

Transcript of Podcast 081: Pride & Prejudice & Motorbikes

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the 'why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

Welcome to the second part of my retrospective of my travels 12 years ago in South-East Asia. All things being well, by the time this is released we'll have returned from our trip to Vietnam, but since I didn't fancy doing an episode immediately on return, once again you've got a pre-recorded episode. Which makes things more efficient and means at least my pods come out on time, but also means you don't get any housekeeping or life updates.

To be honest, they'll probably follow in a subsequent pod. A bit like the pods I did about inter-rail. At the time of writing this episode, I've not really thought of it. But we'll see.

I realised this needed two episodes when I was even collating the original travel diary for podcast use - as posted, in total, it came to over 28,000 words. Even with substantial editing, because I wanted to provide context and updates, that would still mean it'd've been the longest podcast episode by far. So breaking it into two, just as the original travel diary did, makes sense.

The 3-week trip I did to China in 2002 was in three parts. I've not even thought about that yet.

Anyway, when we left our intrepid proto-barefoot-backpacker, they were in the south of Laos, musing about which of three countries they were going to overnight in the next day. Let's pick up where we left off and head to Champasak.

{section separation jingle}

Day 10 - Tuesday 28 February.

It probably gives the game away to note the original title of this day's entry was "One Night In Bangkok", but with "night" and "Bangkok" crossed out and replaced with "day" and "Sisaket" respectively. And it was barely even a day; I was in the Sisaket Province for maybe three or four hours at most. But as you know by now I'm very fond of a music-themed pun.

{As a side note, in all the time I was in Laos, I never once had a BeerLao. I had a sip of 'lao lao' whisky - the Danish/Austrian couple I met in Luang Prabang night market let me have a sip of stuff they'd been given when they were in the far North. Went down like Brandy. Was probably rocket fuel.}

It wouldn't be the first time I'd had suspicious alcohol in Asia, and it wouldn't be the last. From Tibetan herders with something vile stored in Sprite bottles, to illicit moonshine in the heart of a Bangladeshi tea plantation, I always seem to find ... stuff. A reminder you can hear more about that sort of thing in my earlier podcast on Alcohol-that-isn't-beer, from February 2021.

*{In a very hot room with just a ceiling fan circling, and no Internet, I went to bed relatively early, with only **Jane Austen** to keep me company (hey, if I'm going to read chick-lit, I might as well go to the source! Though she does tend to go on a bit and use far too many characters ...). It fitted well with a plan to get up early and catch the 8.30am bus out of Pakse and into Thailand. This was all part of my epic plan to get to North-West Cambodia (Anlong Veng) without having to go through Phnom Penh, and without flying ... as long as the overland journey cost less than \$135 I'd be all right (?!).}*

Walked out of the hotel around 6.15am and met a German couple who were doing the same thing - or at least

going as far as the first town in Thailand (Ubon Ratchathani). They'd been told that a bus passes down the street around 6.30am and stops wherever someone holds out a hand. Well, it came at much closer to 7am, and it wasn't a bus, rather a sawngthaew (basically, a van with benches), and it was already pretty crowded, but the three of us were shoved in anyway! Reasonable ride to Pakse, quite interesting sitting with the locals. Cost: 20,000 Kip.

In Pakse, the two Germans wanted to catch a 'taxi' to the VIP bus station, even though it was only about half a mile - but to be fair they did have lots of luggage. The three of us fitted on a basic bicycle-with-cart contraption - I was squashed with one of the Germans on the seat, the other German rode on the back of the motorcycle. This was a short but interesting experience, especially when he turned left across two lanes of oncoming traffic, which from our vantage point we could see. Quite clearly!

Made it to the bus station in good time, got the ticket, then used up much of the rest of my KIP on water and a packet of Nori Seaweed flavoured fake Pringles. KIP is pretty worthless outside the country cos no bugger will change it, and due to my skilled money management I left Laos with approximately 30,000 KIP, which is about £2.50 worth, or one main meal at a decent restaurant. The bus to Udon passed without incident and soon enough I was on my own in a strange land with no maps and no phrasebooks!}

It seems I never made a note about the border crossing. The actual admin was pretty simple; we got off the bus at the Lao border, got stamped out, walked through the no-mans-land in between the official gates, was stamped in to Thailand, and then waited for our coach to come through. However, it was pretty much my first ever time effectively walking across an international border - all the other borders I'd crossed at that point were either on a train, or were self-contained entities by the roadside where the admin was done either on board the bus or just involved getting off and getting back on again. What struck me the most was the small pop-up shopping centre that occupied the majority of no-mans land; stalls selling everything from clothing to food to electricals. Up to this point I'd naively assumed the area between border posts was a restricted and controlled area, pretty benign and sterile, but apparently not. This was something I was to see later in places like West Africa and Central Asia.

{Thailand, however, is quite a friendly place. Secondly, it is far more organised than Laos. It was pretty easy to find where and when my bus to Sisaket was due - I had enough time to change some money and get lunch. Pork in Oyster Sauce with fried rice for 45 Baht - just under £1. In a bus station. Fabulous! Plus, the bus ticket to Sisaket was only 40 Baht too, a journey of just under two hours. Quite a crowded bus too - as it was getting into the afternoon it was getting a little hot, but the bus was equipped with fans. At some point they stopped working but by then all the windows were open too.

My fear had been the next bit of the journey. I was right to fear it, but for the wrong reasons. I'd initially wondered if I'd have to source a taxi to cover me the whole journey from Sisaket to the Cambodian border (which would have been in the region of £35-£40), but in fact no sooner had I got off the bus in Sisaket than I was directed onto another bus which was apparently heading in the right direction. This bus was even more crowded at first, and there was virtually no legroom. At one point, the bus conductor actually got me to break a social taboo (!) - the back seat of a bus is always reserved for monks, if there are any. He'd directed me to the back seat after about half an hour, but soon afterwards, five monks came on. He got one of them to sit in the seat I was in, in front of me, and squashed the other four monks in around me! When more people had left, I excused myself and sat in a double seat a couple of rows forward - boy did I feel uncomfortable!}

Yeh, this was a bit of a strange one, and your mileage may vary as to the right thing to do. As an exceptionally tall foreigner, the bus driver and the locals were happy to bend the normal cultural rules for me, out of a respect for the guest to the country, and maybe it could be argued it was rude of me to move out of the seat they'd let me have, but I figured in any case this was a good compromise.

{At the small town of Khu Khan, he indicated that this was my stop, and that I needed to do the rest by taxi. So yes, taxis were involved, but this was only 600 Baht (about £12) as it was only about 40km. However, this was no ordinary taxi}

It was, in fact, my first experience of what would on this trip become something of a running theme. And indeed recurred on my West Africa trip two years later. It was, of course, the moto-taxi. A motorbike, a driver, and a naïve western backpacker hanging on to the driver for dear life.

{Of course, I had a big heavy rucksack. The first thing we tried was me on the back wearing it normally. It was

very lob-sided and we actually fell over after about 2km - the motorbike landing on my leg. Joy. Quick brush-down, fix my hat to my waist, check I haven't lost anything, carry on. This time we tried it with me sitting on the backpack, which actually worked relatively well, although I was riding quite high so some of the trees on the main road were near misses. After we stopped for petrol, he tried a third tack and put the rucksack lengthwise between me and him. This was okay, but after a while it got uncomfortable on my arms to hold onto him around the pack. In any case my bum and legs were getting a bit numb by the end, but I couldn't easily shift about because when I did, we weaved! I also couldn't get decent grip on the footrests, possibly due to my position, possibly due to my footwear, but I couldn't take them off as I'd nowhere to put them. The road I'd been warned about being absolutely terrible was actually pretty good; one or two rough spots but it was at least tarmac all the way, even if it was broken up at times. The only snag came from around 8km to go as the road generally went uphill, through some very picturesque countryside, but the poor bike could barely cope with it!)

According to Google Maps, the climb is about 200m over the course of 5km. That'd be one heck of a Parkrun. For comparison on that score, Queens Parkrun rises roughly 44m per lap, so three laps of that is only 132m. And that's tough enough.

{As international borders go, this one is quite quiet. Barely any traffic in either direction, the Thai border office is a portakabin, and the Cambodian immigration office is a shed. Well, to be more precise, it looked like an oversized football dugout or burger stall. And staffed with about 8 or 9 Cambodian border guards. All rather overkill.

Anyhoo. Visa processed and they let me in! Not sure how many English tourists they get but I doubt it's that many. They got me sorted with onbound transportation to Anlong Veng - another mototaxi but this one was much more comfortable. We went faster on better roads, but the feel of the bike was more stable. Or maybe that's the skill of the rider. Anyhoo, got to a hotel, actually the poshest one in Anlong Veng (\$15/night!!!) but to be honest after a journey like that I'd quite like some pampering! The chap who drove me here was eager for any other business I could offer him, so have arranged for him to drive me out to Prasat Preah Vihear tomorrow - yes, the disputed temple.}

We'll come on to why it's disputed shortly, suffice to say it's always a thrill to visit somewhere that, at the time, had a red 'we advise against all travel here' warning issued by the British Foreign Office. It's not something I do very often, despite what my friends think. And hey, what do the FCO know anyway? Hashtag I am not a role model.

Also, another thing I didn't point out in my diary at the time was why I went for this particular hotel. This part of the world was, at the time, a mobile phone blackspot and, because I'd not booked ahead due to seeing how far I could get on the day, this meant I'd have to wander up to a hotel and go 'do you have any room?', which is not something I like doing at the best of times, let alone late afternoon on my first day in a country which doesn't even use a character set I'm familiar with let alone a language. When I had the inevitable conversation with this new Cambodian moto driver, inevitable because the first question he asked was 'where are you going?', which is a pretty reasonable question to ask to be fair, he told me he knew a hotel. Of course he knew a hotel. He told me it was one his girlfriend worked at. I don't know if that's true or not. And maybe \$15/night is expensive for a hotel in Anlong Veng but it didn't feel expensive to me, and agreeing with him made the angst levels drop immensely.

It was a very nice hotel, as it happened. Although as a side note, I ended up paying the bill in three different currencies, as I had some Thai Baht left over that would otherwise go to waste. They barely raised an eyebrow at this request. I guess that's what happens when you stay a couple of nights in a town that may or may not be noted for what you might call 'extra-curricular cross-border activity'.

As for the other two currencies involved in this transaction:

{The guidebook says that Anlong Veng only has one bank and there is no ATM. However, that guidebook was published in 2010. There is now a 24/7 ATM in a nice air-conditioned cubicle. So I thought I'd see if it worked with my card, after the debacle I had in both Malaysia and Laos. However, when I went to use it, three of the bank/security officials said it wasn't working, that the computer was down and it would be back up in 30 minutes or so. (note that it seemed to be about to work fine for me). No matter, I had a wander through the town, picked up some food from the market food stalls, and then went back. It was working, and it worked! Cambodian ATMs dispense US\$ mainly, and the market stalls here accept both US\$ and Thai Baht, so I

haven't seen any Cambodian Riels yet.}

The exchange rate was fixed at 4000 Riel to the US\$. And people used either. Or both. Often in the same transaction. A bottle of water cost 500 Riel, or 12½ cents.

{Anlong Veng. It's not a pretty town. In fact it looks like someone dumped a load of sheds by a roundabout and said 'I can't be mythered to go any further'. There also appear to be no litter bins; there is rubbish on the streets almost everywhere. Plus it's not very big. But in all that, it has its charms, and virtually everyone was saying 'hello' to me and so forth. I think they're just amazed to see a tourist, tbh! None of them speak English, of course, and in all my travels I never managed to pick up a Khmer phrasebook. Also, 20 Baht seems to be the general price for things; I paid one stall 20 Baht for some dodgy meat-on-a-stick and she asked me if I wanted one or two of them ... then I paid another stallholder 20 Baht for a piece of fruit and she then loaded the bag with several more small fruit of two different kinds as well!}

But hey, I'm in Cambodia!! The other feeling I had was, partway through the motorbike trip in Thailand, I had the strange impression that I wasn't really there? Like as if I was watching me in a movie or reading me in a book, that what was happening wasn't really happening but merely a story. Like as if none of this is real. Strange ...}

When people think of backpacking in Cambodia, Anlong Veng is rarely on people's itinerary, and indeed there are more convenient border crossings between Cambodia and Thailand. But this whole day is an example of how I travel. It also leads to a long caveat when someone asks me on Twitter 'how many countries have you been to', since, I mean, I've been to Thailand. Clearly. I set foot in the place, I ate in the place, even if I only technically transited it on a coach, two buses, and a moto-taxi, and spent eight hours in it. I left the bus stations, it's not like I only used the airports, and yet, and yet, have I been to Thailand? I guess I need to go back one day, to set the record straight.

{section separation jingle}

Day 11 - Wednesday 29 February. I go from music to film with "Pol Pot and the Temple of Doom", although it goes without saying ... oh wait, I actually have seen that film. It was just a long time ago and I don't remember much of it.

Anyway.

{Today I achieved pretty much all of my aims - both stated and unstated. Yay.}

Moto chappie (whose name he did tell me but I unfortunately forgot!) came a-knocking for me at 7.40am; luckily I was already up. I wanted a reasonably early start because I knew it was a long journey, but equally I'm fully aware of my own limitations!

*This time, travelling on the back of a motorbike was much more comfortable - as I only had my small red backpack as opposed to my big rucksack. In addition, I forewent the hat - useful as it might have been, it would have been awkward to take along (from the border yesterday I'd tied it to my belt-hook but then spent a good 10-15 minutes untying it again when I got to the room. Knots are *not* my strong point, as some of you may be aware ... :p*

It was a long journey - coming up for three hours - but we did stop twice for fuel and once for breakfast. Time has moved on quite a bit since my guidebook was written (July 2010), and what the book said were dodgy uneven roads had by now all been tarmacked, so it was a smooth and efficient ride. Less comforting was the sight of big trucks coming right at us driving over the central lines in the road, but closing my eyes made it all seem worse somehow. Plus I have no balance at the best of times, so keeping my eyes open was the best way of staying on the road!}

My understanding is that the roads have improved even more since. Cynics might argue that's because the location of Prasat Preah Vihear is strategically important so the easier it is to get there from deeper inside Cambodia the better. And armies need good roads; ask the Romans about that. The same is probably true of the last section to the temple itself.

*{Getting *up* to the temple is a slight faff. You have to go to the (off-the-road, so easy to miss) ticket office*

about 5k from the site, and "hire" another moto for \$5 (access to the temple is otherwise free!). The reason for this is the state of the road up – it's flat like one of those dusty construction roads, so perfectly rideable, it's just *steep*. Most of it is steep like Church Hill near me or Littledean Hill near my uncle, so pretty steep, but the last few hundred meters are ... doable in a car, if the car is a 4WD pickup truck or some other redneck-powered vehicle!}

Calculations via Wikipedia suggest the climb up to the entrance from the open plains is around 400m, making this double the incline of the road I took out of Thailand the previous day. There's a reason you take specialised motorised transport up this route.

{From the 'car park' to the temple site itself, you walk down a long pathway that's flanked by Cambodian soldiers, lookout huts, gun positions, and sandbags. Were you to look out to the left over the cliff, you would see Thailand. It's fair to say that, on the issue of Prasat Preah Vihear, the two don't exactly see eye-to-eye!}

Basically, the temple's always been in an area of dispute, but an ICJ ruling in 1962 finally gave it to Cambodia. Apart from ultra-nationalists on the Thai side, the temple itself isn't in dispute now, rather a small area of land surrounding the temple is – this land wasn't explicitly covered in the 1962 judgment. And ever since then the two sides have been 'on guard' on and off. There used to be direct and easy access to the temple from Thailand but the border here gets opened and closed on a regular basis (currently, it's closed. With razor wire!).}

All around the temple site are signposts saying things along the lines of 'Prasat Preah Vihear is our temple'. And other signs warning of landmines. This is very much a site where you do not go off the paths. Fortunately there's a lot of paths.

*{The temple itself is from the Angkor period (so of the same mould as the *huge* Angkor Wat temple in Siem Reap), so is nationalistically Cambodian, although at times in history the Thais have even controlled Angkor (the French made them give it back!).}*

As an aside, the nearest large city to the Angkor temples is Siem Reap, which translates roughly as 'Thailand defeated'. Note the main border crossing into Thailand (Poipet) is a hundred or so km up the road from it. It's somewhat akin to when the Eurostar to France departed from Waterloo station, or trains from Paris to places in Central Europe departing from Austerlitz.

{As ruined temples go, Prasat Preah Vihear is actually pretty spectacular. It's partly because, although in ruins, it's actually kept pretty well. You can still make out quite a few of the designs on the porticos and on the walls themselves, plus you can quite easily get a feel of what the site must have looked like in its prime. In that respect, it is far far more spectacular than Wat Phu Champasak.}

*However, it's partly also its location. On the ride on the way there, the surround countryside was flat and quite dull – rough fields of grassland and landmines, punctuated by series of small trees and the occasional rough-and-ready villages. However, as intimated, the temple is on a hill. In fact it's built *on* the side of a mountain – the outline follows the contours of the mountain so as you move South, you also move further up. (This is also why access is easier from the Thai side. The 'entrance way' of the temple is on *their* side of the mountains!). Obviously this means that the views are awesome. Or would be if Cambodia wasn't suffering a similar amount of haze as Luang Prabang was. Guess that's the drawback of this time of year.*

There weren't that many people there – a few Cambodian families –; in fact I'd say the tourists were outnumbered by the soldiers who were sitting on pretty much every portal and getting in the way of photography! I think moto-man was tipping them some small cash for their presence; I was too busy taking photos!}

Though not of the soldiers. I got told off for that at the very start and made to delete one photo I took of the trenches.

Again, my details about the temple itself were quite limited in my original diaries, so, for a brief overview: the name means, in a slightly vague-sounding way, "religious offering of sacred shrine". It's around 800m long and, as I said earlier, it kind of follows the mountain from north to south, but despite the Cambodian end being at the wrong side, you still enter it from the north. It's weird being so close to an international border and not being allowed to cross it.

The incline in the temple itself is around 120m over those 800m. Part of this is catered for by a stone staircase almost 80m long, whose steepness is apparently on purpose to represent the difficulty of approaching the realm of the gods. This is because the temple itself is supposed to be a representation of Mount Meru, the home of the gods in Buddhism, Hinduism, and related belief structures. Other parts of the temple complex include large corridors, avenues, lined with pillars, and an old reservoir, now disused. The whole complex is also designed so you can't see it all at the same time, each passageway 'hides' the next room, in a sense. This makes it awfully hard to photograph.

It's a World Heritage Site, unsurprisingly.

{After we'd been there about an hour and a bit, Moto-man started to make suggestions that it was time to head back, as it was a long way home. To be fair though, by this time I'd reached the 'viewpoint' over Cambodia so there wasn't much else to see. I ate a bit of fruit (it's hard to eat a melon without a knife!), then we headed back down the mountain and set off for the ride home.}

In fact his excuse was he was missing his girlfriend. Hard unrelate. But though I was just figuring out my asexuality at this point, I wasn't going to use that as an excuse.

*{Getting back wasn't really that memorable - quicker than the way there, taking only just over 2 hours. But then we didn't stop. Not even for petrol, so we cruised into Anlong Veng having been running literally on empty for about the last 35km. I don't think *he* was quite sure how we did that. Gave him \$60 for the trip, which sounds expensive, but there's really no other way of doing it (there are very limited buses to the town of Sra Em, but even that's still 27km from PPV, and Anlong Veng is some 90km from PPV). Then had a rest in the hotel cos my bum was sore!}*

At equivalent cost of living, that's 480 bottles of 500ml water, which, if you buy them singly (and not in bulk) in a UK supermarket, might come to about £432. That's not a bad hourly rate, in fairness.

*{Headed out an hour or so later, to start the second part of the reason for going to Anlong Veng. This is slightly more unpleasant, and is part of the reason I chose to go to Cambodia in the first place. Most tourists come here because of Angkor Wat. I came because of the Khmer Rouge. In the whole of the 20th Century, I can't think of any other regime who killed as large a proportion *of their own people*, especially not in such a small space of time.}*

My blog as written then went into a long editorial about the Khmer Rouge and how the Vietnamese invasion at the end of '78 wasn't the end of their regime. We don't need to go into such detail here, suffice to say the reason Anlong Veng became important is because it was, effectively, the last part of Cambodia to be controlled by them, and where many of their leadership 'holed out' until their final defeat in April/May 1998. Yes, that long after.

As an aside, Pol Pot, the leader of the regime, 'mysteriously and conveniently' died of a 'heart attack' as Anlong Veng was finally liberated - interestingly he'd already been overthrown from the Khmer Rouge leadership some months earlier and was under their house arrest at the time. He was then cremated very quickly afterwards. Also conveniently. Funny, that.

{Anyway therefore, Anlong Veng has a number of sites surrounding the Khmer Rouge leadership. The first one I went to was the house of Ta Mok, the military head and 'Brother Number Five' in the regime. It's a weird shell of a place, a couple of hundred meters off the main road (most of the good stuff was looted soon after he was arrested in '98). What remains are some of the flooring, and the murals on the walls - depicting scenes from both Angkor and PPV. It overlooks a lake. Or rather, it overlooks what once might have been a lake, and which is now grasslands containing pools of water, with the whole thing covered in dead, gnarled, trees (apparently the water poisoned them). It's a little eerie. Children now go fishing there. On a side note, the house now also seems to be used as a kind of 'play/activity/social centre' for the whole family, as when I was there the place was full of people chatting, running about, using laptops, having picnics, and playing games. One room I walked into I got mobbed by maybe 20-25 teenagers who all insisted that I have my photograph taken with them. Individually.}

This was very weird. In the home of one of the most genocidal maniacs the world has seen, I'm there having my photograph taken by a bunch of kids. The irony that he would almost certainly have killed us all was not

lost on me, and the whole thing felt kinda ... creepy?

{The other sites were a moto-ride away, up by the border I crossed yesterday. I could have seen them then but I just wanted to get to the hotel. So today, walking up the road, I got hailed by a passing moto driver who wanted to know if I needed a ride. After trying to explain to him where I wanted to go (he didn't get it at first, but then a lightbulb went off when I showed him Pol Pot's name), off we went.

There are a number of sites 'beyond' the border village that I really couldn't be mythered to get to, and one site (Ta Mok's grave) that I couldn't actually find, but the place I wanted to go was Pol Pot's cremation site. It's now a 'shrine' - people believe his spirit will grant them the winning lottery numbers, and long ago, anything that remained from his ashes was taken as souvenirs. It's very close to the border (maybe a couple hundred meters), but easy to miss as it's down a side road. It is signposted though.}

It's weird that again, while I provided a picture for the blog, I never actually took time to describe the site itself. It's not very big, and looks for all the world like a large bird table with a roof, in a plant nursery. It's a mound of soil, rectangular, with a wooden post holding up a triangular roof made of corrugated iron, and it's surrounded by a small netted fence. In front of the fence is a small table with what appear to be offerings on it. On my visit there were a couple of plates and a couple of plastic water bottles, and a locked metal box chained to a nearby tree that's presumably used for people to put money and gifts through a slot in the lid. A sign from the Ministry of Tourism is nearby, and says, in Khmer and English, "Pol Pot's (sic) Was Cremated Here. Please Help To Preserve This Historical Site".

Also nearby are two other ... I'm gonna call them bird tables. They both have bottles and flowers on them. One of them is a standard bird table on wooden stilts, a roof and window-like openings on each of the walls. The other is a wooden rendition of what I assume to be Pol Pot's house, which looks like one of those creepy cabins in the woods you find in American creepy folk tales, stairs leading up, gothic type roof, you know the type.

It's a little unnerving to know that people still venerate this place.

Anyway.

{Rode back to Anlong Veng, then had a wander about town for some nibbles, and while I was there I booked my bus ticket out to Siem Reap for tomorrow. At 7am. Yikes! As for food - the Cambodians like to snack, so every other market stall is one cooking some kind of meat (I generally don't ask what) or selling some kind of food (again, best not to ask). I picked up, I dunno, they look like deep-fried very small frogs. That they're deep fried means they taste like a KFC. And you eat them, bones and all (a bit like whitebait). Yeh...}

With hindsight, probably deep-fried cicada or locust. I never did ask. The only downside was the spindly legs or antennae or whatever they were kept getting stuck between my teeth.

{After another rest in the hotel, I went out for proper evening meal food. It was dark by now (and Anlong Veng has no streetlights, but still very very warm. Psychologically confusing). I forewent the hotel's own restaurant, and in town saw a fairly large stall with tables where some people were eating. I sat down. On my table was then placed a tray with vegetables on ice (carrots, shrooms, herbs, and one or two other unidentifiable things), another tray with flavourings and condiments, and a small mixing bowl. This is similar to Laos, but even more do-it-yourself; you mix the flavourings in the small bowl, then apply to the meal, which in this case, was 'cow'. Note that none of this I asked for! So to some pre-made saucy stuff I added a lot of lime, some peanuts, some sugar, onion, and a small amount of chillies, so in effect I made my own satay dip! Fab food, just what I needed. As I was eating, a couple of other tourists came by, which surprised me as I expected to be the only Westerner here. They were doing what I was doing, pretty much - passing through from Thailand having been to Laos (although they came through Thailand further North, from Savannakhet).}

To clarify here, I sat down, was given food, and I paid afterwards, with nary a word said on either side. True efficiency.

{One final note: ice-cream vans. In the UK they play 'Greensleeves' or that 'boys and girls come out to play' song. In Cambodia, the one I passed was playing 'Fur Elise'. More elegant, huh?! Conversely, the ones I passed in Laos all played the 'Mexican Hat Dance'.}

{section separation jingle}

Day 12 - Thursday 1st March. Back to movie references, this day was entitled "Tomb Raider". It's not a spoiler to say that's because I spent it going round the temples of Angkor. It's also not a surprise to say that I've never seen the movie. Nor played the game. I have walked down Lara Croft Way in the centre of Derby, though. And, as I wrote at the time, at least I had forewarning that this was a movie location, not like the time I walked to the Philadelphia Art Museum and thought 'coo, that's odd, there's a statue of Rocky at the bottom of the steps leading up.', and phoned my friend Sarah to ask why.

It is a spoiler to say I could have died through bloodymindedness today. But that's for later. We start the day back in Anlong Veng.

{Bea Marshall Quotient : High until lunchtime, afternoon minimal due to heat.}

I've found out why I was drinking so much water - towards the end of yesterday my eyes were drying up. Of course, I was sleeping in a room with strong aircon! It was necessary, but it explains a lot.

Got up, and caught the bus nicely. It was a pretty standard coach, in all honesty, nothing unusual. We left a little late though as we had to wait for a few bags of rice to be loaded on ... journey was pretty smooth; we stopped off for a breakfast halt near a roundabout in the middle of nowhere, and as the coach was bound for Phnom Penh, passengers for Siam Reap had to change about 20km outside the city onto another coach, which was even more swish!}

I don't remember if I was informed of this or not. I think, I think, I was. These unexpected 'all right, you need to get out here' moments don't happen often, but they happen rather more than you might expect. I was really confused once in Kosovo, when I got dumped in a lay-by just outside Prizren because the advertised coach decided it'd rather go directly to Pristina, despite Pristina's town centre being Right There, just a couple of miles down the road. But hey ho.

{Bus station shenanigans (they've moved it again!), but as I hadn't booked anywhere anyway, I was at the mercy of the touts. Or possibly they were at the mercy of me as I played them off against each other. \$15/night again, but it is a rather luxurious hotel, complete with minibar ... mmhh! I'm taking the view now that, yes I can spend \$6/night on a room, but since the cheapest hotel I stay in often in the UK (Formule 1 Birmingham) is about £25/night for which you get a bed ... \$15 is less than half that and I get aircon, decent bathroom, free Wi-Fi ... I might be on a budget but it's not a pocket-pinching one!}

They weren't even expecting me to be on the coach. They were lurking in the bus station not originally paying heed to my coach, because why would anyone not Khmer or Thai be on a coach from Anlong Veng. And they they saw me, and their faces lit up. Bless them.

Obviously hotel prices have gone up across the world since then, plus the hotel Formule 1 chain have left the UK. The site in Birmingham's now a student hall of residence, apparently. Apt.

{The chap who took me to this hotel - Sinpon - stayed with me as 'my moto driver' for the day. He's cool, bless him, but he does like things his own way, and having random Englishmen like me only confuses him. Anyhoo, as I settled into the hotel towards 10am-ish, I figured it was a bit late to do what I was going to do, so we set off to see the temples of Angkor. Which I had initially planned not to do.

It's a very long, straight, road from Siem Reap to the temples, longer than it looks on a map. Paid \$40 for a 3-day pass - even though I'm only staying for two, it's easier than getting two 2-day passes for the same price ... Anyway. First stop, Angkor Wat, the largest religious building in the world.}

It's now \$62.

*{It is actually huge. On the map it looks like a small square, until you realise the scale of the map. This caught me out later on too (the entranceway causeway *alone* is 500 meters). It's full of very well-sculpted murals and bas-reliefs, patterns on porticos etc, and it's all very symbolic. The trouble is, after going round two entire walls depicting battles, you kind of lose a sense of concentration and they all merge into one. And that is the very problem with the Angkor complex. Lots of temples, all with different designs, sculptures, etc, and yet all depicting similar mythologies and art. An art historian or Ancient Oriental History major would*

spend a full week here dissecting every single one of them. I am not. Although that said, Angkor Wat is prettier and somehow slightly more impressive than Prasat Preah Vihear – what it loses in location it makes up for in intricacy and sheer size – you can't help but be overawed by it.}

That's all I wrote about it. You'd've thought I'd've pay more attention. In truth though I was aware there's a lot more temples on site and I didn't want to get overwhelmed. What I will say though, is, and bear in mind when you hear the rest of my explorations, there's two ways of handling this. Angkor Wat is clearly the star attraction, so you can either do what I did, and do it first, because that's what you came to see, right? Or you do it last, and everything you see is a build-up to it. The upside of that is that you might remember your visit more. The downside is you might be knackered by the time you get there, which is, as you'll hear, why I don't have fond memories of the Bayon temple. Which makes for a very fine second star attraction, by the way.

{After grabbing lunch on site, I went back to Sinpon and he took me several km East, to the temple of Banteay Kdei. From here I told him I'd walk to Angkor Thom's South Gate, almost back to Angkor Wat. He didn't believe me, and said he'd wait for me at Banteay Kdei. Heh. This was nearly 1pm. Banteay Kdei is quite a quiet ruin, as most tourists ride straight past it on the way to nearby Ta Prohm, but it's pretty in its own way.

Ta Prohm, on the other hand, is quite weird. There are trees growing inside it – not overgrown with trees, but enough there to make you realise (as the trees are quite old) just how old the ruins are. They're also still reconstructing/renovating it so much of it is closed off. The most popular part is a weird tree that apparently featured in a prominent (and weird) scene in the aforementioned movie.

*There was then a long walk to Angkor Thom – *much* longer than it looks on the map. It was really hot out, but I tried keeping myself cool by drinking lots of water (on sale at virtually every corner) and the occasional mango. Yeh, wherever you turn, there are hawkers trying to sell you stuff (mainly cute kids, annoyingly); all, oddly, for \$1. So a bottle of water, a mango, a T-shirt, and a guidebook to Angkor are all \$1. Apparently. Someone doesn't have much business sense ...*

*Wandered past a couple more temples (Ta Keo, Spean Thmor, Chau Say Tevoda) before reaching Angkor Thom's Victory Gate. Angkor Thom is a *huge* area contained within boundary walls – but the main site itself is over a mile from the entry gates, and the bit in the middle is a nice country walk! I headed down a quiet path to get to the obscure but well-regarded East Gate, before heading towards the centre, and the rather bizarre temple of Bayon.*

By now I was actually suffering pretty badly from exhaustion due to the heat, so when I reached Bayon I sat down in the shade for about 15 minutes, then grabbed some water. I wandered through Bayon – a mishmash of architecture seemingly built as a self-glorifying edifice by one of the Kings of Angkor (Jayavarman VII, if you care!). Didn't give it as much recognition as it probably deserved, but by now I was exhausted, too hot, feeling ill, and pretty much templed out. I failed to walk the rest of the way, grabbing a tuk-tuk instead.

*After a long wait, a rub-down with a large block of ice I got from one of the water sellers, a phone call, and my nearly throwing up in the moat surrounding Angkor Thom, I finally managed to grab Sinpon (about 4.45pm) and he rode me back to the hotel. Apparently he hadn't believed me when I said I'd walk, so he'd been waiting back at Banteay Kdei, then wondered where I'd gone, rode around trying to find me, asked a policeman if he'd seen me, etc! Anyhoo, all's good now. I've arranged for him to come pick me up at 8am tomorrow to visit a couple of the more distant temples – but we'll be on a moto most of the time so hopefully I'll feel jolly fine! Collapsed back in the hotel room – sometimes aircon *is* A Good Thing!}*

It cannot be overstated just how bad I was feeling after the end of that walk. I don't know how far I went, but it certainly felt quite a long way. It wasn't exceptionally hot; maybe low 30s°C, but there was pretty much no shade whatsoever and I guess I just wasn't used to it. I just felt like I needed to walk and explore on my own, and not be beholden to drivers. That's very much a me-issue, of course.

With hindsight it was probably only heat exhaustion, but it very definitely could have turned into something worse, because although I was feeling weak, dizzy, and nauseous, I was still pressing on rather than stopping and taking a much easier journey. I'm the sort of person that's too bloodyminded to give up, I guess, or at least too bloodyminded to admit defeat, that's probably closer to the truth.

Anyway, I made it back, and it took a couple of hours lying on the bed in the hotel to get back to wanting to move again. Another reason for not taking the cheapest option of hotel available, I guess.

Note too that as I wasn't originally intending to visit the temples of Angkor, it opens the question of 'was it worth changing my travel plans for?'. And I guess the answer to that is still going to be a clear 'yes'. I know it's one of the most popular places in the country and pretty much the reason people come to Cambodia, but honestly, it's an example of some things being popular for a reason. And while most people have only really heard of Angkor Wat and 'the Tomb Raider temple', there's an awful lot here and definitely worth a day or two of exploration.

Just ... don't walk around it in thirty-degree heat when you're a Brit.

{section separation jingle}

Day 13, Friday 2nd March. Sticks and Stones. Not quite sure why, well, the stones are obvious but not the sticks. I guess I thought it sounded good.

{Bea Marshall Quotient: Beyond the Pale.}

Sinpon met me outside my hotel at 8am, and we headed off for day two of the 'OMG not another bloody temple' experience. Still just as hot as yesterday, but this time we were headed out into the sticks, for just two different sites. So not as much walking as yesterday? Yeh, right ...}

The thing is, if you're only likely to be visiting somewhere once, I tend to feel I need to make the most of it. This is why my backpacking trips tend to make me go back to work with the mindset that my job is a rest-cure.

*{Side Note: Cambodia, as has been pretty self-evident so far, is the land of the motorbike. The impressive thing is what you can see *on* these small motos:*

** One chap was riding with a thin block of wood, which must have been at least three meters in length.*

** Another person we passed was carrying at least two, possibly three, double mattresses on the back of their moto.*

** Then there was the teenage girl riding one, with what I assume were her three younger sisters on the back – so four kids on a bike!*

*The other issue I've got with motos, and this applies in Siem Reap more than Anlong Veng, is that the average moto driver does not differentiate between the road and the pavement (AV didn't really *have* pavements). Several times while walking down the main road earlier I got *cut up* by a moto. Oddly, road rage doesn't happen here. People honk their horns, but *only* when passing slower-moving traffic (a sort of 'look out, I'm behind you, get out of the way' honk). They don't seem to use the horn in anger, like the West, or in boredom, like the Maghreb.}*

Compare and contrast with West Africa, especially with the 'zem' in Benin. I'm not quite sure where there's more of them, though I didn't quite have the fear of crossing the road there as opposed to Cambodia. It was here where I learned the safest way of doing it was to make sure someone was always between you and the traffic. Something something trolley problem.

{Anyhoo. Our first stop was the Cambodian Landmine Museum. I'd seen it in the guidebook but didn't know really where it was, until we passed it and Sinpon said 'you wanna go'? So I did!}

*Interesting place; set up by a chap who originally *laid* mines in the days of the Khmer Rouge, but who has since made a career out of mine-clearance and defusing them. For many years, he was a solo operator, clearing mines with a stick (!) in low-priority areas and small villages, but in the late 90s the international mine clearance bodies said 'we don't know what you're doing' and told him to stop. His response was to get trained up to do it properly! The museum's not that big, but it has examples of what bombs and landmines look like, who uses them, why they're used, and how they're cleared. In the case of landmines it's with a dirty great big machine and lots of protective clothing. No rats.}*

While it sounds like a random statement, it's a reference to the way some people got rats to sniff out landmines without setting them off. I have no idea how they did this, but I'm aware rats are pretty intelligent creatures, relatively speaking, so I'd imagine they'd be fairly trainable.

{The second stop was another temple – the outlying Angkor temple of 'Banteay Srei'. What sets this temple apart from the others (apart from being in the back of beyond) is its impressive artwork. Quite a lot of the

temple has been restored/renovated, and the decoration on the sides and the door lintels is quite impressive.

*It seems to have served as both a temple and a government building, or at least had more than one use – the front half appears to have been accessible by anyone but the rear end only by high-ranking officials. Its more recent history was kick-started when, in the 1920s, future French thinker, politician, and chap who my friend Leila's school was named after (Andre Malraux) decided to nick bits of it and sell them (it wasn't one of the designated 'protected' temples of Angkor at that point); it was decided this was a *bad* thing and work started pretty soon afterwards to renovate it!*

Our next (and final) destination was Kbal Spean (the 'bridgehead') – a river with lots of ornate carvings in and around it. While the name refers to a natural rock arch over the river, its other name is 'River of a Thousand Lingas', as many of the decorative effects in the riverbed are of lingas. The tips of Penii, yes.}

Ah yes, back we are with the literal dick heads. But this is where they're supposed to be, nicely wet. *{sighs}* Ah, think of your own single-entendres.

*{However, while the river itself is quite pretty, serene, and interesting, *getting* there is another matter. From the car park, there is allegedly a nice picturesque 1.5km pathway through the woods and up a gentle hill. Well, it's picturesque, certainly. I wouldn't go so far as to say it was a path, though. In fact, if there hadn't been markers every 100m, and other people doing the same route in either direction, I'd be hard-pushed to tell you there was a path there at all! It's fine for the first 100m, then the rocks start. A combination of clambering over rocks, and across tree-trunks, make it quite the adventure. At one point there *is* a flight of steps, but other than that you're on your own. Getting *down* is actually harder than getting *up* – there was a bit around the 800m mark where it was literally a leap-of-faith job.*

The trail itself was dusty, although relatively smooth. After about 400m of rock-climbing and slipping on the dust, I figured my dodgy old walking sandals weren't giving me enough grip, so I took them off and clambered the rest of the way up barefoot. I did feel a little like some kind of ancient hunter lol.}

And here we witness the spiritual birth of The Barefoot Backpacker, on a pilgrimage up a deeply sacred hill. Or something, I don't know. I did 'A'-Level English; I've done far too much symbolism in my life. The curtains were blue because my uncle's an Everton fan, all right?

What I will say though is even before this point I was known for backpacking barefoot, or at least, carrying a backpack and being barefoot, so when two years later I crowdsourced for a blog identity, this particular journey wasn't the primary reason that was the name that my friends came up with. Though obviously it was part of the whole.

{The top of the trail is the rock bridge itself, and the river flows nicely through some small rapids. It's very serene and scenic. Up here there are a few carvings, but then the trail goes slightly downhill alongside the river, and as the river flows down, there are a lot more carvings and decorative effects, both on the bank (such as Shivas carved into the stone) and in the river-bed itself (mostly lingas).

The trail ends at the bottom of a waterfall. Even in the dry season it's quite nice, so would imagine in the wet season the thing would be gushing. And after a long hard climb in the heat (bear in mind that clambering over rocks requires more effort than simply ambling along!), standing in a cool river by a waterfall is incredibly refreshing!}

Although just as hot as it had been the day before, this walk had the advantage of being shaded, as well as being nowhere near as long. But also it shows that whatever had happened at Angkor, it hadn't affected me long-term. Which is just as well, because hiking was why I was there.

For completeness' sake, I also need to point out the view from the path was, as at Prasat Preah Vihear, not necessarily worth the climb, although here it wasn't just haze, although there was still a lot of haze, but also there's a lot of trees in the way. There was no path to the top of the hill itself; I assume for the same religious reasons as no-one's climbed Gangkhar Puensum, a mountain close to the Bhutan/China border and, at 7,570m, seems to be the highest unclimbed mountain in the world.

*{I headed down (sandals *on*); it seemed to be easier going down), nearly slithering down the hill at least twice, and eventually, completely knackered and way too hot, made it back to the car park and straight into one of*

the many food stall restaurants on site. What I have now learned is that it doesn't matter how much water you have, heat exhaustion is just as bad if you haven't eaten!

I did want to go to another site - Beng Mealea - but it's completely out the way, I was knackered, Sinpon wanted a further \$20 to do it, and I was getting cranky on the back of the bike, so we didn't. Rather, he took me back to my hotel and I collapsed in a heap on the bed!

*Evening was quite dull; had a wander down the main road, bought some fruit from a market stall (I've no idea how much fruit I can buy with 1,000 Riel - and I don't know how much a mango costs but it seemed awkward to give a 2,000 Riel note and expect change! I'm sure that's far far too much, but I don't want to be stuck with 500 Riel notes!). Found a small restaurant near the hotel that had a menu in English, Khmer, *and French*, and sold things like 'stuffed frog'. Nope, didn't ask what it was stuffed with!*

I have no idea what to do tomorrow - either stay in Siem Reap or go to Kompong Thom. I'll probably stay in Siem Reap though: I haven't seen anything of SR town, and also KT has a couple of pre-Angkorian temple ruins and a holy mountain pilgrimage site. So a bit too much like today, really!}

Sometimes it's possible to feel you've done too much of something. After this trip finished, it took me years to be wowed by a Buddhist temple again. I have the same vibe about Roman mosaics. And that's not a bad thing; you don't have to see everything. And all my travels over the past couple of decades are testament to me not necessarily remembering or accepting that, and angsty about it on the move.

I did not angst about this particular decision though.

{section separation jingle}

Day 14 - Saturday 3rd March. Today's blog post was entitled "Amok Time", proving that I can take plagiarism and inspiration from many places.

{Today was a day of rest. I thought I was in need of one! Plus, oddly, it would have been more expensive to go to Kompong Thom anyway, as although the hotel would have been cheaper, bus companies on the Siem Reap-Phnom Penh route have a habit of charging 'one fare, one ride'; ie the price to KT would be the same as to PP, so in effect I'd have had to pay twice the travel cost, which would have been more than the difference in price between the hotels.

Also, I couldn't be mythered.}

The beauty of travelling the way I do, without pre-booking travel or accommodation, is that I can change my plans and ideas on a whim. I'm not always beholden to alarms or stressful 'will I make my connection or won't I' bus trips. I mean, I am, but they're not as vital to the overall mission, as it were. And everywhere is interesting. Or has to be if you end up being stuck there for five hours or something. Preston. At least the pubs were open on that ridiculous train ride to Glasgow.

*{What I *did* do was go for a walk into the main touristy bit of Siem Reap. Well, three walks, actually. The first in the morning to check out what was there, the second around 3pm to eat lunch, and then the third just before 6pm to have a look at the night market and to have some evening food. Unlike Angkor, the map doesn't lie - tuk-tuk drivers say it's a long way, and when I say 'no it's not, it's only 2km' they kind of laugh and say 'yes, 2km, long way'. Evidently tourists are lazy ... * looks up at the sky, feels the sun burning, hmmm ...*

The centre of the city is quite a Tourist Trap - there is a road called 'Pub Street', for instance, that consists entirely of restaurants and pubs. Near it is 'The Alley' which is a narrow pedestrian (ha!) street consisting entirely of shops, restaurants, and pubs. There's also 'The Lane', which consists of ... you get the idea! It's slightly more expensive to eat in than Anlong Veng, but let's be honest, that's like comparing Manchester to, say, Grimsby.}

I've no idea why I used Grimsby as my example here. I've still never been there, though a weirdly non-zero number of my personal account Twitter followers live there. It's noted for being used in football punditry in the following sentence: 'ah, he can play well against the top clubs but can he do it on a wet Wednesday night in Grimsby', the implication being that that's the sort of match which requires dedication and the love of the game to make it through, without any pretences or luxury. Raw football. They won League Division Two twice (when

it was still called that). It's a town otherwise noted for fish, food-processing, and being great supporters of Brexit.

But back to Siem Reap.

{There's also a big difference between daytime and nighttime. In the day it looks quite quaint, lots of little shops etc, but it also looks a bit empty - because all the tourists are looking around the temples. At night, however, most of the roads in the very centre are closed off to traffic, the whole place lit up with garish lights, and it's like the city has discovered what it feels to feel the vibe of life!}

So, this morning I had a wander around and down, getting used to the traffic now and crossing the road only when it is safe to do so (which involves quick calculations as to the apparent speed of the oncoming motos, likelihood of them turning a corner, and making sure that someone else is between me and the oncoming traffic). Parts of the city are quite pretty; indeed my hotel is right next to the Siem Reap river. By day it lies between two large grass verges that separate two opposing carriageways of a main road (the gap between the roads is thus so wide that it doesn't feel like a main thoroughfare at all) - and in fact the area just beyond my hotel over the bridge is the 'Royal Residence', a very nice landscaped area with colonial-esque buildings by it - there seemed to be a wedding going on when I passed; by night there are lights in the trees and the benches along the path are filled with canoodling couples. And, at one point, someone sleeping in a hammock that was tied to two trees and completely blocking the pavement. However, as I walked round it, some policemen were there telling him to take it down ...

My first stop was a rather odd place near my hotel, down two side-streets so not a place easily found. Someone has created miniature representations of a few of the major Angkor temples, including Angkor Wat, Bayon, and Banteay Srei. Is very odd, but also quite detailed. If that wasn't odd enough, there's a back yard area where there's a swimming pool surrounded by stone crocodiles. Yeh ...

Had a look around the market - selling the usual tat, but also lots of spices. Not that I'll be taking any back (my backpack is about as full as it can get, or at least it is when I put my daypack in it), but makes me want to get hold of a few of the recipes to try at home. T-shirts are, metaphorically, a 'dime a dozen', as are dodgy metal bracelets. The Night Market was the same, except with more lights and cheesier restaurants/bars.}

It will come as no surprise to learn that I vaguely did a couple of experiments with cooking and then ... stopped. I like to cook, and I like to cook varied things, it's just I tend to always fall back to the same kind of things, because I'm used to cooking them so I'm not so angst about getting it right. And anyway, with South Asian curries, I don't really feel there *is* a 'right' way to cook them. Except you're almost certainly not using enough onion.

{'Lunch' I grabbed on my second trip out, around 3pm (and the heat was still intense!), and was the aforementioned 'Amok', a particular style of Cambodian curry. It's quite mild, compared with cuisine from neighbouring countries, but also flavoursome (lemongrass, especially). Most restaurants offer it - traditionally it appears to be mainly a fish curry but the place I went to offered several meats, as well as both tofu and 'vegetables'.

*Evening saw it a little cooler so I had another wander down, and saw how much it changes overnight. Much busier, but also then that much more interesting. I decided to waste half an hour by trying one of those 'fish-eating-foot-massages' (they seem to call themselves 'Dr Fish' over here); well it was \$3 for half an hour, and a free drink, but after I'd been in there maybe 15-20 minutes, a couple from the Home Counties came by and joined me - *they* were there for maybe 35-40 mins before they decided they'd had enough! It's very *very* ticklish at first but after a while it just feels like rain. *And* when the others stepped in, all the fish left me and went to them instead!!}*

I'd do it again. And I like having my feet tickled. The two are not necessarily connected.

{Have booked my bus to Phnom Penh (departs 9.45am, hotel pickup 8.45am, so no need to rush getting up tomorrow); have also booked hotels in Phnom Penh and Singapore. The end is nigh! Interestingly, the hotel in Singapore is one of the cheapest I could find, and yet it is still more expensive for that one night than my entire four-night stay in Luang Prabang! Good job I decided to spend an extra day in Cambodia from my original plan then, really!!}

Today was also the first day since Monday I didn't ride on a moto. My bum is quite grateful!!

{section separation jingle}

Day 15. Sunday 4th March, which was mostly spent on a coach. I don't really have anything else to annotate about it. I'd entitled this 'Remember, Meeting Expectations leads to Customer Satisfaction'; bear in mind my job at the time back in Nottinghamshire was to implement the Net Promoter Score customer service satisfaction methodology in a large energy supply company. Evidently I thought I was being clever. It doesn't seem to have any bearing or reference to what I wrote.

In fact, I seem to have started off the entry with a joke:

*“Waiter Waiter, there's a fly in my soup.”
“Yes sir, this is Cambodia.”*

It will become apparent why, later. I mean, why the context, not why the joke. If you can call it a joke. I'm not a comedian. Evidently.

*{Today was not a very interesting day. I spent a comfortable six hours on a pretty decent coach, sitting at the front so got to see the road ahead of me. There are a whole plethora of coach companies who operate in Cambodia, mainly on the popular tourist routes (I think I could have chosen from at least *nine* for today's journey from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh). I chose one called 'Mekong Express' who, at \$11 for the trip, are mid-to-high apparently but the service is good - free 2xDanish Pastry and 1xwater, plus hotel pickup for free and easy arrangements made for onward tuk-tuk to hotel in PP. There have been reports of cheaper coaches crashing on this route. It was a smooth ride most of the way, but the last 50km were still being built - roadworks everywhere and the tarmac already laid was quite 'bitty' and rough.*

*The coach I'd got on Thursday from Anlong Veng was run by GST, a slightly cheaper company but I think they're one of the few who actually do that route. In actual fact, both journeys were similar - aircon coach with one food stop, plus TV 'entertainment'. Both coaches showed (in fact I think the *same*) collection of VCD Karaoke videos of Khmer Pop; in fact the whole VCD was several songs in a storyline of 'boy meets girl, they fall in love, shit happens' - late teen girl-pop ballads. * le sigh.*

*Thursday's coach also played some Khmer 'sitcom', again aimed at that tween market, that seemed to have a fairly inept Che Guevara as one of the main adult characters, and two gormless geeky-type twin teenage boys in matching yellow/black sweaters and glasses who, well, had no gorm. Magic was involved somewhere. Today's coach had some bizarre Khmer vaudeville stand-up comedy act involving singing, a documentary in English on Angkor Wat (useful having just *left* the place), and the film 'Live Free or Die Hard', in English (with low volume) and what I assume to have been transliterated Khmer subtitles (though it could have been Vietnamese).}*

It is also apparent that someone should have picked up on my latent ADHD far sooner than they did. That passage started with my pretending to be a travel blogger and actually providing some useful information for a change, and ended up getting lost in the technicalities of Khmer cinema.

I suspect I made a note of it too though because at the time, having screens on coaches felt quite rare. It wasn't something we tended to do in the UK. I remember the first time I saw one on a local bus, in Birmingham, playing some kind of local transport authority public information film on repeat. It was weird. It didn't last long as an idea.

{Our lunch stop was, interestingly, Kompong Thom, where I'd decided not to stop over the day before. Quite a rough-and-ready town, but still more structured than Anlong Veng. Most people nipped into the main big hotel for restaurant lunch, but I hung around the market stalls outside and feasted on 1,000 Riel worth of something slightly crunchy, and I had to be careful the sharp bits didn't stick.}

The blog then went to a picture. But, for the purposes of an audio medium, it was again some kind of locust or cicada, probably. This part of Cambodia is, as we'll hear, noted for deep-fried spiders but these looked much more gangly than that.

{Now. This leads to two ethical questions:

#1 - For the carnivores: what's the difference between eating insects and eating cows and pigs? They're both animal.

#2 - For the vegetarians: if you're veggie on ethical principles, if you could effectively 'pluck' insects out the sky as they're flying past and eat them, the way that most other animals do with prey, would that be more acceptable than farming foods?

*It is often said about Cambodia though that one of the reasons they eat things like insects and the strange mini-frog things I had in Anlong Veng (and one of the towns we passed through to get to Phnom Penh, Skuon, is famed for its fried spiders!), is because relatively recently, that was all they *had*. Food was so scarce during and immediately after the Khmer Rouge regime that they had to survive on what was available - that includes insects. Note that they always seems to be deep-fried, so they don't really taste like anything much other than crunchy and slightly greasy. Again, KFC springs to mind ...}*

I actually was never fond of KFC, but not for that reason. I just never quite got into the flavourings they used. But back to the joke at the start, not flies, but arguably flying things.

*{Anyway. Got into Phnom Penh sometime between 3.30pm and 4pm. It's bigger than Siem Reap, and there are more (narrower) main roads, so there's much more traffic. Is it safe to drive here? Absolutely - as long as you're in the biggest tuk-tuk! On a side note about traffic, while Cambodia has a lot of motorbikes, the most commonly seen car appears to be a **Toyota Camry**. I'm not altogether sure why.*

*After getting to the guesthouse, I had a quick wander down a couple of the local streets, and had a late lunch in one of the *many* bar/restaurants round here. Sitting by a busy street corner, surrounded by greenery, with 80s rock in the background (Neil Young, the Cult, Eddy Grant, some 80s version of Thin Lizzy songs), just made me think weirdly that it felt exactly how I would have imagined it would have done - or rather, if someone had asked me to describe what it would feel like to be in a large city in Indochina, what I'm experiencing is pretty much what I would have said - noise, traffic, food, life. In actual fact, sitting in that bar made me imagine what Saigon may have felt like had the Americans won. Strange.*

Had a bit of a rest before evening meal, which I took at the guesthouse's own cafe-bar. Sitting outside in the street in the cooler night air, all still seems quite surreal! Having to watch my money though, not because I don't have any, but because even the hotel might balk at my paying for a \$4 meal with a \$50 note ... lol!

Phnom Penh was the largest place I'd visited since Kuala Lumpur, by some margin, so though I didn't mention it at the time, possibly because I wouldn't necessarily have realised it, but I wonder if I was experiencing some kind of 'culture shock' on arrival, given I'd spent the best part of two weeks in small towns and travelling through lesser-populated areas.

{section separation jingle}

Now, many of my original plans didn't have me visiting Cambodia at all. Indeed my first plotted itinerary was to go into Laos and go North, cross into Vietnam at Dien Bien Phu, and then hit Hanoi. But once I decided on going to Cambodia, there was only once place that was definitely on my list. I mean Angkor Wat is the mother of all temples, and the only reason most tourists ever go to Cambodia, Paul Gadd aside, but as you know I'm not most tourists and the temples of Angkor were a last-minute thought. I instead planned to make a beeline for Phnom Penh, because of somewhat more recent history. I am of course talking of The Killing Fields, and the story of the Khmer Rouge that I touched the end of back in Anlong Veng at the start of this pod.

Day 16 of my travel blog ("Punishment Park") had two entries associated with it, one with pictures and one without. The majority of the second post became a webpage in its own right, and looked into the history of the Khmer Rouge a little, the background to their regime, and why it was so abhorrent. That's a tale that definitely needs to be told, the more often the better, because we should never forget these things, but I'm not sure a reminiscing travel podcast is actually the best time for the minutiae, or long vents about the West's foreign policy in 1980. So for now, I'm just going to stick to what I did and saw, rather than the whys around it. Just bear in mind two things:

Firstly, Overall, estimates of between 1 and 3 million people died in the 3 years, 8 months, and 20 days of the Khmer Rouge regime, either directly (by being killed) or indirectly (by dying of starvation, overwork, or disease). The population of Cambodia at the start was only about 7-8 million. So, at lowest estimates, 20% of the entire population died. If the same thing happened now, I can pretty much guarantee that **everybody**

listening to this will be dead within two days.

Secondly, I Was Born In Year Zero, and so this kind of resonates with me as being, more or less, in my living memory.

There are two main sites as part of The Killing Fields: the notorious Tuol Sleng prison and the Killing Fields of Choeng Ek. Both are detailed complexes that pull no punches about what they are.

I went to Choeng Ek first - it's about 15km SW of the city and, at the time, would have been 'quite a long way' outside the city proper (these days it's pretty much in the suburbs). The name is a phrase that Google Translate suggests means 'Champion'. Originally a Chinese burial ground (and there are still scattered remains of Chinese gravestones, mostly long since destroyed), it was turned into a very organised and processed site of mass execution. Prisoners were loaded onto trucks more-or-less at dusk from Tuol Sleng Prison and taken, bound and blindfolded, to the site. Mostly they were told they were being transferred to a 'new house' but is likely some of them were well resigned to their fate. There then followed a simple checklist of processing each prisoner individually (to make sure none had escaped), then getting them to kneel down while one of the guards hit them over the head with an implement originally used for farming, or in some cases, slit their throat with a palm tree branch.

I'd love to make a joke here about omnicide being green and environmentally-friendly (and indeed I did in my original blog), but in reality it's very much in keeping with Khmer Rouge principles. An organisation that took people out of office jobs and put them to work on the land, to turn Cambodia back into an agricultural powerhouse, isn't going to kill people with bullets if they can help it.

Generally, the Khmer Rouge didn't just kill one person, they killed the entire family. This included babes; their theory being 'to get rid of the grass you have to get rid of the roots' - leaving no-one behind who could take revenge. There is a tree in the grounds with a sign that tells you this is the exact tree which they smashed babies against. It's called the 'killing tree'.

Another tree in the complex was utilised for a different maleficent purpose; they hung loudspeakers on it and broadcast Khmer folk music incredibly loudly, 24 hours a day. This had two effects; it ensured those arriving would be subjected to a kind of sensory overload, but mainly it was to hide the screams and the sounds of execution from the outside world.

You didn't have to have *done* anything to be arrested either, they just had to *think* something, or even just not like you. Party members were especially pounced on (to preserve the integrity of the revolution) - a bit like Stalin before them, the Central Committee of what they called 'Angkar' ('The Organisation' - a front for the Cambodian Communist Party) were somewhat paranoid - one of the mass graves at Choeng Ek was found to contain 166 headless bodies, all of whom were dressed in the uniform of the Khmer Rouge. It seems these were soldiers who were killed in a purge of Eastern Cambodia of 'undesirable elements within the revolution' - this included the head of the entire Eastern Zone, as it was believed he was in league with the Vietnamese). This made the Khmer Rouge reign rather hard for the average Cambodian to survive, compared with other totalitarian states in history.

When the Vietnamese invaded and/or liberated Cambodia in the 17 days following 25 December 1978, the Khmer Rouge had not long fled from Choeng Ek, so everything there was as it was, with blood on the trees, bones everywhere, pieces of clothing torn and flapping in the breeze ... must have been quite an appalling sight. Even today you can still come across the occasional piece of bone that has recently come to the surface.

Most of the bones have been now properly handled according to Buddhist tradition, which, combined with preserving the memory, means that a Buddhist tower has been constructed in the site with 17 levels, each level containing bones of varying types and ages - the lower levels have the skulls whilst the higher levels have the other bones and bone fragments, all sorted by age, sex, and type. Meanwhile, shreds of clothing and other personal effects are contained in perspex boxes around the site. Much of these were discovered when the site was excavated and cleared in 1980, and preserved for future generations.

While Choeng Ek was where they killed people. Tuol Sleng was where they tortured people. And, to be fair, also killed people. Originally a 1960s-built High School (and it shows, it's an ugly series of buildings!), the Khmer Rouge turned it into the most notorious of their prisons - S-21 (note that there were hundreds of both prisons and killing fields scattered across Cambodia; these however were the biggest and most important of

each). The name Tuol Sleng by the way seems to translate as "Hill of the Poisonous Trees". Which is, you know, not exactly unapt.

The overall structure has been preserved – three blocks of three levels each, built around a wide rectangular open area that's now been 'gardenified' but presumably would originally have been the playground. One of the blocks still has the rooms set out the way they were found when the Vietnamese arrived – with bare metal-framed beds in large empty rooms – there are photographs on the wall taken at the time of the (dead) victims they found therein. Another of the blocks was converted by the Khmer Rouge into narrow cramped cells, some wooden, some brick, and these have also been left in situ – complete with remains of metal chains used to lock prisoners in place.

Other rooms now have exhibits and photographs of all the people known to have been processed here (the Khmer Rouge were, like most dictatorships, very anal about processing and leaving traceable records). It's quite common for Cambodians to go on a visit there and see photographs of long-lost relatives, who disappeared without trace. The walls are lined with the mugshots the Khmer Rouge took.

Torture methods ranged from waterboarding to sleep deprivation, from isolation to removing fingernails and toenails. The day lasted for as long as necessary, and the guards were as terrified as the prisoners (for fear that they'd be next in line if they did something wrong). The idea was to get a confession out of the prisoner – it didn't actually matter what for – so many people just said the first ludicrous thing they thought of (being in the pay of the CIA was quite a common one). Once the confession was signed, they were generally carted off to Choeng Ek, and anyone mentioned in the confession would then be 'called in for questioning'. And if that sounds a bit 'far-reaching', note that one of the slogans of the Khmer Rouge was said to be "Better to kill an innocent by mistake than to spare an enemy by mistake.". Something something DWP.

In the old playground are a series of coffins laid out, representing those who died. There's also a wooden frame which at the time acted as a gallows, and there's pictorial representations of this inside some of the rooms. They were also used to hang people upside down with their heads in buckets, which, just for the record, were usually not filled with water.

Not many people survived Tuol Sleng. Over the entire history of the site, only about 200 people are believed to have emerged alive (out of around 17,000 people imprisoned there) – when the Vietnamese came, there were between 7 and 12 prisoners alive in the entire complex. Everyone else held there had been quickly tortured to death before the Khmer Rouge fled. Those that survived had done so because of their skills – a couple were painters, and one was an engineer so had fixed things in the prison. One of the painters was invited back not long afterwards and asked to paint scenes he'd seen, to show the world what had happened here. If you're wondering why he agreed, it's because everyone in that prison made a pact with each other to tell the world, no matter how heart-rendering it would be; they vowed that they would not die in silence or in vain. Many of his paintings are very, very, graphic and, sadly, leave nothing to the imagination.

There are some photographs also in the centre of the leaders of the Khmer Rouge. People over time have come along and scratched their faces off and written expletives in Khmer over the top of some of the photographs. It's a huge difference from Anlong Veng where they still laud over Pol Pot's grave.

Interestingly, when they came to power in April '75, they were seen as 'liberators' from a USA-backed right-wing government; this sense of joy lasted approximately two days. When the Vietnamese came in late '79, there was no-one left to celebrate their arrival. Imagine a Scottish or (heaven forbid) a French tank driving up a completely empty Oxford Street in London, because everyone had been moved away to work on the fields in Norfolk. Eerie.

{pause}

<Bathos>

And then back in the city centre I had a crepe/pancake with chocolate sauce, and a pineapple smoothie.

</Bathos>

My blog post also relates two minor incidents that kind of broke the mood a little, in a way, at least.

{I also managed to lose my tuk-tuk driver at Choeng Ek. I was slightly longer in there than anticipated (they had a personal audio guide to listen to as you walked round, so I listened to it all, including the story sections;

they also had a short movie to watch, so I did), so when I came out he was nowhere to be seen. After looking around for about 10 mins I decided to have some food at a nearby food stall/court. He still wasn't there when I came out but he saw me very shortly afterwards. Apparently he'd got bored and gone to the same food place but we hadn't seen each other! (I knew he must still have been there as I hadn't paid him yet!).

I also saw a small crash between two motorbikes. Nothing serious, but it was at the road junction just outside my guesthouse. Something to note about Cambodian driving; they drive on the right. On a two-lane road, the middle lane is used for overtaking. Yes, I know what you're thinking. But no-one seems to have told the Cambodians ... !!}

Life goes on, eh.

{section separation jingle}

Day 17, Happy Day, according to my blog entry at the time. I mean, it couldn't have been any 'less' foreboding than the previous day I guess. I seem to have spent it wandering Phnom Penh.

{Ignoring Singapore (damn these early flights!), today is effectively my last full day in SE Asia, so it's interesting to reflect on the symmetry here: I started in Laos with two full days in the capital (Vientiane), then a stay in the second city (Luang Prabang), then a short stay in a small town (Champasak) ... then in Cambodia I did pretty much the exact reverse : short stay in small town (Anlong Veng), longer stay in the second city (Siem Reap), followed by two full days in the capital (Phnom Penh). And because I had nothing specific I wanted to see, like on Vientiane's second day, I went for a walk around the place.

Phnom Penh is quite an easy city to walk around - or would be if the pavements weren't clogged up with parked motorbikes and trucks. Everything's on a grid pattern (very Americanised) and all the roads have two names - a 'proper name' like 'Preah Vihear Street', and a 'numerical name' like '92nd Street'. Even numbered streets go East/West and numbering starts in the North, and Odd numbered streets go North/South and numbering starts by the Riverside in the East, and heads West. Most roads are straight, so it's very much similar to the 'block' system in the US. However, this grid pattern was laid out by the French!

Even though it was morning (c.9am), it was already pretty warm (recent temperatures in Phnom Penh have been around 34 degrees C). I started out by walking North, towards Wat Phnom - 'the temple on the hill'. Now, apart from the area around Prasat Preah Vihear and the Thai border, and the hill I clambered up at Kbal Spean, pretty much everything I've seen in Cambodia has been flat. On the journey from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh, I don't think I saw any hills at all. This explains why Cambodia is great for bicycles and, to an extent, cheap motorbikes. It also explains why a 27m hill with a temple on top is such a popular tourist site.}

In fact, it's why the city is called Phnom Penh. Phnom is, as you probably guessed, Khmer for 'hill', while Penh is a personal name. The folk etymology is Penh was a widow who found some representations of Buddha and Vishnu, and gave thanks by raising the hill behind her house and building a temple on it. This therefore is the Hill the town's named after.

{There's actually apparently a whole host of touristy stuff at Wat Phnom, including elephant rides, but it's built on a huge roundabout in the road network, and I must have come at it from the wrong side, cos I didn't see anything much! It's used as the local 'please Buddha grant me luck in _____' site, so incense and decoration is abound.}

But not as underwhelming as Times Square.

{I then went further North, where few tourists venture; had a quick look at the Japanese Friendship Bridge (blown up in 1975, rebuilt 1993, guess who supplied the cash!) but couldn't get a good view. I did get a better view at the historically significant but incredibly ugly French Embassy (where people fled the incoming Khmer Rouge only to be told by them 'We don't care about diplomatic privileges - get out or we'll kill you'. The French reaction is not recorded, but presumably they weren't up for a fight), before heading back towards the city centre.

After passing the intact but possibly non-functional main railway station, I made my way to the slightly manic Psar Thmei, the Central Market. It's huge (apparently one of the 10 largest domes in the world - one of those statistics where there is a lot of debate, no doubt!), and filled with stalls offering pretty much anything you want.

Under the dome are the jewellery stalls, but much of the market is devoted to usual market tat – silk, toiletries, fresh meat, etc. The edge of the market is lined with the restaurant stalls; today I had squid. And rather a lot of rambutans, because I didn't have anything smaller than a \$1 note.}

Spoiler alert: 34°C, lunchtime, marketplace, squid. See if you can guess What Happened Next?

{Suitably refreshed, I headed onwards, walking through streets of shops, until I realised that a) it was just after midday, b) the main site I was headed to didn't open till 2pm, and c) I was three blocks from my hotel. So I had an hour and a bit of aircon relaxation!}

Unrelated, I'm reading the next paragraph exactly verbatim. It contains a 41 word sentence followed by a 108 word sentence. What acronym am I thinking of?

*{Midday evidently isn't the peak of the heat (although interestingly it's more-or-less the peak of the daylight; dawn coming a little before 6am and darkness falling not long after 6pm), so when I headed out again at 1.30pm it was *hot*. But, still ignoring tuk-tuk drivers who thought I was mad (either that or they were laughing at my hat – something which I *know* people are doing, because they point directly at it when passing and doing so. Assume it's because it looks Vietnamese and is being worn by a pasty white man. That's white as in factor-50-sunblock white. Which, because it's childrens' sunblock, is actually pale blue. And since it doesn't rub into my face particularly well, means I generally look like a pasty blue man. Hmmm, more ridicule.), I walked South towards the Independence Monument and the (somewhat 'forced', given their recent history) Cambodia-Vietnam Friendship Monument. The former looks like a Buddhist 'stupa', the latter, with the soldiers and the mother holding a baby, looks somewhat 'Communist Ideological'.}*

To be fair, at least it contained useful information. Maybe.

*{Thence to the main event: the Royal Palace, containing The Silver Pagoda. It's a relatively large compound behind large walls that serves as the main residence of the King of Cambodia. Yep, Cambodia has a monarchy – probably one of the few Communist states to have retained its royalty. The current King seems to stay out of politics and serves more as a kind of 'figurehead'. The previous King, however ... King Norodom Sihanouk (after whom one of the main roads in Phnom Penh is named) was crowned in 1941, abdicated in 1955 to take up a career in politics, dominated government until he was overthrown in 1970 (in part because Parliament believed he was spending too much time making films (!) rather than running the country), came back in 1975 as Head Of State under the Khmer Rouge (! – he did a deal with them to get back into power), resigned in protest in '76, came *back* in 1993 as King, and finally abdicated *again* in 2004, citing 'old age'. His political party (Funcinpec) in the 80s and 90s was the official opposition to the communists, and consisted of royalists, neutrals, and the remnants of the Khmer Rouge.}*

Wikipedia tells me he was also a composer and lyricist, although not one of much renown and rather used his position to basically force people to listen and watch his works, and that he eventually died at the end of 2012. Quite a colourful life. Definitely not a role model.

*{As befits a Royal residence, the Palace is both huge in area and very picturesque. However, also as befits a Royal residence, most of it is off-limits to tourists. But the *outside* of the pagodas and wats are very pretty ... the Throne Room exceptionally so (it in itself is extremely large). The one building that is open to the public has a number of things on display from a royal wedding, and, creepily, seven life-sized mannequins of who I presume to be the King's daughter, all dressed in different coloured outfits, one for each day of the week (literally! Saturday is Violet, Monday's yellow). But in a 'but wait, there's more' moment, a small passageway off to the South takes you into a completely different half, with stupas, epic murals, shrines to dead Kings, and The Silver Pagoda.*

I'm hyping this up a bit much; the Silver Pagoda's certainly an impressive building but it's basically a large Buddhist shrine with some museum exhibits around the side. And you can't take photos inside it. But it's cool nevertheless!}

The only thing I can't remember is if shoes were also banned.

{Had something to eat at a dodgy cafe on the waterfront – the "Happy Herb's Pizza". On my last night in Siem Reap I did pass a chap in the town centre who wondered if I wanted any marijuana – when I said no, he then promptly asked me if I wanted cocaine or heroin. In parts of Laos (specifically Vang Vieng and Si Phan Don)

you can get your meals normal or 'happy', where 'happy' denotes 'herbs of a different flavour'. So similarly here: you can get pizza toppings normal or 'happy'. I had the Fish Amok - I didn't come to SE Asia to eat pizza, no matter what the toppings! FYI it's next door to the 'Happy Pizza Pink Elephant Pub'. The mind does not, unfortunately, boggle.

Had a slow wander back to the hotel before heading off again to have some stodgy-building rice, as my digestive system seems a bit weakened today - I'm blaming the chillies in both the dip with the squid and in the Amok.}

Listener, it was not the chillies.

{Sitting outside a nearby cafe eating my meal, three young Americans passed, dressed for a beach holiday: the two guys were in vests, long shorts, and sandals, the girl in a vest, very short shorts, and barefoot. They wanted pizza to take away, and were slightly impatient and somewhat blasé about the cafe. I thought to myself 'Is this what it's come to? Was it worth winning the Vietnam War?'}.

[They didn't get their pizza in the end, either, despite coming back three times for it and waiting about 20 minutes. No idea why. They should have had the chicken fried rice instead! :p]

{section separation jingle}

While not the last day of my backpacking trip, Day 18 (Wednesday 7th March) was, to all intents and purposes, my last day in South-East Asia. The title in my original blog was 'English Summer Already?', presumably a reference to the damp, cloudy, humid, and warm weather conditions in Singapore.

{Today was unusual; I had breakfast. Well, noodle soup anyway; I had time to kill before my Tuk-Tuk driver (the once who'd taken me places on Monday) would arrive and whisk me off to the airport. Plus I figured that if I ate something reasonably substantial now, I wouldn't have to eat too much later when I was in Singapore and prices would skyrocket.

Reasonably interesting journey to the airport - maniacal drivers all around, and we got stopped by the police, primarily because "they needed some money", as my driver tactfully put it. This is apparently reasonably common in Cambodia.

*Phnom Penh International Airport is, I dunno, maybe the size of East Midlands airport? It's not a huge place, but equally it's not a runway and a portakabin for a terminal building. But one thing it is, is quiet. Non-passengers aren't even allowed into the terminal building, and as far as I could tell there were only four listed departures during the whole of time I was in there - Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Taipei, and, not long before I was due to board, Yangon appeared. Security was a bit lax (I went through security *with a bottle of water* shock!), and while there's nothing landside, there's not a lot airside either - a couple of shops and a couple of restaurants. The bookshop sold a whole gaggle of phrasebooks ... except Khmer. So even in the *airport* I wouldn't have been able to buy a phrasebook to help me round!*

Flight took just under 2 hours. Operated by Jetstar, a low-cost subsid of Qantas; yes, the majority of the flight crew did indeed speak with an Australian accent! This was slightly surreal. It being a budget airline, of course you'd had to pay for everything, but my taste was sated by the remaining few rambutans I'd bought yesterday.

I got stopped at Customs, who were x-raying everyone's baggage. They found a knife in mine; this confused me, and confused them when I told them I hadn't got one. After searching through the bag, and knocking off everything possible off the list (apart from clothes, I don't carry much!), the offending item was discovered and analysed. I'd forgotten I'd bought that, and much less where I'd put it, but in Siem Reap I'd bought a little gift for someone back home - long, thin, metallic, with a point on the end. But no, it's not a knife. They were happy.}

It was a large-ish hairclip for my friend Debbie. At the time of podding, I don't know if she still has it, and I don't remember exactly where I bought it.

{Singapore airport is very big. But it felt very ... 'quiet', 'serene'; there didn't feel like there were many people around (even though there quite blatantly were), there was just something weird about the ambiance and atmosphere that was somewhat, I dunno, 'calming'? It all feels like marble interiors and wide open spaces; not

quite 'cathedral'-like but certainly those kinds of effects.}

A lot of people rave about Changi International Airport in Singapore. Note that one of the reasons for this is the Jewel Changi Airport, the nature-themed complex that links the terminals and looks real swish. Be aware this project hadn't even been *thought of* when I visited; it was announced in 2013 and opened in 2019.

{Journey to my hotel was efficient - the walk from the local metro stop was longer than it felt on the map though. The weather was grey, overcast, about 28 degrees C, and humid as hell. Pretty much everything's in English, they have a nice selection of single- and double-decker buses, the road names I passed included 'Lavender Street' and 'Hamilton Road' ... yeh, and English prices too. See, I always had the impression that Singapore would be expensive. From what little I've seen, while it's obviously more expensive than Laos and Cambodia, it's probably not much different to back in the UK - maybe a little cheaper here even. It's just that relativity I have to get used to.}

I never quite know if the UK's expensive or not. But these days my main reference point is craft beer, which is relatively as expensive everywhere.

*{Had a brief problem checking in to the hotel; when I book ahead I tend to use Agoda - most of the time the cross-reference of booking ID is fine, but this time the chap who made the booking on my behalf seems to have put down *his* name rather than mine when the booking was made! But this was quickly sorted, and I enjoyed the aircon in the reception area while I waited.}*

I don't remember using Agoda. I certainly don't have any kind of brand loyalty these days.

*{Went for a little walk around the area of my hotel - it's not in the centre of Singapore, rather on the edge of an area called 'Little India'. Obviously all the restaurants and temples around here are, hang on, Chinese?! A little walk deeper into the heart of the district however brought me to proper Hindu temples and a series of off-street food stalls where I got tempted in for dinner. Cheese Naan, rice, curry sauce, and tandoori chicken, for 8S\$ (about £4). And I was the only westerner in there - *everybody* else (and there were four stalls, the seating area was pretty full!) was a) male, and b) Indian. On my way there I did pass something I thought was odd - a fast-food-looking Vegetarian Indian restaurant! It *looked* for all the world like a McDonalds, in terms of store layout, similar seating, etc, but it sold various kinds of Indian veggie fayre! Very strange ...}*

*As I wandered back to the hotel, something happened that I hadn't seen since Kuala Lumpur, more than two weeks ago. Drops of strange wet stuff started to fall from the sky! Have an early start tomorrow - my flight's about 9.30am so I'll probably rise about 6am; also note that despite going mostly South and a bit West, Singapore is, like Malaysia, an hour *ahead* of Cambodia/Laos, so I'm now GMT+8, for a night, which is going to confuse me a bit!}*

My diary continued on, talking about Dubai, but that's beyond the scope of this pod. The last things I wrote about South-East Asia were as follows:

{Went to bed early last night, after battling with the slowest and weakest Wi-Fi signal in the world - even in the designated Wi-Fi seats I couldn't get a signal, and in the reception area the signal was pretty poor. Apart from that the hotel was pretty fine. Got up 5.45am, due to a relatively early flight from Singapore.}

Journey to the airport was fine with no hassles; checked-in very swiftly, and then meandered through Singapore airport seeking out breakfast. Ended up with peanut butter toast and some water as being, surprisingly, the best option.}

What I didn't seem to make a note of was the effect the previous day's squid had had on my body. The actual reason I went to bed early that night was because I was battling with my body, stuffing it full of water and rehydration salts, and trying not to spend more time sitting on the toilet than lying in bed. Then, during my time in Dubai, I always had to make sure I was within quick distance of a sit-down toilet cubicle.

I don't remember when my body finally settled down, but I think it was on my way back to England a few days later. It was only due to my friend Sarah's nagging before I left that I even *had* rehydration salts on me; they're not something I would normally have thought to carry. Conversely, she also suggested I take a mosquito net, which I never even opened never mind used because everywhere I needed one seemed to have one. Though if Laura's listening, no I didn't think to check if they were in good state of repair. Though I clearly

didn't suffer any ill effects from them if they were.

{end pod jingle}

Well, that's all for this pod. Join me again next time for another adventure beyond the brochure, assuming I made it back alive. Until then, don't eat squid from a market stall at midday in 34°C heat, and if you're feeling off colour, which you would be if you don't follow that advice, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}