

**Thursday March 24**

We had been moored in the middle of the river at Phnom Penh overnight but the ship sailed around 7:30 as we were eating breakfast. At 8:30 we had our first shore excursion of the day, this time at one of the larger islands (Chong Koh) in the river. The ship pulled into the muddy shore, much like the Mississippi River boats used to do, but instead of lowering a sturdy gangway, two 20 feet long boards (2x12s) were our passage to the shore.



The island has a number of weaving shops so we were greeted by dozens of children each imploring us to buy from their “shop”. Rather than carry purchases around for 1 ½ hours, most people resisted the temptation to buy until we were back close to the ship. So, we were “escorted” by the children who latched on to at least one visitor and accompanied them on the whole tour.

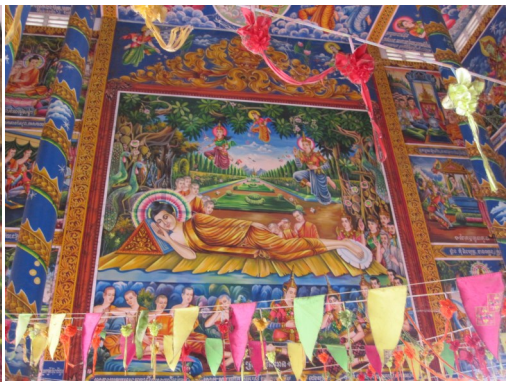
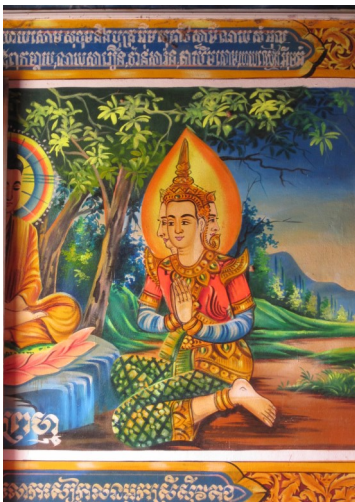
The children all spoke some English (“Hello; what is your name; where are you from; my name is.....”) but we talked with one 15 year old who knew the language very well and we were able to hold an interesting conversation with her.

We saw the weaving shops but it was obvious that the garments they were making were much less complex than the ones for sale, so we wonder where the sale items were actually made. Regardless, there were some

rather beautiful pieces so we helped the economy of the locals and probably that of the country beyond this island.



On the tour we visited a Buddhist Temple with the typical very colorful paintings depicting the life of Buddha decorating the inside walls.



Part way around the tour we encountered a wedding taking place. Apparently the wedding day (and days before and after in some cases) is a **major** event and this one had been ongoing since dawn. As we arrived, the wedding party and guests were being entertained by a couple of local comedians – and everyone in the tour was invited to sit down and watch the show. This seems to me to be the height of friendliness – simply invite another 60 guests to your party as they are walking by!



*Above: Cambodian Wedding Ceremony*



*Still looking for sales as we pulled away from the bank.*

Back on board we continued sailing up stream and we also attended a talk by two local tour guides on Cambodia, covering its history, geography and recent politics. Included was a section on the Angkor Dynasty and the Wats that we will be visiting at the weekend.

At its height, the Khmer Empire covered much of Southeast Asia from Thailand to Vietnam and even down the Malaysian peninsula. Eventually, however, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, first the Mongolians and then others caused significant attrition and Angkor was lost to the jungle for 400 years before being re-discovered by a French explorer. Angkor went from a city of one million (London at that time was 50,000) and the capital of a huge empire to being abandoned and all but lost. Now Cambodia is a relatively small country with a total population of 14 million. Of course, recent history has resulted in a 25% reduction in population during the relatively short period of the Khmer Rouge.

Later in the afternoon we made another shore excursion to visit a local elementary school. Viking River Cruises is part sponsor of the school (just as in China, as we saw last year) and everyone had been encouraged to purchase a few school materials in the market we visited yesterday to use as a donation during our visit.

This is an aspect of Viking Cruises that I am not all that comfortable with. While the company sponsorship of a school is a good cause, and I would not be against a portion of their profits being used for that purpose, I don't particularly like the concept of making the passengers feel obligated to buy materials in this way. I would be much more in favor of a direct donation made by the company on behalf of its customers. However, that's the way it is done – and it does provide some entertainment for the passengers and some smiles from the children.

Once again for this shore visit, our ship pulled into the shore and a walkway was placed between the bow and the shore,

Mississippi River style. The trek up to the road level here was even steeper and longer than the one earlier in the day but there were probably ten crew members on hand to provide support – and a push if necessary – so everyone made it. We were again greeted by a number of young children who were obviously familiar with the process as they immediately had their hands out for the books, etc. that we had brought for the *school visit*.



At the school we went to a kindergarten and a fifth grade class. In each we were given a song and broad smiles and the children politely waited for their gifts and thanked everyone with the traditional hands-together bow. Again I was struck by how beautiful all the children were, both inside and outside the school. This was enhanced in the grade school class and, later as we passed the junior high school, by the blue and white uniforms that all the children wore.

After a walk through the village and a visit to a Buddhist monastery, we returned to the ship and set sail as soon as everyone was on board. This evening, in addition to the cocktail hour and dinner, there was a showing of an hour-long film on Angkor Wat. It was in fact a very good documentary and, despite the hour, we were able to stay awake for its conclusion.



*Ready to go.....*



*The precarious return to the ship*

### **Friday March 25**

We sailed north for about 1 ½ hours while we were having breakfast and then went ashore for another excursion on foot. This time it was not only a steep river bank that we had to negotiate but that was followed by a similarly steep climb to a Buddhist temple on a “mountain”. Actually the hill was only about 200 feet high and the temple complex at the top was worth the climb.

There had been a temple here for centuries and we saw the partially ruined brick original that had been erected in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. It is now abandoned but we did visit a relatively new one that was very colorfully painted inside with the story of the life of Buddha. Once again we were struck by the similarity between the story of Buddha’s birth and life and that of Jesus – only, of course, Buddha’s period on earth preceded that of Christ by about 500 years.



*Hilltop Buddhist Temple with 7th Century remains*



From this hilltop there were also magnificent views of the Mekong River and this panoramic view showed clearly not only just how large the river is but how much it changes in depth over the course of a season. A quite sizeable island – currently being farmed – will be completely submerged a few months from now.



*Last crew member just makes it as gangway is pulled aboard. Later; time to relax*

Once back on the ship we sailed back to Kampong Cham, where we had docked last night and from where we took our afternoon excursion. This was a visit by bus to the “Twin Holy Mountains” which has many temples and pagodas which are still used during Khmer festivals. The two hills are “The Man” and “The Woman”, the “Woman” being considerably higher. (There’s a whole Cambodian story to that but suffice it to say that the man is not as dominant in this country as most).

The temple area that we visited was very extensive and very colorful with three huge gold Buddhas and many pagodas, all set in very nice gardens.





***The gardens and statuary at the “Man” Mountain Temple***

On our return to the ship we stopped at an orphanage sponsored by Viking and had the usual song and a chance to see some of their paintings and handicrafts – all for sale, of course.



**The painting we bought at the orphanage—with the artist**

***Right: A bamboo bridge that is assembled for the dry season and disassembled for the high river season. Built and taken apart every year!***



This evening was our final one on board so the dinner was followed by a show put on by the ship's crew. As with the one we saw in China last year it wasn't a bad show and one guide in particular did a spectacular acrobatic act. Then passengers were invited to take part with their acts. One group of five women had put together a song about the trip which was quite amusing and two other couples did some dancing. Then it was "open" dancing and drinking and I believe Molly and I were amongst the last to leave, around 11:30. Most unusual.

### Saturday March 26



We were off the ship by 8:30 and then driven by bus to Siem Reap. The journey took about 5 hours but was broken with a half hour rest stop. In addition, the roadside scenery was interesting and including quite extensive rubber plantations in areas. Mostly, however, it was the more traditional farming and, despite what appeared to be a rural area virtually the whole way, there were many villages and small towns and the road was busy for the entire journey. One town we passed through was the birthplace of Pol Pot – but it is said that surprisingly few of his neighbors – and even his family – knew that Pol Pot was the person they knew.

Once at the Siem Reap Sofitel hotel (five star and where we had stayed a few years ago), we were the last to get our room but we still had time for a shopping trip to the market (via Tuk Tuk) and afternoon tea on our return.

Tonight we had a buffet meal, followed by a traditional Cambodian show, including the wonderful *Apsara dancers*. We followed this with a nightcap in the lobby bar before retiring about 11pm.



*Below: Gordon and Jay*





