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by Carolyn Gilpin

Tour

Cycle of life

Up close, Cambodia is a kaleidoscope, **Carolyn Gilpin** writes.

SUA S'DEII! I call out to my audience, proud of my local lingo attempt. "Hellooooo" is their response. English phrases are alive and kicking in rural Cambodia.

I lean sideways off my bike, high-fiving the seven tiny hands held out as I swerve around potholes on the red-dirt road. It's precarious riding but something I wouldn't miss, even if it means landing in a puddle of orange mud.

Cambodian children have that effect. It's impossible to resist their ear-to-ear grins and amazed looks as you wobble by in shiny helmet and sunglasses. They come running out from stilt houses built over rice paddies and roofed with banana leaves, past Brahman cattle lying tethered to shady trees.

We have joined a 13-day cycling trip from Siem Reap, in north-eastern Cambodia, to Sihanoukville on the south coast. If you like getting down and dirty with the locals, putting your backside to a bike seat is ideal.

Cycling allows you to see how the people live, in fine detail; and they get to laugh at your red face and mud-splattered strange clothing.

You take photos of farmers working with water buffalo in rice fields; and they wonder why people who could afford air-conditioned cars would choose to ride a bike in 100 per cent humidity.

I wonder about that too, but this travelling style lets you see how cheerful some cultures can be while living on so little.

This ride takes you through a kaleidoscope of Cambodia's history; at times beautiful and horrific.

We started in style, cycling around the legendary Angkor Wat, the world's largest religious building.

Angkor Wat and neighbouring temples, some dating back more than 1000 years and still in use, show the Cambodians' rich history of gods, kings and fervent religious dedication.

Then there was Ta Prohm, famous for the massive jungle trees reclaiming the fallen stones. The temple was used as a location in the movie *Tomb Raider*. No sign of Angelina Jolie but there are many bare-breasted apsara (angelic) dancers carved in finely detailed relief in the stone, right down to their flower-patterned skirts.

In bustling Siem Reap, the temples' neighbouring town, we visited the landmine museum. A local mine clearer, Aki Ra, built the museum around his ramshackle house, providing shelter and a living of sorts for children damaged by landmines.

Mines manufactured in the US, Russia and China are on display. Teenagers whose limbs have been lost to landmines do chores, sleep in hammocks, or take tours of the tiny museum and tell their heartbreaking stories in matter-of-fact tones.

Many have their education

It's impossible to resist their ear-to-ear grins

sponsored by foreign tourists touched by their tales. They are just a tiny percentage of nearly 40,000 people injured by mines in Cambodia.

Heading down south along dirt back roads and the occasional paved highway, you pass the modern Cambodian way of living: rice paddy shacks, chickens, cows and dogs alongside colourful concrete villas



and the odd mansion with satellite dish and electric gates. Children wave from ponds full of waterlilies, or plod to school dressed in neat navy and white uniforms.

In rambling Phnom Penh the delicate gold beauty of the Royal Palace and Buddhist monasteries of the capital city is shadowed by the horror of the not-so-distant past.

Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge

crories loom large, their despotism remembered in places such as Tuol Sleng, the primary school that became Security Prison 21 (S-21), where many Cambodians were tortured. S-21 is now the Museum of Genocidal Crime, a harsh reminder of leadership turning on its own people.

Although the numbers are disputed, it has been estimated that 4 million Cambodians were murdered by the Khmer Rouge – almost half the population. You would be hard pressed to meet a



TRIP NOTES

- Grasshopper Adventures runs Karma Cambodia tours, 13 days from Siem Reap to Sihanoukville for \$1540 (accommodation and most meals included; trip can be done in sections such as Siem Reap to Phnom Penh only).
- Take your bike or rent one for \$128.
- Phone (03) 9016 3172 or see www.grasshopperadventures.com.
- Qantas flies to Bangkok twelve times daily. Phone 131 313 or see www.qantas.com.au.
- Siem Reap Airways flies Bangkok to Siem Reap twice daily. See www.siemreapairways.com.

TWO-WHEEL TOURISTS: Touring Angkor Wat (far left); paddy fields; an apsara carving; and bringing in the harvest. Pictures MIKE ALLEN, GLORY LOPEZ/YOON JIN KOH

local who has not been touched in some way by the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge.

Tuol Sleng is a tough must-see, a horrific contrast to the warm, welcoming smile of the Cambodian grandmother who invites you to eat rice when you stop near her palm-leaf-roofed hut. The Cambodians truly are resilient people.

Riding between 20 to 100 kilometres a day, sometimes on busy town roads, dodging trucks, cars and motorbikes, at other times

on potholed rural roads dodging cattle and carts, may not be for everyone.

The ride combined many challenges: to my fitness, pride and patience. Above all, it sharpened my awareness of what the people in one of the world's poorest countries cope with daily.

But tourism, with all its shiny hotels and flashy cameras, is starting to bring in money, especially if visitors spend some time with the locals themselves, instead of just

passing down the paved highway cocooned in a huge bus.

If you go to Cambodia, buy something from the local stall-holders, a T-shirt from the landmine museum, or tasty food from a little restaurant. And whatever you do, smile, say "sua s'dei" just to get a laugh, and make the effort to return the little children's high fives. It may just make their day – and yours.

The writer was a guest of Grasshopper Adventures.

