

Monday March 21



Once again we were taken by small boats (these held only eight passenger) for our shore excursion, despite the fact that we were docked at the quayside in Chau Doc. We visited the floating homes and villages on the shore to view more of the local handicrafts and industry. The separation between living on the river and living beside the river is quite blurred here as even those homes that are built on land are on stilts as the lower floor becomes the river at certain times of the year.

Not surprisingly, a major industry is fishing and more and more this is done from fish farms which are built about 12 feet underneath a floating home. The tiny fish are reared over a period of nine months until ready to be harvested – a relatively easy process since they are all right below the living room!

Docking amongst the water hyacinth

In another home we saw women weaving (and, of course, there were samples for sale) but once again the homes were built well above the river with rather flimsy wooden walkways between them.



2008 Flood line



Riverside Village and Weaving Shed



Feeding time at a Floating Fish Farm



*Moslem or Buddhist —
she's beautiful*

The village – indeed this whole area – is very heavily populated by Moslems and therefore the women's dress is quite different from that of the other areas we have seen in Vietnam. We visited a mosque which had been the scene of a huge Khmer Rouge massacre in 1979 and the graveyard is filled with headstones with Arabic characters. It seems that the Khmer Rouge crossed the border from Cambodia (not far away) and indiscriminately killed hundreds, just as they had in the Killing Fields of their own country. This precipitated a period of Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia, although the Vietnamese thought of it as a military presence to protect their own people. As with most political situations, the truth is probably between the two. Today, however, the two countries seem to be tolerant of one another and the Cambodians were indeed grateful for their liberation from the Khmer Rouge by Vietnam, when all other outside intervention seemed to have failed them.



After a walk through yet another market – this one specializing in “fermented fish”, we were taken back to the ship by rickshaw. In this case the rickshaw is a bicycle with a rather crude two-wheeled attachment on the back that provides a small seat but very little else. Despite the relative discomfort, the twenty minute ride back to the dock was interesting, if a little scary in the extremely busy city traffic.



Shortly after returning we set sail for Cambodia. In only a couple of hours we were at the border and anchored in the middle of the river to allow both Vietnamese and Cambodian Customs officials to board. Meanwhile we attended a 45 minute talk and Q&A session given by our two tour guides in which a number of facts and figures (and opinions) were given on both the history and present climate in Vietnam. As in China, only a very small minority (3%) are members of the Communist Party. So, communist control exists side by side with a very industrial (capitalist) people and there seems to be a quiet acceptance of each by both.

At 4:30 we were underway again, now in Cambodia, and the contrast both on and beside the river with the country we had just left was amazing. In Vietnam, virtually the whole way from Saigon, the river banks had been wall to wall housing and industry and the river itself was filled with craft of every description. Now in Cambodia there was an occasional house on an otherwise empty bank and the river itself had virtually no commercial traffic.

Tonight we had our first meal in Cambodia, preceded by drinks on the sun deck. It had rained in the middle of the afternoon but now a cooling breeze made for a very pleasant evening.

Tuesday March 22



We got up just as we were docking in **Phnom Penh**. There was a number of cruise boats docked and arriving and the overall impression from the ship of the city was of a modern and relatively prosperous area. This initial image was tempered subsequently as we traveled further in the country and overall Cambodia seems to be less well developed than Vietnam.

At 8:30 we started our shore excursion, once again traveling by cyclo – but this time the seating was much more comfortable and was at the front of the bike. We went in a 60 bike convoy to the Royal Palace, passing on the way some fine pagodas and a very nicely landscaped riverside promenade.



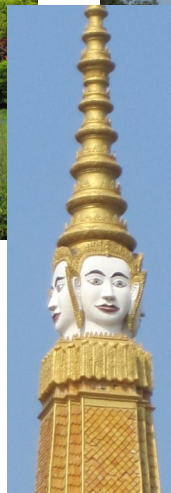
In convoy along Riverside Drive: traveling by Cambodian Cyclo-Rickshaw

Norodom Sihanouk was the King of Cambodia from 1941 to 1955 and again from 1993 until his semi-retirement and voluntary abdication on 7 October 2004 in favor of his son, the current King Norodom Sihamoni. Since his abdication he has been known as The King-Father of Cambodia, a position in which he retains many of his former responsibilities as constitutional monarch.

The son of King Norodom Suramarit and Queen Sisowath Kossamak, Sihanouk has held so many positions since 1941 that the Guinness Book of World Records identifies him as the politician who has served the world's greatest variety of political offices. These included two terms as King, two as Sovereign Prince, one as president, two as prime minister, and one as Cambodia's non-titled head of state, as well as numerous positions as leader of various governments-in-exile.

Most of these positions were only honorific, including the last position as constitutional King of Cambodia. Sihanouk's actual period of effective rule over Cambodia was from 9 November 1953 (when France granted full independence to Cambodia) to 18 March 1970 (when Lon Nol and the National Assembly deposed Sihanouk). [Wikipedia] (Wikipedia)

The palace, now occupied by the second king since independence from France, is a magnificent set of buildings very much like the Royal Palace in Bangkok. The main reception hall was not open to the public today as the ambassador from Myanmar was presenting his credentials to the king. Interestingly the king is now selected by a committee from a list of royal candidates (presumably all sons of the previous monarch) and the current king had to return from his home in France to take over just six years ago. The country is described as a constitutional monarchy with the royal family divorced from politics and a number of parties (as high as 26 in recent elections) vying for the real power. The Cambodian People's Party is now in power, which sounds like a communist party but was not described as such by our guides. Cambodia seems to have far more social services than Vietnam but, as I said above, is less well developed following its internal struggles and wars which are only quite recently behind them.



The Royal Palace

Phnom Penh



In the palace grounds we were able to visit some of the buildings where royal regalia, golden Buddhas and many other very ornate pieces were on display. Despite the fact that many of the buildings were destroyed or severely damaged when Pol Pot took over, much of the treasure seems to have been left intact.

From the palace our cyclos took us to the **National Museum** where we were given a whirlwind tour by an excellent local guide. In 45 minutes she covered the history of Cambodia, its influence by Hinduism and then Buddhism and showed us a number of sculptures of each period to illustrate her point. As we had found in Thailand and in our last visit to Cambodia, the many gods of each religion were difficult to comprehend but it once again struck me how similar the several major religions of the world are.



We were then taken back to the ship by cyclo – fighting city lunchtime traffic all the way.

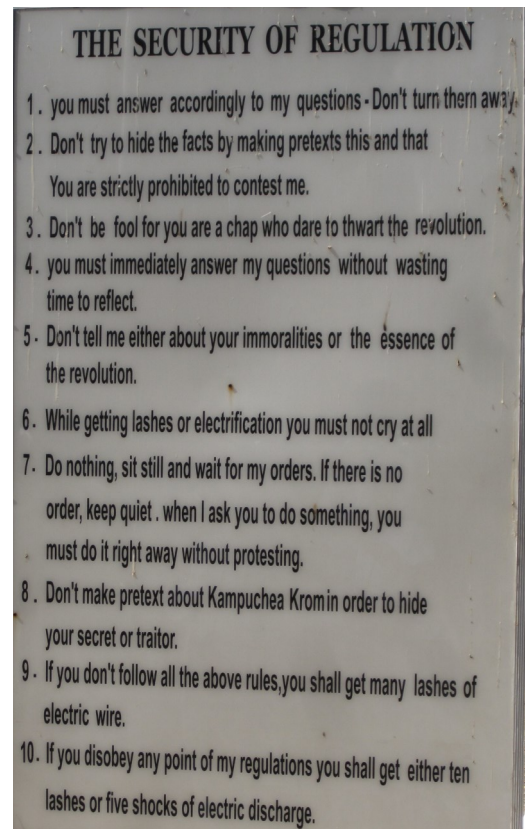
Molly opted out of the afternoon excursion to the Killing Fields. I will admit that I was uncertain but felt that I should see the evidence of that piece of relatively recent history as it was not at all clear exactly what had happened and, more importantly, why it had happened. I am not sure that the second question was answered by the tour but just to see what had taken place was a very sobering experience. The fact that our guide had lost his parents to the Pol Pot Regime added a degree of poignancy to the history lesson.

We stopped first at what had been one of many detention centers set up (this one in a school) to interrogate victims prior to execution. This one was where most of the VIPs of the former dynasty had been brought and so was perhaps one of the major sites in the country – hence its current role as a museum.



Photographs of victims interrogated here and the rules to be followed by the prisoners.

Pot's ambition (despite having been educated in France and holding a job as a teacher) was to return Cambodia to the 11th century when the Angkor



Dynasty had been at its zenith. To this end, he needed to establish a feudal farming system and felt compelled to rid the country of all educated people. This in effect set up a slave state with a whole generation of educated and/or professional people being eliminated. It is estimated that 2 million were killed from a country whose population was only about 5 times that.

After interrogation and terrible torture in the detention center, the vast majority were taken into the countryside and executed in one of hundreds of "Killing Fields" across the country.



***Skulls collected
from the mass
grave sites fill
the central por-
tion of the Mon-
ument
(opposite)***



The one we visited was the one of the movie and is where the National Remembrance Monument has been built. This pagoda-like glass tower is filled with the skulls of hundreds executed and the grassy area around it is filled with mass graves. Bone and clothing remnants still lie on the ground in the region of the graves, many of which were the final resting place for hundreds of victims.

Obviously the whole experience is a shock to anyone visiting but it seems appropriate that the country has established this site as a permanent reminder of the terrible regime and to allow a healing of sorts to take place. Again, although we obviously lived through the era and were somewhat aware of the situation in Cambodia, I know that I was not alone in being shocked by the extent of the genocide that had taken place in less than four years.

As a stark change of pace, tonight after dinner we were entertained by a group of school children who performed traditional Cambodian dances on the sun deck of the ship. As we had been told in Vietnam, "Look forward"; these young children provide the impetus and the reason to do so.



Wednesday March 23

Today was a very relaxing change after the hectic pace of the past several. Shortly after we got up, we set sail from Phnom Penh up the Tonle Sap river towards the lake of the same name. At this time of the year the river level is low enough that the ship could pass under the bridges across this stretch of river. Later in the year, the river level would be higher by perhaps another fifteen feet so visiting our destination of Kampong Chhnang would be done by bus.

For most of the year the Tonle Lake is fairly small, around one meter deep and with an area of 2,700 square km. During the monsoon season, however, the Tonlé Sap river, which connects the lake with the Mekong river, reverses its flow. Water is pushed up from the Mekong into the lake, increasing its area to 16,000 square km and its depth to up to nine meters, flooding nearby fields and forests. The floodplain provides a perfect breeding ground for fish.

The pulsing system with its large floodplain, rich biodiversity, and high annual sediment and nutrient fluxes from Mekong makes the Tonlé Sap one of the most productive inland fisheries in the world, supporting over three million people and providing over 75% of Cambodia's annual inland fish catch and 60% of Cambodians' protein intake. At the end of the rainy season, the flow reverses and the fish are carried downriver.

Sediment is an important part of the river and lake ecosystem, providing nutrients that drive the floodplain productivity when the area around the lake is farmed.

There is considerable concern in Cambodia regarding the dams being built on the Mekong River in China. It is feared that these upstream interruptions to the water flow could radically affect the ebb and flow of the Tonle River and hence its major fishing and farming industries.

The scenery along this river was quite different from that we had traveled on the Mekong yesterday. The surrounding land was still very lush and generally sparsely populated but there were areas that were quite heavily forested and, further



north, we saw several mountain peaks, some reaching about 1000 feet according to the maps on the ship. The river became very narrow in places – perhaps less than 200 feet at the most constricted – so we were able to see the countryside up close as we cruised. The weather was pleasant also, as there was a stiff breeze blowing which made for a very comfortable sail.

We had lunch on board and then, about 3pm, we were picked up once again by small boats to transport us to the town. The major point of interest was that part of the town that was made up of floating homes. We had seen several of these as we sailed north but here was a population of 8000 living on 1600 boats in the river. Everything – shops, schools, cafes, recreation areas – was floating. The part of town that was on land was built about twenty feet above the current water level and even those homes were built on stilts.





Apparently the Cambodian government wants to get rid of these floating villages as pollution of the river is becoming of more concern. Certainly one would imagine that much more acceptable and sanitary living could be found on dry land – but this has been the only life that many of these inhabitants have known. Their living is made on the river and presumably they feel more at home there than they would elsewhere. It seems that change must come, not only to the floating villages but even to the very poor living conditions even on dry land – but it seems equally clear that it will take a good deal of time.

Meantime everyone gives the impression that they enjoy their life and all are very friendly. They will inevitably wave and smile, even to the extent of breaking off from their work to greet any visitor. To Westerners it appears to be a rather primitive life in some difficult conditions. On the other hand, all the homes have TV (powered by battery on the river homes without mains electricity) and the shops on land are filled with electronics, cell phones and the like. It seems a strange mixture of cultures but how long can they co-exist?

As we had learned on our last visit to this part of Cambodia, the majority of the river village people are Vietnamese so the two peoples live together despite years of friction and wars. Three major religions – Buddhism, Moslem and Christian – are represented here also and we saw many temples and mosques lining the river on our journey upstream.



The RV Tonle Pandaw; our home for a week

About 5pm we returned to the ship and started our journey back to Phnom Penh. On the way we were invited to a cocktail hour and barbecue on the sundeck hosted by our two tour guides and then there was the usual 7:30 dinner. So, after a very relaxed day we were still ready to retire well before 10pm.

