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## An extended holiday in Cambodia

*Lonely Planet author and sometime Audley Tour Leader Nick Ray looks back on 15 years of travelling in the kingdom of Cambodia.*



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Cambodia entered my consciousness at a tender age. It was 1979 and Blue Peter had launched a famine appeal for Kampuchea. 'Bring and buy' sales were taking place all over the country and I remember watching the numbers climb as they pushed to raise £1 million. It seemed a million miles away from Watford.

Cambodia was a very different country when I first visited in 1995. It was the Wild East, a place of danger and intrigue. The long civil war rumbled on and the Khmer Rouge was actively targeting foreign tourists. Overland travel was fraught with danger, not only because of the very real threat of ambush but thanks to the dreadful condition of the country's roads.

Flying into the country was the only realistic option. Phnom Penh's Pochentong Airport was a world away from Bangkok and looked more like the proverbial cow shed. Aptly enough, one of the first things I saw on leaving the airport by moto (motorbike taxi) was a couple of locals trying to wrestle a cow on to the back of their motorbike. "Boy, this is going to be an interesting experience", I thought to myself.

I spent three weeks travelling around Cambodia, including a slow ferry ride from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh. It took 36 hours and the boat was stopped at a military checkpoint in Kompong Chhnang to carry some wounded soldiers back to the capital. Gunshots crackled through the



Something about Cambodia spoke to my soul and I kept engineering excuses to return. I finally found a professional one in 1998 when I was offered the chance to research and write the Cambodia chapter for Lonely Planet's 'Yellow Bible', Southeast Asia on a Shoestring. It was a seminal moment to be in the country. Land borders were opening with Thailand, putting Cambodia on the overland backpacker trail. The war was drawing to an end, Pol Pot passing away on 15 April 1998 while I was in Phnom Penh. Journalists were trading stories over G & Ts at the Foreign and Commonwealth Club and I felt like an eyewitness to history.

It was a long trip of two months and promised the chance to explore new areas of the country that had previously been off limits. The beautiful temple of Banteay Srei, with its exquisite carvings, had been too dangerous to visit and an American academic was shot and killed on the road there in 1995. It's hard to imagine these days as visitors throng the petite temple each day. Phnom Kulen, the sacred mountain and birthplace of the Angkor empire had long been a stronghold of the Khmer Rouge. Suddenly it was open to visitors and Cambodians streamed there in their thousands, including the mercurial monarch King Sihanouk, swooping in by helicopter.

One book led to another and I slowly found myself becoming 'our man in Cambodia' for Lonely Planet. The motorbike was joined by a car, the flat became a house and the relationship a marriage. It was a case of the right time, the right place, as new opportunities arose. I found myself working in film and television in roles as varied as location manager on Tomb Raider to motorbiking sidekick to Charley Boorman on his 'By Any Means' trip through the kingdom. Cambodia had first charmed me and slowly it claimed me.

Looking back to then and now, parts of Cambodia have changed beyond recognition. Soldiers are less visible, checkpoints have been dismantled and Khmer men no longer shoot at the sky to keep a thunderstorm at bay. Roads have been rebuilt, communities connected and commerce is thriving. International destinations like Phnom Penh and Siem Reap boast luxury hotels, boutique retreats and designer restaurants. Peace, security and development have walked hand in hand and tourism has played a major role in improving the lives of many poor Cambodians.

Corruption remains a cancer eating away at the fabric of society, but at least the politicians are settling their differences with lawsuits rather than light weapons. Cambodia is no longer the sort of place people fear to tread, at least as long as they stick to the path. Mines remain a danger in rural areas, although lightning strikes claimed more lives in 2009.

Cambodia has come of age as a visitor destination. No longer an afterthought to a holiday in Thailand or Vietnam, many visitors are now choosing Cambodia as the destination in itself. Maybe the younger me preferred the crazy Cambodia of 1995, but the older me is comfortably at home in the more cultured Cambodia of 2010.



1. Monks at Ta Phrom
2. Nick Ray in the Cardomom Mountains, Cambodia
3. Houseboat on Tonle Sap Lake
4. Sarus Cranes at Preak Toal Biosphere on Tonle Sap Lake, Siem Reap
5. Local transport at Angkor
6. The serene smile of the Bayon, Siem Reap

## A Journey through Cambodia & Laos

Nick will be leading Audley's October 2011 group tour of Cambodia and Laos. For more details please call our Cambodia team on 01993 838 160.

### FACT *file*

For those wishing to sample the Cambodia of 2010; a 14 day tour of the country including Siem Reap, Phnom Penh and Kep costs from £1,835 per person. For more information call our Cambodia specialists on 01993 838 160.

[www.audleytravel.com/cambodia](http://www.audleytravel.com/cambodia)

night air and I had visions of Khmer Rouge soldiers boarding the boat to carry me off into the jungle.

I also travelled to the South Coast, succumbing to the charms of somnolent Kampot and exploring the ghostly villas of Kep. I visited the former Khmer Rouge community at Chamcar Bei and met the mastermind behind the train ambush that saw the kidnap of three western tourists in the summer of 1994. Chouk Rin was wiry and shivering with malarial sweats, but still had a steely look in his eye that was distinctly unsettling. In a sign of the times, Chamcar Bei today houses an eco-retreat known as The Vine.