

How it feels to...

...be stuck
6,000 miles
from home

When the pandemic hit, *Jonnie Bayfield* was left stranded in Cambodia. He describes his desperate attempts to be repatriated

How was I to know that my three-month "work trip/writing retreat" would coincide with a global pandemic? On day one of my travels, way back on March 2, Covid-19 was yet to take serious hold in Britain. For many of us the virus still felt like a vague and distant thing, happening elsewhere, in other countries, to anybody but us.

"Do you think you should still go to Cambodia?" asked my partner, Daniela, as I stuffed a rucksack with metropolitan-elite coffee beans. "It'll be fine," I told her. "This will all blow over."

Like many of us (including the British government, apparently) I underestimated the tenacity of a virus that would redefine the world as we know it; I was ignorant to the lightning speed of its spread and the horrific loss of life we have been confronted with over the past few weeks.

This trip was a last-chance saloon for me and my writing partner, Simon. We had been working on a screenplay set in Cambodia, and had arranged meetings with several production companies in southeast Asia. With only more of my own unpublishable novels on the horizon, I kept telling everybody that this was the ideal time for me to "write in isolation". That didn't age well. At 27, this felt like a last hurrah before the onset of stamp duty and trips to Ikea.

March 10

On some levels Phnom Penh is the perfect place to experience a global pandemic. It's a city forever

on the brink of some insanity anyway, feverish and unhinged, with a real sense that if one plate stops spinning we could all end up in the Wild West.

Only now, in the second week of our trip, has the gravity of the situation in the UK revealed itself through frantic rounds of FaceTime. There are six recorded deaths and 373 people have tested positive for coronavirus. There are only small signs of panic to be found here in Cambodia: tuk-tuks full of bottled water are beetling around back streets; pick-up trucks loaded with petrol barrels are accompanied by armed guards. As it stands, most neighbouring countries are in the process of shutting down their borders. Kuala Lumpur, in Malaysia, where my brother works as a teacher, is on the verge of shutting down altogether, so we foolishly hatch a plan to make a break for Koh Rong, a tropical island off the coast of Cambodia. Then another, shorter-lived plan to drive back to Blighty in a tuk-tuk.

Simon starts feeling rough, flu-like, and takes to his bed. The roll call of symptoms is now so ingrained in me that I begin to panic. Is the devil, so to speak, now standing in the doorway? Either way, it forces us to stay put for now. If we were irresponsible enough to attempt to flee with coronavirus symptoms, we would risk ending up in Cambodian quarantine, which Khmer friends of ours have warned us about. They say patients are often obliged to provide their own bed sheets and meals. We

decide to settle in as the last of the readily available, affordable flights home leave the tarmac. Simon soon recovers: it was just a cold.

March 13

Ever-depressing news reports are spewing out of the West, but the state-run media in Cambodia seems to spread only misinformation. A series of tweets by the Thai health minister insinuate that Europeans are to blame for the rising infection rate across Asia, and this sparks a shift in the Cambodian narrative. "Many *farang* [Caucasians] are dressed dirtily and never shower," he declares.

With the media focus now moving away from China, it's us westerners who are in the firing line. Rapidly Phnom Penh starts to

**BACK TO DEAR
OLD BLIGHTY****£75m**

The cost of the repatriation package announced on March 30 to rescue tens of thousands of stranded Brits





turn against us and there is a fresh air of hostility around our apartment block. Previously pleasant neighbours scuttle off into their houses as I pass. When I step out for some socially distanced air, people turn and face the wall. Mothers cover their babies' mouths and gangs of street kids peg their noses. Food stalls refuse my custom and shoo me away. As a white man, this low-level discrimination is both novel and valuable; it's a small, insignificant hit of the racial suspicion I've been shielded from my entire life, with a dusting of viral hysteria thrown into the mix.

March 17

With local animosity still on the rise, but only 24 reported cases, precautionary measures are being

rolled out. Sinks and sanitisers are deployed in shops and at stalls with an authoritarian efficiency. Schools have been shut, and cinemas, hotels and bars are closing. "That's the end of the tourist trade," says Adi Jaya, the general manager of the Plantation Urban Resort, one of Phnom Penh's smartest hotels. With no other choice, he has been forced to strip down to a skeleton staff, with many locals losing their livelihoods in the process. Jaya wears it heavily as we discuss the devastating effect this virus will have on developing countries such as Cambodia. Later that evening I'm approached by one of the many working girls who patrol the riverside after dark. "There is no work now all the westerners are gone," she tells me, visibly shaken. "I don't know what I will do."

CITY LIMITS
Police enforce travel restrictions that prevent people from leaving Phnom Penh for the provinces, where they hoped to celebrate Khmer new year in April

She proceeds to offer me her services at a reduced rate of \$5. Seconds later a pair of street kids turn up clutching old bottles of shower gel. They want a dollar each for a squirt of "hand sanitiser". With 13.5% of Cambodians living in extreme poverty, and many surviving hand to mouth, this pandemic is truly a matter of life and death whether they contract the virus or not.

March 23

Dominic Raab, the foreign secretary, has told all Brits abroad to "get home now" despite the fact that borders are shut and most flights cancelled. Tonight, Simon and I sit pole-axed by a creeping fear that we are now really stuck. All my paid commissions and meetings have been cancelled. ➤➤

I am almost totally broke, and the only lifeline left is the last flight via Hong Kong on the March 27. The tickets cost £1,200. My father — who is not a wealthy man — frantically wires over the cash and we secure the last two places.

Next morning, invigorated by the idea of going home, we buzz through the city on scooters in search of a doctor willing to give us a “health certificate”. A stop-off at the British embassy is indicative of the general vibe of the consulate abroad — we’re not allowed in without an appointment, and they can take weeks to come through. We stand sweating in the car park until a flustered expat emerges from the building. “What’s the advice?” I ask, and he casts a glance over his shoulder.

“We’re f*****!” he says.

That night, word reaches us that Hong Kong has been shut to

We hear that Hong Kong has been shut down. Our tickets home are worthless

non-residents. Less than 12 hours after spending a small fortune on tickets home, they are unusable, refund hanging in the balance. We are beyond broke, and clueless, with the embassy seemingly offering little else but overpriced commercial flights on its Facebook page.

To rub salt in the wound, we get pulled over on our scooters by a pair of police officers who want \$40 to let us pass. We manage to haggle them down and are waved on, passing an opulent, imposing building. It has a big sign on the front: “Anti-corruption unit”.

March 24

The Thai Airways ticket office has a queue snaking out of the door. Inside it looks like the National Theatre lobby during the interval: pale faces staring down at their feet wondering why they have squandered so much cash. Talking to fellow foreigners, it’s clear just how dire and confusing the situation has become. One young British couple have spent every penny on a flight they could not board because they hadn’t taken a Covid-19 test. A French guy has managed to get the test, but has still been refused because it wasn’t done at the “right” hospital. Five Italian doctors (in dire demand back home) are among those stopped from boarding.

Jess, a backpacker from Preston, has torn through five defunct flights. “We have to be showing symptoms to be able to get a test,

which we need in order to fly home, but by having the symptoms we wouldn’t be allowed to fly anyway.” It’s a Catch-22 that nobody has an answer to right now. As the Germans, French and Swiss are being repatriated by their governments, our embassy continues to broker inflated flights on behalf of the airlines.

March 25

After many refusals, we have been accepted into new accommodation. Driving down our street, I see the local residents lined up on plastic chairs. They audibly moan in disapproval as we roll past. Oleg, the house’s Russian owner, tells me that two Chinese nationals were renting the house before us, and that one of the neighbours had wished Covid-19 upon him and his young family as a result. Tensions are high, and that night Oleg informs me that the same neighbour has reported us to the police. The commune chief, a sort of neighbourhood police officer, had paid him a visit to question our stay.

March 27

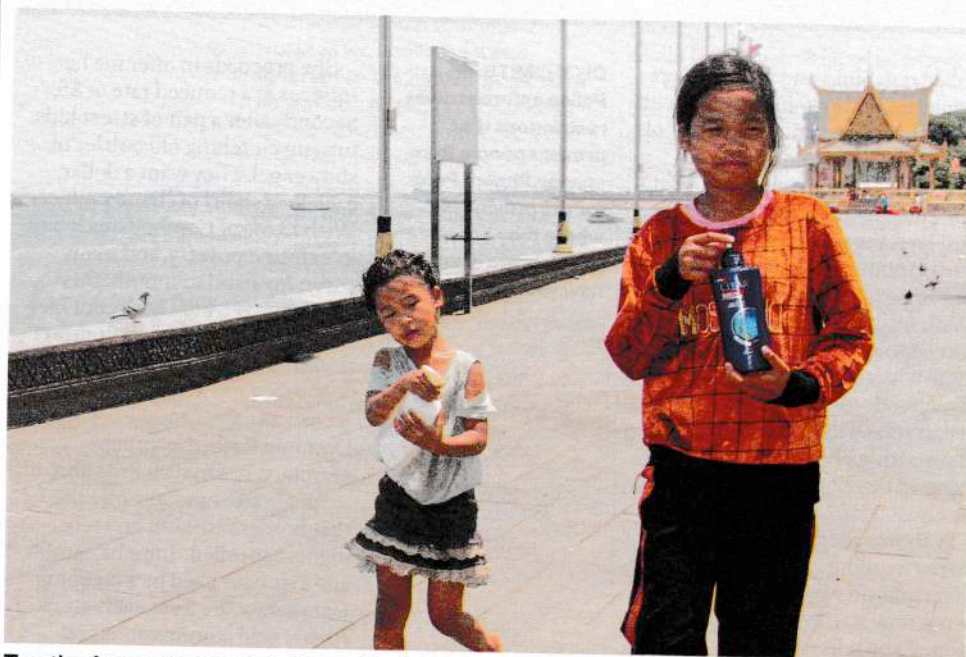
Today we should have flown home via Hong Kong. Instead we are stuck inside watching *Tiger King* like the rest of the planet. We have resigned ourselves to the idea that affordable help is not on its way. Most European nationals have now been airlifted out by their governments, but here we are still, like the last ones picked for the school football team.

March 28

In an absurd twist, a guy called Jerry Lewis has, miraculously, been able to organise a set of private flights for trapped Brits. At £1,250 a seat, it’s a lesser evil compared with the embassy-endorsed ones, but it still begs the question: how is it that one random individual is able to stage a more coherent repatriation operation than the government of the world’s sixth-largest economy? If only we hadn’t already blown all our cash on phantom flights to Hong Kong.

March 29

The police presence in the city has grown day by day. The close-knit market lifestyle and Jenga living conditions of Asian countries such as Cambodia make it extremely difficult for us to self-isolate or observe social distancing. As of



Top: the deserted riverside in Phnom Penh. Above: two street kids sell shower gel as hand sanitiser

right now, food stalls are still open, the leather-upholstery man downstairs is still cracking through three sofas a day and the sugar-cane girl over the road still churns juice out over ice.

April 2

We are summoned to the entrance of our rented accommodation. Oleg, our host, stands there looking at his feet, avoiding eye contact. The commune chief has paid him another visit. He wants us out. An alarming sting in the tail is that Oleg and his wife believe the only way to soothe fear in our neighbourhood is for us to have a Covid-19 blood test at his expense. The only hospital running tests is also a lion's den of the country's 110 confirmed cases. In another time, and in a different mood, I would class this enforced medical testing as a breach of my human rights. Instead we burst into laughter at the madness of it all. We say we'll think about it.

That night I receive an email from the Swiss embassy, which I had been instructed to contact on the off-chance. They've managed to confirm seats on the last Swiss repatriation flight for a few, select Brits. Saved by the bell... or the cuckoo clock. The neighbours are out till late, unwittingly toasting our exit by singing karaoke through a speaker the size of a small child. I cautiously emerge from our block like some kind of mud crab, and all it takes for me to thaw the ice is to dance to tinny Khmer pop music like the drunk idiot I am. I welcome the impromptu round of applause.

April 3

It's 4.30am and lines of Swiss nationals, plus a few bedraggled Brits, wait nervously inside Phnom Penh airport. A small trestle table is manned by a Swiss consulate worker dressed in a little hi-vis jacket. "We all live in the same building," he says, referring to the various international consulate workers in the vicinity. "I keep saying to the British embassy, 'There's 250 of your citizens stuck. That's one plane. Just get it done! One plane!'"

"Well, thank God for the Swiss!" I say.

"Oh, I'm not Swiss," he replies. "I'm from the German embassy. We already got our guys home, so I'm just helping out to make sure everybody gets on this flight."



As he worked his way down the long line, reassuring and settling others shaken up by the turn of events, I found myself moved by the camaraderie between these European officials, while simultaneously embarrassed by the indifference of our own.

April 4

We've now descended into the Dantean hell of long-haul transit travel; the 13-hour repatriation flight from Phnom Penh to Zurich is essentially a tin can full of coughs. That night, stuck in Zurich for a 10-hour layover, a group of us commandeered a posh-looking Swiss Air seating area that has little jazz club lamps and leatherette settees. I wish I could tell you that we kept our distance and reflected on the global situation in stoic silence. Shamefully, we opt for hard drinking instead. It is, I suppose, a nihilistic farewell to the freedoms that will be removed the moment we hit home.

April 5

I wake up as the plane hits tarmac, and am astounded by the lack of security measures at Heathrow: no heat scans, temperature checks, hand-sanitiser stations or quarantine instruction of any kind. Some of us dither at Nothing to Declare, unwilling to admit that the virus may well be silently incubating within us as we pass through. In the arrivals lounge there are no tearful reunions, just



Top: Jonnie (right) and Simon at Heathrow after 28 hours in transit. Above: queuing for the Swiss flight in Phnom Penh

one pale man holding a slip of paper with "Nick" written on it. For us, it's straight into another eight hours of risky, bleak travel on the bus to Norwich, and two weeks of self-isolation after that.

Drifting off while looking out at the empty London streets, a model village writ large, I'm suddenly grateful for the simple things, for the Blitz spirit in resurgence here at home, and the impossible courage of NHS workers, supermarket staff and all the other key workers. In Cambodia it was the tolerance of a few locals who helped us out. Under Covid-19's terms, this previously unremarkable kindness has been transformed into a profound act. In the end, no matter who, why or where you are in the world, fear and compassion will always intersect ■

Most Europeans have been airlifted out. We feel like the last to be picked for football