Elly’s 2013 trip to Cambodia

In December 2013, I taught an intensive two-week course at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (http://www.rupp.edu.kh/ifl/). It was fun and I enjoyed having very committed students.

The most exciting part of the trip was a six-day journey to the east, with stops in Kratie, Mondulkiri, and Kampong Cham and a weekend on the coast.

Some notes follow; the pictures are mine and from students/friends.

‘My’ class

Political/social situation

I arrived just before Human Rights’ Day (10 December), which is a day off, when demonstrations and protests were intensifying; on the day I left they were expecting 200,000 protesters (www.phnompenhpost.com/national/strike-picks-steam). Three groups (at least) are discontented: (a) textile workers who make $80/month and who’d like to double that, (b) the many that are unhappy with the current prime minister in power since 1979 who don’t believe the last elections were fair, and (c) people that get relocated for ‘development’ projects who receive no or little compensation. All three problems are of course related to one root cause that I am not sure is solvable in the next few years. The current opposition is not impressive in my opinion and that isn’t just because one of the opposition politicians made some ‘interesting’ remarks about the current prime minister that he was ‘weaker than a woman’ for not calling a new election (aseandigest.net/2013/12/27/rainsys-speech-under-fire/). The main reason is corruption and the loss of trust people have. However, it will be very hard to stamp out corruption when officials have so little money to live on!

The same opposition leader also criticizes the current PM for allowing Vietnamese to settle. On our trip, it became obvious that many plantations and businesses are owned by Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Koreans, and Europeans. Although in principle only Cambodians can own property, one can buy citizenship (as was/is true in the US and Canada). The Chinese and Vietnamese have always been a major presence in Cambodia but increasing the numbers gives rise to tensions.

As for the textile workers’ strikes, on my way back, I talked to a Taiwanese woman whose company orders clothes from a factory that wasn’t on strike yet. She had looked at efficiency and gave me some more insight into that industry. Her company buys from Indonesia and Vietnam as well because they don’t want to rely on one country and she was in favor of raising the wages. Efficiency is low because workers can’t always get to work or end up helping to harvest the annual rice crop and strikes are many. It isn’t just factory workers who make so little. School teachers make very little as well, especially in the ‘provinces’. On our extended trip, we saw many school kids off for the day at 10:30 am; that way the teachers can have another job too. Rice is harvested by hand as are other crops. Yet, the price of
gasoline is 4000-5000 riel ($1) per liter and food in the city not very cheap. In the countryside, poor people eat relatively well as long as they have some land because there’s lots of fruit and vegetables and delicious ‘street food’ is available. Medical and educational services in the countryside are less than optimal though.

Away from Phnom Penh

What really made the trip memorable was a visit to Kampot and Kep (on the coast) and, especially, the six-day trip to Kratie, Mondulkiri, and Kampong Cham. My Cambodian friend had planned an amazing trip and five of us biked, hiked, rode elephants, and visited Bunong and other tribal villages. Real highlights were a stay on Koh Trong island, seeing river dolphins north of Kratie, swimming in the Mekong, biking across a bamboo bridge and seeing amazing wall paintings in a temple on Koh Paen, discovering the 11th century Wat Nokor in Kampong Cham, and especially riding an elephant and being in the water with it: its skin is warm where I had expected it to be cold and the eyes are just amazingly wise and kind. So, I got to hug an elephant, finally!
The Bunong people live in the eastern part of Cambodia and have their own language and culture. They practice a ‘slash and burn’ agriculture, tame elephants, and produce beautiful weavings. Although they are traditionally animists, they are losing that. In fact, most of the catholic and protestant churches I saw in Cambodia were here. A contemporary village may have 10 elephants which they buy for $10-15,000 and use, it seems, mainly for tourism. They don’t let the elephants breed because it would take too many offerings of water buffalo etc to bring that process to a good end. Though they are accused of being responsible for deforestation, the actual land they slash and burn is very small. The real culprits were and are the illegal loggers who smuggle special hardwood to Thailand and Vietnam. There are daily
reports of such activity and lots of evidence ([http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/can%E2%80%99t-see-forest-%E2%80%A6](http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/can%E2%80%99t-see-forest-%E2%80%A6)). I saw many rubber and pine forests being planted in Mondulkiri where earlier mixed forests had been. The Bunong’s life was disrupted during the Khmer Rouge years as they, like everyone else, were forced into agriculture away from their land.

For my Cambodian friends, who live close to Phnom Penh, the night skies in Mondulkiri were a treat. I loved seeing new constellations, especially the horse!

The food on this trip was unbelievable: street foods of the most varied kinds in addition to three hot meals a day and exotic fruit everywhere: grapefruit dipped in a chile/salt/sugar mix, soursop, pomelo, longan (see [http://www.cambodia-cooking-class.com/fruits.htm](http://www.cambodia-cooking-class.com/fruits.htm)), waterlily, and the sweetest and softest pineapple. I also ate in ’Dine in the Dark’ and the (in)famous Raffles ([http://www.raffles.com/phnom-penh](http://www.raffles.com/phnom-penh))!

The weekend in Kep and Kampot was a lot of fun as well. Kep features (not so well) in a crime novel by Tom Vater that I have only half finished. Good thing I didn’t read it before my visit. Kep had beautiful villas that were all burnt down during the Khmer Rouge times but whose foundations and walls remain. It has a delicious crab market. Kampot is beautiful: it still has a lot of French colonial architecture, with dark yellow walls, shutters in various colors and stages of decay in a way that I love but that many would describe as ‘decrepid’ (e.g. the lonely planet guide!) It has a wonderful river that makes the town come alive.

The French built a casino and church (what an appropriate combination) on Bokor Hill Station in the 1920s that make it a bit spooky up there. There is also an abandoned royal residence. My friend took me there on the back of a motorbike. It was raining and misting and so beautiful with shadows of trees and distance views with sunsets fading in and out! The irony is that the road to the top is now ok because a new casino and hotel were built for the Vietnamese – Cambodians aren’t allowed to gamble!
Abandoned French casino on Bokor Hill

View towards the coast from Bokor Hill

I also spent a day at ‘free the bears’ where I got to ‘shake hands’ with adoring bear cubs and put food in balls for the bears to take out. The organization [freethebears.org.au/web/Projects/Cambodia](http://freethebears.org.au/web/Projects/Cambodia) rescues bears, for instance, from bear farms where their bile is extracted (very cruelly) for ‘Chinese’ medicine and from restaurants that will kill them just for their paws. One can’t really blame someone if a paw is worth $250 and the yearly wage close to that.

(Rescued) bear cubs are very loving

Eating in the hammock

Poaching bears is illegal in Cambodia but the hunting and killing of bears does occur. Currently, there is no bear reintroduction program and the bears at the centre aren’t allowed to breed. Other species, e.g. gibbons and pythons, are being released into the wild again.

In all, a really inspiring trip!