

A resilient Cambodia remembers, too

By Jeff Alexander

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From our seats at Phnom Penh's venerable Foreign Correspondents Club, with its wide, open-air views of the Tonle Sap River, we watched geckos flit across the mustard-colored walls. Sparrows swooped in the sunset as an elephant, ridden by a young mahout, walked the sidewalk below. Peddlers packed up their bagged soups, trays of fried locust, silver trinkets, and traditional Khmer scarves. Another typical late afternoon in Cambodia's capital city.

Having arrived in the country's more likely tourist destination, Siem Reap, days earlier to explore the wondrous ruins of Angkor Wat and surrounding temples, it was difficult for us to imagine a worthy following act during the five-hour bus ride that led us southward to Phnom Penh along a stream of rice paddies, shacks, and farmers working the land.

Our arrival was marked by a rush of tuk-tuk (three-wheeled motorized rickshaws) and taxi drivers, hawking their services as we exited the bus. This was our first taste of a delightfully surprising city rich with broadly smiling locals, boulevards bubbling with activity, late-night cafes, artisan shops, and Buddhist wats (temples).

Settling in, we chose the Renaksé Hotel as our base. Centrally located across from the Royal Palace, it has a long driveway leading visitors away from the bustle of the street into a gardenlike quiet. The clean, minimalist rooms provided a sound night's sleep.

Local attractions are abundant, and a one- or two-hour tuk-tuk tour will quickly acclimate the first-time visitor. Friendly, funny drivers readily whisk travelers through the streets to welcoming bars and restaurants, museums and other destinations. French Colonial architecture mixes busily with ornate temples, grand hotels and ragged cityscapes.

The difficult legacy of the Khmer Rouge is conspicuous in Phnom Penh, and should not be ignored by those wishing to better understand the resiliency of Cambodia. Two sites offer memorable studies. The "genocidal center" of the Choeung Ek killing fields, a half-hour from city center, is a chilling landmark. Hundreds of human skulls, housed in a memorial stupa, sit in blank watch over pockmarked grounds. A former school turned detention and torture center, named S-21, also delivers a graphic history lesson. The squeamish are forewarned.

We returned to the lively city center, where the massive Central Market quickly envelops all who enter. Stall after stall bulges with sundry staples of fish, meat, fruits and vegetables, clothing - a riot of sounds, colors and smells not to be missed.

Other worthy stops include the Royal Palace and its Silver Pagoda, bedecked with golden Buddhas and sterling-silver floor, as well as the renowned Raffles Hotel Le Royal. Famously expensive, it is home to the approachable Elephant Bar, where billiards, inventive cocktails, and less lofty prices reign.

But it's the gentle rhythm of the city that I will remember: Monks strolling in the morning light, the riverside rituals of merchants, the murmuring chants of Buddhists as they welcomed the new day.

It's the survivor I will remember, the vitality of a city that lives on brightly and in ways just discovered, despite the long odds of its painful past.

Jeff Alexander traveled to Cambodia from his home in Philadelphia.