

# Between Temples and Dust: A Bicycle Journey Through Cambodia

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## **Thank You**

I can't express enough how grateful I am for the incredible, kind-hearted strangers who brightened our cycle tour in Cambodia with their random acts of kindness. Their generosity truly warmed our hearts and reminded us that the world is filled with extraordinary people willing to lend a helping hand.

A special shoutout to my amazing sister, Amanda! Her dedication to keeping my journal entries and photos organised over the years has been nothing short of a blessing.

I also want to extend my heartfelt thanks to my dear friend, Val Abrahamse. While I was off adventuring and exploring the world, she dutifully managed my personal and financial affairs. Her conscientious efforts allowed me to chase my dreams without a worry in the world, and for that, I am forever grateful.

And to Janice, Megan, and Erma—thank you for trusting me to lead the way and for embracing some of my wild and crazy ideas! Your adventurous spirits made every moment memorable, and I couldn't have asked for better companions on this journey.

# Between Temples and Dust

## A Bicycle Journey through Cambodia



# **A Bicycle Journey Through Cambodia**

## ***Prologue — The Best-Laid Plans (and Other Myths)***

*Every big trip starts with a grand idea, a map, and at least one person who thinks, "How hard can it be?" In our case, it was four women, four bicycles, and absolutely no consensus on what counted as a "small hill." We set off anyway—armed with optimism, questionable snacks, and the firm belief that Google Maps would never betray us (it did, repeatedly).*

*This is the story of what happens when you follow the road, trust strangers, and hope your seat post doesn't snap before lunch.*

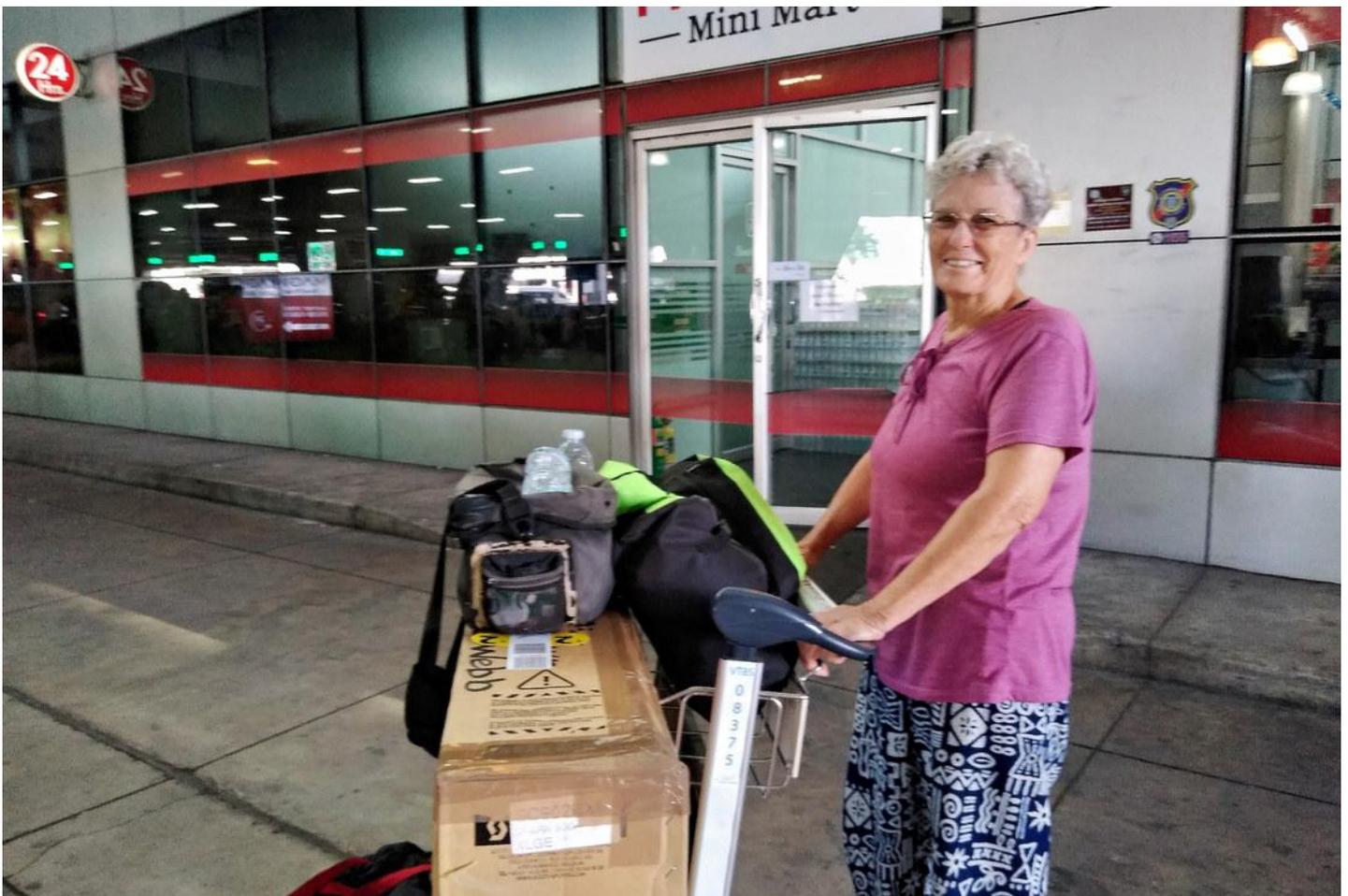


## Thailand - The Soft Beginning

334 Km – 5 Days

### Jomtien - Janice's arrival

Janice landed in Bangkok after a marathon of flights from South Africa, stepping into the humid brightness of Thailand with that dazed, elastic sense of time only long-haul travel can produce. Together we drifted onto a bus bound for Jomtien—a place where one could exhale, eat noodle soup on the beach, and sip night-market smoothies while the sea breathed in and out beside us.





## **Jomtien to Phale Beach (60 km) - Settling Into the Journey**

For three days, we fussed over bicycles and panniers, tightening straps, adjusting seats, and gathering the small things that make a journey feel possible. At last, we pointed our wheels toward Cambodia, where Erma and Megan would join us for a month-long ride through Cambodia. I felt a quiet thrill at the thought of the four of us pedalling through a country stitched with temples, rice fields, and improbable kindness.

Cycle touring always arrives in a rush of colour and scent—diesel fumes and frying garlic, incense drifting from a shrine, the sudden flash of a fishing boat's paintwork. Even though our first day was a modest sixty kilometres, it brimmed with the sensory abundance that can overwhelm a newcomer. Janice handled it with admirable grace.

Our first stop was Ban Chak Ngaeo, a Thai-Chinese community that still clings to its traditional rhythms. Red lanterns swayed above narrow lanes, and old wooden shophouses leaned companionably toward one another as if sharing secrets. From there, we rode on to the vast Wat Yansangwararam complex, a serene sprawl of temples in wildly different architectural styles, all reflected in the lake's stillness. The gardens were immaculate, the air soft, the whole place humming with a quiet, orderly peace.

Minor roads eventually delivered us to the coast, where Phale Beach waited with its easy charm. Our guesthouse sat right on the sand, the kind of place where you could wriggle your toes into the warm grains while watching the horizon blur into dusk. We wasted no time slipping into the lukewarm Gulf of Thailand, letting the saltwater rinse away the day's heat.







At sunset, we wandered along the beach, passing fishermen preparing their boats for the night. Later, we ate dinner at a beachside restaurant—simple, delicious food under a rising moon. It felt like the perfect ending to our first day, and I couldn't help feeling proud of Janice, who had taken to cycle touring with far more ease than she probably realised.

### **Phale Beach to Ban Phe (60 km = Along the Gulf: Salt water, Lanterns, and Quiet Roads**

Morning arrived warm and forgiving, the kind of coastal dawn that invites a swim before thought has fully returned to the body. After drifting in the gentle Gulf waters, we set off along the shoreline, the road curling past quiet beaches and the sprawling Map Ta Phut Industrial Estate. It's an odd juxtaposition—idyllic coastline on one side, the world's eighth-largest petrochemical hub on the other—but cycle touring thrives on such contrasts. They sharpen the senses.

The day unfolded in long, unhurried stretches of beach, the sand pale and nearly empty, as though the coastline had been reserved just for us. Coconut stalls appeared at perfect intervals, each one a small oasis. We sat on low stools, sipping the cool juice while prying out the soft flesh with improvised spoons. The ocean shimmered beside us, unbothered by our slow progress.



Rayong arrived around midday, but the day still felt young, so we pressed on to Ban Phe, a coastal settlement humming with the quiet industry of seafood processing. Fishing boats were moored three and four deep along the piers, their hulls bright with paint and years of salt. The air carried the unmistakable tang of fish sauce—sharp, fermented, alive.

Ban Phe offered no shortage of accommodation, being the gateway to Ko Samet, but our evening was subdued. Janice had come down with a cold, her energy slipping away as the day wore on. We wandered briefly to the docks at sunset, watching boats shuttle passengers to and from the islands, but soon retreated to rest. Travel has its own rhythm, and sometimes the body insists on a slower tempo.



## **Ban Phe to Kung Wiman Beach (70 km) — Cycle Lanes and Lavender Evenings**

From Ban Phe, the road continued faithfully along the coast, a ribbon of tarmac tracing the curve of the sea. Morning light spilt across bridges where brightly painted fishing boats clustered along the banks like confetti caught in a tide. The surprise of the day was a dedicated bicycle lane—nearly the entire way—an unexpected luxury that made the ride feel effortless.

By afternoon, the road delivered us to the serene sweep of Kung Wiman Beach, a one-lane fishing village where life seemed to move at half speed. Our guesthouse sat just across from the ocean, and we barely had time to drop our panniers before wading into the warm, glassy water. The Gulf held us gently, as if welcoming us back.

Dinner came from a beachside eatery, the kind of place where plastic chairs sink slightly into the sand and the food tastes better for being eaten outdoors. The sunset put on a performance—lavender, gold, and fire—spilling across the water in a way that made conversation unnecessary. It was enough simply to sit and watch the day fold itself away.







## **Kung Wiman Beach to Chanthaburi (61 km) — Temples, Fish Farms, and Gem Road**

I woke early and jogged along the coast, the air still cool enough to feel kind. The route carried me over two small hills to a lookout, then down into a tiny fishing hamlet where boats rested on the sand like sleeping animals. By the time I returned, Janice was already packed, patient as ever despite my late start.

The day's ride was another 60-kilometre gift—quiet roads, fish farms shimmering in the sun, and beaches that seemed to appear just when we needed them. During the morning we crossed paths with Kim, a cycle tourer I'd met online. We chatted in the easy, immediate way cyclists do, then continued in opposite directions, each pulled along by our own journey.

Chanthaburi welcomed us with history. This was where King Taksin rallied his troops after the fall of Ayutthaya, and the city still carries the weight of that past. A bike shop fitted mirrors to our bicycles—small additions that made the road feel safer—and then we crossed the Chanthaburi River, where the River Guesthouse caught our eye. It was simple, reasonably priced, and exactly what we needed.

In the evening, we wandered to the night market via Sri Chan Road, known as Gem Road for its bustling trade in gems and jewellery. The market itself was a feast of colour and scent—grilled meats, fresh fruit, sizzling pans—and we ate our way through it with the enthusiasm of travellers who know the next day will demand more energy.







## **Chanthaburi to Ban Phakkat (83 km) - Waterfalls, Forest Roads, and the Twelve-Humped Camel**

We left Chanthaburi through the Historic Market, its narrow lanes and wooden shophouses giving the morning a nostalgic, lantern-lit start. Vendors sold unfamiliar snacks, a gentle beginning to what became a demanding day.

The road soon turned rural, climbing toward Khao Khitchakut National Park and the Khao Bunjob Waterfall. The hills were steeper than expected, but the forest softened the effort. Searching for the waterfall, we spotted a temple across a small river and followed a faint upstream path to a hidden suspension bridge. Dragging our bikes across its narrow planks felt ridiculous and triumphant in equal measure, but it delivered us to an easier road and back to our route.

The main road had one final test: a steep pass that demanded patience. At the top, the world opened again, and soon we reached the turnoff to Ban Phakkat. Wanting to encourage Janice, I promised the road ahead was mostly flat with “a few small humps.” Later she insisted the “camel” had at least twelve—and she wasn’t wrong.

Ban Phakkat appeared like a small miracle. We found a 400-baht bungalow at the town entrance, and I felt a surge of pride watching Janice roll in after such a tough day, still full of grit and good humour.



## **Ban Phakkat, Thailand to Pailin, Cambodia (20 km) - Crossing Into Cambodia - Bureaucracy, Bougainvillea, and a Darker History**

Morning arrived soft and pale, the border town feeling suspended between countries. A short ride took us to the frontier, where noodle soup and omelette fortified us for the bureaucratic shuffle ahead. The Thai side offered a small comedy: a gleaming new building stood empty while the real departure office was a modest prefab tucked off to the side. Stamped out, we rolled toward Cambodian immigration, where a 1,000-baht visa cost 1,500—still, it opened the gate to a new country.

Despite a pesky cold and an unsettled stomach, Janice climbed steadily to the first settlement on the Cambodian side. A sign for the Bamboo Guesthouse tempted us, and it proved a small paradise: bougainvillea-draped bungalows, a shimmering pool, and a restaurant serving unexpectedly excellent food. Twelve dollars bought us comfort, quiet, and the luxury of doing nothing.

We drifted between the pool and the restaurant all afternoon, plates of fragrant Cambodian dishes appearing before us, washed down with cold Angkor beer. With no ATM nearby, we paid in Thai baht and felt lucky for the flexibility.

Yet beneath the tranquillity lay a darker history. Pailin was once a Khmer Rouge stronghold, home to many of its leaders. It's said nearly seventy percent of the area's older men fought for the regime, and few have ever been held accountable. The contrast between peaceful present and violent past lingered like a quiet echo.







## **Into Cambodia (Part 1)**

### **7 Days – 301 km**

#### **Pailin to Sdao (60 km) - Red Dust and Horseshoe Crabs**

We began the day with practicalities—searching for an ATM, buying SIM cards, and picking up a blanket for Janice to use when camping. At a pharmacy, we stocked up on Royal-D, the ubiquitous Asian oral rehydrate, knowing it would be invaluable in the heat.

The road quickly deteriorated into rutted dirt tracks, and we bounced along to the delight of children who waved and shouted greetings. Water stops drew curious stares; foreign women on bicycles were clearly a novelty. Eventually, the back road spat us out onto the main highway, where the riding became easier.

Roadside stalls offered their usual array of surprises. Horseshoe crabs lie neatly arranged, their prehistoric forms unchanged for hundreds of millions of years. I found myself thinking about their blue blood—copper-rich hemocyanin carrying oxygen through their bodies, a biological quirk that felt almost mythical. Nearby, vendors sold grilled chicken tails, mice, rats, and squirrels, all displayed with the same casual normalcy.



Janice, still unwell, was fading fast, and by late afternoon, we decided to camp early at a Buddhist temple in Sdao. Supper was a small misadventure. I went to the shops while Janice set up her tent, returning proudly with cup noodles and a Cambodian baguette. Unfortunately, the noodles were too spicy for her, and the baguette contained an assortment of ingredients that defied easy identification. Buying food for others is always a gamble. I apologised; she tried to smile.

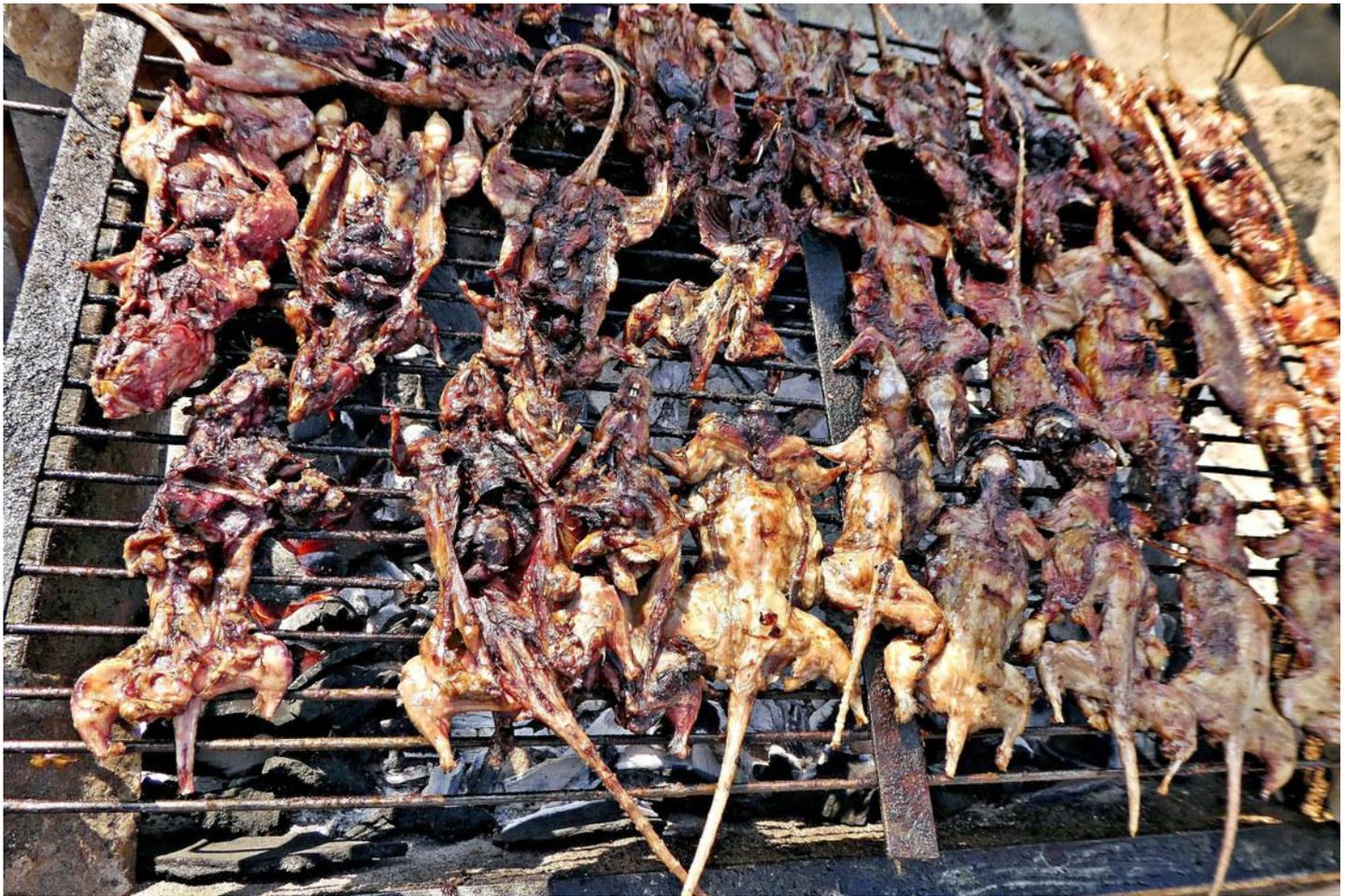
### **Sdao to Moug Ruessei (68 km) - Naked-Neck Chickens and a Swimming-Pool Salvation**

The monks were already deep in their morning chants when we rolled out of Sdao, their voices rising and falling like a tide. Outside the temple gates, women sold pork pau beneath a massive tree, and I had the distinct sense that the entire community had gathered to watch two foreign cyclists eat breakfast. Dust swirled around us as we set off along a dirt track lined with naked-neck chickens and bare-bottomed children playing in the sand.

Carts carrying monks under yellow umbrellas overtook us, their wheels creaking softly. Elderly women shuffled along the road, their faces lined with years of sun and labour. The cultural distance felt immense, yet the warmth of the people bridged it effortlessly. Houses on stilts appeared at intervals, cattle tied beneath them, smoke rising from small cooking fires.







Eventually, the jarring dirt became too much, and we turned toward the paved road, passing carts stacked high with pottery. Janice, exhausted and coated in dust, was relieved when Moug Ruessei finally appeared. The Kheang Oudom Hotel, with its pristine swimming pool and comfortable rooms, felt like a reward for surviving the day. We slipped into the cool water, letting the dust dissolve around us, and later sipped Cambodian beer on deckchairs with a sense of deep contentment.

We stayed an extra day to rest—Janice needed it, and the hotel made it easy to linger. I was eager to reach Phnom Penh to meet Megan and Erma, who would join us for a month-long ride. The contrast between their home country, Namibia and Cambodia, amused me: Namibia, a vast desert with sparse rainfall; Cambodia, lush and humid with monsoon skies. Megan, a gifted photographer, and Erma, a pharmacist and avid hiker, would soon add their own rhythms to our journey.







## **Moung Ruessei to Pursat (62 km) — Highway Monotony and Market Wandering**

The road to Pursat was a highway—uninspired, straight, and humming with traffic—but sometimes the body needs monotony more than beauty. Janice’s backside certainly did. After days of rutted dirt tracks and bone-shaking corrugations, the smooth tarmac felt like mercy.

The kilometres slipped by without incident, the landscape flattening into long stretches of rice fields and roadside stalls selling fruit, petrol in Coke bottles, and the occasional improbable snack. By midday, we rolled into Pursat, capital of the province, where Janice once again insisted on picking up the tab for the room. Her generosity had become a quiet thread running through the trip.

A short walk took us to the market—a labyrinth of covered stalls where vendors sold everything from vegetables to plastic buckets to mysterious fried snacks. The air was thick with the smell of grilled meat and incense, and we wandered through it with the slow curiosity of travellers who have nowhere else to be.

We stayed an extra day. Janice felt unusually tired, and Pursat, with its easy pace, allowed for rest. We searched for cooler cycling clothes, a task made comical by the fact that Cambodian sizes seemed designed for people half our height and width. Ordering food was equally entertaining—our lack of Khmer and their lack of English turned every meal into a small adventure. But that’s the charm of travel: the miscommunications, the surprises, the dishes you order without knowing what they are.



## **Phnom Penh: A Pause in the Chaos**

Time was running short, and I wanted to reach Phnom Penh before Megan and Erma arrived, so we surrendered to practicality and took the bus. The ride was uneventful, the scenery blurring past in a wash of green and dust. Phnom Penh greeted us with its usual chaos—motorbikes weaving like schools of fish, tuk-tuks honking, vendors shouting, the whole city pulsing with heat and movement.

We checked into the Golden Boat Guest House, a place that could charitably be described as “functional.” It wasn’t the cleanest, but at fifteen dollars it did the job. In the cooler evening air, we wandered to the waterfront, where the river widened into a broad, shimmering expanse. Later, we met friends—Dan, Chop, and Teressa—for a beer. Familiar faces in a foreign city always feel like a small blessing.

The next day drifted by in errands and small pleasures. We visited the central market, its golden dome rising like a sunburst above the stalls. We searched for a bike shop so Janice could buy an inner tube, weaving through traffic that seemed to operate on instinct rather than rules. Phnom Penh is a city that demands alertness but rewards it with unexpected pockets of calm.



Jogging along the riverfront at dawn is one of Phnom Penh's quiet joys. The promenade stretches wide and welcoming, the river glowing with early light. Monks walk in saffron robes, fishermen cast nets, and the city feels briefly gentle.

Later, we threaded our way through bumper-to-bumper traffic toward the supermarket, walking in the road because the pavement was claimed by motorbikes, food carts, and baguette vendors. The baguette—one of Cambodia's enduring gifts from the French—remains a national treasure, crisp and airy and sold from baskets on every corner.

What I love about Phnom Penh is its ability to surprise. One moment you're dodging traffic; the next, you turn a corner and find a peaceful temple shaded by ancient trees. By evening, the sun dipped behind the city, monks returned to their monasteries, pigeons returned home in a golden sky, and ferries shuttled passengers across the Mekong. We sat on a low wall watching boats set out for sunset cruises, their lights flickering on as the sky deepened.







## **Cambodia (Part 2) When the Group Becomes Four 913 Km – 25 Days**

### **Phnom Penh - Megan and Erma's arrival - Temples, Eyebrow Relics, and a Sunset Cruise**

Megan and Erma arrived late in the afternoon, stepping into the thick Phnom Penh heat with the unmistakable appearance of long-haul travellers: bodies tired but eyes bright and curious. It was a joy to see them. The city seemed to expand around us, as if making room for the new energy they brought.

There wasn't much daylight left, but we meandered to the promenade anyway, joining the flow of Khmers out doing their evening exercises. Phnom Penh sits at the meeting of the Tonle Sap and Mekong Rivers, and the water gives the city a kind of restless serenity—always moving, always reflecting something new. We watched the river slide past, the sky softening into dusk, and then headed to the night market for supper.

There, under strings of lights, we picked dishes from countless stalls and ate them sitting cross-legged on mats, as everyone does. The food was fragrant and plentiful, and the atmosphere festive. But exhaustion soon claimed Megan and Erma, who had left Namibia nearly twenty-four hours earlier. They turned in early, and rightly so. Tomorrow would come quickly.



Jetlag has its own logic, and by dawn we were all awake, blinking at the pale light creeping across the city. We set out early, ambling toward the Royal Palace while the air was still cool and the streets not yet fully awake. Kipling's line—"the dawn came up like thunder"—felt apt as we passed the Preah Ang Dorngkeu Shrine, where devotees were already lighting candles and offering prayers for good luck. The smell of incense hung thick and sweet.

We wandered through the grounds of Wat Ounalom, the headquarters of Cambodian Buddhism. Founded in 1443, it carries centuries of quiet authority. The stupa is rumoured to contain an eyebrow hair of the Buddha—a detail so intimate and improbable it feels like a secret whispered across time.

Later, once the bicycles were reassembled, Megan and Erma set off by tuk-tuk to explore the city's famous sights. Janice and I stayed behind to tackle a few lingering chores. Time slipped by quickly, and before long it was evening—the perfect hour for a sunset cruise.

By evening we boarded a ferry via a narrow gangplank, armed with a few beers, and drifted along the river as the sun melted into the horizon. Phnom Penh glowed gold and rose, the water catching every colour. Supper afterwards was done in true Khmer style: a table full of dishes shared between the four of us. The frog was unexpectedly delicious, as were the salad spring rolls and everything else that arrived at the table.







## **Phnom Penh to Koh Dach (Silk Island) A Test Ride (52 km) - Silk Island and the Snapped Seat post**

Chinese New Year preparations filled Phnom Penh as we pedalled out—red banners, incense, paper offerings, and families calling “Happy New Year!” from doorways. The nine-kilometre ride to the ferry wound past stilted wooden houses and hand-drawn carts, temples buzzing as monks received mountains of holiday food.

We crossed to Koh Dach, Silk Island, where weaving traditions predate Angkor. On the ferry, a woman invited us to her home to watch her family spin silk. Their hands moved with generational ease, patterns rising like stories from the loom.

A quiet lane circled the island, shaded and gentle. We stopped for coconuts, the vendor slicing them open with swift strokes before carving spoons from the shell so we could scoop out the flesh. Children stared at us—four foreign women on bicycles—unsure whether to smile or flee.

After pork pau and ice cream, we turned back toward the ferry, only to find Erma’s seat stem snapped. A tuk-tuk whisked her to the guesthouse where we later searched for an open bike shop—most closed for the holiday—until luck delivered one with its shutters up. Seat fixed, we returned for showers and another easy night at the market.







## **Phnom Penh to Oudong(k) (52 km) - The Way North Chinese New Year Traffic, Brick Kilns, and Hilltop Stupas**

Leaving Phnom Penh on Chinese New Year felt unexpectedly peaceful. The traffic—still chaotic by any normal measure—was gentler, and my friends navigated it with calm confidence. Soon, the city gave way to quieter roads lined with brick kilns, their tall earthen chimneys glowing from within.

We passed children playing “kick the flip flop,” a game whose rules we never quite grasped, and others riding broom horses with fierce concentration. Roadside stalls sold tamarind and lotus seeds, neither as delicious as we’d hoped. At one eatery, the owner nearly toppled over when four foreign women on bicycles stopped for noodle soup.

Farther along, we found Wat Sowann Thamareach, a temple that looked like a replica of something ancient and half forgotten. Light filtered through its windows in soft, golden beams. It felt like a place waiting to be discovered.

A country lane led us toward Phnom Udong, where a hill crowned with stupas rose like a fairy-tale castle. The central stupa is said to hold the remains of past kings, and the steep climb rewarded us with sweeping views. My friends took the stairs without complaint, even after a full day of riding.

From the hilltop, it was a short ride to Oudong, where we found a guesthouse across from a restaurant. Our first day as a group of four ended with tired legs, full stomachs, and a quiet sense of accomplishment.







## **Oudongk to Kampong Chhnang (55 km) - Ants, Accidents, and the Kindness of Strangers**

We woke to an invasion. Ants — not a few, not a polite scattering, but a full-scale occupation. They marched across our snacks, our towels, our panniers, and, most disastrously, my pants. I yanked them off in a panic, already covered in bites. It was a ridiculous, itchy start to the day, but travel has a way of turning even discomfort into a story.

The road out of Oudongk was congested and noisy, the kind of traffic that forces you into a meditative state simply to endure it. With no minor roads available, we stayed on the highway until a small turnoff offered a brief reprieve — a rural lane winding through quiet countryside. The peace didn't last long. Rounding a sandy corner, Megan slipped and landed in a ditch in a puff of dust. Before she could even stand, the entire community materialised around her, hands outstretched, faces full of concern. She was unhurt — just a dirty bum and a bruised ego — but the kindness of strangers softened the moment.

A coconut stall offered shade and a chance to regroup. The vendor hacked open the coconuts with the effortless precision of someone who has done it thousands of times. Janice, ever curious, asked to try. Her attempt nearly cost her a thumb. We cleaned and bandaged the wound as best we could, prying the machete from her hands.

By the time we reached Kampong Chhnang, the heat had settled heavily on our shoulders. The Garden Guesthouse — a true traveller's lodge — welcomed us with its easy charm. Janice and I took a tuk-tuk to the health centre, where her wound was cleaned and re-bandaged. The next morning, we returned for an anti-tetanus injection. Better safe than sorry.



While Janice, Megan, and Erma visited the floating village, I stayed behind to tend to chores. Kampong Chhnang, with its pottery heritage and river life, felt like a place suspended between past and present — a place that asks you to slow down.

### **Kampong Chhnang to Ponley (55 km) - Clay, Wells, and the Weight of Heat**

The name Chhnang means pottery, and the region wears that identity proudly. Our first stop was Andong Russey, a small settlement where pots were stacked high beneath stilted homes. We wandered from house to house, watching families shape clay with practised hands, the rhythm of their work as steady as breath. The scene was photogenic, but more than that, it felt intimate — a glimpse into a craft that has outlived empires.

The road carried us past wells where people pumped water by hand, past rice drying on tarps, past temples rising like bright punctuation marks in the landscape. A young man climbed a bamboo ladder fixed to a sugar palm tree, collecting the sweet juice that would later be boiled into palm sugar. He offered us a sip. I hesitated, then tasted it — sweet, earthy, unexpectedly delicious.



A watermelon vendor provided a welcome break. She peeled and sliced the fruit with swift, sure movements, serving it with a plate of sugar, salt, and chillies — a combination that shouldn't work but somehow does. Janice, for obvious reasons, was kept far from the knife.

By the time we reached Ponley, the heat had become oppressive, pressing down on us like a physical weight. An air-conditioned room felt like salvation. We spent the rest of the day horizontal, letting the cool air stitch us back together.





## **Ponley to Kampong Luong Floating Village (35 km) - Into the Floating World**

We left Ponley in the company of krama-clad women on bicycles, their scarves bright against the morning light. Roadside stalls sold fruits we'd never seen before — milk fruit with its purple skin and soft, blueberry-like flesh; sugar discs made from palm juice; fermented vegetables; dried buffalo meat. It was a parade of unfamiliar eats.

Being the weekend, we passed several wedding celebrations. Entire wedding parties were dressed in matching silk outfits, shimmering in the sun like tropical birds.

A sign pointed toward Kampong Luong, and a few kilometres later, we reached the boats that ferried people to the floating village. Leaving our bicycles at the "office" was easy — Cambodia excels at uncomplicated logistics. We boarded a boat and drifted past floating homes toward a homestay.

Space was scarce, as it must be when your house floats. We were shown two tiny rooms with mattresses on the floor and mosquito nets overhead. The veranda overlooked the water, and from there we watched life unfold — children rowing boats with the confidence of seasoned sailors, families cooking, washing, bathing, all on the same water that carried their homes.

Kampong Luong was a complete settlement: shops, petrol stations, schools, temples, even a police station — all floating. The water was used for everything, and everything returned to it. It was both astonishing and humbling, a reminder of how adaptable humans can be.











## **Kampong Luong to Pursat (65 km) - Ice Cream, Heat, and the Return to Land**

A boat taxi collected us at dawn, returning us to our bicycles. The day began on rural roads lined with scrawny white cows and ornate temples. Houses on stilts sold petrol in Coke bottles; others de-husked rice by hand. Shops offered water, penny-line sweets, and drinks far stronger than water.

The heat rose quickly, turning the air thick and metallic. Dust clung to our skin, our clothes, our eyelashes. We stopped at every shop to refill our bottles. When we spotted the ice-cream man, we were as excited as the village children, joining the queue amid giggles and curious stares.

By the time Pursat appeared, we were coated in red dust, our faces streaked with sweat. The promise of a hotel with a bathtub felt almost decadent. We soaked, scrubbed, and emerged human again.





## **Pursat to Moung Ruessei (62 km) - Temples, Pineapples, and Unexpected Generosity**

We began the day with a detour into the past. An old brick-making factory stood abandoned on the outskirts of Pursat, its cavernous interior cool and shadowed. The place felt haunted in the gentlest way — shafts of light cutting through broken tiles, dust motes drifting like slow-moving spirits. Outside, monks and their helpers collected food offerings. What struck me, as always, was the quiet dignity of the exchange. Monks don't say thank you; almsgiving isn't charity but a mutual pact — the lay community supports the monks physically, and the monks support the community spiritually. A beautiful reciprocity.

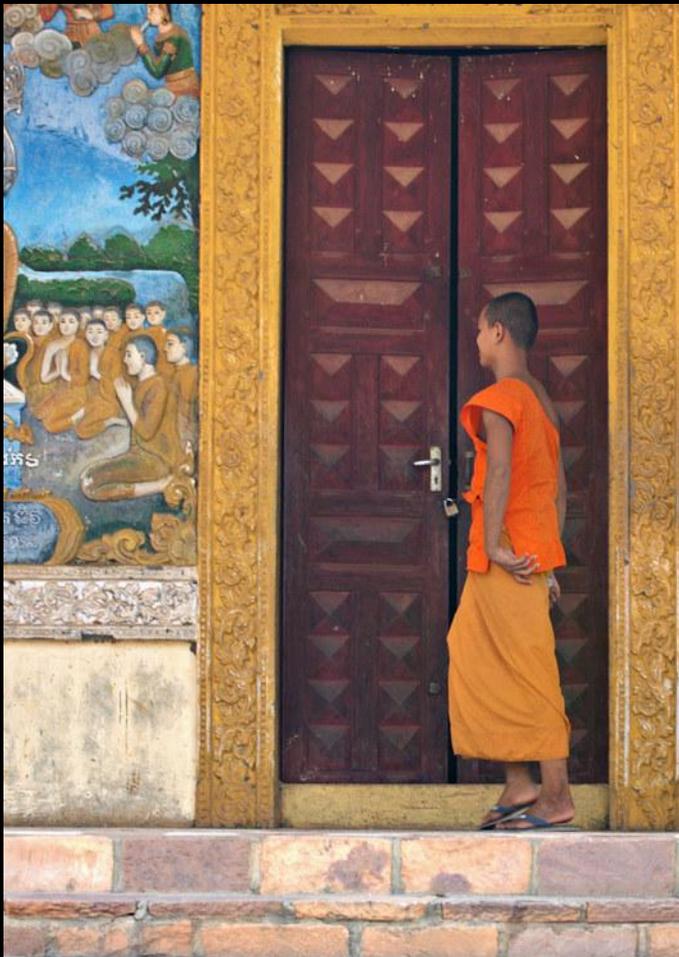
By midday, the heat had grown fierce, and temples became our sanctuaries. They offered shade, water, and the occasional toilet — all precious commodities. One monastery in particular held us longer than expected. Young boy monks darted shyly between the buildings, their saffron robes bright against the pale walls. They were curious but cautious, peeking at us from behind pillars. We snapped a few photos, careful not to intrude.

The road carried us past fruit stalls, and the pineapples were irresistible — sweet, golden, and cut with the kind of precision that made Janice's earlier machete mishap feel even more comical. We ate them standing in the shade, juice dripping down our wrists.

By the time we reached Moung Ruessei, the Oudom Hotel with its pristine swimming pool felt like a mirage made real. We didn't hesitate. Dusty clothes were shed, bodies slipped into cool water, and the world softened. Supper at a nearby restaurant brought an unexpected kindness: Steve, a generous Cambodian man, bought us beer and then quietly paid for our meal. His gesture lingered long after the plates were cleared.







## **Moung Ruessei to Battambang (86 km) - Rats, Rice Mills, and the Road to Battambang.**

We left before the heat rose, rolling through smooth pavement that soon crumbled into a bone-rattling dirt track. Even so, the countryside was lovely — half-hidden temples, villagers moving through their morning routines with quiet ease.

An old rice mill drew us in: a maze of belts and gears dusted with drifting light. Not long after, a woman appeared with a basket of grilled rats. Curiosity won. For 1,000 riel we tried one — tender, smoky, unanimously better than chicken. Megan, believing it was squirrel, took a polite single bite.

Realising our chosen route would take far too long, we doubled back to the main road, adding an unnecessary twenty kilometres. A tailwind carried us toward Banan, where the good pavement ended and the final rough stretch began. The hilltop Angkor-era temple radiated heat and history.

From there, an easy ride delivered us to Battambang and the welcome embrace of the Royal Hotel.

The next morning we tuk-tuked to Ek Phnom, stopping for warm, sun-dried rice paper and watching ironmongers hammer sparks into the air. By sunset we were at the bat cave, watching a living ribbon of wings pour into the sky — a nightly migration written across the dusk.







### **Battambang to Siem Reap (by boat) (14 km) - Crossing the Tonle Sap Lake, Floating Villages, Neon Nights**

We rose before dawn for the boat to Siem Reap. In the dry season the lake retreats, so instead of a short cycle we endured a long, dusty fifty-kilometre tuk-tuk ride to reach the pier.

The boat journey stretched across the entire day — shimmering lake, floating villages, children paddling with effortless grace, fishermen casting slow arcs of net. By the far shore we were sun-tired and grateful to disembark.

A short pedal brought us into lively Siem Reap. Our twenty-dollar hotel felt miraculous: pool, breakfast, twin room. That evening we wandered Pub Street, letting the neon and bustle sweep us along.

We'd arranged a tuk-tuk tour with Mr Lam for the next morning — Angkor's temples and Bayon at sunset. Megan's guidance on shooting inside temples was a gift; she taught us how to read the light and let the shadows do the work.

I've visited Angkor countless times, yet I'm always in awe seeing the temple's spires rise above the treeline, sharp silhouettes against the Cambodian sky.





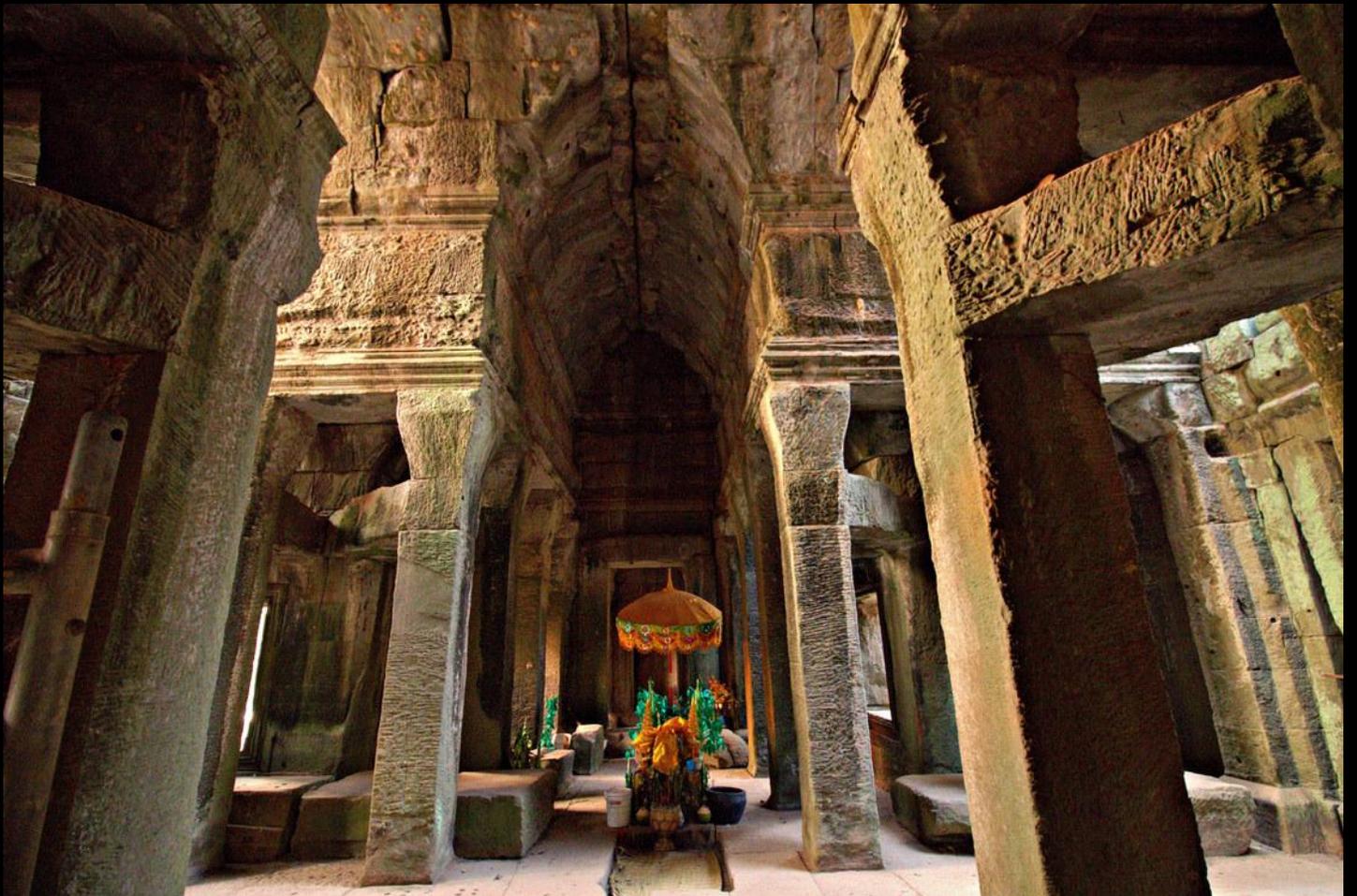


Wandering through the sprawling grounds felt surreal, as though we had slipped into a dream. The temples stood like guardians of time, their sandstone walls etched with intricate carvings that whispered stories of gods, kings, and forgotten battles. Nature pressed in from all sides—roots coiled around crumbling stone, vines draped over doorways, and birds darted through the shadows as if reclaiming the ruins for themselves. It was a reminder that even the grandest human creations eventually bow to the earth's persistence.

What struck us most was not just the scale of Angkor, but the resilience it represented. Built nearly a thousand years ago, it had endured wars, neglect, and the relentless jungle. Yet here it stood, a testament to human imagination and devotion. I thought of Cambodia itself—scarred by history, yet vibrant and alive. The temples were more than stone; it was a mirror of the country's spirit, a reminder that beauty can survive even the darkest of times.

As the sun dipped lower, casting golden light across the towers, we felt a quiet gratitude. This was not just sightseeing. It was communion—with history, with culture, and with the enduring strength of a people who had built something so extraordinary that it still spoke across centuries. Leaving we didn't carry only photographs but a sense of awe that would linger long after the journey moved on.

By evening, a bottle of wine vanished before supper, and the night unfolded with easy joy.







## **Siem Reap to Svay Leu Temple (67 km) - Rural Paths, Temple Hospitality and Meak Bochea Preparations**

We pedalled out of Siem Reap after breakfast, quickly finding a rural path that led through tiny hamlets and seldom-visited corners of the countryside. Women carted toddlers in homemade wooden wagons, perhaps on their way to school. Our dirt path was shared by pot sellers, tuk-tuks, and women leading cattle to greener pastures. Children sold boiled corn, which made for perfect snacking. At a temple, monks were preparing their midday meal, and we snapped a few photos before continuing. Svay Leu appeared in the late afternoon, and permission was granted for us to sleep at the temple. It turned out to be a fascinating experience — monks preparing for Meak Bochea, the holiday commemorating Buddha’s final sermon. Villagers watched with curiosity as four foreign women wandered into a nearby restaurant, where ordering noodle soup required a lengthy combination of gestures, guesses, and good humour.









## **Svay Leu Temple to Preah Vihear (98 km) - Cashew Country, Cloudy Skies and Four Dusty Farangs**

Sleep was elusive. Temple dogs howled through the night, and music played at what felt like full volume until dawn. When the chickens began crowing, the dogs joined in, and we surrendered to the inevitable. Breakfast was another bowl of noodle soup — comforting, familiar, and hot. The ride to Preah Vihear was long, but the sky remained mercifully cloudy. We stopped often to refill water bottles, grateful for the cooler air. The road passed vast cashew plantations — strange, bulbous fruits dangling from branches, the nuts still forming beneath them. Much of the landscape was either planted with cashews or filled with nurseries preparing the next generation. By late afternoon, four hot, dusty farangs rolled into tiny Preah Vihear, ready to devour anything edible.





## **Preah Vihear to Chhaeb (57 km) - Temple Feasts, Quiet Roads and A Hazy Full Moon**

We allowed ourselves a slow start after the previous day's long ride. Breakfast was rice porridge — simple, soothing. Our first stop was a Buddhist temple where Meak Bochea celebrations were underway. Devotees brought food, and monks and nuns sat on mats enjoying the feast. We took a few photos, offered thanks, and continued.

The road to Chhaeb was quiet and desolate, the kind of stretch that encourages steady pedalling and few distractions. Even motorbike salesmen pulled off to rest in the shade — a testament to the heat. We pressed on and reached Chhaeb early.

A guesthouse offered reasonable rooms and a short walk to the temple, where monks chanted and a small fanfare unfolded. We waited for the full moon, but the sky was too hazy for the photos we'd hoped for. Megan, unsurprisingly, still managed to capture magic. Dinner was fried noodles, rice, and cold beer from a street-side eatery.



## **Chhaeb to Stung Treng (88 km) - Early Light, Easy Riding and a Golden River Arrival**

We visited the temple once more before leaving, but the light had already shifted — too late for good photos. Megan, who had gone earlier, captured the best shots of the trip.

The ride to Stung Treng was effortless — excellent tarmac, gentle undulations, and favourable weather. The rhythm of the day felt familiar: load the bikes, cycle, stop for water, admire the landscape, repeat. By afternoon, we rolled into Stung Treng and checked into the Golden River Hotel, perched right on the riverbank.





## **Stung Treng to Kratie (by minivan) – Finding the Irrawaddy Miracles**

The stretch between Stung Treng and Kratie was 130 kilometres of unremarkable road. We were considering a bus when a minivan driver approached us with an offer: twenty dollars per person, bicycles included. It was an easy yes.

In Kratie, a tuk-tuk carried us to the pier for dolphin viewing. The skipper didn't have to go far — the Irrawaddy dolphins were playing close by. We watched them surface and disappear, their rounded heads and blunt noses unlike any dolphins we'd seen before.

They are rare, vulnerable, and genetically closer to killer whales than to other dolphins. Their tiny, lensless eyes can barely distinguish light from dark. Yet here they were, thriving in this stretch of the Mekong — a quiet miracle.





## **Kratie to Peace Hut (86 km) - Life Along the Mekong, Bamboo Sanctuaries.**

We followed the river trail south, the Mekong guiding us like a living compass. The route felt like a single, unbroken village — families fishing, farming rice, tending to children, living lives shaped by the river's moods. Cambodia's heart beats along the Mekong, and we felt it with every kilometre.

By late afternoon, The Peace Hut appeared — two simple nipa huts on stilts overlooking the river. Each room had mats for sleeping and a bamboo deck perfect for watching the water drift by. A bamboo viewing platform became our evening sanctuary, where we sipped beer and watched the river darken. Two dollars per person — a bargain for such serenity.





## **Peace Hut to Kampong Cham (40 km) - Riverbank Villages and a Bamboo Bridge**

We crossed the river shortly after leaving, then followed the opposite bank toward Kampong Cham. It was a short ride, but full of life — children running alongside us, fishermen hauling nets, women selling fruit from woven baskets.

The Mekong Hotel offered fifteen-dollar air-con rooms with river views — a luxury after the simplicity of the Peace Hut. We spent the next day exploring Kampong Cham, a relaxed town perfect for lingering. A short cycle took us to the bamboo bridge — rebuilt every year after the rainy season, a kilometre-long marvel of engineering and tradition.

We had planned to cycle to Phnom Penh, but the highway traffic was notorious, and the ride was usually unpleasant. A minivan was arranged instead — a far more enjoyable way to end the journey.









## **Kampong Cham to Phnom Penh (by minivan) - Final Rides, Morning Markets, Farewells to Friends**

The minivan arrived at nine, and with bikes strapped to the back, we headed toward Phnom Penh. Relief washed over us when we arrived to find all four bicycles intact.

Megan and Erma spent their final days shopping, eating, and revisiting favourite spots. We returned to the morning market, where steam rose from pots and pans, vendors fried and steamed their delicacies, and early shoppers filled their bags with produce. The air was thick with aromas — sweet, savoury, smoky.

Soon enough, their bikes were boxed, their shopping packed, and they were on their way to the airport, bound for Namibia.





## **Cambodia (Part 3) - The Road to the Thailand Border 7 Days – 301 km**

### **Phnom Penh to Angkor Borei (93 km) - City Chaos, River Roads, The Butt Saga Continue**

After Megan and Erma's return to Namibia, Janice and I pedalled out of Phnom Penh, our panniers lighter for the memories they now held.

Men crouched beside mobile carts, slurping noodle soup; motorbikes swarmed around us in darting, horn-bleating waves. Only after twenty kilometres did the city finally loosen its grip.

Seeking quieter roads, we turned onto a narrow path along the Tonle Sap River, the water moving beside us like a slow, breathing animal. Halfway along, Janice bought a new saddle — another attempt to solve her ongoing butt saga. With mostly paved roads and only a short dirt stretch, we reached Angkor Borei in good time, grateful for rural Cambodia's gentler rhythm.





## **Angkor Borei to Kampot (103 km) - Slow Ferries, Sandy Tracks and Kampot's Irresistible Calm**

We set out early, knowing the day would be long, but Cambodia had other plans: the Angkor Borei–Takeo ferry only stirred to life around 8 a.m. Packed in tight, we skimmed across the lake, relieved to avoid the punishing ride around it. On the far side, the reality of rural infrastructure returned.

No paved road linked Takeo to the highway, and we wrestled along a sandy, rutted track until blessed tarmac appeared. Once on the highway, the kilometres slipped by — until twenty kilometres from Kampot, where the road dissolved into a construction zone. Vehicles carved dusty arcs around potholes, and we followed, swallowed by red grit.

By the time we reached Kampot, we were coated head to toe. Kampot River Bungalow was full, but the Naga House next door had a nipa hut on stilts overlooking the river. It was peaceful, beautiful, impossible to leave. Staying an extra day required no discussion.









## **Sihanoukville (105 km) - Drought Roads, Dust Storms, A City Transformed**

Despite being the dry season, this year had brought no rain at all. With most of the country relying on subsistence farming, drought is more than an inconvenience — it's a threat. For us, it meant hot, dusty riding.

The road began smooth and fast, but halfway to Veal Renh we hit the dreaded roadworks. Vehicles abandoned the road entirely, carving new tracks through the dust, while minivan taxis ploughed through potholes big enough to swallow a wheel.

We pushed on through the haze until we rolled into Sihanoukville at peak hour. The city was unrecognisable — a vast construction site of empty lots and half-built towers. I was relieved to find The Big Easy still standing, though now an eye-watering thirty dollars for a fan room. It was clear we needed to escape to the islands.



### **Sihanoukville to Koh Rong (ferry) - Salt Water, Slow Days, Island Stillness**

We left our bicycles and panniers at The Big Easy and boarded the ferry with only a small bag. Koh Rong greeted us with clear water and a slow, soothing rhythm. We swam in the lukewarm Gulf of Thailand, lazed on the sand, and ate meals at tables perched over the water. Days blurred into sun, salt, and stillness.

Eventually, it was time to return to the mainland — and to Thailand, where Janice had stashed her bike box and would soon fly home to Cape Town.

### **Koh Rong to Sihanoukville (ferry) - Return to the Mainland, Sand-Between-Toes Suppers**

With so many ferries running, we left leisurely. Back in Sihanoukville, we collected our bicycles and panniers and began the hunt for a room — The Big Easy was fully booked. Supper was at a beach restaurant, where I indulged in one of my favourite simple pleasures: eating with my toes buried in the sand.







## **Thailand - The Return to Bangkok**

### **15 Km – 8 Days**

#### **Sihanoukville, Cambodia to Klong Yai, Thailand (15 km) - Late Buses, Smooth Crossings, A Hard Day for Janice**

Our Cambodian visas had run out, so we bought bus tickets to the Thai–Cambodian border. The bus was scheduled for 8 a.m., but in true Southeast Asian fashion, it left considerably later. To our surprise, it took us all the way to the border. The crossing was smooth — no complications, no delays — and soon we were stamped out of Cambodia and into Thailand.

From the border, it was only fifteen kilometres to Klong Yai, a small town with accommodation and a lively night market. The next morning, we caught a songthaew to Trat. Janice wasn't feeling well — stomach trouble from the previous night's cuisine — and the ride, though inexpensive, was uncomfortable for her. The songthaew dropped us at the Trat bus station, where we had four long hours to wait for the next bus to Pattaya. Janice lay curled on the plastic chairs, pale and exhausted.

By the time the bus arrived and delivered us to Pattaya, the sun had long set. We cycled the last few kilometres to Jomtien in darkness, bringing Janice's holiday to a quiet close.



### **Pattaya - Rest, Recovery, Last Walks by the Sea**

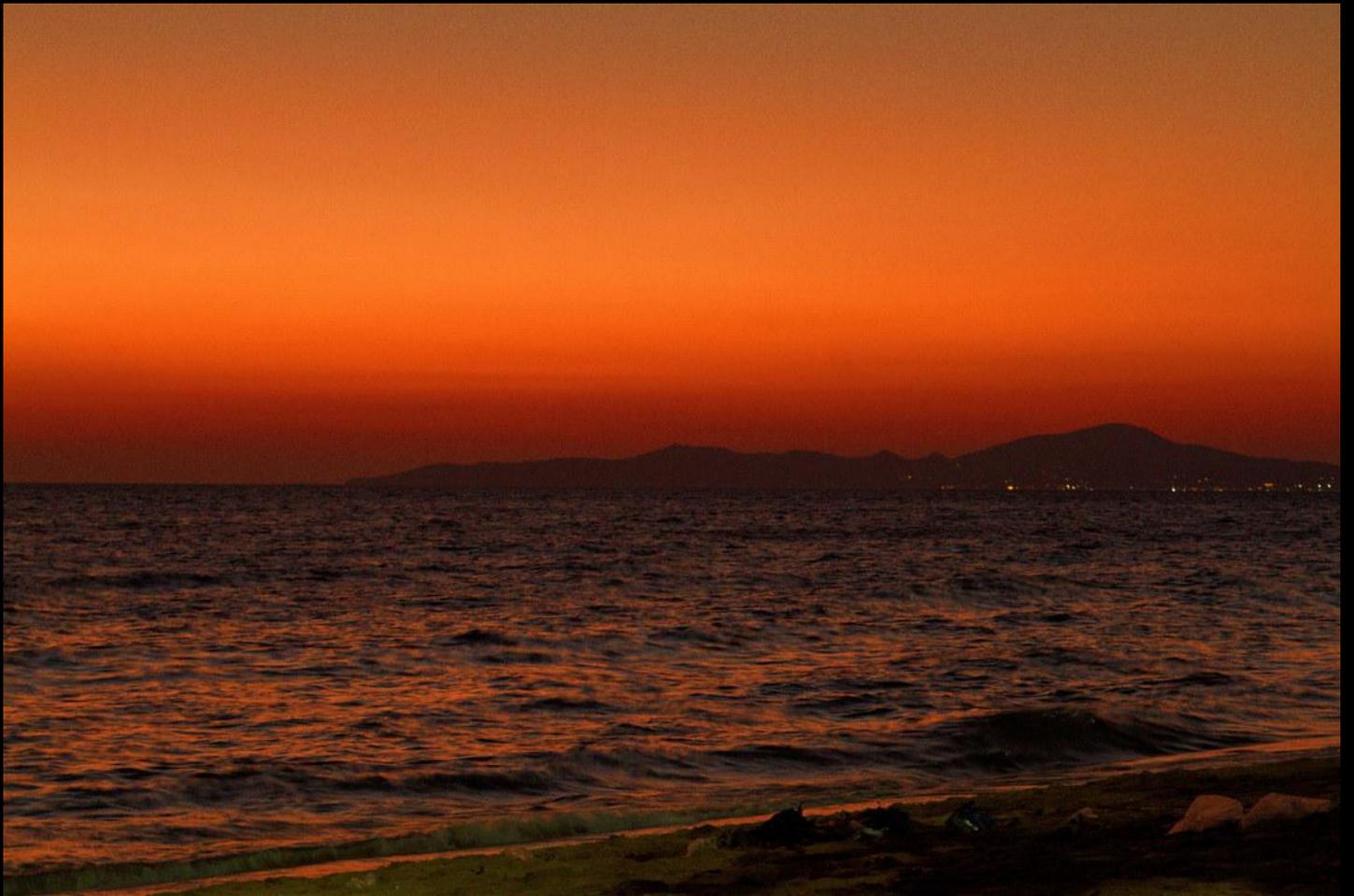
Being a day ahead of schedule, we made good use of the time. We strolled to the beach, letting the sea breeze wash away the fatigue of travel. Janice gradually felt better, well enough to do last-minute shopping, pack her bicycle, and prepare for her flight to Cape Town. Far too soon, the moment arrived for her to head to the airport.

### **Pattaya to Bangkok - Laundry, Repacking, A New Chapter Begins**

I had exactly one day to do laundry and repack before heading to Bangkok, to meet Rouen — my brother-in-law — and Micah, my niece and godchild, for a three-week backpacking holiday in Thailand.

The easiest route was to catch a bus to the airport, then another straight to Khao San Road. From there, it was only a short walk to the Riverline Guesthouse, my usual refuge in the city.

The journey continues.



### ***Epilogue – After the Sweat and Dust***

*Looking back, the kilometres blur, but the absurdities remain crystal clear: ants in my pants (literally), Janice nearly losing a thumb to a coconut, and the floating village where even the police station bobbed gently like it had somewhere better to be.*

*Cambodia left us sunburned, dusty, tired and strangely proud of ourselves. We survived heat, bureaucracy, and snacks we still can't identify. And in the end, the road gave us exactly what it always does—stories we'll be laughing about for years, and legs that may never fully forgive us.*



## About this Blog

This blog documents our ride through Cambodia and Thailand. There are numerous roads, and the route described in this blog is not necessarily the best. If you intend to use this blog as a guide for your own cycle tour, please bear in mind the following points:

### **The distances**

Please note that the daily distances recorded in this blog may not always be the shortest route, as we occasionally deviate from the main path. However, the daily kilometres recorded were accurate according to my odometer.

### **Time of year and date**

This blog accounts for my visits to Cambodia during February 2019. It's important to note that many things may have changed since then. The roads may have been improved or fallen into disrepair, the places we stayed in might have been upgraded or demolished.

### **Insurance**

A travel insurance policy is essential to cover loss, theft, and medical expenses. However, some policies might not cover certain activities, such as scuba diving, motorcycling, and trekking. It's important to carefully read the policy to make sure it covers the activities you plan to do.

### **Clothing**

During a cycling holiday, we spend most of our time riding bicycles, so having high-quality, padded cycling shorts is essential. You can wear any comfortable footwear while cycling, but I suggest sandals for more casual riders. Summers in Cambodia can be sweltering, so pack accordingly. Don't forget to include personal toiletries such as insect repellent and anti-chafe cream. Lastly, I strongly recommend wearing a cycling helmet for safety purposes.

### **The bicycle and equipment**

When it comes to choosing a bicycle for your needs, the most important thing is comfort. I use a mountain bike with a Merida frame equipped with Shimano Deore parts, Alex wheel rims, and Schwalbe tyres. To carry my belongings during the ride, I use Tubus bicycle racks and Ortlieb panniers, which can be a bit pricey, but are worth it in the long run. It's essential to know how to fix a punctured tube, and it's also convenient to have a phone holder on the handlebar for navigation purposes. I use Organic Maps or Google Maps for this. A handlebar bag is also a must-have for carrying a camera and other items you may need throughout the day.

### **Recommended further reading**

Lonely Planet: The e-book is less expensive and a handy guide.



**About Cambodia** (Please refer to your favourite travel guidebook or the internet for a more in-depth overview)

**Capital City**

Phnom Penh is the capital of Cambodia and was once known as “The Pearl of Asia.”

**Currency**

Cambodia has a dual currency, the Cambodian Riel (r), and the US\$, which is widely accepted for larger purchases.

**Language**

Cambodia has a single official language: Khmer. Nearly 90% of the country's population speaks it. English is understood in larger touristy areas like Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

**Religion**

Buddhism is Cambodia's official religion. Approximately 97% of the country's population follows Theravada Buddhism, with Islam, Christianity, and tribal animism making up the bulk of the small remainder.

**Location and size**

Situated in the Southwestern corner of the Indochina Peninsula, Cambodia has an area of 181,040 sq km, extending 730 km Northeast to Southwest and 512 km Southeast to Northwest. It is bounded on the Northeast by Laos, on the West by Vietnam, on the Southwest by the Gulf of Thailand, and on the Western side by Thailand.

**Population**

Cambodia's current population is 16,458,385, and it is ranked 117th in terms of population density.

**Internet coverage**

Internet services are also widely available, particularly in town areas.

**The Rule of the Khmer Rouge**

Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge controlled Cambodia with an extreme form of Maoism. In the process, more than 2,000,000 Cambodians were killed, leaving the country in economic and social ruin. Today, Cambodia is slowly rising from the ashes.



## **About the Author**

Originally from Cape Town, South Africa, Leana was never much of a cyclist. Her passion for cycle touring started in 2005 when she participated in the Tour D'Afrique - a MTB race from Cairo to Cape Town. She bought a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and embarked on a journey that took her all the way to Cape Town. In the process, she became the first female to cycle all the way from Cairo to Cape Town. Upon returning, she found adjusting to her regular life surprisingly difficult and decided to continue her travels on two wheels.

In March 2007, Leana and her companion Ernest Markwood began a bike ride that turned into an around-the-world cycle ride. They started cycling together but eventually found their own pace and direction in life and on the road.

Leana has cycled across Africa twice, the Middle East, Europe, the UK, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. After Australia, she flew to Ushuaia, Argentina, and cycled through South, Central, and North America for several years. She then visited many larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

As of now, Leana finds herself back in Southeast Asia.









There is an immense sense of freedom in carrying with you all that you need.



