

## (WORKING) HOLIDAY IN CAMBODIA

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Ahead were three vast pillars and the sky was purple and crimson and pastel blue. Looking back across the Naga causeway of Angkor Wat the world was mirrored, another three pillars to match the ones ahead, with a darker sky of receding night above. Between the two on either side of the causeway was glassy still water reflecting the sky. *On Earth as it is in Heaven*, a Christian prayer reflected in the I Ching. Over the years a few friends had spoken of Angkor Wat rapturously. The trips had brought them to a pristine and isolated monument to the endless human need for connection to the divine, a miraculously vast monument to worship both Hindu and Buddhist sacrament that had survived nine centuries and the near annihilation of Cambodian society, a place so holy it might even change my life. I felt an odd sort of elation and nervousness, like I was about to try a drug for the first time. What if Angkor Wat left me unmoved?

I returned to shooting, the reason I was here. The light was changing by the minute, so my primary focus had to be the camera. Awareness of where my

small crew was, the actress' emotional state. And, the more I tried to ignore it, noticing that we weren't entirely alone out here.

The sun was just about to burst over the sky behind the temple ahead. I considered shooting the reverse angle. Every square inch and direction held gorgeous light, the kind you could never simulate on a stage or for that matter at some other longitudinal coordinates. Two days prior to this I'd been in Africa, a day before that, Paris. Everywhere has its own light. Looking back, I froze. Behind me the iconic three pillars were malformed by a beige orb rising up behind them, a sight so odd my skin prickled in expectation of some hallucinatory vision, and there it was in line with the solar axis the temple was laid out upon by Angkorian astronomer architects. Wait, I said to the crew. I had a camera, I'd be able to document this glimpse of celestial UFO in hideo, no less. By the time these thoughts had parsed, it was blatantly obvious to myself, to my crew, and the crowd of thousands here at 5am to watch the sun rise over Angkor Wat that the pristine and holy skyline had been infiltrated by a hot air balloon, sparkling as tourists' flashbulbs popped uselessly on their automatically preset digital SLRs some two hundred feet in the air. Angkor Wat was not empty. It was very, very crowded. The tunnel vision of a viewfinder had kept me from seeing hundreds of tourists racewalking past me, all breaking for their glimpse of the sunrise.

We continued the shoot trying our best to make the place look empty. The geography of the place and its texture felt submerged, like it had been waiting at the bottom of the ocean for a length that dissolves the notion of time. Many armed gods and vipers tall as New York brownstones and Bhuddas reeking of incense. A small temple cat leapt out of nowhere from some silent quiet place hushed like a church and a jungle at dawn all at once, crawling into the laps of my crew and asking for affection without hesitation. Maybe there's something to this reincarnated monks business, after all. I spy cigarette butts, empty water bottles, laughing German tourists with hip packs, alignments of architecture and place and age and sunlight that I lose words for. I careen between inspiration and despair. Angkor Wat does not open my third eye, nor does the cosmos penetrate my mind from without. There is only the shoot, my own obsession in documenting the same. At this point the endeavor has become so overwhelming I've become a little surly. I don't have much left.

Four weeks later I am watching even more obsessively the resulting footage on a daily basis, under the crunch of deadline and expectation of delivering something that could aid or demolish my friends' careers as I'm often reminded on conference calls. At 3am I finally untangle a technical knot that's nearly made us miss our deadline. I collapse into my sofa, finally free of the past two months ceaseless work, and to my surprise *The Killing Fields* is on cable. Dith Pran, whose story it tells, died the week before. I watch the movie from start to finish. I think it's brilliant and lucid and powerful and sad that it isn't remembered more. At 5.30 a.m. I ask myself what the fuck am I doing making music videos when the world is like so. I ask myself this earnestly, attempting to realign what kind of a filmmaker I want to be in the wake of all that happened to

me in the past few weeks. I can't forget Cambodia, can't sleep for it, can't stop thinking and reading about it. My doctor orders me to take days off. I stop answering the phone except for my girlfriend, eat large meals, and I stay up until dawn studying the place with the aid of books, Google and Wikipedia for days to come. I never get that deep exhale, that I'm *done*. I want to go back.

How I came to be in Cambodia: I'd won the commission to direct a music video. We'd follow an ordinary girl traveling the entire span of the world in a few minutes. I wanted the actual texture and atmosphere of travel so we're going to just do it for real, and shoot it with the tiniest crew possible. I double as cinematographer and director. I coordinate a second shoot remotely in Los Angeles that has the band being shot in a refrigerated chamber that requires an on set medic so that their breath will flare as they sing in the cold. For the purposes of schedule and budget my dream itinerary becomes brutally compressed and every day we lose or gain a city or continent. My girlfriend Danah is part of the crew and her friend Rachel convinces us over dinner that we have to go to Cambodia, adds to the chorus of those who say Angkor Wat is life changing. She eases my worries about malaria – given we don't have time to take the anti malarial drugs - by telling us about the time she caught it. I can't explain what a reassurance this is: knowing that you can get malaria and survive eases off some of the worry of getting infected by what's probably the single greatest killer of humankind for the past several thousand years. I vow not to get too anxious at the sight of mosquitoes.

Another friend warns me, though, of not letting Cambodia get to me too deeply. I wonder what this means and keep reflecting on it as the trip brings us closer to the place. First London then Chunnel to Paris now flights to Frankfurt and Tunisia and back again to Frankfurt until Thai Airways has us crossing the last half of the globe and I keep thinking about this like something you've been told not to itch. What is it about Cambodia that causes people to renounce materialism or sell all their possessions or become crashing bores at dinner with tales of a new perspective on life? My thoughts are interrupted when I manage to lose my passport on a flight, and scramble across the tarmac in Phnom Penh looking for the pilot, who has it.

A week later we leave New York and find ourselves halfway around the world. The intensity of the voyage is amplified by what we are doing: shooting a film that is neither a documentary nor a fiction, the proximity of our personalities, the physical strain, and the insanity of long haul flights every other day pushing us beyond our limits.

Somewhere over Russia we cross the halfway point on 27997 miles. One week down, one more to go. Tunisia was so pleasant, so warm and wonderful and friendly, that it didn't provide the required jolt of pure displacement I'm seeking for the video and myself and my actress. The 4am flight to Frankfurt and our six hour layover there deflates and destroys our spirits. The enitrety of transcontinental flight and German airports are far worse environs than what I

saw of Africa. We land. Sunlight. Warm air. I spend my first few minutes in Cambodia freaking out over the first mosquito I spy in the men's room.

The hotel driver picks us up at the airport and tells us to call him James Bond. This seems to be a shtick taught in school for anyone signing up to work the tourism industry: find a cute name for yourself that is reminiscent of a Western cultural icon. He's the first of some five or so James Bonds I meet over the next few days. I meet a burly and kind driver named Mr T – spelled Thy, but he doesn't seem to understand why I get so excited over his moniker, but I do get him to say "I pity the fool" which he promises to drop on the next American he drives.

We decided to keep the first James Bond. He has a pompadour, pressed trousers, and an amazing shirt that looks like Tony Leung Chiu-Wai would wear in a Wong Kar Wai movie. He's full of corny jokes, pleasant manner behind an indecipherable smile and just the slightest hints that he's got some kind of sideline hustle going, given he has three cellphones and different women call him on each. I like him immediately but sense he's an iceberg, with just a sliver visible of who he really is. We drive through the heart of the city. Here is the place: in 1975 the Khmer Rouge entered triumphant, the Americans had evacuated, and soon too in their futile dream of remaking the world anew everyone was forced to abandon. Now it is thriving, blooming, palls of red dust kicked up by hordes of scooters.

The Cambodians must be in the running for world's greatest scooter riders. We see entire families of five on a single 50cc bike. Wooden cages for carrying chickens bolted onto the same. Tuk tuks: the traditional two wheeled scooter hauling a rickshaw cart. Pairs of girls and boys flirting bike to bike. Everywhere there are scooters, more scooters than I've ever seen in my life. The odd Hummer or Lexus SUV makes an appearance with darkly tinted windows. Now I finally see with my own eyes what it is about the third world that is dizzying, why it's such a powerfully dislocating experience. In traffic the city of Phnom Penh goes by slowly but far too quickly to take in, the sheer difference of how to live life. Everything is a bric-brac collage of essentials – motor parts and metal workers side by side with open air fruit markets and food carts and clothes stalls where seamstresses are actually sewing the shirts together. A single pickup truck passes laden with twenty people spilling over a pile of junk two stories high until some are sitting on the cab of the truck just out of the driver's way. Now I well and truly feel that I have gone far, because if you were to drop me in the middle of *this* without a passport and money, I wouldn't know where to begin, wouldn't know where to find the smallest comfort or how one goes about getting anything fixed. It's a terrifying thought, but absolutely thrilling. Then I spy a sign for a coming KFC.



On the guesthouse patio in Phnom Penh I meet a Japanese aid worker named Eichiro, who's been holding court with some diplomats and NGO workers. I ask him where to get a good meal. The next thing I know through my insomnia and jetlag we're having a massively profound heart to heart about our entire wayward lives. He's Japanese, slowly opens to me about his confused feelings of connection to outside cultures and where they led him, his life a wild detour, sparked by classroom bullying that he looked Korean, an insult that had the reverse effect on him, made him wholeheartedly embrace the rest of the world. He was in Cambodia during the coup of '97 and after his Cambodian friends came to his side to protect his life he felt he owed some eternal karmic debt to them that he continues to pay out in meted bureaucracy. He advises me on the complexity of NGOs and do gooders in such complicated circumstances: the Swiss hospital is fantastic but will leave soon. In the 70s all civil servants and those in the professions stood a large chance of execution on the basis of their usefulness to society – those with glasses were sometimes killed for the mark of intellectualism bestowed by poor eyesight. Now they rely on the Swiss hospital. What happens when it leaves?

Cambodia is a young country – and my single day here echoes this. So few elders to be seen anywhere. More than fifty percent of the population is under the age of twenty five. He says the greatest challenge is the lack of homogenous parental authority: no respect for elders or tradition or culture to be passed down, being as it was wiped out during the insanity of the Khmer Rouge, leaving only children with traumatic memories asked to continue life and find their place in a new, scrambling and often times cruel economy. The main thing to do is ride around flirting on scooters. This is culture. "And now, KFC is coming. This is what we give them to rebuild their country?" We go back to our own lives, spent adrift all over the globe without a sense of home, but discuss in agreement the joy it sometimes gives. I don't know if I'll ever see this guy again, I feel like he's a long lost family member already. It's hard to admit but I like the enforced intimacy of this kind of travel, where you know your time is so limited you get right to the heart of a person.

He finally comes up with a restaurant recommendation: there's a North Korean place, owned and operated by the North Korean government. Korean tourists flock there, driven by curiosity. Sounds great to me. He continues: the entire place vibes weird. Every waitress seen on the rare occasions they leave the building is always escorted by a fellow waiter, always in pairs. The expat community watching the news one evening recognize one of the bodyguard waiters on tv, he's been arrested at the Thai border. In his bag, counterfeit plates for American dollars. Here the tourist attractions might double as money laundering operations for corrupt regimes. The thought of putting my money into the Dear Leader's pockets fills me with dread – my adventurousness is cut short by my hatred for Kim Jong Il.

007 drives us the four hours to Siem Reap, playing Khmer music for us and explaining what each song is about. After a good nine or so songs I ask him if he has any songs that aren't about being a poor country boy who's in love with a rich girl from the city who won't pay any attention to him, which is alright with him because our corny senses of humor line up, annoying the rest of the car. So instead he plays us a Khmer song, a farmer's song, one he can't really explain to us in English. We listen and watch the countryside go by. It's dry season, especially harsh. I see countless little flashes of Cambodian living go by through the car window to marvel before it's gone in an eyeblink like a lone 8 year old boy pushing a stubborn ox and then flexing his muscles in front of the beast. The song has the dated sound of pan asian 80s rock with Casio keyboard pipe sounds, but the vocal has a weary sadness. The driver says it reminds him of his time growing up on the other side of the country in a small village as a farmer. He says it was a hard life. But good. Now, he says, Cambodian life is about money. "No money, no honey, no baby," but he giggles. He throws on a Khmer dance jam and we have a party in the car for the next few miles.

Somewhere far into the drive everyone falls asleep except for him and I. I ask him about the signs for political parties that dot the landscape, an election coming soon. He explains to me all the political parties in Cambodia and what they stand for and what they're doing. He says his own government is irreconcilably corrupt, but there is freedom of speech. All in all, the only constant is money, the dollar economy of Cambodia, and each party has according to him a different way of being in thrall to that. We see the odd Hummer and Lexus and he points out their license plates to me: a specialized blue. Government workers. No matter how things change, they stay the same. Some people stay on top and some people go to the bottom. They just give it a new name, a new ism.

The next day he will tell me: when he was eight years old he saw the Khmer Rouge kill his uncle. And his grandfather. His parents were spared, and he only faintly remembers these killings. Sometimes he lapses into the preprogrammed niceties of being a guide and driver, with a sweet high pitched voice to match. Sometimes the façade of charm and servitude passes and we talk like two regular people, and his wit and sharpness and humor make me wish we could become close friends.

Siem Reap couldn't be more different in atmosphere than Phnom Penh. The smaller city has superseded the capital as a tourist attraction, now with its own international airport that brings tourists directly to the temple and back. Noise pollution of the temple has become a problem. Siem Reap has many modernized buildings, hawking wares to Japanese and Korean tourists from alligator skin bags to manicures to facial spa treatments. Luxury hotels have sprouted in every corner.

007 wants to take us to the Tonle Sap. His friend is going to take us out to see the sunset on a riverboat which sounds to me like dull tourism but he's

insistent. Suddenly his Nissan sedan goes offroad for a long while and we recede further and further from Siem Reap until now we are somewhere else entirely. Stilt houses run down the road. In the wet season the water will rise some thirty feet to meet them. Some of the houses are the most primitive dwelling you can imagine, while others seem incredibly pleasant – this is the kind of life Pol Pot came from. Dusk paints the sky watercolor pastels. Everything hazes, the sky, smells, thickness of the air. Children running naked in the street coming home for dinner, scooter riders buying 2 liter glass bottles of petrol, chickens walking aloof in the street. We spy a single dog leaping through tall reeds as if the whole world were at play. Bond shows us the plan for some coming behemoth of a development. Everywhere are signs of change; but these are meaningless signs: no signal of what that change will be, good or bad. This entire community will be displaced, undoubtedly. We pass donated wells, donated churches, a donated medical center on stilts.

We pull over by a riverside volleyball game and I'm scrambling to shoot and JB introduces us to his friend who's going to take us up the river. I don't see any boats other than simple rickety riverboats, basically oversized canoes with an awning and outboard motor, and the next thing we know we're departing on one. Water is comfort to me and the world becomes so overwhelmingly beautiful that I am grateful for the footage later because in the moment everything is a rapid blur and I am ecstatic at the size of the world and what's within it. Soon we are overtaken by a skinnier, faster boat and a little water ninja leaps from one boat to ours, only to come up to us revealed as an eleven year old girl who is selling sodas. She jumps back to her father's boat, more comfortable with water than any human I've ever seen.

The further we go upriver the more inventive humanity reveals itself to be. An entire floating village of boats, every possible human endeavour floating on wood and waves, floating basketball courts and pig farms and schools and shops and gardens and restaurants, and happy water people who wave hello as we pass. I marvel, stumble on the prow of the boat, actually rejoice at what a wonder we are and can be. I have never dreamed of or read of a place like this, and I feel my imagination pales to this display of adaptability and ingenuity right here in front of me. All of us are overwhelmed by what we see.

I stop shooting when I see a nine year old boy with an enormous smile and scar and a three foot snake who wants to drape it upon my actress. He is like all children, adorable, but his day to day existence is unfathomable to us. Somehow this moment with him affects my actress so much that she breaks down in tears, gives away all her remaining money to him. I don't ever tell her that he was probably scarred on purpose, and that money will go to a king beggar, who uses the children for such sympathy plays. Yet the child really did seem happy to play with his snake and touch our actresses' red hair.

I realize that there is a disconnect between myself and the crew. It's not that I am unmoved, for I am. My heart swells at everything; I don't want time to

slip away or to turn into frames. But the viewfinder has become the tunnel I am falling down. It only aims, never feels.

We are so deeply affected by this afternoon that we return downriver in silence, and the crew weeps, and JB takes me aside to ask why, I explain to him that to us a certain type of poverty is unimaginable. When the hurricane hit New Orleans a lot of Americans didn't know their fellow people lived that way. But he tells me the river people have a good life, they are Vietnamese who are never affected by flooding, or the seasonal changes who fish and have meat year round and go downriver to sell it to the Cambodians.

He leaves us for the night. I stay up under a mosquito net capturing footage, hearing geckos and monkeys outside the room. I cannot remember sleeping that night. He returns when it is still dark out, and we depart for Angkor Wat.

The temple is now laid out so that one is kept along certain paths so the tourists are shuttled cleanly through the grounds in a linear path that returns them to their vehicles, be they tuk tuk or air conditioned charter bus running right back to a luxury hotel. I feel bad about my behavior to the crew and sheepishly offer to go track down what might have been a monkey for their amusement. Somehow the crowd thins and morning light is extant. The sun beats hard. We stroll past vendors with souvenirs, unaccompanied children selling postcards.

There was a moment where I nearly passed out, shooting. I keep this from the crew. It's exhaustion and medications for migraines I've been taking. I don't want undue worry, so I suggest we stop for breakfast. Two days into our trip and I decide to drop the advice not to eat local cuisine, something I have to stick to because I've already lost a day's shooting in Tunisia to stomach ailments. I'm rewarded with the single greatest egg sandwich I've ever eaten (which never makes me sick, in fact my stomach settles somewhat for the first time in days). The food helps our spirits immeasurably. Our server keeps making gestures to communicate. He shows off his ringtones. I'm pretty sure T-Pain comes through, with a little Mariah Carey and Beyonce. His phone plays music videos. It's cooler than any of our phones. He seems disappointed.

He wants to practice his English, because he hopes to be a teacher someday. We exhaust the possibilities of speech we have between us. He shares his life story with us, tells us of the village at the mouth of a river he came from, what his adolescence in a monastery was like, and most of all his dream to return home a man and be a great teacher. He's a bit of smartass with a quick wit – like most Cambodian young men we meet – but his desire to return home and be a great teacher, of help to everyone, he says this with true earnestness. He's seen the explosion in crowds, sure, but to him it's just a way to live, and all those tourists bring much needed money to the country. He tells us, the Angkorian temple stands as monument to the lineage of strength in the Cambodian people, no matter what happens to it. There is no distinction for this person to see authenticity, to crave a spiritual commune away from brand names and

antidepressants, to feel that their home is a place that can be spoiled by commercialization.

Maybe this is at the heart of all the sadness over places becoming deluged by tourists. We can't escape our own industrialized, westernized, post colonial lineage no matter how far we've come. It's our own selves we're afraid of, and we bring with us, and project our lives onto ways of living that are completely unlike ours. We hope your place does not become like ours. And yet inescapably, why does Cambodia change people? Because in my third day here exoticism and alienation is thankfully replaced by a sort of comfort, a sensation that if I were left alone here I might work it out after all. We are shaken to see that everything we accept about tacit notions of society are not the only way. All I see are people, living lives. The same was true in London, in Paris (two countries who used to rule the world), and in Tunisia, and even on the grumpy faces of people in Frankfurt airport.

A day later I am in Shibuya, Tokyo, and it's raining, the world an infinite display of blinking lights reflected in puddles, and it's my birthday. Before this trip the thought of being in Tokyo would dazzle some part of me, but being here this night, I look upon the glass and concrete and limitless neon and all the street sounds of Tokyo, an ocean of anthemic pop and robot bird calls, and I wish I was still in Cambodia investigating all the potentialities of human existence, poised as it is on a precipice of modernity and timelessness. The Khmer Rouge attempted to destroy memory and culture forever, to create a perfect world from zero. I can't help but think: Pol Pot came from a relatively wealthy family and was educated in Paris and returned with such ideas. This is always a doomed enterprise, for the world happens to be imperfect. In Cambodia given enough time I think I'd find proof that the beauty is in that imperfection.

Downriver from the Tonle Sap in the silent drive away from our boat as night settles and families come together in stilt houses to share meals, ghostly faces lit by kerosene lamps inside, we pass by in Bond's sedan, looking out. We run parallel with a child on a bicycle for a moment, lost in concentration on the uneven dirt road. He turns to me and smiles.

I ask Dan-ah what she's thinking about. Dan-ah tells me "I'm not sure if the world is bigger than I thought it was, or smaller." I know exactly what she means.