My mostly rural Cambodian trip

Paul Sarno

I have just returned from an educational four weeks in Cambodia with car and driver (my second trip there). I journaied from Siem Reap, where Angkor Wat is located, north to Koh Ker and the mountain temple of Preah Vihair, then west to Anlong Vinh, the former home of many of the Khmer Rouge when they were ousted from power. I proceeded south to the enormous ruins of Bantrey Chmar and on to Battambang, Cambodia’s second largest city (population over 250,000). I then traveled southeast to Kompomg Chhnang to see river life on a tributary off the Tonle Sap Lake and to Phnom Penh, the national capital, primarily to see the wonderful National Museum filled with sculpture which was formerly in ancient temples. I ended the trip going north and west to Kompong Thom, a Sixth Century capital, and flew to the United States from Siem Reap via Singapore and Frankfurt.

I learned seven major things about Cambodia. First, contrary to general belief, there is not much rain in August. In fact there is generally a dry spell for the first fifteen days of that month when tourists flock to Angkor Wat and adjacent temples. When it does rain, the duration is usually either at night or for forty-five minutes at about three in the afternoon so a visitor can wait it out in a restaurant, temple or museum. Second, the roads are generally good, paved and not very crowded (unlike Java). There are some exceptions, e.g. to and from Banteay Chmar, but improvements underway will make road travel even easier in about two years. Third, while Cambodia’s per capita GDP on a purchasing parity basis is no more than $2,400, judging by the number of large private houses in rural areas, there are plenty of affluent residents. Fourth, the country has by-passed restoring its land telephone line system, seriously damaged by civil war, and has installed micro-wave towers everywhere I looked. Thus, internet via wi-fi and telephone communication is very good (for rural Southeast Asia). Fifth, the Cambodians were friendly, have a wonderful sense of humor, have improved their spoken English facility (in 2005 our guide in Angkor could not really speak our language) and are encouraging foreigners to volunteer (if for only a week) to teach English to their children after the formal school day ends—using academic facilities. I never felt unsafe and the female tourists to whom I spoke had the same experienced. Sixth, the country is filled with numerous, ancient, fascinating, mostly Hindu, temples, free of tourists, outside of Angkor Wat. Many are partially ruined and walking through them is not easy. Lastly, while Cambodia is 97% Theravada Buddhist (with residual animism and Hinduism thrown in), I was astonished at the number of Christian churches, some evangelical, in the cities.
Paul Sarno will teach an eight week course at Lifelong learning Academy (Sarasota Manatee USF campus) (about 12 hours) on Southeast Asian History starting in January 2015.

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