

A Visit to Our Village

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Background – our travels in Cambodia (January 14- 17, 2008)

We spent two days in Siem Reap (Cambodia), exploring the famous Angkor Wat. The next day we had a wild 7-hour boat ride to Battambang, the jumping off point for our little village. Just a 45-minute taxi ride, over dirt roads, from Battambang is our little, rural village. After the long, grueling boat ride to Battambang, we checked in a La Villa, a lovely guesthouse that was once an old French Colonial mansion.

Our visit to the Village (January 18, 2008)

The next morning, after breakfast, in the sunny guesthouse atrium, Man Sowun, her daughter Mao (who lives in the village) and the young, hip driver who had that James Dean “rebel without a cause look,” picked us at the hotel. Man Sowun told us the driver was her adopted grandson. (We didn’t find out if he was a real grandson -- She had a big family, but manages to adopt a lot of others along the way.)

We had a day full of surprises in store. The first surprise was what happened to Man Sowun, that shy little Buddhist nun who sat quietly on my living floor communicating by pointing to pictures? The hair on her once-shaved head, from her nun days, had grown back. She was dressed in stylish tan slacks with a white silk blouse lined with gold buttons. She was charismatic and powerful -- definitely the one in charge. She made Oprah look like a wallflower. It felt good just to be in her presence.

Our first stop was at the open-air market in the center of Battambang. Man Sowun and Mao went into action – negotiating, buying beef, vegetables and other food. I watched Man Sowun's direct, yet graceful moves through the market. She was on a mission. I stood dazed and confused while both Man Sowun and Mao completed a series of quick transactions. The next stop was at the bakery to pick up loaves of bread. Last stop was to pick up a couple of cases of beer and water before we headed to the village, 45 minutes away.

We had no idea what we were in for. The car pulled up along a dusty road and there they were, 720 cheering school kids lined up along both sides of the village’s main road. Bill and I were overcome with emotion and weak kneed as we got out of the car. The school's headmaster, teachers and town dignitaries bowed, greeted us, and put orchid leis around our necks. They handed Man Sowun a bouquet of flowers.

We walked through 100 yards of excited, beautiful kids, along the side of the road. They came in a range of sizes – from 1st to 6th-graders. All of them were

wearing their old, worn school uniforms that had been passed down from bigger brothers and sisters.

I'll never forget that walk. Some of the children were jumping up and down and whistling. All were clapping and excited to see us. Nothing has ever touched me so deeply. The little money we gathered and contributed seemed insignificant to us, but to those poor kids, living a world away, it brought the greatest joy. Tears flowed as we walked through the line. Even Bill choked up. We walked with Man Sowun in her regal gait oozing charisma. I had never been a dignitary on such a grand scale and wasn't sure what to do or how to act. (I wondered how Princess Di would handle this.)

We walked into the main village area and then followed Man Sowun to a long table on an open veranda. We sat with the dignitaries -- Man Sowun, the school principal and other assorted village leaders -- on that makeshift stage wired with a 1950's P.A. system with speakers propped up in the branches of a tree. We each had a bottle of water, but quickly we were given larger bottles.

I did some deep breathing to try and settle down. I was still in shock from the warm welcome and grand entrance. Just below the veranda was a series of 5 or 6 long wooden tables piled high with the gift packages (school shirt, flip-flops, pen, and a spiral notebook). Each pile was sorted according to uniform size and gender. The tables of gifts and the veranda separated us from the kids. I tried to peer around the overflowing tables to see the kids with their dark eyes, dark hair and faces beaming with smiles.

In no time they formed long lines according to size and gender. They squatted down in the dust to listen to speeches that seemed to go on and on. I wish I knew what the village leaders were saying. We heard the occasional Mr. Bill and Miss Nancy which made us chuckle. Bill and I were asked to say a few words. I called on my Toastmaster training, but then remembered nobody, except for Man Sowun and Bill, knew what the heck I was saying.

As the speeches continued, I remembered how this all came about and marveled how a simple idea -- 40 years of marriage / \$40 bicycle took on a life of its own -- thanks to our generous family and friends and to Man Sowun and her family. Now we were here, in the moment, witnessing a miracle. I wish I could bottle the love and gratitude that flowed from the kids and take it back to share with all those who made it happen. It was a powerful moment.

When the speeches were over and the clapping done, Bill and I handed a package to each child. Man Sowun and a group followed behind us passing out sweet rolls and bottles of water. Everything was well organized and efficient. Guys would appear out of nowhere carrying piles of packages -- right size, right gender -- for that particular line of kids. I moved right down the row placing a package in the hands of each grateful child. Each child would say something,

then put their hands in prayer and do a little bow. It was such a joy seeing each little face. From my former life as a teacher, I got a sense of each student – the goody-two shoes, the nerd, the class clown, the serious student, the class leader. It was the greatest joy for me to make a little connection with the individual kid.

The kids dived into their sweet rolls. They were hungry and the rolls were a real treat. In no time, the celebration was over and the kids left, each carrying their gift. Then we gave the teachers each a shirt. The giving was the easy part; Man Sowun organized and orchestrated the entire affair without a glitch. I know Mao and others worked very hard to make this miracle happen.

After the last child left, a group of village leaders, along with Man Sowun, walked us out to the open field next to the building they call the school – but could not possibly hold all 720 students. They pointed to a marshy field they want to reclaim to build a classroom. The area needs to be pumped out at a cost of \$3,500 before we build the school. Our village needs a school so I guess we have to find a way to build one.

We walked to Mao's house -- Man Sowun refers to it as "Hotel Mao." It's a house built on stilts. The family hangs out on the ground level under the house where there is shade and some breeze. Today the ground floor was packed with family, village dignitaries, teachers and us (the most honored guests). In no time Mao and her kitchen crew served a huge Khmer feast – barbequed chicken wings (my favorite), shrimp, beef, veggies, rice with special sauces. Everything was delicious and fresh, made with the meat and veggies we picked up at the market just a few hours earlier. Man Sowun had arranged the entire production and what an amazing job she did.

We stuffed ourselves – then came pastries – then, for the after lunch entertainment, a handsome young guy scurried up a palm tree to gather coconuts. We drank the coconut milk with straws. Didn't think I could hold another ounce.

I took a little stroll around the grounds at Hotel Mao. An orchard of various trees surrounded the house -- coconut trees, guava trees, and others I didn't recognize. Five or six large rain barrows, used to collect rainwater, were lined up at the back of the house. A beautiful young, smiling girl was chopping some kind of stalk to feed the family cow. The outdoor facilities and adjacent kitchen were separate from the house.

The women (from Mao's friends and family) were sitting on the kitchen floor (rather, ground) in a circle enjoying their lunch. Everyone was smiling and happy. Only the male teachers and village leaders were eating with us. (The women teachers had to go home to feed their children.) Man Sowun was at the head of the table and in charge of the entire operation. One by one, as the teachers and village leaders began to leave, they each stopped to say a few words to Man

Sowun and show their respect. It was an impressive sight. They, like me, were honored just to be her presence.

After the other guests left, we were off with Man Sowun, Mao and assorted family members to explore the village. We stopped at the local temple. Man Sowun showed us the stupa where she and her husband will be buried. Carved at the end of a long string of Cambodian letters was "USA". Man Sowun said her name was there as well. I would love to know her story. With her wisdom and strength, I can understand how she survived the Khmer Rouge and managed to get her children to safety.

Next we headed down the dirt road Man Sowun built years ago connecting the farms to the main road. The road had huge potholes and was in need of repair. I can't imagine driving a tractor here during the rainy season.

An ice cream man came peddling by with his frozen goods. We stopped him to buy ice cream for the few kids nearby. Word travels fast and within minutes, a gang of about 30 to 40 kids gathered for their treat. It was so fun to see them running gleefully down the road, bare feet kicking up dust.

The kids stopped next to the ice cream truck (really ice cream bike) and waited for their turn. In silence, they enjoyed a simple, rare treat. The ice cream had a coconut flavor and was very tasty. Bill and I shared one.

One little bare-butted toddler gobbled down his ice cream and stood quietly while the others finished. Man Sowun patted him on the head and said, "This one needs another one." In a matter of seconds, he was gobbling down another ice cream. None of the other kids complained -- "Hey, he got another one -- what about me?" There was no pushing or grabbing -- just little kids standing along the dirt road together with melting ice cream dripping down their happy, dusty faces. The bill for the ice cream--\$10. The kids smiling faces--priceless! I only I wish I could be there every afternoon when the ice cream man cometh.

We stopped in at a few farms to say hello. With this season's rice harvest over, we saw the big piles of rice drying in the sun. It looked like stacks of wheat to us. Mingling around the stacks were a few cattle and chickens pecking the hard, dry ground.

Man Sowun and her group directed us down the road to one farmer's house. We went upstairs and saw him lying paralyzed on the open porch. He was in his early 40's and suffered a major stroke a couple of years ago. His worried wife was by his side. They have ten children to feed. Life is really tough for them. We gave them a little money and left with heavy hearts.

The sun was very hot, so we went back to Mao's house to relax with her family in the area under the house. It was hang out time -- Bill in the hammock, me on a

mat, the family relaxing and a beautiful two-year old baby girl (Mon Sowun's great granddaughter) taking her nap in a small hammock. (She defined the expression: "Sleeping like a baby".)

Our tummies were stuffed from the huge lunch, the coconut, the ice cream, but Mon Sowun brought out yet another goody to share – French bread dipped in sugar. I never had such a combination, but it tasted good and could become a comfort food.

About 2:30 we were ready to go back to the big city of Battambang. Mon Sowun said we'd stop at a big temple on the way to say a prayer of thanks to Buddha. She grabbed three bags of incense sticks and we were off -- Mon Sowun, Mao and our young, handsome "James Dean look-alike" driver.

The temple was grandiose. We lit the incense sticks and offered up our thanks for so many good things that happened that day. Then we walked around the temple grounds looking at such strange statutes with Western eyes and speculated about their meaning. Not many tourists stumble in on this place. We waited with Mao while Mon Sowun talked with the monks and videotaped them. I felt close to Mao. Several times I broke into English, forgetting that she didn't understand. I just felt like I had meet a new pal – and language wasn't an obstacle. Mao dashed off to the little road and found a street market to buy us a special canned drink. With her big smile, she offered us a drink labeled "Bird's Nest White Fungus." I was afraid to drink mine, but Bill tried it and said it had floaties in it – is that the bird's nest part or the fungus?

On the way home, Mon Sowun kept asking how I was doing and if I wanted anything to eat. I laughed and would say, "Stop it – I couldn't possibly eat another thing." Along with pulling off a major production, she was focused on our well-being. She took very good care of us.

We got back to La Villa hotel and said our good-byes to Mon Sowun, Mao and our handsome driver. We showered and rested and walked into old colonial Battambang for dinner at the White Rose. Still full from the day, I ordered just the soup. It was a busy place crowded with backpackers and professors – and boy was it noisy in that café opened to the street. Motorcycles buzzed by, fans whirled overhead and the heavy wooden chairs made loud irritating noises scrapping against the hard floors. I missed the village and the country life. Mon Sowun and her family were probably having leftovers in the quiet evening air in the village.

We already missed our little village where we planted some hope for the future. Now Bill and I have to go home and figure out how to built a school.