

# **Rain & Rice Fields**

## **A Journey Through the Heart of Cambodia**

*Leana Niemand*





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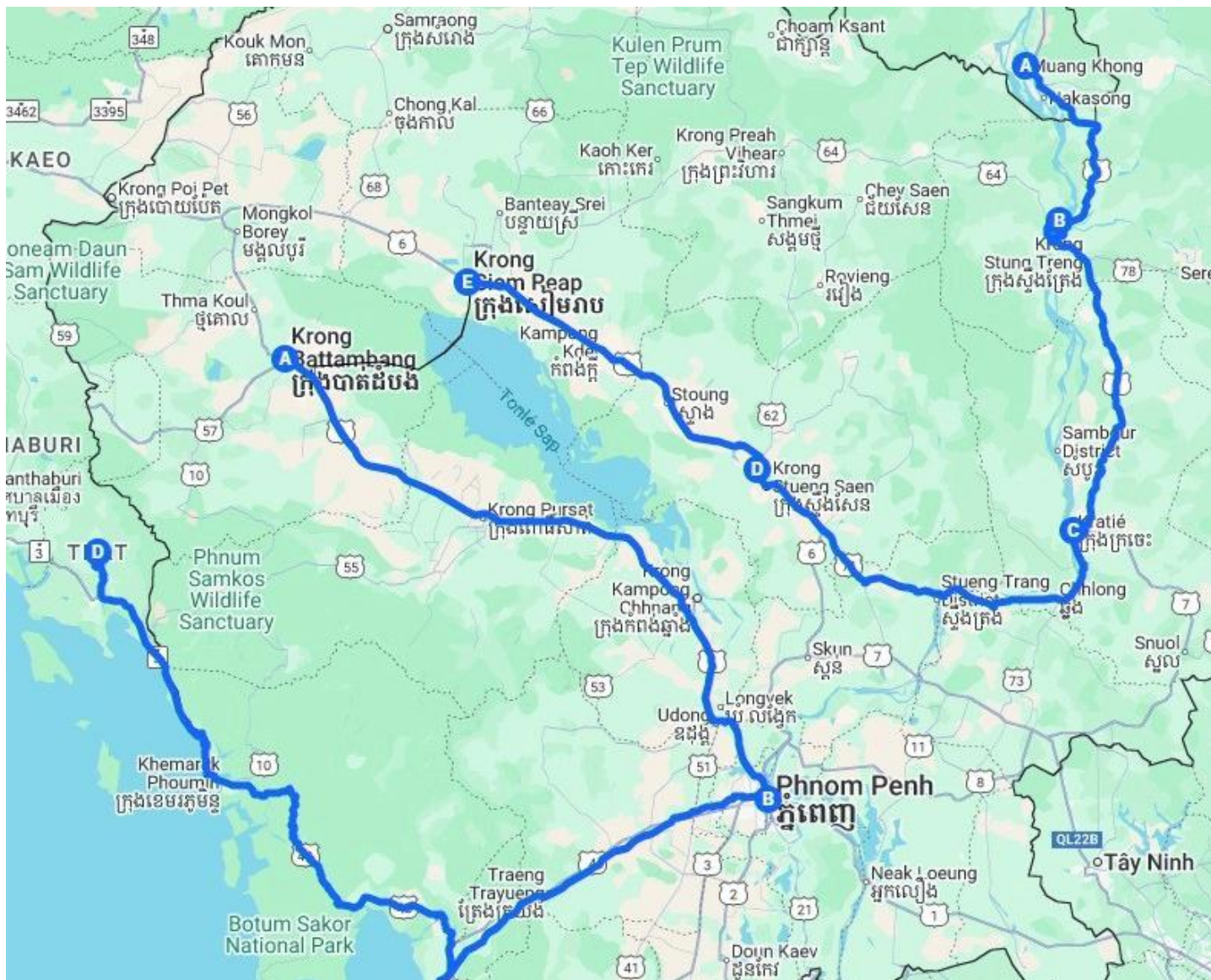


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***Thank you***

***As always, when cycle touring, I was amazed and humbled by the kind generosity of strangers and the random acts of kindness bestowed on us by the people of Cambodia.***

***I'm also immensely grateful to my sister Amanda, who, over the years, selflessly kept my journal entries and photos well organised. Without her, there would have been no record of my travels.***

***As always, I'm much indebted to my friend Val Abrahamse, who kept my personal and financial matters at home in good order while I travelled the globe. It would have been quite impossible to achieve this without her conscientious efforts.***

***Thanks also to Tania Bouwer, who trusted me to lead the way.***







# **CYCLE TOURING CAMBODIA (3)**

## **Rain & Rice Fields**

### **A Journey Through the Heart of Cambodia**

#### **PROLOGUE**

*Cambodia arrived like a whisper on a dusty road —a border, a stamp, a dirt track dissolving into green. Children's voices rose from behind banana leaves, monks drifted through morning light, and the Mekong moved with the patience of centuries. Here, life balanced on stilts above the earth, rice dried in the sun, and kindness met us long before we learned the words for thank you.*

#### **Leaving Laos, Entering Dust — Maung Khong, Laos to Stung Treng, Cambodia (100 km)**

Crossing the last stretch of Laos felt like leaving a gentle friend behind. "I feel quite emotional leaving Laos," Tania murmured as we rolled toward the border, the morning soft and forgiving. At the border, an unofficial \$2 exit fee vanished into the border officials' pockets, but we claimed poverty, and a long wait later, our passports were stamped. Next, we scurried off to the Cambodian border, where officials charged a dollar for not having a yellow vaccination card and five extra dollars for the visa bureaucracy.







Beyond the border, the world opened into a quiet countryside of red dust and scattered wooden shops. The dirt road was kind, the air warm, and the small stores along the way kept our bottles full. Tania exchanged her last Lao kip at a petrol station—an unlikely but welcome stroke of luck.

Stung Treng appeared in a haze of heat and market noise. We found an ATM dispensing only US dollars, then a guesthouse with no water, then another with just enough comfort to collapse into. The day ended with the familiar exhaustion of border crossings—dust in our hair, hunger in our bellies, and the sense of stepping into a new chapter.

### **The Long Road to Kratie — Stung Treng to Kratie (140 km)**

We left far too late for such a long day, stopping to exchange money, popping into a pharmacy, and photos stops swallowed the morning. Late morning, the urgency hit: we needed to move.

The road south was a ribbon of rural life. Women in bright pyjamas sold steamed duck eggs from roadside stands—houses perched on stilts above the dust, hammocks swaying beneath them like slow pendulums. Children shouted “hello!” from behind banana plants, their voices carrying across the fields. Invitations to share meals drifted toward us like warm breezes, but the headwind pushed back, reminding us of the distance still ahead.













Storm clouds gathered. Roadworks slowed us. By the time we reached the Kratie turnoff, the sky cracked open. We sheltered, waited, and when the rain finally eased, darkness had already fallen. We rode the last stretch by the glow of our headlamps, dodging potholes and puddles, arriving soaked and relieved at a riverside guesthouse. The shower washed away the day's grit, but the memory of that long, wet ride stayed with us.

By morning the Mekong carried us upriver in a small boat, its surface smooth as brushed silk. We searched for the elusive Irrawaddy dolphins, and when they surfaced—rounded heads, soft breaths—it felt like witnessing a secret.

They are nearly blind, the guide told us. Tiny eyes, no lenses. They sense the world through sound and shadow. Their population is fragile, scattered across rivers and estuaries from the Ganges to the Mekong. Watching them rise and disappear into the brown water felt like watching time itself—ancient, endangered, and impossibly gentle.













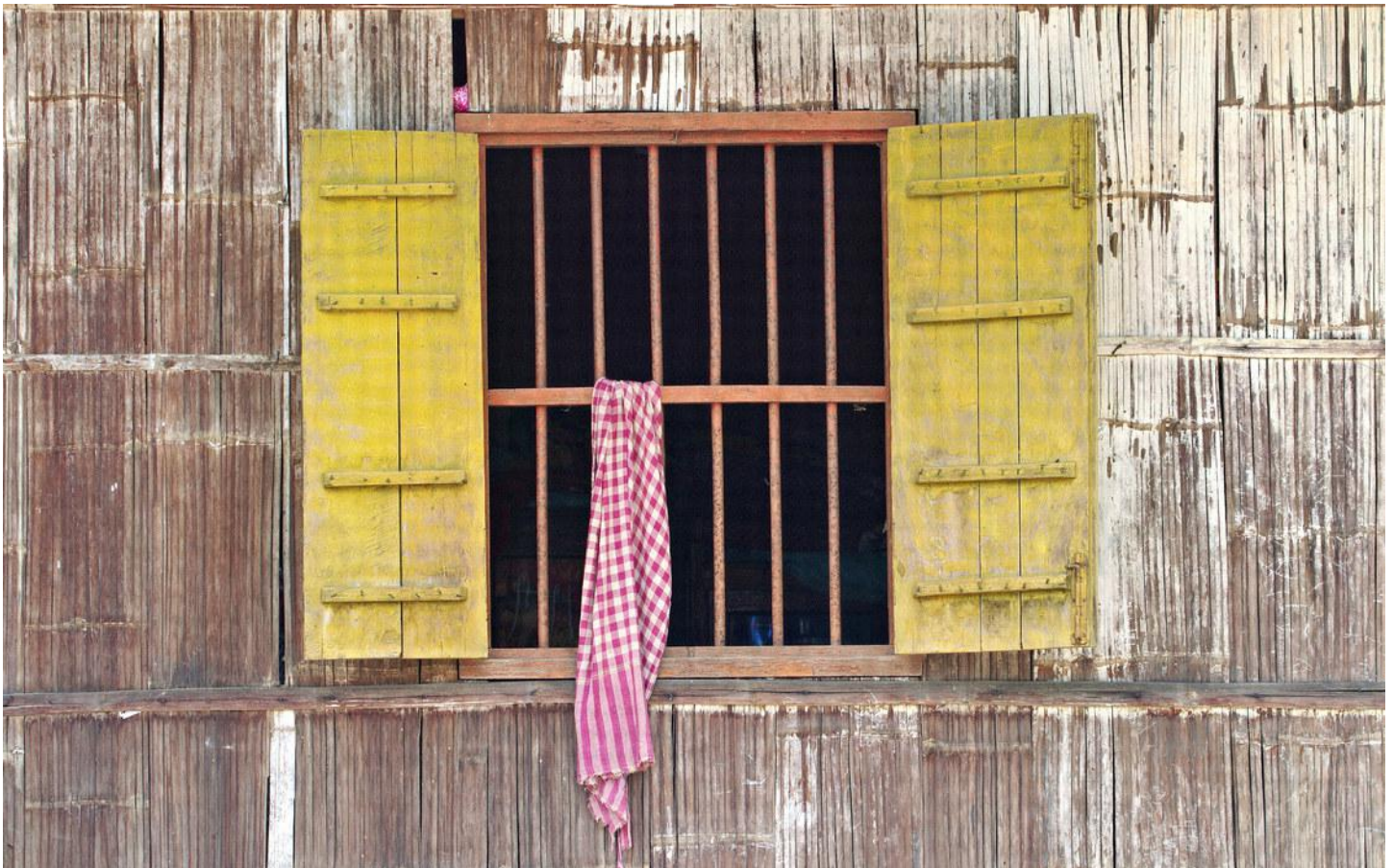


## **The River Trail — Kratie to Stung Trang (89 km)**

Leaving Kratie, we chose the river trail over the main road, and it rewarded us with a day of pure rural poetry—houses teetered on stilts above the floodplain, their wooden steps worn smooth by generations. Ox carts creaked along the path, children skipped to school, and women pedalled bicycles laden with vegetables.

Rice dried in the sun. Bare-necked chickens darted across the dust. Fishermen cast nets into narrow rivers, their silhouettes framed by morning light. Vendors sold sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves, and sugarcane juice dripped down our chins.

By afternoon we reached the ferry—a wooden platform drifting across the Mekong—and crossed to Stung Trang, lulled by the slow rhythm of river life.

















## **Fields Without End — Stung Trang to Kampong Thom (97 km)**

We turned inland toward Kampong Thom, leaving the river behind. The landscape widened into vast rice fields, green as emerald cloth. Children stared at us with shy curiosity; even the stray dogs seemed startled by our presence.

Rubber plantations stretched in regimented rows. Cassava fields rippled in the breeze. Signs pointed toward ancient Khmer ruins hidden somewhere beyond the horizon. Dust-covered artisans carved statues for temples; their faces white with stone powder.

It was a day of quiet pedalling, the countryside unfolding like a long exhale.









## **A Day When Nothing Happened (Except Everything Did)** **Kampong Thom to Kampong Kdei (89 km)**

A day when “nothing happened,” except everything did. Monks in saffron robes collected alms. Women ploughed fields with ox carts. Traders pushed carts stacked with wooden furniture, baskets, and improbable loads of live chickens.

Children cycled to school with astonishing balance—tiny legs pumping, friends perched on handlebars or rear racks. Watermelon stands and coconut juice stalls offered sweet relief. By evening, we reached Kampong Kdei, where a surprisingly comfortable guesthouse awaited us.









## **The Ancient Bridge — Kampong Kdei to Siem Reap (64 km)**

We rolled through the morning market, weaving between vendors and curious stares. Soon after, the ancient Kampong Kdei Bridge appeared—an 11th-century marvel of laterite and stone, once the longest corbelled-arch bridge in the world. Now bypassed by the highway, it remains a quiet relic of Khmer engineering.

The road to Siem Reap was lined with bamboo-cooked rice, fruit stalls, and herds of cattle. Fifteen kilometres out, temple ruins began to appear like ghosts in the trees. By afternoon, we reached the city, ready for rest, repairs, and a few days of stillness.









## **Stillness in Siem Reap**

Two days of errands and small pleasures. Tania explored Angkor's ancient stones while I tended to the mundane: laundry, bike service, camera repairs. The circus surprised us—ingenious, intimate, full of heart. Cambodia's creativity shone in that small tent.









## **Across Tonle Sap - Boat to Battambang**

The boat across Tonle Sap was slow, old, and charmingly unreliable. It sputtered, broke down twice, and carried empty beer cans beneath the driver's seat. But the floating villages were unforgettable—schools, shops, police stations, all drifting on the water. Children steered boats before they could walk. Life here was buoyant, precarious, and utterly unique.

A crocodile farm floated ominously among the houses. We shuddered at the thought of escapees.

By the time we reached Battambang, our backs ached from the wooden benches, but the night market revived us with food and colour.









### **The Bamboo Train — Battambang to Pursat (118 km)**

We set off the next morning, soon reaching the “bamboo train” - more trolley than train—a wobbling platform on wheels that rattled through the forest. We laughed the whole way.

Back on the bikes, the road south offered familiar scenes: rice paddies, friendly children, pottery sellers, motorbikes stacked with pigs in woven baskets. Storm clouds gathered late in the day, and we raced the rain into Pursat, arriving just in time.









## **Flying Snakes & Coconut Ice Cream — Pursat to Kampong Chhnang (96 km)**

"This is Cambodia, baby!" Tania exclaimed as we pedalled into a cloud of morning fumes. The road was alive with tuk-tuks, buffalo, buses, and vendors selling steamed buns.

We devoured an entire watermelon at one stand, then coconut ice cream on bread, drenched in condensed milk. We declined the fermented ant larvae. Flying snakes—dropping from trees and slithering into the grass—were unsettling enough.









### **Into Phnom Penh — Kampong Chhnang to Phnom Penh (93 km)**

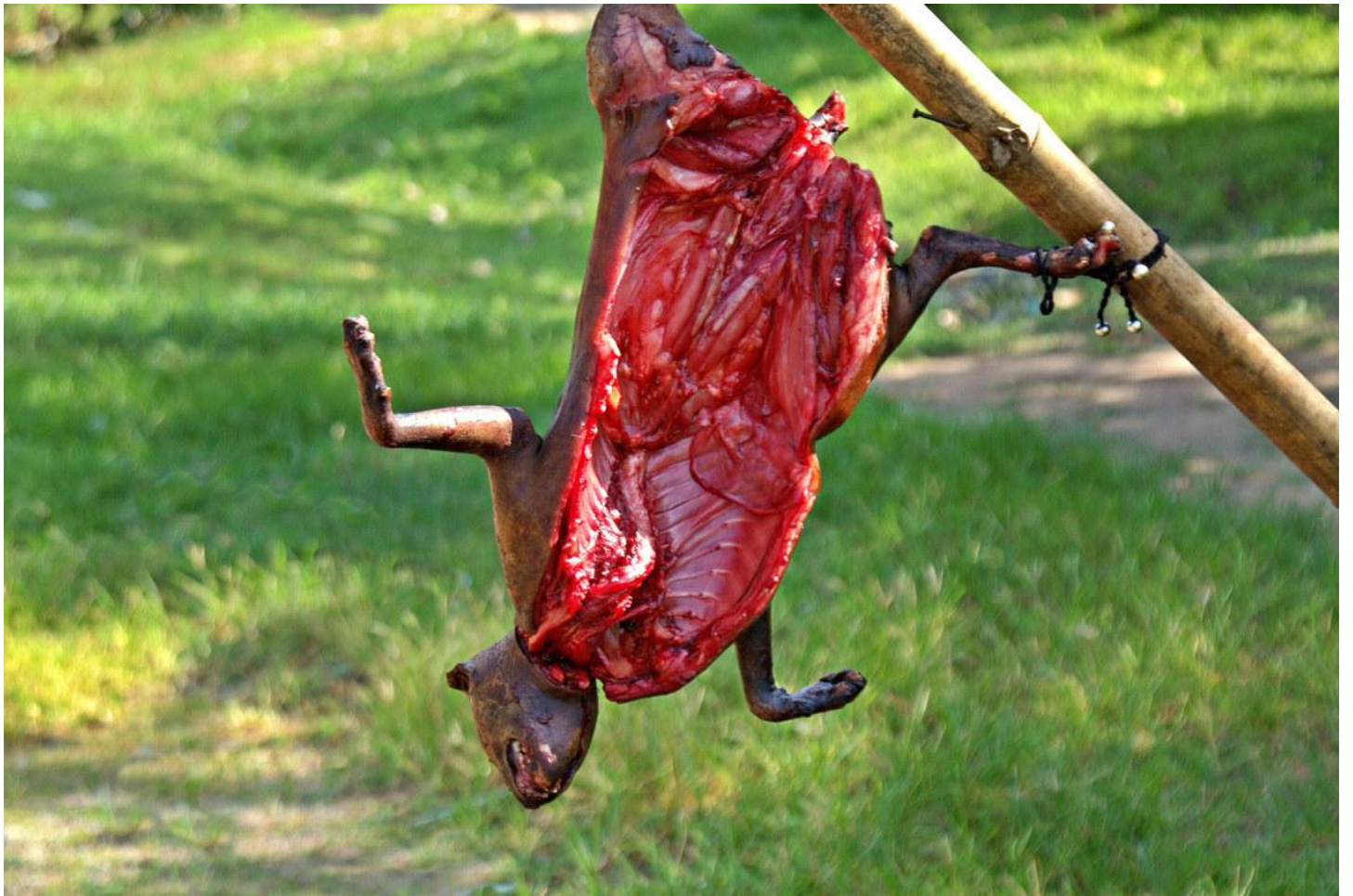
Nine years of cycle touring, and still the world surprised me. We passed monasteries, rice planters, petrol sold in Coke bottles, and unidentifiable animals hanging from roadside branches. Trucks overflowed with chickens. Farmers led buffalo through rivers. English was scarce; smiles were abundant.

Phnom Penh swallowed us in Friday traffic—chaotic, dusty, relentless. We ducked and weaved through carts and markets until we reached the city centre and found a room good enough to stay a week.

The next day brought the sombre weight of the Killing Fields and Tuol Sleng. History pressed close. I visited the Canon store—bad news: the lens needed calibration in Singapore. I applied for a Thai visa and Tania bought a tent for our onward journey.

















## **The Monastery at Takeo — Phnom Penh to Takeo (77 km)**

Leaving the capital was a battle through morning traffic. Flatbed tuk-tuks carried elderly women in wide hats; trucks towered with hay and passengers. Tania grinned through the chaos: “This is Cambodia, baby!”

We visited the Phnom Tamao Wildlife Rescue Centre—6,000 acres of forest sheltering elephants, tigers, gibbons, and sun bears. It was Tania’s world, and she lit up among the enclosures.

By evening, we reached Takeo and camped at a monastery. The monks offered the temple floor, a bucket shower, and electricity. Their kindness felt like a blessing.









### **The Road to the Coast - Takeo to Roadside Camp (104 km)**

We rode past luminous rice paddies, coconut piles, and duck stalls selling every imaginable part of the bird. The closer we came to the coast, the hillier the land grew. Rain hammered down. I fixed a flat tyre in the downpour, longing for my Schwalbe tyres.

Near Kampot, a sign for “Café & Camping” appeared—a rarity in Cambodia. Two Turkish travellers welcomed us with coffee and stories. They were making a film about their journey. We camped under a canopy, grateful for the unexpected companionship.

















## Everything breaks at once - Roadside Camp to Sihanoukville (85 km)

Tania's \$20 tent collapsed overnight, leaving her in a sad, flat heap. We laughed, but it was disappointing—we'd hoped to camp more.

The road wound past oyster farms, fishing villages, and neon-green rice fields. My cheap tyre tore; duct tape held it together long enough to reach a town. My scandal broke too. Rain poured. It was one of those days where everything fails at once, and you keep pedalling anyway.

Sihanoukville was touristy but full of rooms. We scrubbed off the day, repacked, and attempted to fix the tent poles. No luck. I glued my sandal and hoped for the best.









## **Chasing the Bus**

I rode the early bus back to Phnom Penh to collect my Thai visa. The tent shop refunded Tania's money. I bought a tyre, tube, and gloves at the Giant store. The visa wasn't ready until 17:00, so I spent the day wandering the mall like an expat.

When I finally collected the visa, I rushed to catch the return bus—only to find it had already left. A motorbike taxi gave chase, and we caught the bus kilometres down the road. Only in Cambodia.









## **Rain, Fatigue & Petrol Station Camping - Sihanoukville to Sre Ambel (98 km)**

Rain hammered down in the morning, delaying our start. Tania felt unwell—lethargic, nauseous—but insisted on riding. The drizzle persisted all day as we retraced our route to Veal Renh and turned west toward Thailand.

By afternoon, the rain returned in sheets. We sought shelter at a petrol station, where the staff kindly let us camp under a canopy with lights and power. A humble but welcome refuge.









### **Into the Cardamoms - Sre Ambel to Andong Tuek (43 km)**

There's no sleeping late at a petrol station. Tania still felt unwell, but we continued toward the Cardamom Mountains. The vegetation grew lush and wild.

At Andong Tuek, boats ferried people upriver to Chi Phat, a community-run eco-tourism village once home to loggers and poachers. We found a rustic bungalow and booked a trek. Supper was rice, boiled cabbage, and goose eggs—simple, filling, forgettable.

















## **Hammocks Under the House — Chi Phat Trek**

Cambodia continued to astonish. Children half the size of cattle herded them confidently along the road. Five-year-olds rode motorbikes. Life here began early.

We set off with our guide into the Cardamom Mountains. My “fixed” sandal broke immediately, and the guide phoned a friend to fetch my sneakers from my panniers—delivered by motorbike, there is nowhere Cambodians can't reach by motorbike.

The forest was dense, fragrant, alive with insects and strange plants. Lunch was cooked over a small fire—rice and vegetables ready in minutes. By late afternoon, we reached a family home where we hung our hammocks beneath their stilted house. Chickens and dogs scurried around the kitchen area. The family cooked pumpkin flowers, bamboo shoots, chillies, garlic, and wild greens into a delicious soup.

They lived with almost nothing—no electricity, no running water, no toilet—but with a grace and resourcefulness that humbled us. We fell asleep to the forest's chorus.

Morning came with roosters and the smell of boiling water. The family offered us coffee—a luxury for them. After breakfast, we hiked back to Chi Phat, then caught a boat to the main road. Tania's stomach cramps worsened. We hoped rest would help.















### **Illness in the Mountains - Sre Ambel - Koh Kong (43 km cycling + 60 km minivan)**

Tania woke with severe bloating, cramps, and nausea. She insisted on riding, and we climbed slowly into the Cardamom Mountains. The scenery was breathtaking, but worry shadowed the beauty.

At a riverside rest stop, we visited a small clinic. The nurse offered two tablets and a place to rest, snill, nothing improved. We flagged down a minivan to Koh Kong, where the driver dropped us at the hospital door.

The doctor diagnosed the illness quickly and prescribed medication. Relief washed over us both.

We found a room along the river and settled in, hoping tomorrow would bring strength.







## **The Border & the Bay - Koh Kong, Cambodia to Trat, Thailand – 100 km**

Morning arrived with relief. The \$2 medication had worked its quiet magic, and Tania woke with colour in her cheeks. We pedalled the short distance to the border, where tuk-tuks, trucks, and buses jostled for position in muddy puddles. Cambodia spat us out in a flurry of noise; Thailand received us with a kind of gentle order.

The road to Trat was quiet, lined with bays and beaches that felt untouched by tourism. The air smelled of salt and wet leaves. Midday brought four Thai cyclists on a two-day ride — cheerful, curious, eager to chat. Their presence felt like a small celebration of Tania's recovery.

Rain found us again in the afternoon, soft at first, then insistent. By the time we reached Trat, we were soaked through. The monastery by the river welcomed us with a jetty — a long wooden platform above the mangroves, with a canopy, lights, and the soft hum of evening insects. The monks locked the gate behind us, pointed out the toilets, and left us to the river's rising tide.

We cooked noodles, drank coffee, and watched the mangroves disappear beneath the water. It felt like the world was tucking us in.







### ***Epilogue — Cambodia***

***When we left Cambodia, the red dust still clung to our panniers and the echo of "hello!" lingered in our ears. The Cardamom Mountains faded behind us, but their hammocks, their fires, their soft forest nights stayed close. Cambodia did not end at the border. It travelled with us — a gentle weight, a changed way of seeing.***















## About this Blog

This blog post captures our cycle ride through Cambodia, as we made our way from Laos back to Thailand. I was lucky to have the company of Tania Bouwer, and while there are countless routes to explore, the path we took might not be the most travelled one. So, if you're planning to use this as a cycle touring guide, here are some key points to consider:

### The Distances

Let's be real: the daily distances in this journey weren't always the most direct. We often took scenic detours that added to our adventure! What's important is that the kilometres logged were accurate according to my trusty odometer. And yes, those readings occasionally clashed with distance markers and maps—sometimes it seemed like I cycled a bit more, sometimes a bit less. But we always recorded our total at day's end, which often included jaunts to local markets or frantic searches for a place to crash for the night.

### Time of Year and Date

This chronicle of our bike ride through Cambodia spans July to August 2016. A lot can happen in the world in a few years, and the roads you'll encounter may be different now—some might be smoother, while others could have fallen into disrepair. As for the hills, well, they were pretty steep to us back then, but they might feel different to you!

### Insurance

Let's talk about safety because it's crucial. A solid travel insurance plan is a must to cover potential theft, loss, or medical issues. Just be mindful—some policies might exclude "dangerous activities" which can include everything from scuba diving to motorcycling (and sometimes even trekking). Cycling typically isn't flagged as dangerous but always read the fine print to be sure.

### Clothing

Spending long hours in the saddle means comfort is absolutely essential! Invest in some good-quality, padded cycling shorts—you'll thank me later. As for footwear, while I usually pedal in ordinary sandals, wear whatever feels best for you. Be prepared for the heat! Cambodia can be sweltering, so warm clothes are likely a waste of space in your packing. Don't forget personal toiletries, insect repellent, and anti-chafe cream for those long rides. Oh, and a helmet? Definitely a good idea!

### The Bicycle

Let's talk bikes! Comfort should be at the top of your priority list. I highly recommend outfitting your bike with Tubus racks—most bike shops can help. While some panniers can be pricey, they're invaluable. Ortlieb panniers are well worth the investment and known around the cycling world for their durability. And don't overlook your tyres—Schwalbe is a brand you can trust. It's also smart to familiarise yourself with fixing a punctured tube before you hit the road. Lastly, a phone holder is super handy for navigation; most cyclists use apps like Organic Maps or Google Maps to find their way. And a handlebar bag? Essential for keeping your camera and other daily essentials close at hand.

### Recommended Further Reading

For more insights, check out the "Lonely Planet" e-book. It's budget-friendly and packed with handy information!

So, gear up and get ready for an unforgettable cycling adventure through the heart of Cambodia!







# About Cambodia

## Discovering Cambodia: A Vibrant Tapestry of Culture and History

### Capital City

Welcome to Phnom Penh, the bustling heart of Cambodia, affectionately known as “The Pearl of Asia.” This vibrant capital is a blend of rich history and modern charm, offering visitors a glimpse into both its past and dynamic present.

### Currency

When it comes to shopping and dining, Cambodia offers a unique twist with its dual-currency system. While the Cambodian Riel (r) is the official currency, the US dollar is widely accepted, especially for larger transactions. So, whether you're bargaining at a local market or dining in a chic café, you'll feel right at home with both.

### Language

Khmer is the soul of Cambodia, as the official language spoken by nearly 90% of its citizens. Don't worry if you're not fluent—English is widely spoken in tourist hotspots like Phnom Penh and Siam Reap, making it easy for travellers to connect with friendly locals.

### Religion

Immerse yourself in the deeply rooted traditions of Cambodia, where approximately 97% of the population practices Theravada Buddhism. The country's spiritual landscape is woven with the teachings of Buddhism, alongside smaller communities of Islam, Christianity, and tribal animism. This rich tapestry of belief systems coexists harmoniously, enriching the country's cultural landscape.

### Location and Size

Nestled in the Southwestern corner of the Indochina Peninsula, Cambodia boasts an area of 181,040 square kilometres. Its diverse geography stretches from the lush hills in the Northeast to the pristine beaches along the Gulf of Thailand in the Southwest. Bordered by Laos to the Northeast, Vietnam to the West, and Thailand to the Northwest, Cambodia is a gateway to exploring Southeast Asia.

### Population

With a current population of 16,458,385, Cambodia is a nation filled with potential. Despite its ranking of 117th in population density, the spirit of its people is anything but sparse. Each individual contributes to the vibrant culture and resilience of this remarkable country.

### The Rule of the Khmer Rouge

The shadows of history linger in Cambodia, particularly the period of the Khmer Rouge from 1975 to 1979, during which an estimated 2 million Cambodians lost their lives in a tragic quest for ideological purity. Though the scars of this time remain, Cambodia today is a testament to resilience and revival, slowly rising from the ashes. Its vibrant culture and resourceful citizens are crafting a hopeful future, blending the lessons of the past with aspirations for tomorrow.

Embark on a journey to Cambodia and experience a land where history, culture, and hope intertwine in the most extraordinary ways!







## About the Author

Hailing from the vibrant city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a path that would lead her to become the first woman to complete the entire route from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.



























**When travelling by bicycle, even the most mundane trip becomes an adventure.**





