This trip was completely for fun: hiking and playing in the water in the Cardamon Mountains. With two very good Cambodian friends and a guide and a cook, I went on a trek. The actual hike was cut short a little by the rainy season because that season lasted longer than expected. We started in Chi Phat and had an amazing time.

1 My camera ended up in the water on day three of our adventure so many of the pictures are thanks to Rith!
The Cardamon Mountains have been home to many people; the National Museum in Phnom Penh had a (small) exhibit on this, called ‘People living in the shadow of Angkor’, i.e. in the shadow of the famous temples around Siem Reap. The people living in the remote Cardamon mountains may have been the ‘original’ people of Cambodia and are now also known as Khmer Daeum. They were weary of the Angkor empire since it, most likely, was trying to enslave them to help build the famous temples. During the Pol Pot years they were dispersed but some have returned.

There are jar and coffin burial sites all over the Cardamon Mountains and we got to see some; see pictures below. Radiocarbon dating suggests that the oldest remains are from the 13th or 14th century. The jars came from quite far (and provide evidence that the people traded with China and other parts of the world). The tops of the jars were broken off to put the bones in (and beads and rings) but there is no indication if the bones were first buried. The skeletons (skulls) show teeth modifications which is not wide-spread in that area of the world and neither are these burials, indicating a unique culture of the Cardamons.

The jars and coffins were left on rock perches and most have only recently been discovered. There are probably lots more since the area is quite inaccessible. Many articles exist in the archeological literature (many by Nancy Beavan) but I had never heard about them before and find them fascinating!
We had great food, fish, eggs, meat and rice of course! Tea and boiled water, all provided by our guide/cook. Beer was available in the village, not on our trek...

One of the setbacks on our trek was the continuation of the rainy season (past its expected end). That meant wet clothes and shoes but also leeches (the Dutch word makes them worse: `bloedzuiger`). These leeches sit on the trail and wait for your shoes so they can climb up. One of us had a leech on his backpack which then went into his back. One is supposed to use lemon to get them out and chew tobacco to put that on to stop the bleeding! Leeches have something in their saliva that stimulates blood flow and are used medicinally for that and look somewhat like what is in the picture on the right.

After the hike, we spent time in Kep and Kampot, again swimming and kayaking on rivers and the sea. Kampot is the center of good pepper and has salt fields as well. I bought a bag but decided to leave it in case airport security found it... It also has amazing seafood but I have left out those pictures for the benefit of my animal-lover friends and relatives! Kep had many French-Cambodian villas before the Pol Pot regime, the burnt-out frames of which are still around. Gradually some are being restored.
After our great week in the mountains and on the water, I spent a few days in Phnom Penh. Another friend took me up to Koh Pich, i.e. Diamond Island, to see the new real estate developments and to Koh Dach, i.e. Silk Island, for another day in the countryside. We also spent a wonderful afternoon looking at the sun set over Phnom Penh.

The developments at Koh Pich were described by the New York Times in 2014 as follows. “If all goes according to plan, Koh Pich, ..., a 100-hectare, or about 250-acre, spit of land hugging downtown Phnom Penh’s shoreline, will be home to more than 1,000 condominiums, hundreds of villas, two international schools, a replica of the Arc de Triomphe, a near-clone of Singapore’s Marina Bay Sands Hotel and one
of the world’s tallest buildings” (source [here](#)). Driving around the ‘French’ parts, built by the Chinese, of Koh Pich was weird! Land disputes are still going on in other areas of the city too, where people need to move to make place for new developments.

The trip to Silk Island was another trip back in time, from the boat ferry to the dirt roads, to the cattle being washed in the Mekong and the pagodas in different states of decay. Cambodia has long cultivated silk ([sericulture](#)) but currently has to import most silk from China. The cultivation is labor-intensive so would be a great fit for Cambodia, a country with low wages, and lots of Mulberry trees, whose leaves are eaten by the larvae who then spin cocoons. We visited a weaving center and silk scarves are said to take two weeks to weave.

I’ll finish with some thoughts on eco-tourism which can be defined as giving people living in a wild, untouched place something to do that impacts their environment the least and where they can use their knowledge of the forest. Before the tourists came, the villagers in Chi Phat poached wild animals and cleared the forest for sugar cane and other crops. Guiding and cooking for tourists is supposed to be low-impact and helps the entire community. The trips we did in the forest and river pay people 8-10 dollars a day and the extra money goes to the community. That said, eco-tourism does come with new demands for better roads (we got stuck a few times) and services in the village. It also changes the rich-to-poor ratio faster. We saw many houses being changed into small palaces. As a tourist, I am most interested in original houses but home-stays are mainly in rooms built specially for tourists!

Throughout Cambodia, I have noticed the upgrades that houses get although they remain in the original location. The traditional house is on poles, so that the flooding doesn’t affect it, and made of bamboo and palm leaves and has a thatched roof. Upgrades use planks and bright colors and elaborate staircases. The villas are made of concrete (see Killeen 2012: 85 for a similar observation about the building styles). As a result, you find a villa next to a hut. It is the paradox of a ‘better life’!

This was my third trip to Cambodia and again an incredibly delightful one, full of surprises! I also realized much more clearly that most people in this world have a lot less ‘stuff’ than I have. It is nice to have painting and rugs and books to look at but not essential!