

Touching the soul of Cambodia

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KOMPONG CHHNANG PROVINCE, Cambodia — In the village of Anchanh Rung, a three-hour drive from the traffic-clogged streets of Phnom Penh, water buffalo outnumber motorcycles and the night noises come from animals my Western ears can't identify.

Barefoot children in T-shirts and shorts crowd around us as we step out of our air-conditioned van into a cloud of red dust.

Son By, 49, a villager whose family will be hosting us for the night, greets us and leads us up the ladder to her house, a one-floor wooden platform perched on 12-foot-high stilts and covered with a thatched roof.

Spread on teak floorboards are colorful plastic mats — our seats for a community meeting about to take place — and later, our beds. Each is set with a bright silk pillow, a plastic bottle of water and a roll of toilet paper. Mounted on a shelf is an altar with a stick of incense poking out of an empty Fanta can, and in the corner, a portable television plugged into a car battery.

In Cambodia, where temperatures reach into the 90s even in the dry season, visits to rural villages like this one don't make their way into many tourist itineraries.

But the six of us — all Americans in our mid-40s to 70s — are not ordinary travelers. We're part of a "Reality Tour" sponsored by Global Exchange, a San Francisco international human-rights organization dedicated to plunging participants into the heart and soul of the culture and countries they visit.

Along with trips to the ancient Hindu temple of Angkor Wat and a pre-dawn boat ride through the floating villages on Tonle Sap Lake, we've spent a morning in a shanty town behind the Phnom Penh train station talking with women and children suffering from AIDS; shared duck and mushroom omelets prepared by Buddhist nuns; and talked with beggars who lost arms and legs in land-mine accidents.

Now, leaving behind indoor plumbing and our air-conditioned hotel for a night, we've come to find out what life is like for the 75 percent of Cambodians who live in 14,000 rural villages like this one, subsistence fishermen and rice farmers in a country still struggling to overcome 30 years of genocide, war and international isolation.

Poverty level on rise

In Cambodia, \$25 is enough to buy a bicycle and start a business delivering coconuts to a market or peddling pots and pans, but with the exception of a fledging garment and tourist industry, there are few ways to earn cash.

Prostitution and the child sex trade thrive. Political corruption is a way of life.

Peter Swift is an American social activist whose nonprofit organization, the Southeast Asia Development Program, helped arrange our visit to Anchanh Rung. For the past 11 years, he has been looking for ways to help, one village at a time.

The poverty level among rural Cambodians continues to rise despite millions in foreign aid. Swift thinks hope might lie in the idea of importing Western concepts along with cash.

With his help, the villagers have become familiar with American buzz phrases such as "empowerment of women," "nonviolent direction action" and "goal-setting." They've formed community associations to build schools when the government refused and to stand up to illegal loggers.

Sitting cross-legged on our mats inside Son By's house, we listened as villagers talked proudly about surrounding logging trucks and turning back a big company with plans to level the mahogany and bamboo forests and replace them with high-profit, fast-growing eucalyptus.

"In this area," one woman explained, "if you want to marry your son to someone, you have to build a house first. So we have to protect our land for our children's future."

Successes such as these are fueling dreams, not about college educations or cars, but about a future that might include a pan in which to cook cake to sell at a market or seeds to grow vegetables.

With a few hours of daylight left after our meeting, Swift suggested we take a ride a few miles down the road to Andong Rovieng where villagers recently formed a savings group, a type of credit union. Members each contribute 12.5 cents a month and borrow when they need it.

Water buffalo lazed in a ditch by the side of the road as the sun began to set and our van pulled into a dirt clearing. The villagers were waiting for us, and when Swift asked a few to talk about their goals, it was mostly women who volunteered.

"To have a well," said a woman in a plaid work shirt and silk sarong.

"To be able to plant vegetables," said another.

"To buy a cooking pot."

"To plant two seasons of rice."

"To go to school," said Son Kosal, 14, a seventh-grader with a big smile and shiny black hair pulled into a pony tail.

Son Kosal has six brothers and sisters and a dream of one day becoming a lawyer. She's second in her class, and with some help, she might beat the odds. Only about half the girls in Cambodia attend school and three-fourths of all children drop out between the third and sixth grade.

Pol Pot regime

Bombed by the United States in an attempt to destroy North Vietnamese hideouts during the Vietnam war, Cambodia is a country where no family was left untouched by the genocide of the Communist Khmer Rouge (Khmer means Cambodian and Rouge is the French word for Red) under its leader, Pol Pot, between 1975 and 1979. Millions died as he drove people out of the cities, purging the country of doctors and teachers, considered "educated" classes, and filling mass graves in rural areas that came to be known as the killing fields.

An invasion by the Viet Cong ended the the Pol Pot regime but threw the country into political turmoil and economic isolation until the United Nations brokered elections in 1993. The population, once 30 million, now stands at just 13 million; the average family of five earns about \$375 per year.

"Many poor people feel they were born to be poor and will always be poor," explained Sor Sat, a Cambodian social worker who works with Swift. "It means most people tend to live day-to-day with no clear goals, but now that's starting to change."

Last night, saying goodbye

It was dark by the time we drove back to Anchanh Rung. A single fluorescent light bulb brightened Son By's house as we climbed the ladder again, this time for dinner.

The mats become our dining-room table, and we ate in shifts. Guests first, then village leaders and the women who spent most of the afternoon preparing the meal.

Bowls of rice were passed, then fish steamed under leaves on an open fire under the house; strips of chicken and beef; a soup with coconut milk; and for dessert, pencil-thin potatoes that we peeled with the back of a spoon and dipped into palm sugar.

Music began a few minutes after the dishes were cleared. Someone fetched the light and carried it down the ladder to a dirt clearing where a group of village men were tuning up handmade instruments — drums, a xylophone made of bamboo and a stringed instrument with a scratchy, high-pitched tone.

A thin woman took my hand; her friend grabbed by husband Tom's. We followed their swaying motions as they formed a circle and began to dance in slow motion.

Soon everyone was dancing ... and laughing. I glanced behind me and saw that Tom had decided to pick up the pace by dancing his version of the Moon Walk.

Son By's floor was big enough to sleep the six of us, our guides and several of her family members. Bedtime came early, and as we tossed and turned, flicking flashlights on and off and trying to get comfortable under mosquito nets in the 90 degree heat, I thought about how easy our own lives are.

In the morning, the villagers fixed a breakfast of rice porridge with coconut milk, dried fish and sweet balls of sticky rice, then took us to the fields in carts pulled by oxen where they taught us how to wield sickles to harvest rice. Afterward, we visited a school where 100 children share two rooms. No books, no pencils, no paper. The teacher brings his own chalk.

Over farewell drinks of fresh coconut milk, Bhavia Wagner, the American guide Global Exchange hired to travel with us throughout our trip, offered the villagers "thank you" gifts we had brought from the U.S.- ball caps, shampoo and aspirin, plastic kazoos and roasted almonds.

In 2002, Wagner, 48, of Eugene, Ore., published a book called "Soul Survivors," an anthology of first-person stories from women and children who survived the Pol Pot regime. Since that time, she's deepened her ties with Cambodians through her work with Friendship with Cambodia, a humanitarian organization she formed after making her first trip in 1991.

"Here in America, we hear about poor people, but we don't really realize who they are until we see where they live," she said.

Now that we had, what could we do?

It's a question Global Exchange challenges travelers to answer in the weeks following its Reality Tours.

Some pledged to support a scholarship fund for Son Kosal and other village children set up by Friendship with Cambodia. Others said they might speak to groups about their experiences or do volunteer work in their communities.

In a few hours, we'd be back to a different kind of reality — one with air conditioning, showers and CNN.

Before we left, we folded our hands at our chests and bowed our heads in the traditional way Cambodians say goodbye. As our van pulled away, and the villagers kept bowing, I

thought to myself that maybe we really can make a difference, one village and one person at a time.

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