

# A trip to Vietnam & Cambodia



By Edward Oatley



# FORWARD

This cycle ride was undertaken to help raise money for St John's Primary School's new mini bus. The school played a large part in this by taking full advantage of the challenge. Sally Quirk, the Head teacher and the staff made sure that over the ten days I was away all the pupils and teachers cycled the 520km on two static bikes. Helen Copp and her team organized the My Donate fund raising web page and also a morning at the Gravesend Cycle Park following my return. There St John's families again cycled the 530km with me around the track (in fact they actually cycled 700km in two hours). My wife Janet has kindly typed my diary after which the Sevenoaks Prep digital computer team turned the text and photographs into this booklet. Although the group was small we certainly gelled as a team almost instantly and with the inspirational Christina from Discover Adventure as our leader, it really was a great adventure. My thanks go to Mike Thomas, Peter Moore, Karl Moss, Ben Davies, George Robertson, Steve Glover, Steve Burnett, Brian Lambert, Jane Brooks, Petra Murray, Richard Schiessl and not forgetting Matthew Bennett at Head Office in Salisbury who organized the trip and helped us all to prepare for the challenge.



## VIETNAM

Vietnam has a history as rich and evocative as anywhere on earth. Certainly the American war captured the attention of the West, but centuries before that Vietnam was scrapping with the Chinese, the Khmers, the Chams and the Mongols. Vietnamese civilisation drew many of its influences under a thousand-year occupation from the Chinese and later came the French and the humbling period of colonialism from which Vietnam was not to emerge until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Americans were simply the last in a long line of invaders who had come and gone through the centuries and, no matter what was required or how long it took, they too would be vanquished. If only the planners in Washington had paid a little more attention to the history of this proud

nation, then Vietnam might have avoided the trauma and tragedy of a brutal war. I am not going to dwell on the history of the country in any depth but just to say that Vietnam is now at peace with itself. The relatively recent liberalisation of foreign investment laws and the relaxation of visa regulations for tourists are part of a general opening up of Vietnam to the world. Relations with Vietnam's old nemesis, the USA, have improved and in 1994 the USA finally lifted its economic embargo which had been in place since the 1960s. Full diplomatic relations with the USA have been restored and Bill Clinton, who did not fight in the war, became the first President to visit North Vietnam in 2000. Relations have also improved with the historic enemy China and trade and tourism are now booming. Vietnam is an active member of ASIAN, an organization originally established as a bulwark against communism. The future is bright but ultimate success depends on how well the Vietnamese can follow the Chinese road to development. With only 2 million paid up members of the communist party and 91 million Vietnamese, it is a road they must tread carefully.



So what kind of life do the people lead? Most of the population are followers of Buddha with 10% Catholic so this is a harmonious society. Vietnam is a young country with 65% of the people under the age of 30. Traditionally it has been a rural agricultural society but with more and more education and more Western influence the race is on to move into the cities. The population of Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) is now over eight million and the population of Hanoi is rising all the time. The extended family is important to the Vietnamese and that includes second or third cousins and many live under one roof. As in the Western world the young in the towns group together. The role of the woman is changing fast and more are now delaying marriage to be educated. The Vietnamese consider pale skin to be beautiful so the women go to great lengths to protect their skin by wearing hats and scarves over their faces. To tell a Vietnamese woman that she has a white skin is to pay her a great compliment whereas telling her she has a lovely suntan is to insult her. The Vietnamese culture has been greatly influenced by the Chinese and the largest minority group in Vietnam has always been the ethnic Chinese community which makes up much of the commercial class in the cities. 10% of the population live in the high country. Now that electricity, modern medicine and education are improving the standard of living, and tourism is bringing in extra money, many of the old traditions in certain areas are being abandoned. Chinese opera, traditional Vietnamese

folk dancing, music and puppetry are important to the people. Songs are usually sung without any instrumental accompaniment and the traditional instruments are the Dan Bau (a single stringed lute), the Dan Tranh (a 16 string zither) and the To Rung (a large bamboo xylophone). There is a thriving domestic pop scene whilst painting on frame-mounted silk dates from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and is still popular. On the sport side they are a nation of badminton players and every street is a potential court. Volleyball, basketball and table tennis are also popular. However, football has taken off in recent years and all the world soccer matches are watched on television, mostly during the night due to time zones. Vietnam has a soccer league and a national team but are still minnows on the international scene. Golf and tennis are now being played in a big way due to tourist influences. As to the environment the South is much flatter than the North and the major rice growing areas are in the Red River delta and the Mekong delta. Amazingly Vietnam, with all its mouths to feed with rice is the second biggest exporter of rice in the world. The whole land area is slightly bigger than Italy and slightly smaller than Japan with 3451km of coastline. This coastline is one off Vietnam's biggest draws for tourists and the beaches, towering cliffs, undulating dunes and countless small islands in the North are spectacular. Vietnam flora and fauna is exotic but only recently is the government showing determined enthusiasm for ecological conservation. Vietnam is home to 275 species

of mammal, more than 800 species of birds, 180 of reptiles, 80 of amphibians and hundreds of species of fish, but many of these live in remote forest areas and an encounter is extremely unlikely. As in other countries deforestation has reared its ugly head with all its obvious problems.

## **CAMBODIA**

Cambodia, like Vietnam, was under Chinese rule for much of its earlier history and it was not until 1864 that Cambodia came under French influence and rule. In 1941 Cambodia's young king, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, took over power from the French and in 1953 its independence was recognised.

However the Vietnam war was raising its ugly head and the Khmer Rouge entered the country. In April 1970 US and South Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia in an effort to flush out the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops and so the Vietnamese community withdrew deeper into Cambodia. For the next four years huge areas of the country were carpet-bombed by the US B52s killing thousands and hundreds of thousands of people became refugees. Phnom Penh was captured by the Khmer Rouge in 1975 and so started one of the most brutal restructuring of a society every attempted. It is estimated that three million people were killed. It came to an end in 1989 and

Cambodia was welcomed back onto the world stage in 1991 with the Paris Peace Accord and normality slowly started returning but corruption still travels such a destructive path. Cambodia's greatest treasure is its people. They have been to hell and back but thanks to an unbreakable spirit and infectious optimism they have prevailed with their smiles and spirits largely intact.

Life starts before dawn and food is almost as important as family. The working day winds down around 5.00pm and all the family will try to come together for a meal. Most people live in rural areas but the race is on to move to the cities. With a population of 15 million there are still large Chinese communities.

Cambodia is still a one-party state but communism, the mantra for a generation, has taken a back seat to capitalism and the rush to embrace the markets. Cambodian economy relies on the textile industry and tourism but agro-industries such as rubber and palm oil are growing fast; however traditional agriculture and fishing remain very important to the average person. Buddhism is the number one religion but there are several hundred Islam worshippers with 10% of the population Christian.

## DAYS 1&2

### HO CHI MINH CITY

I was at Heathrow in plenty of time to find there are only three of us flying from Heathrow, the rest are meeting us in Ho Chi Minh City. Amazingly one of them is Petra who has been living in Birchington since 1994 with her family, extraordinary as that is where my brother lives and where my mother and daughter lived until recently and she knew them all. Off for a coffee and hopefully we will be taking off in about an hour's time.

Now in Singapore airport trying to get onto Wifi but I seem to be plagued with failure. I punch in all the codes but nothing seems to happen! Our flight took about 11 and a half hours instead of 12 so we must have had a tail wind.

This is a vast airport and the shopping centre seems to be even bigger than Heathrow. We now have a two hour wait before boarding our flight to Ho Chi Minh City where we will meet up with the rest of the group, seven of them from Jersey.

We've arrived at 12.00 midday, 5.00am in England. I have never seen so many people waiting outside the airport to collect holiday makers, you would think the England World Cup team was arriving! Organised chaos with hundreds of

people waiting with placards. It is hot and humid, about 30 degrees I would think. We have a 45 minute coach drive to our hotel.



Most people still call Ho Chi Minh City Saigon; it is a mixture of old and new and we are travelling on a four-lane motorway through the heart of the city, surrounded by masses of mopeds with every one wearing helmets. For a Sunday the traffic is very heavy and our guide says that during week days it is absolutely chock-a-block and this is why we will not be cycling through the city but will have a 20 minute bus ride to the outskirts on our first day. Most people still call Ho Chi Minh City Saigon; it is a mixture of old and new and we are travelling on a four-lane motorway through the heart of the city, surrounded by masses of mopeds with every one wearing helmets. For a Sunday the

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The Vietnamese are all getting ready for the Chinese New Year on the 14<sup>th</sup> February, as they will be in Cambodia, when everyone will have a three day holiday and the schools will have two weeks. It is 1.15 and there are now 12 of us in the group. We have had 15 minutes in the hotel to get acclimatised and I find I have a room to myself. We will have lunch and then go to have our bikes checked over and make sure they are ok.

A nice lunch in a restaurant, lots of Chinese options which will be the staple diet of the holiday and we're all getting to know one another. We are only a small group of 12 so this is not difficult. After lunch a half hour drive to find our bikes and to make sure they are the right size etc and that we are all happy with them, which we are. 3.15 and back to the hotel. It's now 35 degrees and the humidity is bearable but it is certainly there.

Seven of our fellow cyclists are friends from Jersey and by the end of the day they had welcomed us into their group and the twelve of us are now very much one group, this is so good and is a great start to our adventure.

I've just walked around the area by the hotel, it is very busy, with a huge market place. Back for a shower and have written emails to everyone at home - I had success with the Wifi! - and now off to supper and a briefing. Whilst we were eating a market sprung up in the street just outside the hotel so I walked around that, bought a couple of t-shirts and filmed what seemed the whole population of Saigon riding their mopeds. Back in the hotel at 9.30 and it's definitely bed time.



## DAY 3

### EN ROUTE TO TRA VINH

Monday morning and luckily a wake-up call as it took a long time to get to sleep even though I was very tired. I was a bit worried knowing we had a long day ahead of us but I must have dropped off eventually at 3.00 and gone into a deep sleep. 6.00am and down to breakfast.

This morning we are going to visit the Cu Chi Tunnels which were built in 1948 and extended by the Vietcong to use for storage and as a refuge with sleeping quarters, hospitals and schools. However, when the war started these tunnels were used as a base from which the Vietcong mounted operations for the offensives in 1968. When the Americans first discovered this underground base on their doorstep they would simply pump CNS gas down the tunnels and set off explosives. As they realised the tunnels could also provide valuable intelligence they sent volunteer tunnel rats into the earth to capture prisoners. It is now a museum of all that went right, and wrong, in the past. The population of Ho Chi Minh City is well over 8 million and with 5 million on mopeds, to help with the morning rush hour the schools start at 7.00 and offices open an hour later at 8.00. There is a great French influence here. Cars are very expensive with high insurance and tax, so there are very few on the roads;



it would certainly be virtually impossible to drive here if everyone had a car. Our guide is just saying that now the war is history Americans are made very welcome and it is as if there has never been conflict. As in other countries in the world many Chinese are moving to Vietnam, settling here and starting up businesses and there are certainly more high-rise blocks of flats. Of course, we are now leaving Ho Chi Minh and have seen little of it but it seems that people are still living cheek by jowl, amongst the new buildings there are small houses and shops. We are travelling on two lane roads and with 5 million mopeds we are making very slow progress but of course people here just accept it and it's fine as long as you are prepared to take time and wait.



We have been travelling for an hour now and we are coming into rice fields and vegetable growing countryside. There are many lorries on the road now and we are passing an industrial zone with warehouses amongst shacks and shops along the side of the road, and this has been continuous since we left Ho Chi Minh. Now in full countryside with trees everywhere and one tarmac road with dirt tracks going off from it which is fine when the weather is dry but must be a nightmare when the rains come. It seems that most of life goes on by the side of this main road with farmland behind. Electric wires become intertwined with the trees and foliage and look very unsafe. We left the hotel at 7.20, it is 9.10 and we have finally arrived at the tunnels. There are 250kms of

tunnels and we are now in Vietcong territory when the Russians and Vietnamese were fighting against the Americans. This was gorilla warfare and we're now passing traps doors all over the ground which opened up so that the Vietcong had easy access to the tunnels but also which the enemy could fall into.



80,000 people could be in the tunnels at one time and we have stopped where it is possible to crawl through about a 100metres of tunnel; of course it is impossible for us to stand up in them but the Vietnamese are a much smaller race, however it would even have been a tight fit for them. We are now in large bunkers where the roofs have been heightened for tourists and this is where the cooking and first aid took place. The roofs of these bunkers and in fact all the houses in the countryside were made from foliage and banana leaves and in fact some still are. We have been offered tea and a snack, not sure what it is but it tastes like potato. This place is all very

well presented as a tourist attraction; it is surrounded by forest where we have been walking which shows how extensive the area of tunnels was; it certainly brings home to you the strategies of the war. Back on the bus for a two hour drive to Ben Tre, the gateway to the Mekong Delta. We will then have lunch before the cycling starts. In England we take rubbish to the tip but here it is piled everywhere, I assume it is probably all re-used: pallets, bits of wire, old bikes and machines, bricks. It's 1.15 and it's been a long drive, we've just crossed the Mekong River and this is where the challenge starts as we shall be following the Mekong River from here into Cambodia.



We ate our packed lunch at 1.45 and now have 50km to cover before nightfall – will we do it? 2.15 and the cloud cover has gone so although it is not quite as hot as yesterday it is 32 degrees and quite humid. Here we go.

3.45 and we've had our first stop after 18.5 km. I must admit I am finding it hot, with no exercise for two days and coming from 1 degree in England to 35 here I am feeling it a bit and certainly in the countryside it is much warmer. It's fabulous actually because today we have really gone into the heart of Vietnam and some of the houses are quite impressive with marble fronts, looking really lovely. There are small cemeteries dotted all over the place. We've followed a tarmac path through the countryside where there is no through traffic, just the locals. Occasionally there are little shops, passing mopeds and some electric bikes but again very few cars, just the occasional van. Well we arrived at Tra Vinh just as dusk was falling and lights were coming on at about 5.50. A very spacious hotel. A good afternoon session but we were all a little worried for the first 20km as we had been static for so long but by 4.00 it was beginning to cool down a little, the going was flat and not too difficult. Everyone is tired and after a good meal I for one was happy to settle down for the night.

## DAY 4

# TRA VINH/ CAUKE/CANTHO

I woke up at 3.00 but then slept through till 6.00 so have had my first good night's sleep for three days, that should help today. Up and dressed and down to breakfast at 6.30 as we'll be starting off at 7.30. Left the hotel at 7.45 and twenty minutes later we have arrived at a temple so I must put on a proper T-shirt; I'll just pull my shorts down a little to make them look longer and I think they will accept that. See the Temple and now we are riding for 24km, again off the tourist track through the real Vietnam with rice, fruit and vegetables of all kinds growing on either side, villages with small industries but all really based on farming.



Again, small burial plots all over the place and it seems that families just bury their dead in their own plots of land. It does look very strange as the tombs are very big and just sit alongside the houses. Apparently, they are so big because people decide what they would like to be buried with them before they die and there can be several items, including maybe furniture! It's getting very hot now, I'm wearing my Brazilian top which is now completely drenched and we're cycling in the hottest part of the day but the humidity is not too bad. Houses all along the side of the road for 20km, you can't really say they are villages, just 5 or 6km of farm land in between groups of houses and small shops. People are mending bits of machinery etc but it is a very relaxed way of life. Mopeds carrying everything, piled on the back and off the sides, you can hardly see the driver and children are balancing against their parents wherever there is room.



Stopped for lunch at 12.00 having covered 45km with one short stop. This is the smallest group I have ever been part of so we are all sticking together but the pace is pretty hot and although we are roughly keeping up with one another there is very little time in which to take photographs; as I am not the fastest cyclist, swimmer or anything I'm having to work hard to keep up. So, a welcome stop for lunch which is Chinese food (Chinese for breakfast, lunch and dinner!), I'm sticking to the vegetables which are very nice but for me not too many as I simply can't cycle on a full stomach. Iced tea to drink which seems very popular here. It is now very hot and I must admit the ride so far has been tough but I feel in control. I don't think the afternoon will be quite so bad as we have one or two ferry crossings so we won't be cycling the same distance as this morning but if by this evening I have reached the hotel feeling normal I shall be very happy. The countryside is very pleasant although the last 10km was not quite so pleasant as we were on the main road. Lots of bikes and mopeds with men and women alike cycling in tops and long trousers and wearing masks while we are all sweating wearing next to nothing. The reason for this is that the Vietnamese like to cover up because they want their skin to stay as pale as possible, just the opposite to most of us who like a tan. 12.30 and off again and I'm pleased to say I'm feeling much better after the break and have more confidence in this

afternoon's escapade. 2.00 and we've stopped for a rest having just crossed another waterway which is very shallow and only took a few minutes; we just put the bikes on the boat and off we went. I feel better and we have only 30-35km to go so not too bad. Life out here has a real community feel as we pass local people getting on with their lives, we are very lucky to see this. The young children go to school from 7 – 11.00, then all the children go home for lunch and school starts again from 1.00-5.00 for the seniors. We passed a school where the children were leaving at 11.00 with parents waiting for them on mopeds, not cars as in England trying to find a parking space! The children all piled on the mopeds and off they went. We have been into one of the local houses which is quite nicely laid out, there is a washing machine out the back but not that many mod cons. There are hammocks everywhere, which are very popular in Vietnam, both inside and outside the house with people lying on them. The last 15km into the town was quite exciting. Can Tho which is the largest city in the Mekong Delta has certainly proved that it must be with the amount of traffic so I don't think I would have any trouble cycling round London now. It was rush hour, a few cars and lorries, some bikes but hundreds and hundreds of mopeds. There are traffic lights but no one seems to obey them to any great degree and mopeds are turning, left, right, going straight on, as are pedestrians, and we had to cope with all this, it was quite some experience. The

secret is not to look behind you, just go straight forward, make your own decisions and trust your reflexes as to whether you will miss a vehicle, and just go for it. That I can tell you is pretty hard work for the best part of 14k. However, we are now in a rather nice hotel right in the centre of the town, I'll just go out and have a quick wander before supper but I certainly won't be going to bed too late as that has been quite a difficult day. I am in control but I think what I am finding difficult is that we are all keeping together for 20k without stopping so the opportunities to rest for a few minutes and take photographs are few and far between. Tomorrow, well tomorrow is tomorrow. I know I am being boring but I still can't get or send emails, I can get BBC news and sport so that keeps me up to date but I've not been able to touch base with home or school since the second night which is a shame. I will see if the hotel reception can sort me out. Well what a disastrous evening. Still no email connection and when I came up to my room after supper I tried again but I had completely forgotten my password, I tried all sorts of variations for several minutes with no luck so unless I can remember it I shall not be able to send updates or take photographs and this really panicked me. Karl kindly lent me his phone so I could email Janet and ask for the code. We went out to a restaurant about 10 or 15 minutes away and had a good meal and are all very happy that we have completed the 100km today. Everyone obviously looks tired but all still

feel fit. Walking back to the hotel there are mopeds everywhere but you don't feel unsafe as if you keep walking they will miss you. There are loads of people here at present, it's a popular place with a large population. With the Chinese New Year just around the corner the markets are full of flowers and decorations and people are coming out to buy. Back at the hotel, it's 9.45 and I need to go to bed.



## DAY 5

# CAN THO—LON XUYEN

Now Wednesday. I went to sleep quickly but woke up soon after 10.00 worried about that ridiculous password and took a long time to get back to sleep. A wake up call at 6.30 but I was already awake hoping that Janet would send my password, which she had so back to feeling confident again! It's now 7.30 and this morning we have a short boat trip through the Can Tho floating market. It's quite windy but a lovely morning with no clouds in the sky so I think it's going to become quite hot. We're on the boat with our packed lunch, which is of course Chinese, so I'd better get used to eating Chinese for breakfast, lunch and dinner. I've taken photographs of the many barges going past.



All the farmers bring their fruit and vegetables to sell from their boats so the river really is a floating market with hundreds of boats plying their trade. A lot of bartering goes on swapping one lot of vegetables for another and this all starts at about 4.00 in the morning so now at 8.30 they will have been at it for 4 hours.

The water of the Mekong is filthy but people swim in it and wash their clothes here. Boats are selling food and coffee and navigation through it is a bit like missing the mopeds on the roads, you are sliding past them making your own way through, all very normal and perfectly safe and everyone going very slowly. Some people live on the boats and you see them throwing their rubbish into the river. An interesting trip seeing another side to local life. Feeling more normal now as Janet has sent my password and maybe I will be able to send an email this evening. 10.15 and we have cycled 25km following the Mekong with its little tributaries and life going on by the side of it and I've managed to keep up with the group. Apparently, the irrigation of the Mekong has improved dramatically over the past 20 years so the fields are now well irrigated, especially the rice fields and it is very impressive. The side wind this morning certainly helped and we now have another 25k to go.

Having lunch now and I have been setting my own pace which means by the end I am 2 or 3 minutes behind

everyone else; its hot but I'm enjoying it and taking in the sights. The first part of the journey this morning was very interesting as when you are frequently crossing the Mekong tributaries you lose your sense of direction. We had to cross these very very narrow steep bridges over the tributaries which are only 25 – 50 metres wide, hardly any distance at all and I certainly couldn't trust myself riding over them as I would lose my balance at the top and fall in – that is guaranteed. So I was a little bit slower as at every bridge I had to get off my bike and walk across. There are two teenage girls on their bikes riding effortlessly across the bridge very slowly up and then down and their balance is perfect. Unlike the rest of us who are building up speed going down so as to gain momentum to go up. 12.20 and having lunch and then another 25km to the bird sanctuary followed by a 20-minute bus drive to the hotel so as to avoid all the traffic. No cars again but the duty and tax is so high people can't afford them. The only people, apart from the very wealthy, who do have cars, are those people who need them for work such as taxi drivers, doctors, tradesmen etc. Just completed 15k on a very bumpy track and going at any speed gave your backside a hammering. Slightly out of breath so pleased we are having a short stop. Again, beautiful countryside, taking in the way of life of the local people and village life. Having a chat in the bus with our guide, and he is answering our questions. Schools are not free, everyone must make a contribution and also

the Vietnamese have to take out health insurance unless they are very poor. Apparently, the hospitals here are brilliant, the best being in Ho Chi Ming City, and pregnant women now go into hospital to have their children. Arriving in quite a sizable town, Long Xuyen where the population is 400,000. I have been looking out of the window for the past three minutes and just 16 cars have passed me. Driving through the centre there are the usual small shops and industry along the road with rice fields at the back. I have enjoyed a swim in the hotel pool and have decided to do some washing as the sun is streaming through my bedroom window, the clothes I have been wearing for the past two days are black! They should dry overnight. Trying to get the wretched Wifi working (life was much easier when you knew you couldn't keep in contact!). We will be saying goodbye and thankyou to our guides in Vietnam tomorrow as it will be our last day cycling here before we cross the border into Cambodia. Been out for a walk, still no success with the Wifi so I must stop worrying about it and just go day by day. There are three children crossing the road with what seems like hundreds of mopeds swerving around them. Supper not too bad, all vegetable based, it's getting a little boring. At least my high tech fellow cyclists have taken pity on me and let me use their phones to send some messages and photos home. Now off to bed.

## DAY 6

### LONG XUYEN/ TRI TRON/

A good night's sleep and back to normal as far as sleeping goes which is good, ready for a hard day today. 7.30 and on the bus. What is interesting here is that there is no need for car parks but you do have moped parks and they are arriving in the park by the hotel thick and fast, about one every second. Our guide is our fountain of all knowledge and explains that nobody needs to be able to drive. The Vietnamese do not celebrate birthdays only anniversaries and deaths, he says that couples celebrate anniversaries as they have succeeded in putting up with each other for another year! In the north there are more problems with the weather as it's hot and wet. The main sports are football, netball and basketball. There are some golf courses but they are mainly for tourists. Vietnam is not really a religious country, 80% are Buddhists and 7% Christians but few actually practise their religion. 8.00 and we have arrived outside a huge cemetery for war victims. We will pick up our bikes and start cycling. It is the usual lovely morning with a slight breeze which will help, not in our faces. 10.00 and our first stop. Unfortunately, the wind has died down now and it's starting to get hot so let's see what the next 25km brings. 1.00 and we stop for

lunch. I think this has been the worst day and I'm feeling it a bit now; it's going to be mind over matter for the rest of the journey. It's very warm and we now have some pretty boring cycling really as we will be on a main road through the same countryside as before. I hope there will be one or two stops before we reach the Killing Fields at Ba Chuc which will be interesting. So, for the next two or three hours watch this space, I think I'll be all right but I'm really having a problem with lunch because I cannot eat this Chinese, or I should say Vietnamese, food all the time. I made a jam sandwich at breakfast, and have eaten a few vegetables and a chocolate bar along with a drink. Well we're stopping at Ba Chuc at 3.05 which is very underwhelming really, just somewhere where there are photographs and a big mausoleum in which were hundreds of skulls and every bone from all parts of the body. . Also, masses of clothes from those poor people who were massacred and the building seems half empty. The whole area is very rough and ready and you wouldn't even realise it's here.



On the move again and I am really finding this difficult at the moment, we have another 25 minutes to go and it is very hot and we are now going up our first hill so I'll see you soon. Well I didn't think we'd finish in such good time but we've come to the end of by far the hardest day. The Vietnam part of our trip is over so we will be leaving our bikes here tonight and will pick up new ones in the morning. It is easier for the bikes to be taken back to the start from here so they do not have to be returned from Cambodia which is why we have two sets of bikes. We now have a forty minute ride from the outskirts of the town to the hotel. It's been a difficult day and I can't say I enjoyed the last 25/30km, luckily it did get a little cooler as the afternoon wore on but that was hard work. Anyway we all achieved it so that's great. I hope we have a good meal at the hotel and I shall certainly sleep well tonight, that's for sure. Well I'm now in my hotel room, have had a shower, sorted out some things and am about to go out for a drink with everyone before supper. Thank goodness, I have the E45 for my backside but I now find I have a blister appearing on my foot I think because I have been wearing my old trainers so they are going to be chucked. I will wear my new trainers tomorrow, put on a blister plaster and wear socks. Hopefully it's not too bad but it could get worse and I'm not used to blisters. It's certainly been a very full-on day and I think everyone's tired, it's the first time I've really felt my age which I certainly do now so I will

get out my book and read myself to sleep after supper. Tomorrow won't be too bad, it's about 50km to the border and 20km from there to Phnom Penh where we will meet our new guide. We will start cycling after we have stopped en route at the infamous Killing Fields. So it's sight seeing tomorrow before the next day's cycle of 75km. We've now cycled 325km so we've broken the back of it.

## DAY 7

### CHAU DOC/ TAKEO/

### PHNOM PENH

Having breakfast at 7.00 and we will leave at 7.30 for an hour's bus ride to the border and then we start our cycling. I know I've mentioned this before but the coffee is undrinkable, it's so sweet, all the drinks are so sweet here, the orange is almost like drinking neat cordial, you have to add water to make it at all drinkable. Public transport is limited in Vietnam, there is only one train service from Ho Chi Ming City to Hanoi. There are bus services in the towns but we haven't seen a bus along the way. Four days to go and we're on our way to the Cambodian border. Irrigation is much better here making rice growing easier. The water comes to the paddy fields from the Mekong River and brings snails along with it so the farmers have to try to get rid of them by using hundreds of ducks to catch the snails to keep them in check. There are so many rice fields which take a lot of nutrition out of the ground and with a population of 92 million people they need an awful lot of rice. However amazingly Vietnam is the second largest exporter of rice after Thailand. We're now at the border

and so far we have had to show our passports three times and we now have to fill up another form. 9.30 and we're through customs. We got here at about 11.45 after 50km cycling along the main road. Easy cycling on a tarmac road, no cars and not much traffic at all. Warmer but not too humid. Our first Cambodian lunch and there is certainly plenty of it. Very much fish and meat based with vegetables but a great meal. 1.15 and we now have a two hour coach ride to the Killing Fields before going into Phnom Penn. Now into Cambodia which has a history of wars and our guide is telling us about the war with America which went on from the middle of the 60s until the 90s and the American bombings. The population of Cambodia is 15 million a big difference from the 92 million of Vietnam and we notice how little traffic there is, still no cars and not nearly so many mopeds. There are fewer shops alongside the road with more grass areas unlike Vietnam where it was shop after shop and shack after shack. Fairly primitive houses with corrugated iron roofs and well spread out. The cows in the fields are extremely thin and there are masses and masses of shrines dedicated to the Gods around the various Temples here. Speed limits certainly aren't necessary because the roads are so bumpy, they may be tarmac but they haven't been re-laid for donkeys years. I can assure you that if we went at any speed we would all be hitting our heads on the roof of the bus so we keep at 20-25 miles an hour along with the

mopeds. There are more lorries and cars now as we near Phnom Penn. As we arrive and get off the bus the humidity hits us. We are now at the memorial to all the people killed by the Khmer Rouge in the 70s.



We have just seen a film about the atrocities and been shown the massed graves and the building where all the bones and skulls are on display along with clothes. It really isn't a pleasant sight and I wonder why it is necessary to dig up the bones rather than leave them buried in the graves. The area is in a semi wild state with long grass, trees and hens scabbling around not well looked after at all. In the museum all the facts and figures of the wars are on display, what happened to the leaders during and after the war. To me this is all a bit bizarre. We are now looking at graves where people were put without heads and there are rags from victims in a glass case. It is strange that all

the executioners were later welcomed back into society. Apparently in the rainy season bones and clothes come to the surface. I don't think I was the only one to be a bit distressed by the unearthed bodies, wondering why they couldn't be left underground and how it might have been a better memorial to have a more cared for site. We leave at about 4.45 all somewhat depressed by what we have seen. In Phnom Penn now. Masses of traffic, more cars but still mostly mopeds and as we are in the centre on two lanes it is M25 stuff. Just as in Vietnam people cross the road and keep going whilst the traffic moves around them. If the pedestrian stops it causes chaos. There are very few traffic lights and traffic just eases its way in from the side roads. The Chinese New Year is not celebrated so much in Cambodia but the Cambodians do have another holiday in April, in fact they have quite a few bank holidays, more than most. We have been told that in Cambodia there are a few very wealthy people but most are poor and you can see that here with the modern 4x4s and very expensive cars. They just look completely out of place; you don't even need a car here, they are totally unnecessary. This must be the rich showing just how powerful they are. We have spent a lot of time in the bus today, three hours going to the Killing Fields and then on to Phnom Penn. We know that the Cambodian economy deals in the black market and there is corruption here but on the other hand there are opportunities for entrepreneurs to make money and it

seems a much more cosmopolitan city and much more westernised than Vietnam. Although the shops alongside the road look the same it just seems more organised. We had lunch in a restaurant where the menu also had everything printed in English which made you feel more at home straight away. You knew what the food was that you were eating and the price. Unfortunately, we won't have any time to really explore the city as we only arrived at 6.00 and we are now having a swim at the hotel but I will try to take photographs from tomorrow. There seem to be plenty of hotels and apartment blocks around and they are fairly modern buildings. It is certainly very different from what we have seen during the past week and definitely very different from Ho Chi Minh City. We went out this evening and now back at the hotel at 10.45 so I really do think it's time for bed as we have a very hard day tomorrow. I have been speaking to some Americans who have been here for two weeks staying in the hotel. They are a Christian group from a Church in America and next week they will be helping a local Church to rescue girls who have lost their way. They will be helping them to start a new life, some are children of only 9 or 10 who will be given a formal education and be taught how to cook and sew and how to go about finding a job. The girls will be

looked after by the church, just like being in a boarding school, until they are ready to go out into society. It would be great to think they will go back to their families but the trouble is more than half of them have been sold by their families in the first place which is difficult for us to understand. These Americans are doing a great job just being in the centres, chatting to the children, eating with them, going to their lessons and just generally taking an interest in all they are doing.

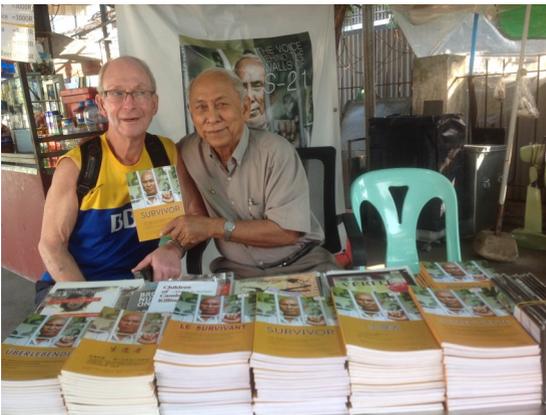
## **DAY 8**

### **PHNOM PENN/KAMPONG**

### **CHHANG**

A successful morning so far as at breakfast I was able to make a ham sandwich and purloin some mini chocolate croissants so I know I'm all right for lunch! Another hot morning, it's 8.00 and we are ready to start the last hard day of cycling. Now travelling in the bus out of Phnom Penn to the outskirts of the town. It is Saturday morning and it is so interesting to see how the cars and mopeds just feed into the main stream, no one in a rush, giving way to one another and no road rage. It's uncanny how it works but it certainly does. We have reached the Torsen genocide museum, this will make us depressed before we even start

cycling! It is the secret network centre which held 20,000 prisoners with only 12 survivors. I truly think this is awful because there are probably 100 rooms here with different types of torture showing the men and women that were killed and how they were killed as you will see from the photos I have taken. The Kymer Rouge regime which ruled under its Marxist leader Pol Pot from 1975-97 was responsible for one of the worst mass killings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This could have been commemorated so much better. It could have been turned into a school with vibrant children and a suitable memorial in the centre to show hope for the future but this is totally sick making as far as I am concerned. I just don't know why the Cambodian people have decided to remember all these atrocities in this way and wanting the public who wander around here to see exactly how prisoners were tortured, it is just staggering. There is no way I can walk around these rooms, it would just make me ill. The cycling today is supposed to be a challenge but it is much more of a challenge for me to be in this place.



I am sitting outside in a welcome breeze so I hope this continues for the cycling today. I have bought a couple of the books about this place which will be interesting to read. I would rather that than seeing it first-hand. I did meet one of the two living survivors who is there to sell his book and I had my photograph taken with him. He is a writer and the other survivor is a painter and the reason these two men were kept alive was because they were useful to the Khmer Rouge. Again because the Kymer Rouge leaders said after the war that they had no option but to torture the people they were accepted back into society. It's now 10 o'clock and we're leaving to travel in the bus for another hour and a half so will not start cycling until about 12.00. We are travelling alongside the river which is very attractive, there is a walkway with places to sit and flowers growing. There are restaurants and keep fit areas with different apparatus, all very clean and tidy. It is Saturday morning and you might expect to see market stalls but there are none. We must go very slowly as the speed of the traffic is controlled again by the mopeds and there is no way you can overtake. Now travelling along a road with open fronted shops linked one to another on both sides, mostly wooden with a few brick ones, a few selling food and clothes but most of them look like junk shops. There are no pavements so it is difficult for people to walk in and out of the shops and there is nowhere to park apart from just abandoning your moped along the road so I can see hardly anyone in the shops even though it is 10.45 on a Saturday morning. There is access to cross

the road in very few places which makes it much safer. The tuk-tuks carry two to three people, they are mostly driven by mopeds with a few bicycle driven ones nearer the city. There are piles of rubbish lying around which have obviously been there for some time but not as much as I thought there might be.



So, after 45 minutes we have come out of town into what I suppose are the suburbs with the river on the left and farmland on the right, there are houses and the odd temple and a few industrial sites but we are travelling more into the country and at a much faster speed. Quite a few of the houses are built on stilts. The interesting thing is that for our take away lunch the rice is wrapped in a banana leaf which acts like our tin foil only much better. You can cook this in the oven so nothing is wasted and there is no recycling. Thank goodness for my ham sandwich. To be fair this aversion of mine to Asian packed lunches is not shared by the others who all say how good they are. It's 3 o'clock

and we've achieved 35km with another 40km to go but at least we are now on proper tarmac so it should be easier than this morning with no bumps although it is a minor road. This is still hard work and just what I thought it would be in all honesty. We should finish by 5.30-6.00 and it may be dark by the time we reach the hotel so it will really be a question of pacing ourselves now for the rest of the day, well certainly as far as I'm concerned. 6.00 and we've reached the hotel. It's been a tough day and I think the trouble was we left too late this morning and spent too long at the Killing Fields site. We were there an hour and a half and didn't leave till 12.00 I think it was and we then had to achieve 75km in the heat which hasn't been easy and especially as the terrain wasn't ideal to start with. However, we're here and the worst is over as the next two days we will only be cycling 30 or 40km around here and then on to Angkor Wat. Off to our rooms for a shower and at least we escaped cycling in the dark. Funnily enough it obviously gets darker a little bit later here than in Vietnam as we didn't need lights. An enjoyable supper in a restaurant where we will have breakfast tomorrow as there is no breakfast service at the hotel. Tomorrow we travel by bus before a four hour boat trip across the immense Tonle Sap which is the largest fresh water lake in South East Asia. So a rest from the bikes, we have a packed lunch on the boat – so I hope I can find some bread at breakfast. We then have a 40km ride to Siem Reap, which will be fairly high pressure to arrive in time. Then a

short bus ride to the hotel near the temples, where we will stay for two nights before cycling into Angkor and around the temples. We will have a chance to see the town in the afternoon before packing our cases. I've written an email to Janet, not to school now as they are on half term, but it just won't go. Emails are coming in but not sending, very annoying.



## DAY 9

# KAMPONG CHHNANG TO SIEM REAP

I was up at 5.00 this morning and amazingly the emails were working so I was able to re-send the ones from yesterday and had some time to look at all the football results. Omelette and bread with some processed cheese

for breakfast so not too bad and we're ready now for our 4 or 5 hour trip across the lake. You notice there are bikes for sale but they are all old-fashioned ones or mountain bikes, you couldn't ride a sports bike here because the roads just aren't good enough. You could not get up any speed on them so road cycling is out of the question. We've had half an hour to look around the town, there's a market going on and I've taken some photographs, one is of a really revolting sight. There are no freezers so here are chickens which have had their wings cut off ready to be bought, killed and eaten. We were all on the boat by 9.30 and here we are sitting on the roof, we're going pretty fast but no one's been asked to put on a life jacket. We're in the sunshine passing lots of scenery with river houses. At the moment we can still see both sides of the lake and we're going to be sitting or lying up here for the next four hours. Unless anything untoward happens, I'll come back to you when we land. We've been on the boat for an hour and a half and we are now right in the middle of the lake, we can just see land either side but it is very very far away.



We're all wearing next to nothing and it is warm but with the breeze blowing off the water it is very pleasant. Now a lot of Cambodians want to join us on the roof. We're travelling at 44km an hour so pretty fast however decided to come down from the roof and have now been standing on the side of the boat for the last two hours! It's 1 o'clock and we're back on dry land having all really enjoyed the 220km crossing. We are now unloading our bags ready to set off on our bikes. 2.00 and we're about to start; I don't think it will be easy, it's very hot and we will be riding on the same surface as we had the early part of yesterday. It is flat with farmland all around. 3.30 and we're half way there, it's hot and good to have a rest. The roads are difficult, very uneven and of hard sand with masses of pot holes, you've got to concentrate on finding your way around them. There are less people around and some really quite well to do homes. We've passed through some villages with very few people, but we've come across two weddings taking place. Another 20km to go to the hotel and it is hot, my top is drenched in sweat. The last 20km were not too bad really and we are now in a nice hotel with a swimming pool. I have had a welcome swim and am now trying to get the shower to work in my room, it is probably very simple when you know how. Having a look at emails, doing a bit of washing and sorting out one or two things. I'll try the shower again and just relax for a while before supper with a cup of decent coffee. This is a great group of people and we've had a lot of fun this evening. Tomorrow we shall be cycling round the Angkor temples which is quite a big complex.



We shall have to wear long sleeves and shorts below the knee so I will wear my new longs for the first time however I'll probably take them with me and change there, the same with the top. That will take most of tomorrow and unfortunately no swim in the morning as the pool doesn't open until 11.00. There will be a celebration meal tomorrow night in the town and our group will then split up in the morning. I and two of my new friends will take a tuk-tuk to explore the town before going to the airport for a 6.30 flight to Singapore; we will have to say goodbye to our other friends first thing as they will be leaving earlier.

# DAY 10

## ANGKOR CYCLE

Woke up at 4.30 and answered a couple of emails, and down to breakfast at 7.00. I did have quite an experience last night. I decided to go for a quick walk before bed and suddenly a motorbike pulled up beside me and this girl got off and put her arms around me saying “wouldn’t you like to come with me”. When I said no she started attacking me and trying to get me into a side street, I pushed her away saying “go away” and managed to get into the road amongst the cars and mopeds at which she gave up and scuttled off on the moped. That was rather fun and I continued on with my walk. There is a pleasant wind today, it’s quite cool but no doubt it will hot up later. We’ve arrived at the Angkor temples in the province of Siem Reap; we bought our tickets at 9.00 and have been cycling for another 35 minutes through very thick forest on a very narrow path and have reached a market on the outskirts with 12 children all under the age of 11 trying to sell us all kinds of trinkets; I suppose they should be at school but their parents would prefer them to be making money. For this very reason we were asked by our guide not to buy from the children but of course generally tourists think they are helping the poor and buy.



This is such a huge place, it is 35km around the perimeter but of course if you cycled through the whole area visiting all the temples you would cover much more than 35km. After an hour of cycling we have reached our first temple. 11.20 and we are having a water stop after cycling for another 5 minutes having seen the first temple and will now cycle for another 5 minutes before we reach Angkor Thom which is a 3km square brick wall surrounding the Bayon temple, one of the largest in the Angkor complex and we are on our way to see this, having just been told we have another 5-6km to go! This drives home just how big the place is and to try to give you some idea of the size of it, Knole Park has a circumference of 11km and Angkor just under 40km. I am now starting to understand the layout; we started by cycling through the forest which was

great but we've now come to the Angkor Thom and the Bayon temple via the main road having passed quite a few other smaller temples which still have a huge meaning but unless you are going to stay here for a week there is no way you can see all of them. They are all around us and I can see coaches by the dozen and many tuk-tuks and other cyclists as walking would not get you very far. People obviously decide in advance which temples they would most like to see but we shall just be seeing the four biggest. It is very hot today and I do feel tired and really do not have the strength to walk up the steps of another temple, possibly 100 steps to the top. You certainly couldn't see this place in a day and you would have to be very interested in the history of Angkor to stay a full seven days to see it all because, to me anyway, they are all fairly similar but I am sure they all have their own particular history which I'm too tired to explore! Well we've done it! We've cycled around as much of Angkor as we can cope with and at 1.00 have had our photograph taken as a group having complete the 520km. A lot of rejoicing and a certain amount of relief. We have now enjoyed a leisurely lunch in one of the many restaurants around here chatting and going over all the experiences we have shared in what has been an incredible seven days of cycling. This is obviously very much a tourist place and the monument of Angkor Wat is certainly awe inspiring and is very much the centrepiece of Angkor. We had an hour and a half to walk round Angkor Wat which itself covers a huge area so we didn't see the whole temple.



There were some decent souvenir shops on the way back I'm glad to say, and some market stalls well set out so worth a look and at last I was able to buy some local musical instruments to take back to St John's. We then had a 6-7km ride back to the hotel arriving at 5.00 and I immediately went for a swim. Now having a cup of coffee and we'll then go by bus into the town for a celebration meal at about 8.00 when for the first time we will be able to choose what we eat. Will there be any English food? I don't know but I will let you know when I get back. We went to a very nice restaurant in the middle of the town which served all kinds of food. Some of us had steak, some Cambodian food and I had a pizza but we all enjoyed ourselves. There was plenty of beer and at the end Christina gave us all a T-shirt and a certificate and congratulated everyone. We had collected some money

for her and thanked her for her guidance and patience. Christine has been a great leader and within minutes became one of us, she understood each of our personalities and really helped to make this challenge a great experience for us all. I then thanked the seven people from Jersey who are all lovely down to earth people and who had embraced the rest of us straight away. That is why we became a team almost instantly which is very unusual and what made it such a successful cycle trip. After the meal we stayed in the town to walk around and have another drink. The town was certainly alive, music was blaring loudly and all the restaurants, of which there are many, were full and life was being lived to the full. Five of us took a tuk-tuk for 5 dollars back to the hotel, it took about ten minutes and it is 11.45 now. I imagine the rest of the group will probably arrive about 3 o'clock in the morning but no one has to be away early, the first group leave about 10.00 and we leave about 3.30.

# DAY 11

## FREE TIME/FLY HOME

Got up a bit later this morning at 7.00 and joined the group for a leisurely breakfast. I might even have a massage this afternoon. As I sit here in the sun thinking back over the last 12 days it is very difficult to come to an instant assessment of what we have seen. The way of life of 92 million people in Vietnam is very different from here in Cambodia where everything seems to be a little bit more organised. Most of the population are unable to find jobs and have to move to Korea, Singapore or other places in Asia to earn any money to keep their families. Some of the families are to some extent existing by one of the children going away to earn money and sending it home. The towns are similar in both countries, with no pavements and everyone walking, cycling or riding mopeds. Everywhere there are stalls by the side of the road with lots of street food for sale which is being cooked on a sort of primus stove. This is all fresh healthy food, with local vegetables and fruit and meat. Supermarkets don't really exist so there is no processed or take-away food. There are very few puddings, we always had fruit for pudding. This healthy diet and all the exercise the Vietnamese and Cambodians take would certainly help the obesity problems we have in Great Britain. Beer is the

most popular alcoholic drink and fruit drinks are also very popular; there is wine but this is expensive.



On a trip like this there is so much to see all the time which makes it difficult to take it all in. Certainly family life comes across very strongly, especially in Vietnam which we were very aware of as we cycled through the countryside. The amount of dirt and filth around the place is extraordinary; we know the rivers are polluted but people never seem to clear up the mess. As we pass the homesteads the houses seem to be clean inside but outside no and of course toilet facilities are very basic. I can't believe how they can wear so many clothes in this heat, but I know this is because they want to keep their skin colour as pale as possible; we would all have been very uncomfortable wearing the clothes the population wear. We have now said goodbye to our friends from Jersey and are walking around the very well organised market, it is early morning and there are not many people here. I bought a couple of shirts and a picture of the countryside we have cycled through. On a trip like this there is so much to see all the time which makes it difficult to take it all in. Certainly family life

comes across very strongly, especially in Vietnam which we were very aware of as we cycled through the countryside. The amount of dirt and filth around the place is extraordinary; we know the rivers are polluted but people never seem to clear up the mess. As we pass the homesteads the houses seem to be clean inside but outside no and of course toilet facilities are very basic. I can't believe how they can wear so many clothes in this heat, but I know this is because they want to keep their skin colour as pale as possible; we would all have been very uncomfortable wearing the clothes the population wear. We have now said goodbye to our friends from Jersey and are walking around the very well organised market, it is early morning and there are not many people here. I bought a couple of shirts and a picture of the countryside we have cycled through. This whole area is much more westernised and has been developed enormously over the past ten years. The restaurants are serving many more varieties of food to suit western tastes – even chips! The streets are clean, tuk-tuk taxis everywhere and as you walk around there is definitely a cosmopolitan feel about the place. It seems quite a lot of people hire bikes and there are even smart shops which wouldn't look out of place in England. We stopped for a drink and got back to the hotel at 12.30. The others went out for lunch and I went for a swim, then a shower and finished my packing. Then it was time for a massage. I've never had a full body massage before and it was extremely good; it cost 20 dollars and lasted about an hour and I do



feel much better for it. The masseurs must be very strong as the girl treating me certainly gave me a good pummelling and she certainly knew what she was doing, finding the right pressure points on all the muscles. We walked back to the hotel and the bus took us to the airport. At the airport now, we have a three hour flight to Singapore, a two hour wait and a twelve hour flight to London arriving tomorrow at 6.00am. It's been a pretty active day, it's now 5.00 so by the time we get on the plane in Singapore it will be midnight and I'm hoping I will be tired enough to have a good sleep on the way home. By the time we had accomplished a long walk of about 35 minutes at Singapore airport for our connecting flight, and we were walking fast, we only had about 40 minutes to wait before we boarded the plane for London. We landed 30 minutes early after a 13 hour flight, 16 hours altogether with the 3 hours from Angkor to Singapore. I was very lucky to get a front seat so I could stretch out and I can honestly say that for the first time on a long haul flight I have had a good night's sleep so I do feel quite refreshed. So a very successful 12 days comes to an end.



**By Edward Oatley**