

# CAMBODIA

## A LESSON IN RESILIENCE

**AUGUST 2016**

---

WOW!

### I REALLY HAD NO IDEA

I guess that's the best part about travel...discovering things you didn't really have any idea about. My ride to Cambodia seemed like a good idea; I had never been there before; I had a vague idea about the history of the place (3<sup>rd</sup> world , war and mayhem); I knew there were Rotary initiatives in the country. That's it....I really had no idea.



The plan was to fly into Siem Reap, explore, then take a bus to Pursat, explore some more, then take a bus to Phnom Penh, explore, then take a bus to Saigon, rest and explore and home. I was keen to know more about Rotary initiatives.

## **CAMBODIA '101'**

Remember 1985? That's when the population of Australia was about the same as the population of Cambodia today (15.7M). About twelve years before that (1975) a truly mad communist regime under Pol Pot captured Phnom Penh and evacuated the city. They butchered an estimated 1.5M people, targeting anyone with an education, wealth or an inclination not to participate in the 'utopia' they had in mind (sound familiar?). The result is that a civilization that dominated SE Asia in the 10<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries and constructed Angkor Wat – the largest religious edifice in the world at the time – is now struggling to regain a position in the modern world.

Perhaps the most chilling fact I could dig up is this. The population in the age bracket 55-64 years old is 816,000. Take a closer look and you find 315,000 men and 501,000 women. 60% more women than men! Guess where the others are!

## **THE RIDE**

I decided a mad dash thru the countryside wasn't my style, hence the decision to bus between the main points. But I did want to ride and I did want a local guide. I didn't want to be staring at things wondering what they were...and I am allergic to 'group tours'. So I contacted the Rotary Club of Pursat...centre of a number of Rotary initiatives. I asked them to help me find a guide and wala...Sina!

Sina is a local teacher who has worked as a tour guide sometime in the past. She would be enjoying school vacation and was keen to help. A deal was struck and away we went.



I would have Sina's Honda 250cc trail bike and she would ride her everyday transport...the Honda Dream...a zillion of them in Asia.







In Pursat we rode through the region and saw the presence of Rotary clubs from all over the world everywhere, particularly in booster schools, a community development program (Sustainable Cambodia), community schools, bicycles for village kids to get to school (Santosa in Singapore),

water and sanitation, medical supplies. Despite everything, the scale of poverty was almost overwhelming. I was encouraged by the determination and resilience of the many great people I met who are determined to help their communities recover from traumas of the past.



I was particularly impressed with 'Building Bridges for Children'. Look them up on Google. These kids have already been to government school. Now they come to 'Building Bridges for Children' school to learn English and boosted maths and other subjects. And the teacher is a

unpaid volunteer (university student).



I enjoyed great fellowship at Rotary Pursat Friday evening meeting. I was very impressed with the scale of effort and the spread of activity throughout the community.



Roadside refreshment stall out in the middle of nowhere....perfect for Rotarcyclists!

**IN THE END....**

In the end what matters most is

- Is it worth it?
- Was it fun?

Yes to both. The people are poor but they are not without hope for their kids. The kids in these booster schools are so enthusiastic it is unstoppable.

A ride to Cambodia should be a must for any IFMR member with any spark left in the tank. It's inspirational!



Bill Ivory

IFMR Western Australia

August 2016