

# MindStormPhoto Cambodia 2011



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# 90/90/90 and Floods!

90 degrees F, 90 % humidity, 90% chance of rain daily, streets flooding as the river is highest level in 14 years. What's not to love?



Our flight from San Francisco to Siem Reap, Cambodia was *long*.. We left at 1PM on Friday and arrived at 11PM Saturday. The first leg from SF to Seoul was almost luxurious, on a wide body Asiana flight, even though we were in "travel class" -- AKA "economy", AKA "back of the bus." The seats were wide, the legroom ample, the food... well, let's just say the term "airplane food" applied here quite well. The entertainment system allowed you to watch any of dozens of theater-run movies on demand... until the entire system froze about 4 hours into the 12 hour flight, after which we were fascinated by endless runs of The Green Lantern... NOT.

The second leg was the same airline (Asiana), but the plane was old, small, crowded, no entertainment system at all, and one of the most continuously turbulent flights I have been on in years. There were at least 3 tour groups of teenagers on the flight, and every time we hit an air pocket, they would scream in Korean "we're all going to die!" (at least I'm pretty sure that's what it sounds like in Korean...)



Landed in Siem Reap, were met by our guide and were taken to our hotel. We are staying at the City River Hotel, named because it is across the street from the river than runs through the city... literally. The river is at the highest level in 14 years and is flooding the streets, with people wading up to their knees through the water. The car drives right up to the steps of the hotel, so we can hop out of the car and onto the steps to avoid most of the flood. Fortunately the hotel is up a few steps, and on the high side of the street, so it is (barely) dry so far.



We have now been through two days of temples, including the grand daddy of them all -- Angkor Wat. They are all ruins dating from the 9th through 16th century in construction, and at its peak, there were close to a million people who inhabited this city. Though they are being guarded, with steep entry fees to pay for their maintenance, there is actually not much evidence of renovations being done. As such, we are seeing them largely as nature has left them after the centuries of tropical weather. The overcast weather, with occasional short rains, means we have very flat lighting on the temples. For photography, this is a mixed blessing -- no harsh shadows to counter, but also no shadows to give depth to the images.



Since we are traveling with just the two of us and a guide, we are flexible enough to go places that larger groups would not be allowed. Yesterday we stopped in on a working monastery, and were allowed to photograph them having lunch. The chanting almost made me wish I were back making videos, but we got some nice photos from that session.

Getting up at 5AM to start the day means we haven't had much time to edit our photos yet. Here are a few selected images from our first day.

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, October 11, 2011

[Travel](#)

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# The Flood Starts to Subside



I thought when I started this trip, that I would be sending one of these updates daily... maybe every other day at most. Not a chance! Getting up at 5AM for sunrise photography, getting back just in time to shower before a show, coming back to unload the photos from our cameras and then trying to keyword and rate them (We had 3102 photos in the first 4 days). We are falling behind on doing that before collapsing to sleep, let alone being able to write much. I keep forgetting that I married a wife who believes no vacation is good enough unless I need a vacation to recuperate when I get back!



The floods continued until this morning (Thursday), but are now starting to subside. We have lost two cars to the flood so far. The first developed a really serious whining sound, and was taken to the shop before it stranded us. The second car (Wed) actually did strand us as it stopped in the middle of the street twice. The third time it totally died -- at least it had the decency to do so at a restaurant, so we had lunch while they retrieved a third car. Turned out both the first two got water where water ain't supposed to be, and needed repairs to get them road worthy again.

Up until 2 or 3 years ago, there were literally no "rules of the road" here. Most drivers are still not licensed, and the driving reflects that. The only rules of the road currently appears to be

- 1) thou shalt never stop -- keep moving
- 2) the bigger you are, the more you have right of way
- 3) never give in to anyone -- see #1



Food here is amazing, and amazingly cheap. We had a very nice dinner for 3 people last night, and including drinks it came to less than \$10! The beef and chicken are both on the tough side in many places, but the fish is always excellent, and today we had beef skewers that were some of the best I have ever had -- and they cost \$2 for more than we could possibly eat.

We have seen more temples than I ever imagined possible. Angkor Wat is the grand-daddy of them all, but was rather disappointing from a photography point of view. Ta Prohm was the most interesting photographically, with giant trees having taken over, their roots interwoven with the stones of the temple.



We have had a massage here the last three nights at the hotel. A full hour costs \$8, and the masseuse was quite good. They want to give a full body massage though, and I had the hardest time getting them to understand I just wanted a back massage (my back was in agony after lugging too much camera equipment for too long a distance over too many hours yesterday). Once I got it understood though, I walked away downright limp and with a back that was fit for another day.

Yesterday we did some walking around town and went to a restaurant not far from the hotel. While there, it started to rain. No, that doesn't convey it. The sky opened and god dumped a very large bucket on us. The amount of water was astounding! We had gone to a part of town that was not flooded, but within the 30 minute gully washer, the streets were under 18" of water. With the drains already overloaded from the flood just a few blocks away, there was nowhere for this water to go... so it stayed...





When we arranged this trip, we communicated both with the owner -- Dave, a sometimes professional photographer -- and with his chief marketing sidekick -- Warren. Dave has been taking us around on the tours, and is a bit of an odd duck, An Englishman by birth, he moved to Cambodia in 2003 and decided to stay. If you want to learn the techniques of photography and composition, he is a good instructor. As it happens, we are advanced enough in those areas that his occasional reminders are useful, but not key. Rather, we are relying on his knowing where to go for the best photographs. Unfortunately, the record floods that have occurred over the past 3 weeks have meant that many of the best places are not accessible. He has been extremely accommodating though and responded to every request we have made almost before we made them.



We met Warren last night when he picked us up and took us out to dinner. He is a character with a life story to make any vagabond jealous. He started as a civil engineer in England, moved to America for a few years, returned to England, and decided he was bored and wanted to see the world. He bought a one year round-the-world airline ticket, sold all his belongings and went traveling. He has lots of stories from those travels. He then wanted to "give something back" and volunteered with a well-digging project for delivering fresh water to outlying villages in Cambodia. He fell in love with the country, fell into tour guiding as he became an expert, and decided to live in Cambodia for a variety of reasons (not the least of which is he now has a Cambodian girlfriend).



Yesterday we visited a "floating fish market" that moves around from time to time. Since the region was completely flooded, the major boat tours that were usually at a boat dock were now anchored on the side of the street. An occasional tour bus would show up, and carts pulled by water buffalo took the tourists from the bus to the temporary dock in the middle of the street. Meanwhile, the fish mongers just dumped their fish on planks and let them flop around while customers negotiated prices and took home dinner. The fish were certainly fresh, and likely caught on the side of the road -- aka the river...



Today we went to the Phnom Kulen waterfall with a temple at the top for photography, which is also considered the most holy place in Cambodia. Unfortunately, the waterfall was at its highest level in decades but was not all that interesting photographically. We also encountered an 8-year old kid enroute to the falls at the banana fruit stand who presented countless poses that any portrait photographer would die for.

The road there was largely destroyed by the rains and floods, and a 2 hour drive took 4 hours to get there. To our surprise there were a couple of 2-wheel drive taxis that also managed to make it up the road to the falls. They didn't fare so well coming down... We left after them and found one of them stuck in the mud about halfway down the mountain. We got there after their insurance truck had arrived (who knew??), who helped them cut down small trees to make a wooden ramp they could get out over. We then traveled further, only to find the second taxi had gotten stuck even deeper, with no insurance truck in sight. Our car had a winch, so we helped winch them out of the hole they were deeply entrenched in.

About that time a scooter came up the road and got stuck too. Now, let me tell you about scooters in Cambodia. They are *everywhere* and the primary means of transportation. They are mostly small Honda or Suzuki bikes with maybe 125 or 175cc max. And they carry the whole family. Three on a bike are “legal”, and we have seen several times where a complete family of 5 was crowded on a single scooter. Dad in front, mother in back, two kids in between mom and dad, and a third tyke in the basket in front of dad.



Oh yeah, our scooter in the mud. Well, a family of five did come down, but they got through OK. The mom and kids got off. Dad powered the bike through the mud, the family reloaded, and off they went. But... coming up the hill was a bike with a load of pigletss. Yep, pigs. Across the seat behind the single male driver was a basket slung that was at least 8 feet across, stuffed with piglets. Looked like maybe 20 or 30 piglets stuffed in there. The guy became totally stuck in the mud, and almost did a turtle flop on his back. He was saved by tourists watching the stuck taxi, who got together and pushed him forward, letting the piglets move to their new home to grow into proper pork and bacon...



Any photos you may see of me from this trip are to be properly burned in a funeral pyre. Evelyn has been after me to grow a mustache for the past couple months, and I said I would see how it went on vacation, where nobody I know would see me... except in photos... I think a mustache will look bad, so I decided to go for a full beard again (I shaved the last one off about 25 years ago), which means I look *really, really,...* *yes really* scruffy right now, after 5 days of not shaving.

We went to a classical Cambodian Dance show tonight. The Aspara dance consists of elaborately costumed dancers and music played by a pinpoint ensemble paying homage to royalty with deities and spirits. It was a huge hall, but our guides arranged a front row table for us. Dinner was a buffet, and I was pleasantly surprised to discover the food was actually quite good -- not something I normally expect at buffet dinners. The speakers were terrible though, and you could not even tell when someone was talking much of the time. Of course they were talking (and singing) in Cambodian, of which I don't speak a single word, so I guess that didn't really matter all that much...

Need to pack it in and send this off, as we still have to get everything together tonight to leave for Phnom Penh at the crack of dawn tomorrow. En route we are scheduled for a boat cruise and to see a floating village on Tonle Sap Lake.





I want to leave tonight with one last thought. The Cambodian people are remarkably resourceful. They have been inundated with floods for the past several weeks. Conditions that would cause most Americans to scream and call for the Feds to save them. Here, the people just get on with life. When watching the people drive their scooters with 2, 3, 5 people on them through the floods, it is common to see them laughing and making the most of their situations. The people here are unfailingly polite and helpful. If it weren't for the humidity, we would seriously consider retiring here. Oh yeah, that and the language which is highly tonal and which a tone deaf guy like me would have little chance of mastering...

# Montezuma was a world traveler?



I had always been taught that the Aztec king Montezuma never left Mexico. Well, I now have plenty of proof that the history books are wrong. He clearly made it to Cambodia... or at least his revenge has... Evelyn says that I have always had an iron stomach, but it appears to be developing some rust spots.

Friday we visited Tonle Sap Lake, which has a floating village. It seemed strange to see a floating village flooded, but the flood was pretty severe. They have electric wires going down their "main street" which is in the large lake. We were not able to go down most streets because the water was so high that the power lines were within a few feet of the water surface, and our boat would have surely electrocuted us and killed the power to the town.



Most of the homes are actually on poles rather than floating. Their floors are normally several meters above the water surface, but the floods had risen into their homes. They coped by simply raising the floor higher and higher to keep their belongings out of the water. The flood was so high though, that their floors were now within 4 or 5 feet of the roof, so they could not even stand up inside. We had initially planned on having lunch at a restaurant there, but it was flooded to the point where they could not serve food.



We had also originally planned to go out onto the main lake to watch the fisherman, but the winds were too high and we were told it was too dangerous, so we had to abort that portion of the tour.

The children in Cambodia all have free elementary school. However, there are so many people that the schools cannot handle them all, so they each get only half a day education, going to either a morning or afternoon session. On the lake, we saw boat after boat leaving the school with kids in their starched white uniforms rowing home, usually 3 to 5 kids per boat.



Driving towards Phnom Phen, we stopped for quick snack --- of roasted tarantula.



They barely look like the spiders you think of when the word tarantula is spoken. They are black, shriveled, and piled high. Hundreds in a single vendor's pan. You have to choose which of three varieties you want, as each has a different texture and taste. I let our guide choose mine. When you order one, they roast it again so you can eat it warm. Yum... not... Tasted like burned toast. One of those things I am glad to say I tried once, so I can politely decline next time... I was also offered roasted cricket and roasted cockroach, but I decided I really wasn't all that hungry...



Traveling on, we took a small detour to a historic bridge, where we found half a dozen teenage boys jumping into the river. Seeing our cameras, they turned into instant hams and jumped over and over from the bridge, each trying to outdo the other in their comic jumps. As hot as it was, I was sorely tempted to ditch the camera and join them, but we had to get moving again.





Saturday morning we visited the central market in Phnom Penh. It was just the kind of local food market we like to visit around the world. Mountains of chickens, beef, fish, fruits and vegetables all being sold to the locals for their daily meals. Some of the food was unique to Asia, with fish squirming on the ground, being picked up, then beheaded when a customer chose one to assure fresh fish.



And then there were the frogs. Something we had never seen before. One vendor had three large piles of skinned frogs, sorted by size. He had to keep grabbing them and putting them back because they were still hopping around! They reminded me of cutting off the head of a chicken on the farm as a kid and watching the body run around the yard until it finally fell over. These were skinned, and their heads completely cut off, but the bodies were still hopping like they were running from my net (I used to go down to the creek as a kid and catch frogs -- much to the dismay of my mother at the time).



We were there in the morning when piles of everything were high. I asked our guide what the vendors did with any leftover food, and he assured us there is almost never any food at the end of the day. As the market closing nears, the vendors start bargaining fiercely to sell the last of their product at whatever they can get. People that want the best choice and are willing to pay "top dollar" (meaning \$1 for more food that you could possibly eat in a meal) would come in the morning. Those that wanted to save money and were willing to take the leftovers came later in the day.



80% of Cambodians live below the poverty line and are living hand-to-mouth, so saving 50 cents really is important to many of them. While you can see the poverty everywhere you look, it is still sometimes hard to remember that fact, because the Cambodians we met were so universally friendly and seemed happy to all outward appearances. Of course, we don't speak Cambodian, and weren't able to interact with very many more than polite exchanges when the camera was pointed, but we certainly never saw any indication of the hopelessness that seems prevalent among the poor in American cities.



We then visited S21, which was an interrogation center of the Khmer Rouge. We have been to Dachau in Poland, but this was far more depressing. It is almost amazing just how depraved people can become and reminds us that we are but a short history from our violent animal past. There were 7 million Cambodians when the Khmer Rouge came to power. When Vietnam finally invaded and liberated the country (the term every Cambodian we talked to used), the population had dropped to 4 million less than 4 years later (1975 to 1979). The Khmer Rouge had killed 40% of the entire population in their short reign. They made the Nazis look like amateurs both in the volume of killing and level of sadism. I ended up asking the tour to be terminated halfway through, as it was simply too distressing.



Warren -- our favorite vagabond guide -- took us out to the Foreign Correspondent's Club in Phnom Penh for drinks and then out to dinner at a local restaurant, Empire, owned by an English expat friend of his for spicy pasta and his favorite red curry noodles.

Though the floods have caused several of our original planned tours to be cancelled, Peace of Angkor (the company we used to organize this trip) has been instantly responsive to setting up replacements. Anyone wanting a personal tour of Cambodia and/or Vietnam will be happy with this group.

