantly hesitating to oblige. Conversation came to a grinding halt. The women seemed to have an argument but neither of us could figure out what it was about. How do you get out of this situation as gentlemen becoming? Were we westerners known here as gentlemen to uphold the standards and subsequently let us been taken advantage of? Or of the rough macho variety? Robert said not to worry, it was a public secret that adventurous women here would use men like ATM machines if they got into your pants, and wallet the next morning. Are they to blame for seeking quick profits? I wondered. The whole world seems to have developed from hand to mouth and is still being run on short term quick profits; daily profits for the stock brokers, quarterly profits for the multibillion multinational conglomerates, annual profits for the still noteworthy businesses. The only that can build up deficits over decades are rich countries. Who are we to morally judge these freelancers when Bear Stearns distributed 100 mil Dollars in bonuses to their management at the end of last year, knowing that there was trouble ahead. Now they run to the Fed to bail them out. Shall the tax payers then pay for that kind of mismanagement is asked? Or shall we just quietly envy those in the position to get away with greed and look for other pastures to predate on? Beats me!

While we were standing there pondering around our navels what to do about it, the women had gone. What the heck, I'm not going to run after them find out where to!" I told Robert, "Let's get out of here!" Robert more gentlemen than I, reasoned: "We took them here!" "True enough but you didn't promise to bring them back home" I pretended to sound like a hard boiled egg. "It's not nice to dump them here and run off" Robert insisted, "let's give them \$10 for a tuck-tuck home" "That's very generous of you, let's settle for that, 5 each" I reached for my wallet in my back pocket and found it half unzipped. "Robert look", I panicked without reason, "if I hadn't had my belt bag over the vertical back pocket's zipper my wallet would have gone. I'm sure it was in the disco someone had tried to pickpocket me", and no sooner had I come to the end of the imaginary pre-drawn conclusion the women showed up. I was quick to pull out a \$10 note with the words this will take you home, but they did not accept it right away. They wanted 10 each. I've probably seen it in the movies when the bad guy tears the bill in two, but I didn't have the guts, I pretended the gesture though and it did the trick.

Meekly Chowdee accepted and we could say goodbye and thank you in a decent way. They even escorted us to the entrance where I picked up my camera and took a shot of Robert with his newly found and lost girlfriend. Waving goodbye we drove off into the night. It was just passed midnight when we reached the hotel.

At the counter the sleepy night man gave us our respective keys and Robert reminded me of the ride to the Vietnamese displaced people's settlement some 40km out of town the next day before getting up in the elevator.

The next day the meager bacon and eggs with toast, instant coffee without fresh milk left Robert still hungry. I related him about the new waiter hired in a Paris Café for the peak tourist season. The headwaiter was overlooking the terrace next to him checking if all was in order, chairs neatly arranged around the tables, parasols at the same height, the ashtrays clean, when a young woman with the looks of a Vogue cover page vamp came to sit down at the furthest of tables. The young waiter had seen her haughty moves with some apprehension and hesitated, fumbled the white napkin on his left arm and turned to the headwaiter. "What are you waiting for?" this one hissed, "go and attend to her!" The young waiter went robotically. Coming to the table he greeted "Bonjour Mademoiselle, et vous desirez?" His voice trembled at the sound of 'you desire?' She looked up from under her canapé hat and smiled, showing a set of front teeth whiter than white, pink pearl lipstick contours completing the flash. "Coffee please, but without cream!" she said with an unmistakably Marylyn Monroe accent. The waiter jotted her order down in illegible scribbling, stopping shy of clacking his heels as he stepped backward. The head waiter anticipated seeing him hit the chair behind, stumble, tip the table and make a complete fool of his establishment, but it didn't happen. He passed him on the way to the new Italian coffee machine and the headwaiter held his breath. Before even passing the order to the bar tender the young waiter returned on his steps, went to the table where Marilyn Monroe was sitting and apologetically addressed her: "Excusez-nous Mademoiselle, mais nous venons de dégarnir la crème, est-ce qu' un café sans lait serait acceptable? " Or in decent English; "Would a coffee without milk do, we just ran out of cream?"

I understand that jokes don't fill up a hungry stomach and agreed to jump on our motorbikes to get us a second breakfast before riding out to the boondocks. Somewhere in the river front area a corner in the westerner's quarters, a café to our liking; almost hidden behind thick leafy trees, but wide open, no doors or windows, it afforded spectacular riverside views. The whole red and ochre interior, rattan arm chairs and low tables flanked with tropical pot plants, paradise in a nutshell. We ordered pancakes and real coffee with real fresh milk. Robert took a fruit salad in addition, saying he was giving himself a real treat. While Robert was studying the map and had it hard to find where to veer off to the Vietnamese settlement, two monks passed by with their begging bowls. "I thought you went out at sunset" I said half loud, signaling them I was well willing to drop my share of alms today. They approached; what a bright sight their clean saffron orange robes! The older one with his broad flat nose and beautifully shiny slit eyes immediately asked "Where are you from?" Unhesitant I pointed at the tip of my nose, Japonised as I may be: "Belgium". "He", pointing at Robert "England". "You?" ... "Phra something Watt"... I shied away from asking specifics, wasn't intent on starting a conversation and pulled out my wallet. I had a few 1000 Riel notes; the equivalent to 25 US cents, that was peanuts. Dollars? Only tens, can't tell them to tear one in half, so 10 each it was. Holding the first note in my stretched out hand he refused to take it!

Instead he removed his robe from the bowl and held it out, so I dropped it in. In a loud voice he said convincingly: "I'll pray for you!" He bowed and stepped aside giving his silent fellow monk his turn. I saluted them in my own respectful way. Robert had followed the short episode and commented: "That's very generous of you".

I gesticulated: "I always get such a happy kick out of such encounters".

"You can have a whole night kick girl for that money" he taunted. "Yeah, and a short life with Aids" I mocked back. "Come on," Robert teased "never heard of condoms?" "That's no longer part of my long time married life" I insisted, "would definitely turn me off". Robert picked up the bill, "\$4,5 for me and \$3,5 for you". Dollars and Riel were 100% exchangeable everywhere, so I put in three Dollars and 2000 Riel. Robert settled it with the tiny Khmer waiter. We took off, swerved the bikes into outbound traffic, streamlining with the lane effortlessly. "Way to go!" I shouted. Robert looked back -all smile.

At full throttle we speeded out of town and were to go straight across the Japanese bridge, but the view of the houses on stilts at the river bank were worth taking a picture of. Standing still there you could feel the bridge bouncing under the weight of the heavy traffic crossing. I suggested making a detour to the tip where the Sap River flows into the Mekong. It would offer us a good skyline view of Phnom Penh from the other side and on bikes we would get there in no time. The road to the tip was virtually empty for traffic, few houses, so we could crank up the speed to the max. I felt that 80 was about the limit I could ask from the machine and still keep control. Robert said he had once done a hundred with a 125cc when we came to the end of the road. A bad smell of cooking oil that had burned for far too many times was not appetizing so we ignored the shags where the locals sat plucking chicken and preparing dumplings for lunch time. Overlooking the muddy riverbanks with long fishing house boats moored, plastic trash in abundance, totally naked kids running around. The sight of a fisherman throwing his net with routine skill against the backdrop of the city's skyline at the other side wasn't idyllic. Robert had seen better photo scenic places on the Mekong in Vietnam he assured me. There was no point in hanging out here any longer, not enough curiosity for following what the military frog men went diving for in these polluted waters.

In no time we were back on the main artery out of town. The north bound traffic just as dense as last time we went south, but shops and houses stretched much further out and more long distance coaches blasted their horns in anticipation of respect: every motorized vehicle gave way. The drivers probably knew and must enjoy this dominance on the road. We were going to be on one of these to Angkor Watt tomorrow I cheered. No military convoys or other noteworthy transportation, the usual trailers packed with traditional Khmer head scarf clad workers pulled by motorbikes of a 250cc caliber. One time only I caught sight of a black government VIP sedan with tempered glass and Kampuchea flags at the front. It wasn't speeding at all, possibly because no Harleys were escorting it. We rode on and on, passed through a township smelling horribly of some difficult to identify stench. Was there a garbage dump nearby releasing gasses that were burned? Couldn't be organic dung mixed with pesticides to fertilize the fields. What was it? And why of all places was there such a concentration of Muslim population just right here? Khmer men

and women easily wind their headscarves around so only eyes remain uncovered; understandably when riding on trailers in such dusty wind conditions. But these people were unmistakably religiously motivated, and indeed I could spot the minarets of a mosque with golden dome to my right. I felt like lighting up a cigarette while riding. I had done it before, but here there was still too much traffic and I was going a way to fast. As soon as we were out of this township the stench had gone but still hung over this place when we passed it again on our way back into Phnom Penh. On and on we rode, more and more rural scenery between townships. Robert came riding by my side, "In for a bite?" he shouted. My dilapidated Casio watch showed shortly before 1pm, yeah, next town!

I signaled back. He turned the twist grip throttle control up and sped ahead. Houses at the far end of my sight looked promising. When we got there it looked less inviting to me, but suddenly Robert turned sharply and parked right in front of what appeared an eating place across the street. He often makes such rash turns and acknowledges being well aware that would be considered dangerous in developed countries, but well this was a kind of Wild West in the east and people are very vigilant and alert so, all things considered, nothing to get hung up on. Next door to the place another big question that to today remains unanswered. Several patches of charcoal successively spread in yellow, red, black, bright blue colors. Seeing charcoal is nothing unusual in the developing world, but then in pebble size pieces and colored, spread out to dry or so? A mystery it remains. At the tables under the canapé on the patio some men sat gambling, a game I had no clue to, no indication that it actually was an eating place, no menu of the day board or prices or anything, not even a commercial for Coca Cola on the wall. The wooden wall boards of this saloon type hut had seen its number of seasons as the broken white and blue paint could witness, the faded colors of the motives at the sides of the door and the windows without glass indicated the place had had its heydays once upon a time. A quick look inside; only one table occupied, flashy colored old Chinese posters depicting romance and happy one child family life revealed it had been run by Chinese previously, a Khmer election poster probably the most recent addition. I was not ready for this and expressed my doubts about the hygiene of the food, citing the shits, hepatitis B, but Robert argued: "eat what the locals eat and you'll be just fine". I had been an adherent to this hippy philosophy, but I wasn't quite convinced. I considered riding with a rumbling stomach to a long distance coach/bus stop -who knows how far- and eating there was not guaranteeing anything either so I gave in. We sat down at the table and ordered beer to avoid unhygienic ice water. The young waitress didn't understand the word menu, no matter how hard Robert tried.

I remembered from my early off-the-beaten-track travels that going to the kitchen and pointing at whatever looked edible in the pots was the way to go. But yellow was our surprise to find out that there was nothing in the pots, except then some cold left over rice. The young waitress pulled a meager chicken from the cooler box in vehemence. If she had pointed out one of the live chicken in the yard I would have had to categorically deny her chopping off the head on my account. Robert had the enlightening idea to pull the young woman to the table where elderly men had had lunch and pointing out that we wanted the same, could get across what we wanted to eat.

One of the elderly men sitting at the table had a short contention with the young waitress after which he stood up and went to the kitchen to prepare our lunch. Encouraged by getting things moving Robert took an electric fan out of a corner and moved it close to our table. With the plug in his hand it was obvious he was looking for the socket and didn't take the no, no sign for an answer again. The young waitress gave in quickly and plugged it in an extension cord hanging from the ceiling. I had to admit that here you wouldn't get anything done with my adopted Japanese resigned attitude. At least I should learn to push things my way with a broad smile. Too bad the fan stopped working after good 5 minutes. Lunch was served much faster than I had anticipated. A curry, no doubt, heaped on lettuce leaves filling a big oval plate, lukewarm rice in a big bowl, more than one helping for each. The Chinese overlong plastic chopsticks: no problem, we shoveled the mix in with speedy greed. Both of us having adopted many of the Asian eating manners, it might embarrass the western observer with slurping noodle soups and so, but Asian eyes are also keen observing us barbarians. My students once told me that they frequently saw me turning my eyes up when I was deeply thinking how to answer a question, opposite to what most westerners do when searching their memory. And I once was so surprised to see Robert finish his lunch last during a ZaZen weekend session that people from all over Japan attended in Kamakura. Yes, Robert and I go a long way back and we still had a long way ahead of us.

While Robert had remarked "Nothing we can't afford" to my doubts on having lunch without haggling the price, it wasn't all that cheap when we were presented the bill, a bit to his surprise. Anyway, it was worth it I must admit. We hit the road again in good spirits and rode past a couple of intersections lined with a few houses in the four directions and fewer cow farm huts further up the road. When also these started thinning out and there was only fields dotted with the typical sugar palm trees as far as the eye could see, Robert signaled for a stop at a place where a stream meandered with a mazy motion through the marshes. We had most certain missed the turn off.

I joined Robert's visualization of the place we had missed. To back track the road while he described what he had seen 7 years ago, I was at a loss: a big signboard at the right side indicating the small road that steeply went down at the other side of the road. Indeed not much to go on for me. A sip of fizzy stuff, a look around, it was good to be in the shade of the ferny trees that lined the road. The sight of two wooden houses down the mount on which the road was built spurred a closer look. Green, green, leafy green of every pixel grain and pantone scale; the big banana tree leaves left a wider shade of pale than the wilder feather-leaved palm trees against the blue sky. Beneath, on the puddle, short floating leaves just supported the smaller variety of purple lotus flowers. A gangway on stilts across the puddle surrounding the houses connected them to the road. I signaled a boy making the passage with my Canon to wait a sec before walking over to me. Timing was on my side. Pitch perfect shot. I showed him before he got on his rusty bicycle, he shared little of my enthusiasm. Glitter on TV probably would have. Beauty is only in the eye of the beholder it is said... We rode back for a while and stopped again, Robert had recognized some orientation points. Things here don't change as fast as they do in Japan,

I suppose. I tell my wife we shouldn't go too long on a holiday; things might have changed so much we won't find our way back home again... Here, well, the signboard had gone all right but the road was still unpaved and going down the moat steeply as Robert had described. I rode behind wondering what in the world had attracted visitors to this insignificant place other than NGOs. So poor and horribly hopeless! Robert asked here and there whether this was indeed Svay Pak the place he had described me -what I had imagined to be a mini Las Vegas of SE Asia. From the dark of a watering hole where gamblers and unemployed pimps sat watching two TV sets next to each other a young man in fashionable jeans came out, with the posture of a movie star he brushed his half long front hair aside and asked in perfect American accented English what we were looking for. Robert asked again if this was Svay Pak where the bars and entertainment places he had seen 7 years were. "Gone, closed by government, now behind doors in private, you want young girl, boy? I take you there!" Hesitation was the unspoken communication between me and Robert. "Just tell us where" Robert preferred. "Out there to the left" was all we needed. He did not further insist and walked off. We took the opposite direction independently, sure to get to the place riding around a block or two. Disappointingly every block had the same run down feeling; spaces between demolished knocking-shops and sporting houses had become garbage dumps with over growth of wild unhealthy looking marihuana plants, many houses with closed shutters, hardly people in sight. Time for refreshment was called for. We had now finally come to the once thriving village main road and settled for a seat at a terrace table from where we could overlook it in both directions. Not that there was much to observe. While the mama san owner went for the Pepsis we ordered Robert made jokes about the Thai pronunciation of Pepsi. I pointed at the poster pictures on the wall to Robert and said "Look, all Christian biblical scenes!" Odd that here of all places we would sit surrounded by the Asian version of biblical vistas. The mama san owner must have noticed my inquisitive look, she explained without being asked "My father, Vietnamese Christian, in his memory". I wanted to read more into that but well, why not just take it on face value. Robert asked "What happened? I was here seven years ago". Her face brightened up at the memory. "Yes, good times. Everybody happy, plenty money, plenty food. Every day and every night party. Many shops, business good, very good, then police, army closed everything about 5 years ago; took many girls and people to prison. I could side with her and Robert that the NGOs had probably done more harm than good here, putting the Cambodian government under pressure to close down the sex industry and human trafficking without offering any incentives for alternative livelihood. Why not mythologize the paltry facts of life, an armature for a brilliant meditation upon the 70s and 80s when expectations about life with hash were blown to smithereens.

After this refreshing conversation a recognizance tour of the village led us through purgatory scenes of poverty. Really eyeball rolling to see a living environment so human degrading, we turned back on the bridge over a brook turned open sewer canal between the makeshift wooden shags and the dark market on the other side. Littered with mostly blue plastic bags the stench was simply suffocating; and then to see that laundry hanged out to dry there? Our technology has still no means to digitalize odors on camera so suffice to the eye a shot of the plastic bag covered brook. Robert wasn't all that unhinged.

He had been on photo reportages of garbage dump places like Mumbai and Manila where people scavenge for leftover foods and other trash. Passing by the men manicuring their cock fighters again, I saw more of them lined up in cages along the wall of a narrow passage. A picture or two without interaction, and we walked down the path hopeful of some more picturesque views. Two boys aged 6 or 7 but could be closer to 10 turned up from another alley. Interaction! Holding my Canon up for a picture, I asked them to stand in front of the entrance of a shop with nothing noteworthy for a close up. One of them shied behind the other who had a dull sad look in his eyes. With the same apathy they accepted the smallest bill of Riel I had at hand. Walking further down the path, looking in through open doors and windows of their dwellings, feeling the discomfort, intruding on poor people's privacy, we turned back. I sensed people's looks on my back; a couple of gay pedophiles? We may not have appeared all that ignorant or innocent to those suspicious eyes, no straight animosity but it certainly did not feel we were very welcome here. At the crossroad Robert bought a real -fresh from the oven- 'baguette' under the watchful eyes of people at a distance. For the price he had understood from the street vendor he got 4 of them, but no hassle to return three and get the change with a smile. On our ride out the old woman sporting a newly woven bamboo hat waved. That was at least a goodbye in style.

We had no trouble finding our way out of this sad settlement. In fact, I was glad to be on the road with an outlook again. We had the liberty of leaving it all behind, with hope for happy horizons ahead, able to reach destinations. Tomorrow Siem Reap and Angkor Watt, in quest of quenching the thirst for conquest; all royal roads lead to Angkor.

Would I be able to forget the misery seen here in Svay Pak? Close this chapter and shelve the book on the unjust world? Apparently Buddhist prayers don't make much of a difference in this indifferent world. Power to Capitalism! More difficult to predict is what happens if an ideology imposes a brutal cold turkey on opium for the people. And for crying out loud, is democracy doomed and capitalism there to collapse? How many roads must a man travel on before he sees ... and you know the answer in Bob Dylan's song...was this his winning Pulitzer citation?



Part 1; written on my Hewlett Packard hand held computer on commuter trains during January - April 2008 under the influence of Mogwai music, the Glasgow Punk Band ... the Pink Floyd of the 90s.

<http://www.ne.jp/asahi/clover/multi-lingual/>