

camboodia

ANCIENT CULTURE - MODERN CARNAGE



pic above: Walkway to the Ancient Temples of Angkor Wat

WE JOIN **LIZ BARRY** ON HER UNFORGETTABLE FAR EAST JOURNEY



Phnom Penh the capital city of the Kingdom of Cambodia sits at the confluence of three rivers the Mekong, the Bassac and Tonle Sap. A fast boat along the Mekong River had been the means of transportation for me and a travelling companion from Vietnam. With its tree lined boulevards Phnom Penh was one of the loveliest of the former French cities of Indochina.

SHOCKING PAST

In contrast, just a stone's throw away, is a very different setting, that of the Tuol Sleng Museum a shocking reminder of the genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge regime arrested and eventually executed almost everyone suspected of connections with the former government or foreign governments. The

persecution extended to professionals, intellectuals, people from various ethnic backgrounds, Cambodian Christians and Buddhist monks.

The Toul Svay Prey High School was taken over in 1975 by Pol Pot's security force and turned into Security Prison 21 (S-21), soon to >



Tuol Sleng Museum

THE MOST TRAGIC

EVEN IN THIS 20TH CENTURY, IN CRIMINALS HAD COMMITTED A HEINOUS GENOCIDICAL ACT. THEY MASSACRED THE POPULATION WITH ATROCITY IN A LARGE SCALE. IT WAS MORE CRUEL THAN THE GENOCIDICAL ACT COMMITTED BY THE HITLER FASCISTS, WHICH THE WORLD HAS NEVER MET.

WITH THE COMMEMORATIVE STUPA HEARING THE GRIEVOUS VOICE OF THE VICTIMS WHO WERE BEATEN BY POL. POT MEN WITH CANES, BAMBOO STUMPS OR HEADS OF SWORDS WE SEEM TO BE LOOKING AT THE STRICKEN FACES OF THE PEOPLE WHO WERE DYING OF STARVATION, FORCED LABOUR OR TORTURE WITHOUT MERCY UPON THE SPOKE BODY. THEY DIED WITHOUT GIVING THE LAST WORDS TO THEIR KITH AND KIN. HOW HURTFUL THOSE VICTIMS WERE WHEN THEY GOT BEATEN WITH CANES HEADS OF SWORDS AND STABBED WITH KNIVES OR HOOKS BEFORE THEIR LAST BREATH WENT OUT. HOW BITTER THEY WERE WHEN BEING THEIR BELOVED CHILDREN, WIVES, HUSBANDS, BROTHERS OR SISTERS WERE SEIZED AND TIGHTLY BOUND BEFORE BEING TAKEN TO THE MASS GRAVE!

WHILE THEY WERE WAITING FOR THEIR TURN TO COME AND SHARE THE SAME TRAGIC LOT.

THE METHOD OF MASSACRE WHICH THE CLIQUE OF POL. POT CRIMINALS WAS CARRIED UPON THE INNOCENT PEOPLE OF KAMPUCHEA CANNOT BE DESCRIBED FULLY AND CLEARLY IN WORDS BECAUSE THE INVENTION OF THIS KILLING METHOD WAS STRANGELY CRUEL. SO IT IS DIFFICULT FOR US TO DETERMINE WHO THEY ARE FOR THEY HAVE THE HUMAN FORM BUT THEIR HEARTS ARE DEMON'S HEARTS. THEY HAVE GOT THE KHMER FACE BUT THEIR ACTIVITIES ARE PURELY REACTIONARY. THEY WANTED TO TRANSFORM KAMPUCHEAN PEOPLE INTO A GROUP WHO KNEW AND UNDERSTOOD NOTHING, WHO ALWAYS BENT THEIR HEADS TO CARRY OUT ANKAR'S ORDERS BLINDLY. THEY HAD EDUCATED AND TRANSFORMED YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE ADOLESCENT WHOSE HEARTS ARE PURE, GENTLE AND MODEST INTO COOCHUS EXECUTIONERS WHO DARED TO KILL THE INNOCENT AND EVEN THEIR OWN PARENTS, RELATIVES OR FRIENDS.

THEY HAD BURNT THE MARKET PLACE, ABOLISHED MONETARY SYSTEM, ELIMINATED BOOKS OF RULES AND PRINCIPLES OF NATIONAL CULTURE, DESTROYED SCHOOLS, HOSPITALS, PAGODAS AND BEAUTIFUL MONUMENTS SUCH AS ANGKOR WAT TEMPLE WHICH IS THE SOURCE OF PURE NATIONAL PRIDE AND BEARS THE GENIUS KNOWLEDGE OF OUR NATION. AN INTELLIGENCE OF OUR NATION AN INTELLECTUALITY OF OUR NATION. THEY WERE TRYING HARD TO GET RID OF KHMER CHARACTER AND TRANSFORM THE SOIL AND BLOOD AND TEARS WHICH WAS DEPRIVE OF CULTURAL INFRASTRUCTURE, CIVILISATION AND NATIONAL CHARACTER. BECAME A DESERT OF GREAT DESTRUCTION THAT OVERTURNED THE KAMPUCHEAN SOCIETY AND DROVE IT BACK ON THE STONE AGE.



All pics Left and above: The Killing Fields
Below: Climbing towers at Angkor Wat
Right: Monk at Angkor Wat
Below right: Ancient Temples Angkor Wat

become the largest centre of detention and torture in the country. The school rooms were transformed into jail cells -- narrow bricked rooms, hauntingly airless -- that still carry the presence of death. Thousands of people held here were taken to the extermination camp at Choeng Ek to be executed.

THE KILLING FIELDS

The infamous Killing Fields are just outside town. From 1975 to 1978, approximately 17,000 men, women & children (including nine westerners), who had been detained and tortured at S-21 prison (now Tuol Sleng Museum), were transported here. In order to save ammunition, the executions were often carried out using poison, spades or sharpened bamboo sticks. And for babies and infants it was a much crueller death. The reasoning for killing the children was to prevent them from growing up and avenging the death of their parents.

In 1980 the remains of 8,985 people were exhumed from mass graves. Many had been bound and blindfolded. Many graves are still visible. After a heavy rainfall when the earth is disturbed, fragments of bone and pieces of clothing break through the surface due to the tremendous number of bodies still buried.

Today the area is a memorial Park. A Buddhist Stupa containing over 5,000 skulls now stands in memory of those murdered and the utmost respect is given to the victims of the massacres.

FABULOUS TEMPLES

Fortunately Cambodia is not only visited in deference to its dark history but for the Ancient Temples of the jungle, at Angkor Wat. From Phnom Penh you can fly to the town of Siem Reap, nestled between rice paddies. Lying next to the river, this small provincial capital serves as the gateway to the ancient ruins. Stretching over some

400 square kilometres, including forested area, Angkor Archaeological Park contains the magnificent remains of several capitals of the Khmer Empire from the 9th to the 15th centuries, including the largest pre-industrial city in the world.

Emerging out of the jungle the ancient city of Angkor is a compound of palaces and temples. The awesome spires of Angkor Wat are only part of the complex though it is this temple which is

recognised by all. It was an early morning start leaving in darkness to join the procession of slow moving cars buses and motor bikes as the convey of vehicles drove around the moat towards the long walk way which takes you across to the entrance. The approach road was lined with stalls and small restaurants all ready with fires lit and steam rising, knowing that as soon as the visitors had seen the sunrise over the towers of Angkor Wat a brisk breakfast trade would begin.

Built for the king Suryavarman II in the early 12th century as his state temple and part of his capital city it honours the Hindu god Vishnu and is a symbolic representation of Hindu cosmology. Consisting of an enormous temple symbolizing the mythic Mt. Meru, its five inter-nested rectangular walls and moats represent chains of mountains and the cosmic ocean. At its centre there are 4 towers in the shape of a lotus flower. The most famous decorations of Angkor are the Apsaras, heavenly nymphs always bare-breasted and usually dancing, representing an ideal of female beauty. There are over 300, and each is unique.



The Bayon and Baphuon temples form part of what was the giant city of Angkor Thom thought to have held a population of one million. The Bayon is one of the most widely recognised temples because of the giant stone faces that adorn the towers. The complex is quite spread out but it was quite remarkable walking between the ancient stones and seeing the Buddha faces carved into these huge chunks of weathered stone. Two nuns and a monk sat on the stone slabs beneath a towering >





Temple of Ta Prohm



Elephant Terrace



Monk

◀ edifice laying offerings and prayers. There are 54 towers of four faces each, totalling 216 faces. A debate still reigns on whose faces they are. It could be Avalokiteshvara, Mahayana Buddhism's compassionate Bodhisattva, or perhaps a combination of King Jayavarman VII and Buddha.

Jungle lore

There is the Elephant Terrace and the famous Temple of Ta Prohm which has been preserved by the jungle. Fig, banyan and kapok trees spread their gigantic roots which clamber and probe the crumbling walls; it has been left untouched by archaeologists except for the clearing of thick undergrowth as a pathway for visitors and sufficient repairs to stop further

deterioration. Like a jigsaw puzzle, pieces of temple lie across the jungle floor, birds chirped and there was an overwhelming sense of peace, surrounded by this ancient kingdom that had been hidden within the tendrils of the jungle for hundreds of years.

Cambodia has a past that holds some dark moments, but also one steeped in history with ancient ruins that take your breath away. The vision that remains with me is of a solitary figure -- a saffron robed monk standing before the motionless waters of the lake in front of the temple against the backdrop of the towers of Angkor Wat silhouetted against the orange ball of sun rising through the jungle canopy and the silence of the morning.

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