

Cambodian contrasts

Siem Reap, with its mix of stunning views and extreme poverty, made for a beautiful, if distressing, experience for Irish artist **Andy Devane**

WE WERE MET at Siem Reap's tiny airport by a tuk-tuk driver, So Kun. He drove us through fields of unparalleled beauty and poverty.

On the roads, bikes weaved in and out of pickup trucks with monks sitting atop. The driving was both ridiculous and terrifying, with children on oversized bicycles, motorbikes with up to six people on board, or with fully grown dead pigs strapped to the back of the driver, or pulling trailer loads of bricks.

In the paddy fields, workers stood up to their knees in water, bent double, and water buffalo mooched around. Barefoot children and women sat on the mud outside their huts. Men smoked in hammocks. Bare toddlers chased chickens down the streets. Everyone stared at us, many pointing and laughing. Every single thing was rundown, the newest things were, at best, extremely second-hand, but the people seemed happy.

Everyone had a sob story, everyone wanted us to buy something, or give them a dollar. Children here are born old - I saw them haul logs and work in brick factories and garages.

The next day we arose at 4.30am and met So Kun, who drove us to the temples of Angkor Wat at dawn to watch the sunrise. Considered by many to be the eighth Wonder of the World, the scale of building there is awesome. It is, however, the human stories that touch the most. We had met scores of children already, some as young as four or five, selling scarves and bracelets. They were entranced by my girlfriend Anna; they told her she was beautiful and wanted to touch her white skin. They followed us, haunted us, called us by our names. They had an arresting visual appearance, a strangely serene aura; a mixture of gentleness and sadness enveloped their voices.

So Kun brought us on a fantastic trip around the greater area of Siem Reap over the next 10 hours. What we saw was incredible. We went right off the beaten track, where there were no westerners; people lived as you would expect them to in a jungle, literally at home among monkeys. Their homes were like tree houses, built on stilts, roofs made of straw. Round outdoor ovens cooked their meals. Children and adults washed in the rain. All the roads, even the main road, were made of mud. We pulled up to a village and two girls emptied glass bottles of diesel into our tuk-tuk.

Everything here smells of cooking, farmyards, unwashed clothes and wet mud. All around is lush vegetation, perfect postcard material, but it's a dangerous landscape too - no one veers off the recognised routes, as there are still thousands of unexploded landmines, and the countless amputees tell their own tragic tale. We feel quite exposed. There is a slight sense of vulnerability that comes with seeking out, and finding, strange new places - this was one of those times.

At 9am we went on a trek through the jungle at Kbal Spean. A one-hour hike through vines, rocks, waterfalls, enormous butterflies, breathtaking views, birdsong and growling gibbons, it was sweaty, heavy work, but thoroughly worth it.

Down in the valley we were befriended by about eight children, all of whom had dirty clothes, not all of whom had shoes, and some of whom appeared to be quite sick. HIV/Aids is rampant in this part of Cambodia, as is malaria, and later we came across the harrowing sight of a girl with leprosy lying by a ditch at the side of a road. The children were fascinated by us; we ate fried rice and vegetables in a wooden hut with an earthen floor and they watched and smiled at us as we ate. An hour later we had a sending-off worthy of a royal couple. It proved to be a humbling, unsettling and distressingly beautiful experience.

On the third day we were driven through mud and puddles down a cul-de-sac towards Chong Khneas, Siem Reap's floating village.

The further we drove, the more disturbing the living conditions became. Families live in huts built of old scraps of wood and jaded sheets of corrugated iron. They live along the water banks - their toilet is both the river behind them and the street in front of them; the squalor and smells that faced us are barely describable.

Eventually, the road dipped steeply and we got off at a makeshift port thronged with wooden boats. We jumped from boat to swaying boat with our guide until we reached our own, and off we sailed in a cloud of diesel.

It was bedlam. Sailing up the brown river we noticed women using the water to cook their meals and wash their children. It was a water shanty town with over 3,000 inhabitants. At the end of every boat there was a shawl and a few planks, with a gap in the middle for a toilet. I saw dead fish bobbing up and down - this is the same river from which they drink.

Every houseboat contained people in varying degrees of undress, their wretched lives intimately on display to anyone passing by on the busy waterway. On one side were native Cambodians, on the other immigrant Vietnamese in their cone-shaped hats.

These people were the poorest of the poor. Out in the lake I saw one child sailing perilously in a plastic bin, begging for a dollar from the scarce supply of tourists. Another Vietnamese toddler hopped out of a boat wielding a water snake. Our guide shared with us the daily lives of these people. It was bleak. On the way he stopped to show us a cage containing 10 hungry crocodiles - they were being kept so their skin could be made into shoes.

Anna bought 40 copybooks and 40 pencils in the market and we sailed to the area's only primary school. It was a timber room with chicken-wire windows. Unexpectedly, we were ushered into the full classroom of little children and were greeted by a beaming schoolmaster who graciously accepted Anna's gifts by bowing. The children all stood to attention, cheered Anna and loudly shouted their blessings with huge smiles. It proved to be an emotional visit, leaving what will surely be an indelible memory.

Andy Devane exhibits between Dublin and Rome.

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