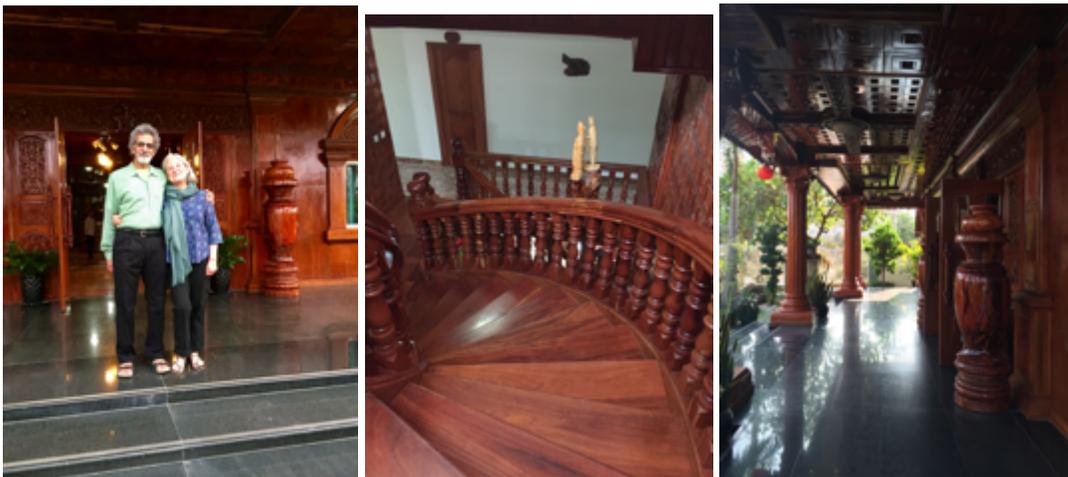


Shanghai Journal 2-11-16 (Cambodia Trip)

Ni Hao (Chomreabsuor in Khmer),

Can't believe how fast time has flown since I've been in Asia. I leave tomorrow night for New York and six weeks at home before I return. Our vacation in Cambodia was amazing – the temples, the culture, the people, the weather, the food! Truly a memorable experience! The only downside was getting to and from Siem Reap. On the flight there we missed our connection in Hong Kong and had to spend the night at an airport hotel (the airline paid). On the flight back (a direct flight that was supposed to leave at 2:20 a.m.) the plane was over an hour late. All this fades, however, in the light of memories we will never forget.

Our hotel was really nice – with lovely carved façade and staircase made from Cambodian woods that we learned are becoming rare because of theft and corruption that sends the wood to wealthy people in China, Vietnam and other places. The hotel is owned by Cambodians and showcases the culture. It was a bit outside of the center, thus quieter and we could easily take tuk tuks back and forth. We appreciated the small size when we saw the huge five star hotels that line the road to Angkor Wat.



The hotel provided a guide and transportation for our tours of the temples and surrounding environs and it was well worth it. Our guide, Sayoeun, was knowledgeable and interesting and took us many places in three days we would have had difficulty seeing on our own. On two days, we went by tuk tuk with our driver, Borey. For the furthest trip to a mountain temple we went by car. Sayoeun went to school at Buddhist institutions and was a monk for thirteen years, but recently left and is now married and has a new baby daughter. We had lots of interesting conversations with him about Buddhism, the connections between Cambodia and South India from the earliest periods, the time of the killing fields and the Khmer Rouge and aftermath today, and other topics.

Our first stop was Angkor Thom (“great city” in Khmer), the last capital of the Khmer empire, established in the 12th century. The entrance is framed by a row of devas on the left and asuras on the right, each row holding a naga (snake) in a tug of war that refers to the churning of the sea of milk also know in Hindu mythology, and very familiar to Indians. If you have been in our house in New Paltz you have seen the print hanging in our kitchen that tells that story. The temple is covered with huge heads and walls are covered with bas-reliefs depicting stories and poems of ancient Hinduism modified by centuries of Buddhism. They tell stories of wars and also daily life – on the right below, for example, are women helping to deliver a baby.

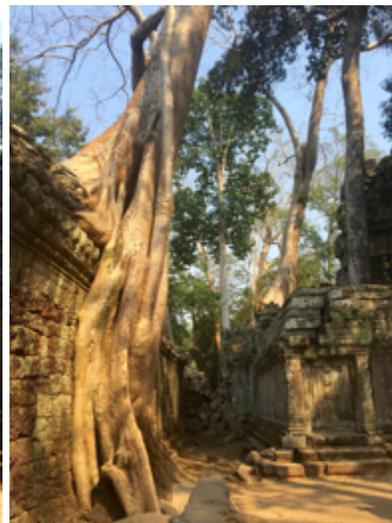




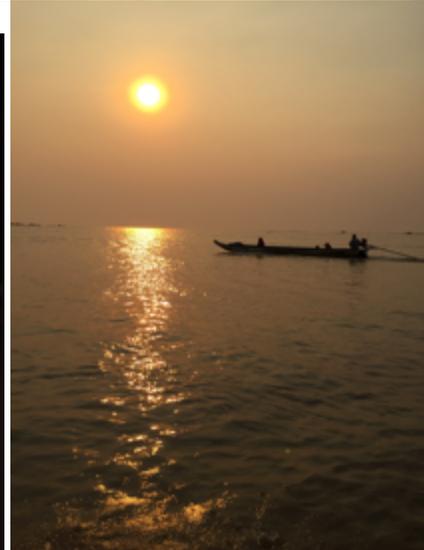
Outside of the old temple is a more modern Buddhist statue where we met some nuns who gave us a blessing. Such beautiful faces!



Next we went to Ta Prohm, a nearby temple that is now famous for appearing in the film Tomb Raiders, so lots of tourists taking photos. It is surrounded by jungle and in many places trees have grown out of, and often support, the temple structures.



In the afternoon, we went to Tonle Sap, the largest fresh water lake in southeast Asia, where there is an entire floating village, including a school, basketball court, market and many homes. We stopped at a restaurant to watch the sunset.



The next day was a Buddhist holiday and the hotel staff set up an offering to Buddha in the lobby. Later they would share a big feast!



We went by car to a mountain temple in the jungle called Preah Ang Thom. Our guide said many of the people who live there are former Khmer Rouge who still live in isolated villages in the jungle. The road there was a very steep, curvy, unpaved road full of ruts. Worth the ride to see the temple at the top of the hill, and the huge statue of sleeping Buddha with lots of smaller statues all along the base!



Loved the roadside stands selling all kinds of interesting things, like all these different kinds of ginger and mountain honey, and Buddhist monks as tourists too!



We stopped at a river where there are a thousand Yoni and Lingam (symbols for Shakti and Shiva) in the water that you really can't see in my photos, and a huge waterfall that must be amazing in the rainy season.

After lunch, we went to a spectacular temple built in 10th century called Banteay Srei (citadel of the women, or citadel of beauty) carved from red sandstone. It is a gorgeous site with amazing carvings throughout. I'm afraid photos cannot do it justice, as is true for most of the sites we saw.



On the way back we stopped at a stand so Ravi could have fresh palm fruit, a treat from his childhood. It has to be cracked open with a machete and then peeled to get to a small white glob inside that is slippery and sort of sweet. The guide cut one for me but it was so slippery I dropped it, but he cut me another one. An interesting taste!



The third day we got up at 5 a.m. to watch the sunrise over Angkor Wat. Photos cannot do justice to this magnificent place, truly. It is enormous with amazing carvings on all of the walls. We had to wait in line 45 minutes to climb to the top!





Our final day, Borey drove us by tuk tuk to a nearby 18th century pagoda, Wat Bo, that is a working monastery today. There are statues of all the monks who have lived there and stupas where they are buried. There is even a Buddhist radio station. A very peaceful place in the midst of bustling Siem Reap!



I have to mention food before I close. There were lots of vegetarian options that we both enjoyed and I sampled some wonderful fish dishes as well. We went twice to a vegetarian restaurant that had delicious mango salad. I really loved amok, a coconut based curry that usually has fish in it but is also made vegetarian. This is my last journal until April. Ravi finishes his semester in mid-May. Looking forward to seeing friends back home.

Zai Jian or Leah Sin Houwy in Khmer! Lee

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