



Wat It Is

(Working) Holiday in Cambodia

words | Aaron Stewart-Ahn
pics | Dan-ah Kim

This spring I traveled around the world in two weeks directing the “I Will Possess Your Heart” music video for the band Death Cab for Cutie. Accompanying me were illustrator Dan-ah Kim, a producer, and an actress. This is what I recall about our stop in Cambodia.

LOST CAUSEWAY

Over the years, friends had described Angkor Wat rapturously, as a pristine, isolated monument to the human need to connect to the divine—a monument to both Hindus and Buddhists that had survived nine centuries and the near annihilation of Cambodian society—and a place so holy it might even change my life. I was oddly nervous and thought, what if Angkor Wat left me unmoved?

I returned to shooting. Ahead were three vast pillars. Looking back across the Naga Causeway I saw three more, mirroring the ones ahead. The light was changing quickly, so I fixated upon the actress, the camera, and the dance between her and f-stops. Yet I kept glimpsing something around the viewfinder. Just over my shoulder, the three iconic pillars were malformed by a beige orb rising behind them—a sight so odd my skin prickled. Here, just before sunrise, a UFO was appearing, and I was poised to capture it in hi-def.

Before I could find a frame, it was blatantly obvious to myself, to the crew, and the crowd of thousands here at 5 A.M. to watch the sun rise over Angkor Wat, that a hot-air balloon had infiltrated the skyline. The tunnel vision of a viewfinder had kept me from seeing hundreds of tourists race-walking past me. Angkor Wat was not empty. It was, in fact, very, very crowded.

For the remainder of the shoot, we tried our best to make the place look like the empty, timeless shrine I'd been told of—taking in armed gods, colossal vipers, and air reeking of incense. Despite cigarette butts, empty water bottles, and laughing German tourists with hip packs, I lost words for the alignment of architecture, place, age, and sunlight. I careened between inspiration and regret that I didn't come here sooner, but Angkor Wat did not open my third eye.

COMING TO CAMBODIA

Before we departed, a friend warned me to not to let Cambodia get to me too deeply. I wondered what this meant and kept reflecting on it as the trip brought us closer to the place—like a rash that I was told not to scratch. What is it about the place that causes people to renounce materialism, devote their lives to aid work, or become crashing bores at dinner with tales of a new perspective on life? At 4:00 A.M. in Carthage we prepared to depart Africa for Southeast Asia.

The intensity of the voyage was amplified by what we were doing: shooting neither a documentary nor fiction, the proximity of our personalities, the physical strain of nonstop travel, and the insanity of long-haul flights every other day. Somewhere over Russia, we crossed the halfway point of 27,997 miles. Finally, we emerged in the sunlight and warmth of Phnom Penh.

The hotel driver picked us up at the airport and told us to call him James Bond. He was the first of five or so James Bonds I'd meet over the next few days—a local shtick locals use to appeal to tourists. He had a pompadour, pressed trousers, and an amazing shirt. He laid on the service and charm, but I sensed he was revealing a fraction of himself and was a tough hustler.



We tried our best to make the place look like the empty, timeless shrine I'd been told of, taking in armed gods, colossal vipers, and air reeking of incense.

In 1975 the Khmer Rouge entered the heart of the city triumphantly, forcing American troops to evacuate and their leaders in Washington to abandon the futile dream of remaking the world anew. What I saw was thriving and blooming, with palls of red dust kicked up by hordes of scooters.

Cambodians must be among the world's greatest scooter drivers. In addition to being enveloped by hordes of motorized rickshaw tuk-tuks, we witnessed entire families of five sharing single 50cc bikes tricked out with wooden cages for carrying chickens. Pairs of girls and boys flirted from bike to bike only to be blocked by a black-windowed Lexus or Hummer.

Traffic was slow in Phnom Penh, but it still went by far too quickly to be taken in. Everything was a bric-a-brac collage of essentials—motor parts and metal workers side by side with open-air fruit markets, food carts, and clothing stalls where seamstresses actually sewed



shirts together. A single pickup truck passed filled with 20 people sitting on a two-story pile of junk. I truly felt that if you were to have dropped me in the middle of this without a passport and money, I wouldn't know where to begin. It was a terrifying but absolutely thrilling thought. Then I spied a KFC sign.

At the guesthouse where we were staying, I asked a Japanese aid worker where to get a good meal. Soon we were discussing our entire wayward lives. He was in Cambodia during the coup of '97, and after his local friends came to his side to protect his life he felt he owed some sort of eternal karmic debt to them, which he continues to pay via meted bureaucracy.

My new friend informed me that more than 50 percent of Cambodia's population is under 25, and that the country's greatest challenge is the lack of homogenous parental authority. There is no respect for elders, tradition, or culture to be passed down, since it was wiped out during the insanity of the Khmer Rouge, leaving only children with traumatic memories to reestablish normalcy and find their place in a new, scrambling, and oftentimes cruel economy.

Finally, he came up with a restaurant recommendation—a place owned and operated by the North Korean government that is hugely popular with South Korean tourists. When the news reported that a waiter was arrested at the Thai border, it was said that in his bag were counterfeit plates for American dollars.



A rumor circulated that the tourist attraction might double as a money laundering operation, but the thought of putting my money into the Dear Leader's pockets filled me with dread and cut my interest short.

GREAT REAP FORWARD

The next day, 007 drove us to the countryside at Siem Reap. As slices of Cambodian life flashed by, we listened to Khmer dance jams and rock ballads. When a sad song about farming life came on, the driver told me about growing up on a farm. It was a hard but good life, he said, and that today life is all about money. "No money, no honey, no baby," he giggled. In his experience, he had seen politicians come and go, only to be replaced by more of the same with different names. When a Hummer passed, he pointed out its blue license plate, revealing the occupants to be government workers—just like all the other luxury cars.

Later on, he would tell me that when he was 8 he saw the Khmer Rouge kill his uncle and grandfather. He only faintly remembered these killings and said that everyone has the same problem: no one really knows what happened in those years.



Siem Reap was far less chaotic than the capital, having preceded it as a tourist attraction. It had its own international airport, modernized buildings, and luxury hotels, as well as vendors hitting up Japanese and Korean tourists in their own languages, hawking everything from alligator skin bags to manicures to facial spa treatments.

Bond wanted to take us to the Tonle Sap, where his friend operated a riverboat. The idea reeked of dull tourism and I almost asked him to forget it, but we wound up going on the long off-road jaunt to the riverside village anyway. During the journey, we saw stilt houses along the road raised off the dry delta. Some were the most primitive dwellings you could imagine with palm frond roofs and no walls, while others were surprisingly modern. Dusk painted the sky watercolor pastels and everything became hazy: children running naked in the street, scooter riders haggling over 2-liter bottles of gasoline, and chickens everywhere. Undoubtedly, this entire community will eventually be displaced, as Bond showed us the plan for an upcoming behemoth of a development.

We pulled over by a cluster of oversized canoes equipped simply with an awning and outboard motor, and the next thing we knew were departing in one. It wasn't long before we were taken over by a skinnier, faster boat from which a little water ninja leapt onto our craft with uncanny grace, turning out to be an 11-year-old girl selling sodas.

The further we went upriver, the more inventive humanity was revealed to be as we saw every possible endeavor floating on wood and waves: basketball courts, pig farms, schools, shops, gardens, and restaurants. Marveling at entire floating villages, I had never dreamt of a place like this, and I felt my imagination pale alongside this display of adaptability and ingenuity.

Mindful of the Cambodian fear of being photographed, I stopped shooting when a 9-year-old girl with an enormous smile signaled that she wanted to place a 3-foot-long snake upon my actress. Adorable but unfathomable, soon there were other young beggars clasping our hands and sharing their smiles.

We were silent on the drive back to town. Bond took me aside to ask why, and I explained that we were affected by the poverty. That made sense to him, but he wanted us to know that the villagers fish year-round, always have something to eat, and come down river to sell to the farmers during the drought season. When the rivers rise, their homes float upward with them. They have a good life.

He left us for the night and returned when it was still dark out for our departure to Angkor Wat.

WAT IT WAS

On the outskirts of Angkor Wat, we saw hints of how the temple used to be. Somehow the crowd was thin and the morning light was extant, revealing stray horses eating grass by tree-hidden ruins.



What is it about the place that causes people to renounce materialism, devote their lives to aid work, or become crashing bores at dinner with tales of a new perspective on life?

Strolling by souvenir vendors and unaccompanied children selling postcards, we stopped at a food cart for breakfast. Our server showed off his ringtones, and we were connected by the international language of Beyoncé. Practicing his English and speaking with great earnestness, he shared his life story, describing the village at the mouth of a river where he came from, what his adolescence in a monastery was like, and—most of all—his dream to become a great teacher and return home a man.

He didn't see the Angkorian temple as a spiritual commune, shared no desire for authenticity, and didn't fear commercialization. To him, the structure was a monument to the strength and survival of the Cambodian people, and the explosion in tourism was a source of much-needed money for the country.

It turned out my fear of "authentic" culture being spoiled by tourism was actually a fear of their place becoming like mine. Upon that realization, exoticism and alienation were replaced by a sort of comfort. On the third continent and ninth city in so many days, I finally saw that all the world is merely full of people, living.

I recalled our slow, silent drive from the Tonle Sap to town. As the night settled and families were sharing meals in stilt houses, I could spy on ghostly faces lit by kerosene lamps. For a while, Bond's sedan ran parallel with a child on a bicycle who turned to me and smiled.

At that moment, I asked Dan-ah what she was thinking about, and she said, "I'm not sure if the world is bigger than I thought it was, or smaller." Finally, I knew exactly what she meant. 🐼

