



OK. I have one week left. I have one paper to edit. And I feel like I have too much other stuff to do! So, in the spirit of getting to other things, this past week, I went to Cambodia and the previous week I enjoyed 3 days at the beach (Hua Hin) and in a flooded city (Petchaburi).

Cambodia was a crazy trip! First, you have to get there. If you are coming from the Thai side, like I was, you have two choices: fly or drive. I wasn't flying. After 4 hours on a huge tour bus from Bangkok, we arrived a few kilometers from the border where our "guides" kept us at a restaurant and pressured us to get visas from them. Luckily I had mine already. The woman who was "in charge" was one of the most abrasive people I've met (for this reason, I knew right away she wasn't Thai). When she realized I spoke a bit of Thai and already had my visa, she ignored me the rest of the way...I wasn't going to give her any money. Following this stopover for ways to get more money out of us travelers, we went on to the border and crossed (the Thai immigration people made a big deal of me being a student at Thammasat, which was fun). Once we arrived on the other side, it was about 3 in the afternoon and we were taken to a small, comfortable bus. Soon we found out that this bus was going to take us to our real bus.

The real bus was small, cramped, had no air conditioning and was missing a few windows! This was the start of a very interesting trip from the Cambodian border to Siem Reap: There is only [one road](#) from the border, Poi Pet, to Siem Reap. It is the Cambodian version of Route 66. But this storied road is the place where, instead of getting your kicks here, you get your bruises. The potholes number in the hundreds of thousands on this 160km dirt road and the only reprieve from the constant jolts rocking the bus are the short bridges which are slightly less bumpy. "Bone-jarring" and "wretched" are understatements. And this was when our driver was going less than 20km/hour (~12 mph?) Basically, the only thing that saved us from this torturous ride was that the company was in good humor. We had an interesting group of australians, americans, israelis, koreans and english. As we rode through this hellish road amidst gorgeous scenery, it dawned on us that we were not getting to Siem Reap within the 4-hour estimate given at the beginning of the trip. Once it got dark, things got a bit more dire-- Lee: "Where are we? I think we're lost, in the middle of nowhere!" Me: "We're not in the middle of nowhere! We're on *The Road!*" --A few times it began raining and we had to use the curtains as rain blockers where the windows were missing. Finally, we arrived at Siem Reap 7.5-8 hours later and the driver stood up to tell us, "OK everyone, now we're in Siem Reap and this (gesturing) is my guesthouse." Since it was



11pm, raining and we were all exhausted from enduring metal bars from the worn out seats mashing our bodies on every bump, the scam worked and everyone stayed that night in his guest house.

A few things that were strikingly interesting about this horrible trip: 1) The scenery in rural Cambodia is amazing. Miles and miles of open green accented by mountains in the distance on either side. 2) Once it started getting dark, we began to notice huge conglomerations of fluorescent lights in the fields and the small villages. It turns out that the people use these to attract crickets and grasshoppers to a) keep them away from the rice and b) to eat! The lights were placed on large pieces of cloth which would either catch the insects or drop them into the water below, stunning them a bit and allowing them to be caught. MMM DELICIOUS.

3) It turns out that Thai Airlines has a contract with the Cambodian government and is rumored to be paying bribes to keep *The Road* from being developed in order to increase flight sales to and from Siem Reap. Genius.



So, once I woke up the next morning (well rested, and still a bit sore), I did very little. The big draw in Siem Reap is [Angkor](#), the ancient city of the [Khmer Empire](#) which has hundreds of temples, palaces and other buildings dating from over 1000 years ago. On my first day, I was too tired and incoherent to make a trip there. Instead, we set up things for the next day with our adopted driver, Johnny. Johnny worked at the guest house and was a great find for us as he was helpful and generally sincere. He took my newfound friend, Toby, and I wherever we needed to go, and then took us to Angkor the following day at sunrise (beautiful). [Angkor Wat](#) is the big draw of Angkor because of its phenomenal size and nearly everyone goes there at 5 in the morning to see the sun rise behind it. (The wat is also depicted on the [Cambodia flag](#)) However, most people you talk to who have been there (including me) will tell you that Angkor Thom, the capital of ancient Angkor is much more interesting. The Bayon temple is one of my favorites as it includes over 173 (formerly 181) faces carved into its stone. The temple is not nearly as large as the Wat, but I found it far more interesting. And for those of you who are Angelina Jolie fans or Tomb Raider fans or both, you can also go to the temple ([Ta Prohm](#)) where Ms. Jolie taped her scenes for the [Tomb Raider movie](#)! When I was in the temple, in a particular spot, you could hear all the tour guides talking about Angelina Jolie recording her famous scene running out of a doorway above which there is an immense tree with its roots

cascading down around it. This is probably my favorite one as it is a large temple which is being taken over by the jungle. Trees are growing on top and through the walls and



towers of this temple in the most curious of ways. There are some massive trees which have their roots beginning atop walls and curling down through the building and finally into the ground. Go Nature!

Following this first day at Angkor, we returned to the guesthouse around noon (it was getting hot) and I waited for my friend Janelle to

arrive from Laos. Once she arrived, we began planning our foray into Angkor for the next day, again for the sunrise, but at a different part of the historical park. We decided to climb up to the highest point in the park and watch as the sun broke the horizon. After checking out Bayon and the Wat and others, we ate breakfast at Restaurant 27. This proved to be the bane of my trip. First of all, the food didn't taste good at all. (sidenote: Cambodian food is not very good, in general. One of the reasons for this is that so many people were killed in the wars and such raging from the early 70s (American bombings in Cambodia) to late 70's (Pol Pot, Khmer Rouge) to late 80s (more civil war). Estimates range from 20-50% of the population of Cambodians were killed and so much cultural knowledge was lost that many customs have died as well and the food is now a conglomeration of Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese, but put together poorly because the remaining people don't know how to cook well...more than half of the population is under 20 years of age)



Aside from the untastefulness, this food also gave me a great bout of FOOD POISONING! We had returned from Angkor again around 11 and by 2 or 3 that afternoon, I was restricted to my bed or the bathroom. I could not have asked for a more uncomfortable experience. Instead of continuing on to Phnom Pen (which would have required another interesting bus trip) I took the first flight out the next morning back to Bangkok. I'm still recovering (can't eat much at all yet...nothing like dry, plain crackers...)

A few more notes on Cambodia: 1) Cambodian people are quite possibly the most beautiful people I have ever seen. The children are striking and it is difficult to find an unattractive woman. I'm not sure what it is but Cambodian women's faces are amazing. And my friend Janelle says that while the women are very attractive, the guys aren't that great. 2) If you want to see some of the worst poverty in the world, go to Cambodia. It is unbelievable how some of these people in the villages live. A few friends from the bus ride went to a market and we bought a few armloads of gifts and had our drivers take us to some outlying villages so that we could give them away.



It was a crazy experience. 3) Cambodia, with its dearth of material wealth, also has some of the most impressive biodiversity in the world. The scenery is obviously gorgeous, and I returned to see [this in the NYTimes](#) today. 4) Cambodia doesn't seem to have a national currency...the official currency is Riel (4000/ dollar), but dollars are used more (even the ATM put out dollars, not Riels), and baht are accepted as well.

So that was Cambodia. Before this I had been in [Hua Hin](#) at the beach. It was another of Thailand's amazing beach resorts. The night we arrived there, my friend Casandra and I went to the beach to watch as storms were forming over the water and providing quite a natural spectacle. A bit of background on Hua Hin: It started as a vacation get-away for the Royal family decades ago and a palace was built on the beach with a name meaning "Far From Worries Palace". After development south of the palace, Hua Hin has become Thailand's most popular beach resorts. The palace is now the King's full-time residence, too. I can't blame him.

The city itself is mainly a tourist town. It's full of touristy foreign-themed restaurants and bars. On the first night we ate at a place with a british theme, but had surprisingly good Thai food. Walking around at night, it became apparent that the main thing to do at night was drinking at the various bars on two main bar streets and hanging out with the Thai women who work there (mostly prostitutes of some sort). However, there were also two really good nightmarkets. They had lots of good stuff and were alive with good food.

When we went to the beach during the day, it was very relaxing and peaceful, save for the old women who were offering Thai Massages on the beach and the horses you could ride for 400 baht (12 bucks) per hour along the beach. I did manage to get sunburned pretty bad however, despite putting on sunscreen. Chalk up another point for skin cancer.

Finally, leaving Hua Hin, we decided to stay a night and day in Petchaburi, a small town between Hua Hin and Bangkok. Little did we know it would be completely flooded

when we arrived. As we waded ankle/calf deep in water through the streets trying to find a hotel, we drew a lot of stares from the locals, but they loosened up a bit as we would talk to them to find the closest accommodations. That night we went in search of some good food and found some nervous Thai people in their restaurant, not sure what to do with the first foreigners to ever eat at their restaurant. The looks of relief on their faces when they found I could speak Thai (enough) and read their menus were really funny. We had some of the best Pat Kanaa (fried chinese broccoli) and Tom Yam Gung (spicy, sour soup with shrimp) I've had since I've been here. Then, after that we heard some music coming from a place nearby our hotel. We decided to stop in and found an outdoor



karaoke bar where the people who were singing were scantily clad women. By the time we realized what was going on, a girl had already sat down with us and we had ordered a beer---we were stuck there until we finished our drink. I'm not sure if the girls who were singing were just there to keep people company while they were there or if they provided other "services" but the girl who sat with us was only 17 yrs old, though still in school. It was surely generally a place for Thai locals, as again we were the first foreigners to set foot in this place. We left rather quickly.

It turned out that the hotel we decided to stay at was directly across from the [main attraction](#), a park on a mountain which contained temples and a royal residence built in the 1800s as a guest residence for foreign dignitaries. Casandra and I explored this mountain top and had some great views of the city stretching out and the mountains surrounding the town. And there were even a few caves which had been used by monks for short meditation retreats (no longer used). There were many Thai tourists here and they were very friendly to us as we went around this park on top of a mountain.

Now that I've returned from Cambodia, I have 8 days left for my trip. My last paper is due on the 24th and is nearly completed already. This coming Tuesday I am supposed to go to a dinner (formal, I may need a suit!) held for the graduating seniors from my department and I'll be wrapping up things with friends I've met this semester. As long as my body recovers quickly enough, it should be a nice relaxing way to finish out my travels!

Hope you all are enjoying life on the other side of the planet :)

Chon Kaeo--Aaron