



Member Gary Hacker writes the following about his current trip to Cambodia. Gary is a regular traveler and often shares his experiences with the Club through his writing or sharing his photos during a Sunday meeting.

6AM in Battambang, Cambodia: My deep sleep is invaded by the sound of loud Temple music blasting from speakers somewhere outside. Oi-eee, I roll over, try to sleep some more but the music gets louder; I give up and sit up in bed. I part the drapes to look outside and locate the speakers but the exotic music seems to come from everywhere. The devotees of Buddhism are waking up the neighborhood.

I am looking out across low rise buildings with rooftops of red tile, dotted amongst the trees as far as I can see across the flat landscape; clumps of these dense trees hide small columns of smoke rising from farmers burning their trash. Whiffs of spices and smoke entwine to provide a pleasant morning aroma. Several pastel colored new buildings stand out amongst the small tin roof shacks and empty green meadows that shine tantalizingly in the early morning sun.

We arrived in Battambang yesterday in the early afternoon after striking out from Phnom Penh in the morning and are continuing our journey to visit Siem Reap and see the infamous Angkor Wat, a complex of ancient temples envisioned in history books throughout the world. My friends John and Tony have never been up north in Cambodia so we have found a guide, Narith, together with his vehicle, and left Phnom Penh early to head out Highway 5.

Highway Five north from Phnom Penh has currently been repaved so we made good time while dodging motorbikes and farm animals and passing slow moving lorry trucks on the narrow roadway. Students on bicycles are prevalent and stream out on the road from tucked away country schools. The young girls are dressed in crisp blue and white uniforms and sit upright on their bikes reminding one of the French Countryside.

We enjoyed some great days in Phnom Penh before leaving and it's hard to believe that this is my fourth trip there in the last two months. I seem attracted to this third world city only an hour's flight from my home in Thailand. The downtown rages with motorbike traffic in the daytime with vehicles of all types cutting in and out on the narrow unpaved side streets. These side roads offer a mix of run down shacks, large updated mansions from the French colonial days and shops with dirt floors. The sidewalks, made up of uneven clover shaped tiles, are an obstacle course to navigate. Benches and tables placed outside force walkers to constantly move

out to the street in order to get by. Cars and motorbikes park across the walkways and pot holes and obstructions are prevalent. But the adventure of discovery rewards patience and the excitement of always something new constantly prevails.

The days we spent in Phnom Penh offered a pleasant daily routine of exploring the City by foot while nights were spent in one of the small French restaurants, then progressing to one of the dark streets lined with small bars filled with young beautiful Kymer girls.

Back in Battambang and it is time for breakfast. A word about this hotel: It is only two months old and looks terrific. The rooms are large and well trimmed out. The baths are tile and glass with huge encased showers. Beds are remarkably comfortable. And all at the unbelievable price of \$15 Dollars a night.

It's time to get on the road again. We pack up and climb aboard Nareth's rather ancient Camry and find a noodle shop serving steaming bowls of luscious "Pho" soup. We over-tip the laughing fun-loving waitress, settle back in the seats and weave our way back to head north on Highway 5.

This newly paved highway is a far cry from the potholed road of just two years ago and a pleasure to drive on. It takes an hour to reach Sisophon, the junction of Highway 6 to Siem Reap and we turn inland on this new freshly paved road, cutting our driving time substantially.

The traffic is sparse and several dated motorbikes putt along the shoulder carrying produce and items to sell at the local market. We pass several carrying live pigs laid out sideways on their backs across the seat with short legs wiggling hopelessly in the sun. One bike has pole sticking out on both sides hung with live chickens and ducks hanging by their feet flapping their wings in utter despair.

The little town of Siem Reap that I remember is no more. As we enter the outskirts I can already see the changes. New hotels are everywhere and young tourists crowd the streets. A new law prevents the rental of motorbikes or cars to foreigners after accidents claimed too many casualties. Narith knows the way and we arrive at our hotel. John found this one on the Internet and we are overwhelmed with the façade and fancy entrance. Yes, it is superb; good job John, the courtyard with swimming pool acts as a magnet after the long drive. Rooms are equally lavish and at a price of \$36, impossible to beat. Breakfast is included, as is WiFi in the rooms along with a delightful décor.

I've done the Angkor Wat tour three times before so I'm leaving it up to the arranged guide to take my friends through the extravagant ancient temples. I intend to spend my three days around the pool listening to my iPod and reading a fascinating book about the Kings of Siam. I will explore this newly expanded Cambodian city and wander through some of the new markets and tourist stores and see what mischief I can dig up.

So this is Chapter One of our ten day adventure to the far reaches of Cambodia and so far we are having one heck of a good time. Lots of laughs are constant and unbelievable sights await us in the next few days.

Gary and friends in the wilds of Cambodia.....