

Cambodia and Southern Vietnam November – December 2005

Cambodia is a very flat country, very warm and extremely friendly and polite. Vietnam is much more in your face.

Day 1 London/Ho Chi Minh City

We flew into Ho Chi Minh City, got the bikes transported across town to the hotel. There was a festival in the square opposite the hotel, so we mingled amongst the crowds, goggling at the wares of the stalls and outdoor events. Everyone joined in the entertainment young & old. There were many simple games that challenged the dexterity of the contender, from walking the length of a thin tree trunk while balancing a pot on the head and limbo dancing under another branch; to jumping in and out of moving bamboo trunks, serious ankle pain resulted if you miss your step! It all finished abruptly when the heavens opened with a torrential rain downpour. We thought we had missed the monsoon season! We huddled together under a canvas cover but as soon began to get wet, so we dashed for shelter in a doorway. We watch the smiling faces ride scooters through the flooded streets, plastic bags on the head, umbrellas held for drivers, while mobile food carts still carried on selling their wares, with lonely shoes bobbing down the road. By now the water level was halfway up the cycle wheel and the road converted to a river. We thought it would stop in a few minutes but soon realised that it was not going to stop for many an hour and made a dash for the hotel arriving like bedraggled rats still smiling and the joy on the faces of everyone, and my first taste of Vietnam. Like a dream no evidence of the downpour could be spotted in the morning

Day 2 Flight from Ho Chi Minh City – Siem Reap

You can tell the new comers to the city of Ho Chi Minh as they stand on the pavement heads going from left to right, right to left looking for a gap in the traffic. Forget all those years of road traffic conditioning, just walk out into the road slowly at a consistent speed and traffic just finds a route around, like dividing of the Red Sea, and miraculously you arrive safely on the other side of the road. Another road tip is to forget what's behind you and just keep your eyes in front and weave in and out of the obstacles.

After a famous egg & tomato breakfast we ventured to the airport and flew into Siem Reap. There was a noticeable difference in temperature and humidity. We sorted the bikes out, enjoyed a wander around and a glass of beer while we waited for our four travelling companions to arrive from Phnom Penh. A memorable sight as we spotted them on the road in the afternoon rain with one pannier each ... now that's travelling light!

Memorable moments.... Tasting the wine Khmer Rouge wine at the Dead fish Tower Restaurant ensured we drank beer for the rest of the trip. In order to visit the loo you had to take a stroll over a badly lit rickety bridge under which were housed at

least 30 live and hungry crocodiles of varying sizes. The red soil tracks we cycled along.

Day 3 Siem Reap Cycle 45km

The next day was a cycle around the temple complex. Set wonderfully in the middle of a forest so a beautiful setting with loads of welcome shade.

Angkor Wat is a place of wonder at how any civilisation could have created such beauty and expanse of stone carving. But they did and truly a wonder of the world.

With loads of little encampments for refreshments, from fresh coconut milk, fresh pineapple on a stick, to the less refined coke-cola corporation options.

Day 4 Siem Reap Cycle 40km

The golden stone shows Ankor Wat at it's best at sunrise with it's reflection in lily lake is breath taking. Back to the hotel for a refreshing swim and snack late afternoon.

Day 5 Siem Reap/Phnom Penh Cycle 12 km

Mad men and Englishmen in the midday sun comes to mind, so an early 6am departure, lights ablaze to catch the 7am ferry to Phnom Penh a 5 hour ride down the Tonle Sap.

A welcome roadside breakfast with the locals was enjoyed with hot noodle soup and coffee. We soon discovered the local delights of strong hot coffee with condensed milk, or strong coffee poured over ice cubes with condensed milk. Great when the temperature reached 30°C +

Having strapped the bikes onto what looked like a narrow boat we border the vessel. Watched life on the floating villages along the Tonle Sap, before we sped out into the open water to our destination.

In the afternoon we visited the School and Palace.

Day 6 Phnom Penh to Takeo. Cycle 74 km

Takeo a town bordering the water plains showed signs of former grandeur in it's buildings but now very much a back water. We found a local fish restaurant on the lake with a rickety wooden floorboards and sheet of plastic for windows, that later wind & rain drove straight through.

Day 7 Takeo to Kampot Cycle 85 km

Kampot was a delight. After finding our pre-booked accommodation double booked we found an more favourable unfinished hotel off an unfinished road.

Day 8 A perfect rest day Cycle 16km

This was the day I discovered the wonder of sugar cane nectar, fantastic in the heat of the day and provides a sugar rush for the tried exhausted cyclist. Race you to the

next water buffalo. We cycled around Kampot and took up the offer of a boat trip to a desert island. An idealic warm swim followed by BBQ fish straight from the sea and coconuts from the trees. Kampot lies on the Gulf of Thailand and is famous for it's black pepper, which is like nothing ever tasted in Europe. Caryl got the 1st prize for being caked in red mud enjoying the off-road sprint. It took over 20 washes to remove most of the stains from the T-shirt!!

Day 9 Kampot to Chau Doc Cycle 80km

We strapped our bikes to the roof of the van and took the van to where the road was hostile to the car and this the main road to Chau Doc the border crossing to Vietnam. A red pot holed, muddy wet track, interlaced by huts either side and livestock on the road. As we neared the border the landscape changed to paddy fields. The border control was a tin shack with no pens, and quarantine medical was a series of hard interrogating questions followed by a bill for everyone interviewed in the party. A distinctive change of attitudes in just 100m was a culture shock. Cambodia is still the friendliest, helpful and resourceful place and my favourite destination.

Day 10 Chau Doc to Long Xuyen Cycle 55km

The school uniform was a beautiful graceful white "ao dai" that somehow they managed to keep perfectly clean even when riding the bikes.

Day 11 Long Xuyen to Vinh Long Cycle 72km

Sugar cane stalls became an unfamiliar site as we neared civilisation and out of the rural areas.

Day 12 Vinh Long to Mytho. Cycle 56 km

Hired a boat to take 6 bikes, panniers and us to see the floating market. This consists of cargo boats of every shape and size loaded with goods. The tradition is to display the item they are selling on a flagpole for all to see which makes for some interesting sights!

Not to miss out on a shopping opportunity we were taken to the compulsory island for a barrage of sellers. But always barter for any item! One of the advantages of cycling means you can't buy very much as you have no means of transporting it!

Day 13 Mytho to Ho Chin Min Cycle 72km

Having found some wonderful off-road route passing by villages, markets, alleyways and bridges, we finally hit highway 1 the main thoroughfare into Ho Chi Minh. We joined the heavy trucks with their endless hooting of horns, exhaust fumes, dust clouds, and oncoming traffic on the same side of the road. We finally found our hotel leaving time for sightseeing and shopping.

Day 14 Sightseeing in Ho Chi Minh

Day 15 Farewell Vietnam and Cambodia