

New Discoveries: Laos & Cambodia

By Maureen Edwards, Oct 2009

The trip was Discover Laos & Cambodia, the duration was 13 days, and from my point of view, after we left Bangkok, they were all wonderful days and nights.



The group, which included three men, numbered only ten - all fun people and experienced travellers. Ann and Maureen hailed from Perth WA, Corinne from Melbourne Vic, Julie, Bronya, Ken, Jan and Peter from Adelaide SA, and Mike and me, from Tanunda SA.

The group enjoy a cultural dinner at Siem Reap.

Once again we were travelling with Bunnik Tours – some of us for the third time - and, as we've learnt to expect when travelling with Bunnik, everything went very smoothly. All the hotels we stayed in were superior to most accommodation in Australia – large rooms, king size beds, great pools and excellent service and food.

But the real enjoyment for me started when we left Bangkok! I have never felt the need to visit this city and found myself not enjoying the experience at all. We spent the early morning visiting temples adorned with 24 carat gold and exquisite porcelain flowers, extremely ornate and decorative architecture and a Buddha covered in emeralds. One could only marvel, speechlessly, at the craftsmanship. And the wealth was stupefying!



Royal Palace, Bangkok

The later part of the morning was spent travelling by boat along the Mekong River then from the river into small canals along which people live in very tiny houses on stilts – sometimes constructed of teak or rosewood, sometimes iron. Some aged one hundred years or so, falling down in the middle, at the ends or all over - but amazing all still inhabited, somehow! But some homes were decorated with flowering plants in pots, bird feeders and caged birds imparting a sense of pride and joy in life.



Traditional housing in Bangkok

I have never been able to come to terms with this contrast between indulgence and deprivation.

Our tour of Laos started in Luang Prabang which now has UNESCO World Heritage listing and a good part of it has remained unchanged over centuries. Our tour guide, Xui, was enthusiastic and informative, the food was yummy and our accommodation was very comfortable and fun. Fun for us but serious for the poor hotel owners because in the middle of our stay there was an explosion during the night and all power ceased! A high voltage transformer had 'blown up'! Next morning, because it was not known when the situation could be rectified, we were offered accommodation in another hotel. "Do you have candles?" we asked. "Yes, yes – but no air conditioning!!!!" A very brief group conference took place and a unanimous decision was made; "We'll stay!" They were so pleased and we had such fun – sitting round the pool watching and laughing with the workmen, after organising ice to get the beer cold enough!!! If I return to Luang Prabang I will definitely stay in the same hotel!



Kuang Si Waterfalls

Our days were spent sightseeing on the Mekong River, at caves, having lunch in a very small village overlooking the river, at stunning waterfalls and whilst strolling from the waterfalls we came upon a black bear refuge. We visited temples as well. Our nights were spent eating as a group then heading off to the night markets! How much better can it get?



Kuang Si Waterfalls

Well you might ask, because from Luang Prabang we visited Vientiane which has a strong French influence and is the capital of Laos. We visited more temples but also had time to wander on our own. Our hotel in Vientiane was separated from the Mekong River by a small rustic road. It was just marvellous and owned by an Australian fellow who was originally from Perth. He moved to Laos in the 1970s and feels no need to return to Oz!



*Outside the Beau Rivage
Mekong Hotel, Phnom Penh*

Although we were sorry to leave Laos we were looking forward to Cambodia and it was just another short flight before we reached Phnom Penh, the capital city. Here we had less than 24 hours which was a shame as one had to be very selective about what to see in that time. We did see the Royal Palace and the National Museum. After dinner Mike and I hired a Tuk Tuk (a scooter powered taxi) and did a great tour of the city observing how the locals spend their leisure time. Phnom Penh is a city that warrants another visit.



Our guide Sky

We visited 10th century temples cleared of the jungles, temples with jungles and other temples – all absolutely fascinating. We also visited floating villages, re-training centres, markets and a rural area to meet a local family. We had a Cultural dinner with talented dancers. We also had free time in which to wander.



Children from the small village

There was so much in this trip and it would take me too long to record all that made it exciting, but the Cambodian people themselves are amongst the major tourist attractions. They are friendly and welcoming, eager to for tourists to appreciate their country and they display such a stoic outlook. This poor country has been pillaged and raped by so many for so long and still these people keep smiling. They are so poor and they need our tourist dollars, so I strongly recommend that your next venture overseas is “Discover Laos and Cambodia” with Bunnik Tours.

IT WAS WONDERFUL



Above: The Group at the rear of Angkor Wat

Photos supplied by Mike Perks.