Cambodia's Past and Present Hubs

story and photos by Lauren Wise

After 25 years of isolation, Cambodia finally opened its doors to tourism in the 1990s. It is one of those places in the world that is naturally beautiful, historically rich, and somewhat untouched by Americanization—the latter of which won't last too much longer. But as historically rich the region may be, the poverty that rules the majority of the population's way of life is almost inconceivable even for America's homeless. The average income per person a year in Cambodia in $500, but to me, their way of life is simple and self-sustained, something that hasn't been celebrated in my home country for decades.

The main question my mother and I encountered about our month-long excursion to Southeast Asia was simple, yet stumped me all the same: Why? Isn't it unsafe and dirty? Won't you catch malaria? Why?

And the answer was always, why not?

For travelers, this trip is all about the taste of an extremely different culture, the chance to learn about religious practices, and visits to lavish temples. Not to mention tuna stuffed-croissants with chili sauce for a sunrise breakfast, curry chile chicken with mango for dinner, and fried pastries drizzle with coconut milk for dessert.

But there were also the museums that could rattle your emotions to the core, a look at the propaganda against the Americans during times of war, and disease that have caused thousands to suffer. A place like Cambodia is pretty foreign to Americans, who have little to no understanding of their past, current lifestyle or culture.

Ancient temple ruins are as prevalent throughout Cambodia's Siem Reap Province as the wild monkeys that run rampant amongst the lush vegetation. Many will recognize one in particular, the 12th-Century Ta Prohm Temple, from the 2001 film "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider." The multiple rooms and lofty towers bound by massive, gnarled tree roots is perhaps one of the temple's most distinctive feature. As we walk up along the secluded trail through the muggy jungle, we gaze skyward to the soaring trunks and their flickering green canopies that seem so far away. The air is filled with the sounds of birds whooping and squawking

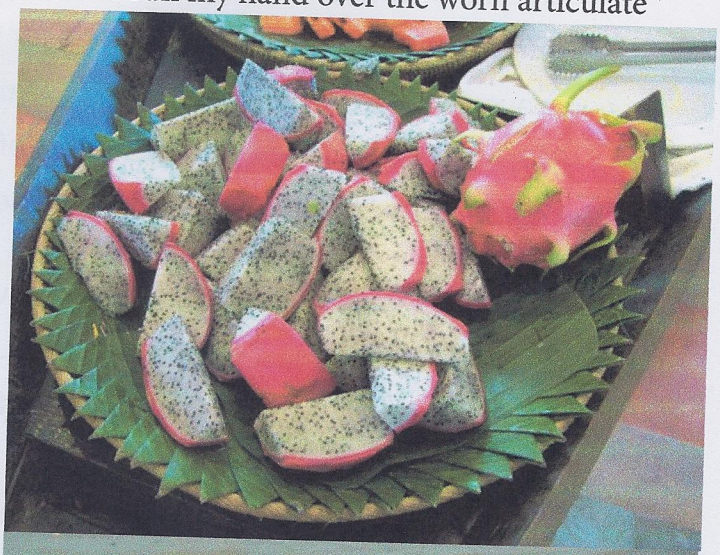
in protest of our presence. Cambodia's signature mode of transportation, small rick shaws pulled by pedal bikers (a.k.a. tuk tuks) drop off locals and visitors a little down the road from the jungle path.

Built in the late 12th and early 13th centuries, it is unique from most other Angkorian temples because it has been left in the same condition in which it was found. Built by King Jayavarman VII to honor his family, the temple is supposed

to inspire wisdom and compassion, and was once home to more than 12,500 people and such considerable riches as gold, pearls and silks. After the fall of the Khmer empire in the 17th century, Ta Prohm was abandoned and neglected, and when the French re-discovered it in the 19th Century, they left it in its natural state—not only was it one of the most imposing temples, but it had also merged so much with the jungle it almost didn't make sense to restore the structure.

The endless roots coil like snakes through thousand-pound stones that have tumbled over from the vegetation's forceful entry. The roots, some spanning several feet wide, roam in and out of the temple windows, cracking up through the floor and down from the lush canopy, fusing together for ancient nature and ancient stone to become one.

I run my hand over the worn articulate



carvings along the walls, and I can't help envision what it must have been like centuries ago—precious stone embellishments, the chime of enchanting music, flickering torches. I move through ancient rooms that were once sacred pools, and watch monks step softly where water once was, deeply concentrated on meditation. The temple carvings are largely "bas-relief" carvings, referring to a sculptural technique. "Relief" is from the

Latin verb "to raise," and to create a relief sculpture gives the impression that the sculpted part was raised out of the stone surface. What it really means is that the surface area around the carving is what was sculpted away, which is quite time-consuming and requires a lot of chiseling. As my mother and I duck in and out of small stairwells and nooks and crannies, we see that the bulk of the temple walls are these bas-relief carvings depicting a range of religious figures, battle scenes, daily life activities and indulgences. We pass by female deities, meditating monks and temple guardians. One badly eroded bas-relief illustrates the "Great Departure" Siddhartha, the future Buddha, from his father's palace.

There's also a heavy presence here, and it isn't just from the blanketing humidity. There may be a sense of serenity in the beams of sunlight that push through the thick treetops, filled with glinting dust and insects. But there's also a trickle of the desperation, a vein that runs deep in the local mentality. This means thieving children who con naïve wanderers into out-of-sight corners, and pick-pocketing monkeys—surprisingly adorable, and identifiable by small collars or bracelets.

However, I feel that Ta Prohm is one of the more mystical temples in Cambodia, seemingly a fight between nature and man. But it's a peaceful one that will only continue to grow more haunted and beautiful.

After leaving the ghosts of Ta Prohm's once-royal hub, it seems only natural to head to the region's current source of vitality: Tonle Sap Lake, the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. The body of water supplies 75% of Cambodia's fish, and supports dozens of floating villages—can you imagine never setting foot on dry land?

On our way to the lake, I gaze out at the small thatched homes sitting along the narrow dirt road, the bus kicking up a cloud of dust in our wake. The houses range from tiny shacks to rickety one-story homes. Some have small fruit stands on their front stoop, full of bananas, coconuts and dragon fruit, while others have large pots cooking over a smoky wood fire. Women stir the enormous cauldrons with long skinny spoons, and later we discover that they are boiling the extract from palm fronds for sugar. However, the sweet smell rising from the pots can't compete with the hot acrid dust in the air. The one thing that can? Exotic spiced dishes cooking over open fires, or some of the small spice stands—curry, chile, ginger and nutmeg—that locals opt to run instead of fruit. Tiny children play alongside the road, tuk tuks wheel people down the road, and men can be seen on the lake in the distance, standing on boats and attending to individual fish farms that are rigged up with stilts and netting.

The Tonle Sap is unusual for two reasons: its flow changes direction twice a year, and the portion that forms the lake enlarges and shrinks dramatically with the seasons. It is currently the month of April, which is technically Cambodia's dry season (usually running from November to May), so the lake has partially drained into the Mekong River at Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital.

As we pull up to the lake, we board a tour boat right out of the film "African Queen" and spill into the rhythm of the floating villages. We only see a fraction of this great lake that is encircled by five provinces. More than three million people inhabit the area around the lake, or live within the floating villages, and 90% of them earn a living by fishing and agriculture.

We float past a range of Khmer, Muslim and Vietnamese floating households and the floating markets, fisheries, clinics, schools, chicken and pig farms, bargaining boats, even a basketball court and town trash dump. The whir of our clicking cameras compete with the boat's diesel engine as we near our destination, the large floating village of Chong Khneas.

We dock at the floating market, and step right onto a platform that rises up over a handful of pits. One sells huge fresh catfish, their watery cages built right into the floor of the market. A whir of slapping fish tails is heard every time a small handful of live bait is thrown into their

overcrowded cages. One of the most legendary species in the lake is the Mekong giant catfish, the largest freshwater fish in the world. It can grow eight to 10 feet long, and weigh up to 500 pounds. The largest caught on record in this lake was more than 650 pounds.

Another watery pit is full of crocodiles, slithering over each other and snapping their jaws loudly. On this lake, it isn't rare to catch a sighting of the nearly extinct Siamese crocodile, or a writhing nest of snakes—the world's largest population of freshwater snakes also resides here.

Several small rowboats ease up next to the market, belonging to people from the floating village. They entice us to buy their bananas, coconuts, candies and woven jewelry. It isn't uncommon to see a child adorned with a small Python curled around their tiny necks, and for a $1, you can snap a photo with the child and their "pet." Many of the babies have the typical Buddha style haircut, which consists of a patch of hair on the front, sides and back, and the rest of the area shaved. While it may look unusual, it is the typical haircut for infants because it denotes good luck.

Children, who have lost limbs in long-forgotten Vietnam War land mine accidents, float by in deep plastic buckets or small bathtubs, paddling with a stick in their good arm. They eye us, unsure if we should be trusted as a target for conversation, theft, or neither.

We get back into the boat and glide along the dark emerald water, watching some of the many fishermans' techniques. There are more than 300 species of fish here. Next to their floating homes, the fishermen dip cone-shaped nets and let them set for a few moments before pulling them back up, full with two to three tons of fish each time. Many women work in fishing as well, and as they cut off the fish heads—then dried in the sun to become fertilizer to sell—they clean the fish and cut off the fat, which is then boiled to make soap. Often, the fishers salt the fish to preserve it, and many homes allow the fish to macerate for months until it becomes a paste call prahok, a nourishing condiment that is utilized on just about any Asian dish.

It's clear that this is a place that will always value a life of simplicity to make ends meet, but it's unclear how long it will be until Americanization invades. In fact, towards the end of the trip, we discover that there were small villages that were going to be relocated in the future in order to make room for a luxury beach front, five-star resort.

Cambodia has its fair share of busy, populated cities, yes; but the majority of these one-of-a-kind experiences stem from what isn't the norm for us. I can only hope that if I return to Cambodia in the future, it will still be full of tuk-tuks, exotic spices, and gorgeous temples that aren't yet seen as tourist attractions. And, of course, those adorable, pick-pocketing monkeys.