

St.Sometimes - EcoLodge



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Looking for the Elephant Herd

According to some sources, there are over 200 wild elephants still roaming around the South Western parts of Cambodia around the Koh Kong area. Truth or not, as I drove with the Fuller-Weimar clan en route, there were numerous signs.



I awoke on the first days of Christmas holiday break and jumped into a rental Camry for a four hour road trip to the jungles of South Western Cambodia. Annette and Mark, with 12-year old

Elenie and 8-year old Jonah, had planned a four day excursion to the Rainbow Eco Lodge. I was invited to go along. We were all looking forward to seclusion, jungle treks, sleeping in the fresh air, and simply getting out of the humanity of Phnom Penh.

It took quite a while to just get out of Phnom Penh on Route 4. It's not easy driving a car through the traffic. But once we got a little outside of the city, the two lane road opens up a little bit. Mark claims he is such a professional driver because he has driven in China, and the difficulties of driving in Cambodia pale in comparison. Sure enough. We made it without a hitch! We threw some Christmas music into the stereo and watched the Cambodian countryside fly by heading on Route 4 to Sihanoukville.

The Eco Lodge

Annette was having troubles getting through to Janet (the owner/operator) to let her know an extra American was coming along. The lodge was supposedly full, and I might have to sleep in the open jungle. Hah! No matter. We could somehow make do.

As we neared Sihanoukville, Route 48 branched off to the North towards the Koh Kong province. We saw fewer and fewer signs of life and even stopped to see an 8ft snake along the



road. Too bad it was almost dead! Mark kept watch for elephants because there were road signs warning of elephant crossings. We counted bridges, as per instructions, and

stopped along the fourth major bridge to meet up with Janet and her dog Sunny! They had come downriver to pick us up in their tiny, dugout longboat. I thought to myself: "This is going to be fun!"



Mark doing the bamboo limbo for the hundredth time. Elenie is in front of him wary of land leeches!

A Bamboo Jungle Hike for Short People!

Our first expedition was the jungle hike. The five of us followed Mr. Lay and the dog, Sunny, for a full two hours through the bamboo jungle. The first fifteen minutes was a hike directly up a mountain side. The trail must have been at an 80 degree slope! And we had to go under or over large sections of fallen bamboo that had not been cleared since before the rainy season. Mr. Lay had a machete to do some clearing but he is a much smaller stature to get underneath the brush. Between the low, dense bamboo and the land leeches, this turned out to be quite an exciting trek.



We trekked for two full hours, rarely stopping. Mr. Lay was careful not to get too far ahead. He would slow down and point out specific plants or simply wait while Mark and I tried to navigate under especially low lying bamboo sections. It was a sticky, jungle heat too! Every step of the way, one of us was either shaking a foot to get a leech off, making an elephant joke, or laughing at how easily Sunny the dog was navigating through the jungle in a blur of brown fur.

I don't recommend this trek for everyone. It is not easy. By the end of the two hours, we were counting our steps as each step was one closer to the waterfall.

Ansel Adams? NOT



Dragon Fruit, my favorite.



On Wisconsin!



Merry Christmas 2008



You may have found yourselves in zero degree weather for the holidays. I did not. It was hot and muggy in this bamboo jungle along the southern tip of Thailand. There wasn't any sandy beach to create my annual Merry Christmas message, so I used bamboo. God knows, there is enough of it here. The family was swimming at the base of the falls and I had already spent an hour or two in the water. So I created this little message just for all of you.

Waterfalls without Elephants



Those 200 elephants were no where to be seen. We only saw three other people for the entire time we were at the falls. That was very pleasant. Some of the travel books had warned against coming here on a Sunday because all of the locals fancy it here. I have no idea where that information came from. There was no one here. Sunny (the dog) barked at a few other Westerners hiking around. Other than that, the only people we saw in the jungle were in the boat that was bringing our picnic lunch.

With the Family



The "icing on the cake" was the picnic lunch delivered up-river to us by boat. Janet sent out fresh sandwiches, fruit (including my favorite-dragon fruits), popcorn, fresh brownies, and drinks. What an awesome reward after a jungle trek and a waterfall shower. I really lucked out when Mark and Annette invited me along. My Christmas was very special this year. Their kids are well behaved and full of energy. Both of them picked up the game of cribbage in one sitting. I won, of course. Haha Jonah! In the end, I accidentally donated my favorite 29 shaped cribbage board to the Rainbow Lodge. **Thank you to Mark, Annette, Elenie, and Jonah for sharing your Christmas. It was fantastic!**

Searching for the Colonel

We just got back from the upriver trip. Twelve of us in a longboat went up and eight of us returned. It felt like the river scene from “Apocolypse Now” on the way back. A slow longboat with a motor, plugging along back down the Kep River. No one really knows the name of the river. The Tatai waterfall (from yesterday) is up one of the ends and the river rapids are up the other. So the owner of Rainbow Eco lodge calls the branch going up to the falls the Tatai River, after the falls, and the other branch, on the banks of which the lodge lies, the Kep River. Who knows. No matter.

We left around 2:00pm and left an American couple (two Californian conservationists) and a Dutch couple (really interested in birds) at the mouth of the rapids for an overnight camp out. I took a look at the “campsite” on the rocks besides the river rapids. It smelled like human excrement. I didn’t stick around to see them set up the two man hammocks! It smelled too bad.

We spent a good two hours swimming in the rapids. Actually, I didn’t feel like it so I sat and drank water while I watched the family swim around the mouth of the rapids. I sat there wondering where the birds are. There really weren’t any birds, or any wildlife, to speak of. Where are all of the animals? I saw one butterfly. An hour putting upriver through a fantastic bamboo forest and no sign of wildlife. Was it the time of day? Was it the wrong season? I don’t know. I think it is human consumption. Walking around the streets of Phnom Penh you see a lot of people selling small birds, and I don’t mean just exotic ones. I mean the little finches and other varieties of basic small birds. Hmm. I see a connection. You know the Cambodians eat almost anything that moves and there are no animals in the forrest. Come to think of it, we saw neither hide nor hair of any animals on the two hour hike through the forest. Hmm!

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Wishing You All A Merry Christmas 2008!

Wherever you are, have a happy one. Always remember, look close by for the interesting places to go. There are little hidden treasures in the little nooks and crannies of each country. Back in the states, there are so many. I remember going to the Groundhog Festival in Pennsylvania, the Rattlesnake Roundup in west Texas, the mountains of Tennessee, a little place in Arizona that brews a special Jalepeno beer. And that is just in the States. Think of all the little hidden treasures outside of the big cities and touristy big cities around the world.

Travel safe and stay in touch.

Greg Lemoine - December 2008 in Cambodia