

4 RIVER LIVING



The roosters around our hotel always started crowing around 5:00 am, LOUDLY. Myrtle would bury her head under her pillow, but I would get up and head to the restaurant about 5:30 for a first cup of tea. The morning after our Angkor Wat excursion, I found the restaurant still closed. Later I learned from a server that the restaurant is not supposed to open before 6:00 am. “The reason you found it open before was because the Koreans were staying here, and they barged in and we had to struggle to try to accommodate them. It is a Korean holiday, you know, but now they must return home. Now that the Koreans are

gone, the restaurant reverts to its usual routine.” “The Koreans,” confided another disgruntled server, “have been quite disrespectful and obnoxious, having loud parties at night, leaving messes all over. One even opened his new camera equipment at Angkor Wat and threw all the wrapping on the ground. Can you imagine? To desecrate that holy temple that way.”

On this day we were going to visit a river village and market, enjoy a home-hosted lunch, and take a ferryboat ride on the Mekong River to Tonle Sap Lake. Our guide used our time on the bus to tell us more about Cambodia. “There used to be lots of elephants and wildlife in Cambodia before the war. Many of them were killed by violence or killed for food when the people were starving. Medical care for children is free in Cambodia, but for adults, medical care is very bad. Right now there is a dengue fever epidemic. That is why you see people lined up at this hospital we are passing. A doctor from Switzerland practices at that hospital. He plays cello and sings every Saturday night to raise money for the hospital.” We saw about 60-70 people standing patiently in lines waiting for care.

“Angkor Wat’s Cultural Exhibition is still on right now,” continued our guide. “Siem Reap is getting very crowded. My father’s generation did not like Americans because America bombed Cambodia to fight the Viet Cong. Then the Americans got out and the Khmer Rouge came in. So my father’s generation blames America for the Khmer Rouge coming to power. My father thinks the Sam Rainsy Party is a good one. You see a lot of political signs along the road, and usually when people put up those signs, they are trying to gain political favor in the party. All school is free in Cambodia, but the parents need to pay for the uniform and supplies, and some parents cannot afford to send their children to school. The tour company you are with has given us money to build a school, so the government has given us the land to build it on. That is good.

There are many Vietnamese in Cambodia. They occupied Cambodia for ten years trying to get rid of Pol Pot because Pol Pot had conducted bloody cross border raids into Vietnam, killing many Vietnamese. After the Khmer Rouge was defeated, many Vietnamese remained in this country, especially in and around the Lake Tonle Sap area. I was raised in a stilt house, and I learned to speak Vietnamese by listening to the Vietnamese soldiers under our house talking together. They would shelter under the stilt houses. Our people would do what they could to help feed and care for the soldiers.”



“You can see how the people live in stilt houses here on the river,” said our guide as we left the bus. “No matter how poor a family may be, they will try to have a shrine. Cambodia is a Buddhist country, and religion is important to the people. The people cut a hole in the floor of their houses and their poo and pee go right down into the river. They use river water for washing their clothes and their bodies, but they get their drinking water from the pumps. They are afraid of flooding when the monsoons come and the water rises.”



We saw lots of baby geese and ducks. The dogs we saw did not seem to be pets. They were all very thin and had lots of fleas. We saw pigs and we saw farmers making pig feed out of water hyacinths. We saw sugar cane being pressed into sugar cane juice and sold in bags. Our guide bought us some fish cakes, which were delicious, and some fried bananas which were also delicious. Our driver and guide would give us sanitary wipes for our hands each time we got back on the bus, and they kept us supplied with bottles of drinking water, for which we were all grateful.

When we drove to the village where we were to join a local family for lunch, our driver sometimes had to stop to let water buffalo cross the road. We saw live pigs being carried to market on bicycles and motorcycles, like the ones being carried by the boys below. This sight elicited some commiseration from our group, “Oh, those poor pigs! How terrified they must be!” We passed a Bank of England School where English language classes were taught. Then we were treated to an oxcart ride through the village. I managed to convince Myrtle she could not sit with the driver.



Our oxcart took us to the home we were going to visit, where we found tables of fish drying. “This family,” said our guide, “makes fish paste for market. They also raise pigs, chickens, and ducks. Right now they have a sow and a boar and 13 baby pigs. This family is a prosperous family. They own two oxen, have rice fields, and they have an outdoor modern toilet.” “Wow!” said one of the men in our group. “Look at the size of that boar. He must be over 500 pounds!” The guide confirmed that that boar actually weighed 625 pounds. Yikes!





There were seven children in the family we visited, but they were all at school, so we did not meet them. One of the women in our group asked if we were expected to bow or in any way acknowledge the home shrine. Our guide said that was not expected. "As you have seen," he said, "Most of the families will have a small shrine outside their houses to bring luck and good fortune to the family, keep sickness away, etc. But you are not expected to worship or pray at the shrine." The lunch this family made for us, like all the food we had in Cambodia, was truly delicious. I fell in love with the sticky rice balls with palm sugar covered with coconut and served in a banana leaf bowl. "This is a traditional Khmer dessert," said our guide. I asked how to make it, hoping to try to make it at home for my family. "You boil down palm juice to make palm sugar. This is very sweet. You grind rice in a stone grinder to make rice flour. You add water and roll the rice dough into balls. Then you flatten the balls and put one lump of palm sugar inside each one before rolling them up again. Then you drop each ball into boiling water. The balls will sink. When the balls rise to the top of the water, they are done. Shred fresh coconut and roll the balls in that." OK then! I confess, dear reader, that I have yet to make this recipe. But we can always dream, right?

Our trip through the village market was fascinating. We saw fish in many forms, of course, freshly caught, dried, grilled, made into fish cakes, and processed into fish paste. We saw dried octopus, which I had never seen before, and we saw pig's faces, which I gleefully pointed out to Myrtle as the real ones. You will remember dear reader, that she and I had got into a small argument about pigs'

faces when we were in the market in China. When I spotted the woman in the picture below pulling live snakes out of her Styrofoam container, I quickly steered Myrtle in the other direction. I knew she had her little emergency pills, but I did not want to chance a major fainting or freaking-out event. I have to say that when those snakes started slithering around and raising their heads and flicking their little tongues back and forth, with the woman sitting right there unconcerned, I was a little unnerved, and I like snakes! Poor Myrtle did not need to be exposed to that.



I asked our guide later if the snakes are always sold live in the market, and he responded, “Yes, people will not buy them if they are dead. Remember, they are not poisonous snakes.” Two things that the Cambodians eat that I gratefully report not seeing in the market were roasted tarantulas and rats. Shudder! One charming thing we all oohed and aahed about was the palm sugar candy business the two small girls were conducting. They boiled the palm juice until it was the right consistency, then scooped it into small palm frond circles, which we bought from them.





Some of us were trying to figure out how we could support these entrepreneurial girls by buying up their whole inventory, but our guide discouraged that. “No matter how you wrap or store the candy, you will soon be infested by any number of critters trying to get at it,” he said. So we had to settle for what we could eat, which, dear reader, turned out to be more than any of us should have eaten, that is for sure. From the market we took a quick side trip to a silk farm, where we watched girls picking 24-day old worms, the yellow ones, which have stopped eating and are ready to spin a

cocoon. The girls placed them in baskets on the wall to spin the cocoons.



“We have 1000 apprentices now,” the factory guide told us, “and we have created more than 700 new jobs. These are guaranteed jobs. We have 12 workshops now throughout the country. Silkworms will eat many leaves but will not produce silk unless they eat mulberry leaves. Cambodia produces yellow cocoons. If you have been to China, you know that their cocoons are white. We keep back 20% of the cocoons for new worms and breeding, and we use 80% for silk. The outside 20% of the silk cocoon is used to make raw silk and the inside 80% is used to make

fine silk. When the cocoon is in hot water, it separates and the fibers clump together. We spin the clumps to pull out the knots and then boil it all to remove the stickiness and make it white. After that, we boil the silk for three hours with natural dyes to color it and then we wind it onto bobbins for use. As you can see, making high-quality silk is a laborious process.”

As we drove to the small dock where our ferryboat was tied up, our guide told us about the unique geology of Lake Tonle Sap and the Mekong River. “Lake Tonle Sap covers 10,000 square meters in the monsoon. Right now it is covering 3000 square meters. Water from the Mekong River flows into the lake during the monsoon and out of the lake during the dry season. Five Cambodian provinces border the lake, and over one million people live by the lake. Almost all of them are fishermen. There used to be thousands of crocodiles here and lots of water snakes before the Civil War in the 1970s. Then during the years of famine, the crocodiles mostly disappeared. There are not many left in the wild now, so farmers along the lake raise crocodiles. When there is a big flood here, it takes a week to come down. The locals call this lake the mud ocean because when the monsoons come it gets so big and brown and covers all the bushes.”



When we had all settled into seats on our ferry boat and were beginning our trip on the Mekong River, our guide continued. “You will see along the river a lot of floating houses and businesses. All of them must be moved twice a year. When water flows into the Mekong River, they move into the lake; and after the monsoons, they move back into the tributaries. People fish all year round here, but now the government has made rule changes that limit fishing time and the size of the fish you can catch. That is to protect the breeding. They are also trying to protect the bushes and trees along the river for fisheries habitat. People are used to taking what they want because they burn wood for cooking fuel, and now they must change.” Several small boats approached us holding out cans of

Coca Cola for sale, and some of our group bought cokes. I was struck by how happy the Cambodians seemed.

“Tonle Sap Lake is sometimes called a hematoma on the Mekong River,” continued our guide. “UNESCO has designated this a unique ecosystem. In October the current reverses from the lake back into the river. Half of the annual fish catch takes place in January. The per capita income in Cambodia is about \$300 a year. Typically, Cambodians eat about 47 pounds of fish each year per person. Even today, fish and snakes caught in Lake Tonle Sap account for about 60% of the protein intake for Cambodians.” We passed a four-boat flotilla loaded with fruits and vegetables. The first boat had a motor and was pulling the other three.

We stopped at a floating school, where the students invited us into their classroom. The school was rocking gently in the waves created by passing boats. The children sang a school song for us, and we sang “If you’re happy and you know it clap your hands.” The children thought that was fun, and they requested Itsy Bitsy Spider, which we tried to sing. The children knew more of the words than we did! Then they sang their national anthem really loudly, which had everyone laughing. I noticed that almost all the children were barefoot. When we were back on our boat, our guide said, “Boats bring the students to school. Some of the children live in floating houses and some in stilt houses. This tributary dries up in the summer. The lake can rise 27 feet during the monsoon season.”



We passed a Vietnamese Floating Village. “You cannot buy land along the river,” said our guide, “so people attach boats and rafts together to form communities of people. Most of the people who now live along Lake Tonle Sap and the Mekong River are Cambodians of Vietnamese origin. That TV antenna you see would be attached to a TV that runs on rechargeable batteries. Lake Tonle Sap is Cambodia’s most vital ecosystem, and it is at risk. Last year the Wildlife Conservation Society estimated that nearly 4 million snakes were harvested from Tonle Sap. That is too many for a sustainable and already fragile ecosystem. The snakes are mostly fed to crocodiles, which prefer them over fish because they have red blood and good quality protein. The crocodiles are raised mostly for leather products and some for meat for specialty restaurants. There are about 900 crocodile farms in Cambodia, some having 2000 or more crocodiles. The people who catch the harmless water snakes are typically poor fishermen who live on the water in the bayous in cramped small boats. During the months of the monsoons when the fishermen cannot catch fish in Lake Tonle Sap, they catch snakes. Both fish and snakes are being depleted. Right now a fisherman needs to catch 50 water snakes to earn one U.S. dollar, and most of the fishermen here are quite poor. The snakes are sometimes easier to catch than the fish. They catch fish by clubbing them.”



Then we came to a floating store, where we were invited to browse the store and buy what we wished. “A cruise ship stops here,” said our guide. “It takes two days to get from here to Phnom Penh. People sleep in hammocks on the boat.”



To be continued . . .