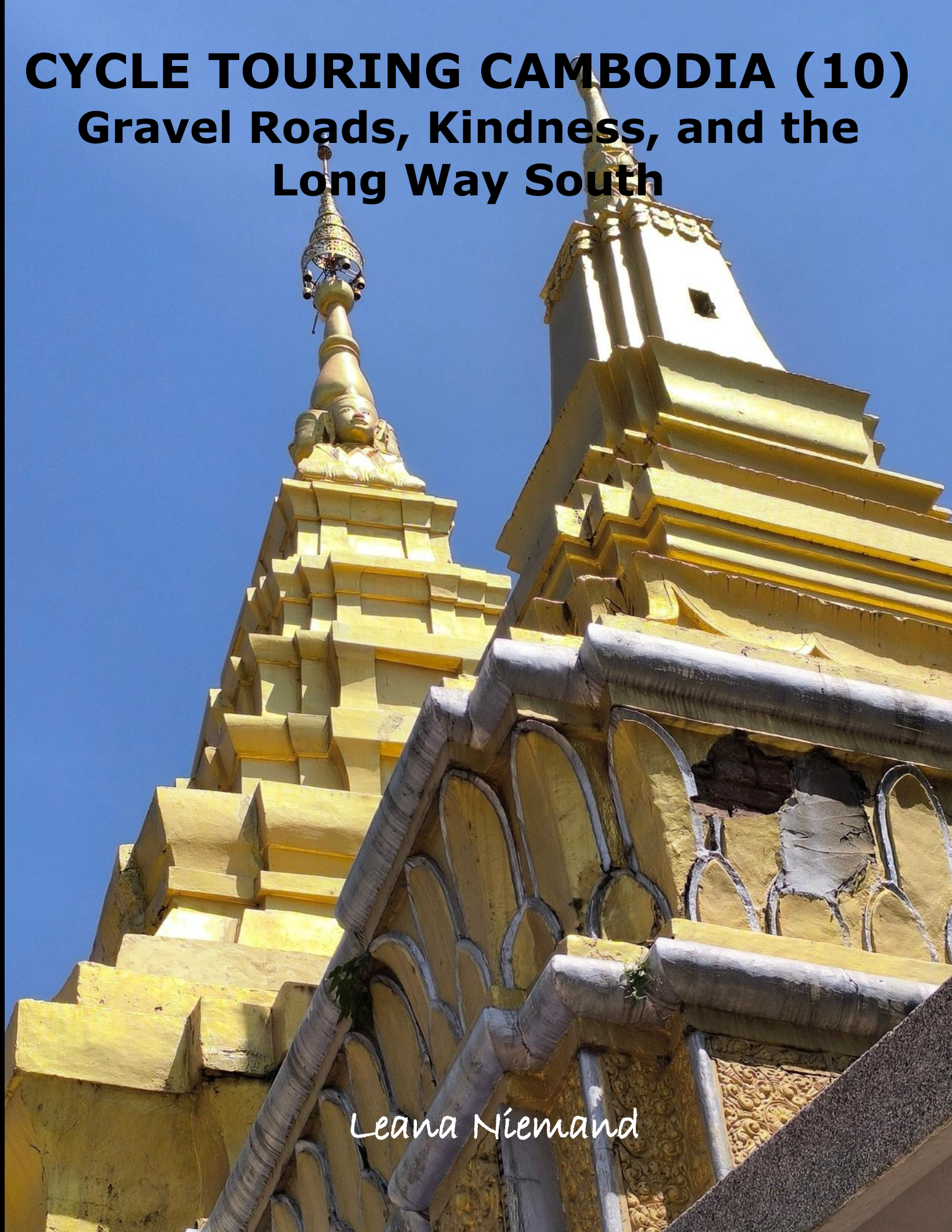




CYCLE TOURING CAMBODIA (10)

Gravel Roads, Kindness, and the Long Way South

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Thank You

I want to thank the kind, generous strangers who showed me random acts of kindness during my cycle tour in Cambodia. Their generosity humbled me and made me appreciate the goodness in people.

A special thanks to my sister Amanda, who diligently kept my journal entries and photos well-organised over the years. Without her support, I would not have been able to document my travels.

I owe a debt of gratitude to my friend Val Abrahamse, who managed my personal and financial affairs while I explored the world. Her conscientious efforts made it possible for me to pursue my dreams.



CAMBODIA (10)

Gravel Roads, Kindness, and the Long Way South

Prologue

Gravel Roads, Kindness, and the Long Way South

Cambodia has a way of pulling me back—not with grand gestures, but with the quiet insistence of gravel roads, river winds, and the soft chorus of “Hello Farang” drifting across the fields. Five years had passed since I last cycled here, yet the border crossing felt like stepping into a familiar story whose pages had shifted in my absence. I didn’t know what waited beyond the first stretch of broken road—only that the country would meet me, as it always had, with a mix of challenge, generosity, and the unexpected. This is the tale of those seventeen days: of ancient bridges and muddy detours, festival winds and roadside kindness, and the long, slow unravelling of the road south.

កម្ពុជា
CAMBODIA

ស្វាគមន៍
WELCOME



Crossing Into Cambodia

Gravel, Ghost Roads, and Festival Winds

I began my day with a steaming cup of coffee as I prepared for my ride from Muang Khong, Laos, across the bridge to join Route 13 South. Despite the brisk wind tugging at my clothes, I felt a surge of excitement at the prospect of returning to Cambodia after nearly five years, when I cycled the country with my friends Megan, Erma, and Janice.

The process of getting stamped out of Laos turned out to be surprisingly straightforward, despite the border post's notorious reputation for bribery. The officers requested a \$2 stamp fee, but I firmly declined, and they didn't push the issue. The Cambodian immigration process was much smoother, and I paid the \$35 visa fee before resuming my journey.

The road leading south was in a sorry state due to ongoing repairs, covered in a thick layer of gravel that made cycling a challenge. Fortunately, motorbikes had carved out a single track next to the road. Although signs periodically indicated the "End of road work," the gravel would quickly reappear, and I kept reassuring myself with the mantra, "This too shall pass."

On a more positive note, I had the pleasure of meeting another cyclist from Japan who was also on a cycling adventure through Asia. I also discovered that Cambodia was in the midst of celebrating Pchum Ben, or the Festival of the Ancestors, one of the country's most significant and grandest festivals. I caught glimpses of the festivities, witnessing two-wheel tractors laden with villagers passing by in the opposite direction.



By the time I arrived in Stung Treng, it was late, and I struggled to find a hotel with rooms available, most likely because of the festivities. I settled for one that offered an air-conditioned room with a window for \$12, but I found the cleanliness lacking, and I wondered if my frugality was worth it.

I decided to stay in Stung Treng the next day to withdraw Cambodian Riel or Khmer Riel (KHR) (4,000 KHR = 1 US\$), a SIM card, and take care of a few other things.





Surge of Energy and the Ride to Preah Vihear

The next morning, I felt remarkably energetic, and the weather and the road were good. As a result, I pushed on. I forgot just how scenic Cambodia is. Numerous unusual sights kept me occupied, and I again realised just how comfortable the Cambodians are on a motorbike, as twice I saw people returning from the clinic with an IV drip bag on a stick attached to their arm.

I don't know what was in the drink I bought from a roadside vendor, as I was so energetic that I cycled the 140 km to Preah Vihear. Once there, I was more than happy to find Javier Guest House, which has a lovely, large room for only \$7.









Koh Ker in the Forest: A Detour into the Ancient Capital

I wasn't all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, and my morning search for a baguette revealed nothing, so I got on the road and headed toward Siam Reap. Again, the scenery was unsurpassed, and it turned out to be a lovely day of riding. Sixty km later, I came upon Koh Ker, a UNESCO World Heritage and Archaeological Site. This Ancient capital of the Khmer Empire, between 921 and 944 CE, is now partially hidden in a dense forest; I dropped my bags at a guesthouse and went exploring. It was after six p.m. that I returned and headed straight to a restaurant, starving.









Hello Farang: Rain, Rural Roads, and the Chaos of Siem Reap

It rained throughout the night, and I could still hear it pouring when I woke up. I stayed in bed with a coffee and played on my phone until I heard that the rain had subsided. It was thus late morning by the time I saddled my old iron horse for the ride to Siem Reap. I felt immensely happy to be on the bike, pedalling down a rural road. The sound of children calling “Hello Farang” always brought a smile to my face, their voices blending with the sound of cattle. If you didn’t respond, they would keep calling louder and louder, their excitement echoing through the countryside.

This is such a rural part of Cambodia that, at times, I could imagine I'm on a different planet. By the time I neared touristy Siem Reap, 100 km down the road, I was somewhat taken aback by the urgency of the drivers and the chaotic dance of traffic, which sharply contrasted with the peaceful countryside. Still, I joined this dance and made my way to Smiley Guesthouse, which has ground-floor budget rooms and a swimming pool. It’s a good place to lay low, and I paid for three nights.

On stepping out, I thought I could easily spend the three days eating as the aroma of the local delicacies wafted through the air. I imagined myself exploring all the culinary delights of the area.

The following day, I took the bicycle to the bike shop to be cleaned and oiled. I was shocked at the prices in Siem Reap. When prices are quoted in US\$, you know you have been overcharged. So, nothing much came of eating at all the restaurants that looked so inviting the previous evening as they were clearly priced with tourists in mind. Eventually, I grabbed a baguette with egg and salad from a mobile vendor at less than half the price at the sit-down restaurants. I also handed in my laundry to get a proper machine wash as it’s a fee I never complain about.



The Old Khmer Highway and the Bridge That Outlived Empires

I made a bit of a detour because I didn't want to cycle along the main road, but the minor road I chose soon spat me out on the main road south. I guess I'll never get used to Cambodia's ingenious means of transport. There is nothing they cannot transport by bicycle or a two-wheel tractor.

Once away from Siam Reap, the road was quiet and a pleasure to cycle. The rain lasted no more than 10 minutes, and soon, the sun was shining bright again. I met the nicest people; a man stopped and handed me a Pocari Sweat. How nice was that? Later, I stopped to take a break and met a mum and her daughter who could speak some English. She was ever so helpful, and we took a few selfies.

I was on the old Khmer highway between Angkor and Phnom Penh. It's a new road today, but surprisingly, the Kampong Kdei Bridge is still in use. Built in the 12th century, Spean Praptos, also known as Kampong Kdei Bridge, was once the longest corbeled stone-arch bridge in the world, with over 20 narrow arches spanning 87 metres.

I arrived in Stoung around four p.m. It is a typical Cambodian small town with a market, a temple, muddy roads, a petrol station, bug vendors, and the ever-present mobile food carts. My guest house cost 8 Dollars, and the room was as big as a dancehall. Taking the stir my presence created, I didn't think a farang had ever stayed at this establishment; great was my surprise thus when I discovered a young American lady also staying at the guesthouse and travelling by bicycle. She was heading to Siam Reap and this was her fourth day on her first cycling holiday.







Ambok Makers and the Rhythm of Rural Cambodia

In a 2021 survey, it was found that approximately 63 per cent of households in Cambodia are engaged in agricultural production. It's thus common to see wooden houses on stilts with chickens, buffalos, cows, palm and mango trees next to rice fields. Today, I came across many "Ambok" or flattened rice producers along the road. The rice seemed to be first roasted in a pan with a mechanical stirrer, then pounded in a wooden bowl and separated from the husk in a sieve. During the rice harvest, some rice is specially prepared for certain Khmer ceremonies and family gatherings. I regret not buying any, but hopefully, I'll find them again tomorrow. After 110 km, I found Win With Guesthouse, a perfect spot midway between Phnom Penh and Stoung. Once again, the experience of finding food was fascinating and amusing.





Spider Village and the Easy Roll Into the Capital

The ride to Phnom Penh was surprisingly easy, as it is a new road. Still, it was pretty boring, and I believe that my ride along the river trail was far more interesting. However, it was easy riding, although not much happened except for stopping at Skun, known as Spider Village. The reason is that it's well known for its exotic tarantula cuisine. Vendors sold deep-fried tarantulas coated in garlic and chillies, and although the aroma was appetising, I don't think I'll ever get myself to eat one. The last stretch into the capital was easy-going except for the chaotic traffic. I rarely made a booking, but this time I did, and as always, it was a total disaster, and I didn't stay at the place booked. I, however, easily found a room as just about every second building in Phnom Penh is a guesthouse.

I stayed in Phnom Penh for three nights as I quite like the place, and I had the usual housekeeping to attend to. I also met up with Matt, a friend for many years, and we had supper at the Addis Restaurant. I love Ethiopian food, and the food at Addis is excellent, which made for a lovely and relaxing evening.











River Roads, Chisor Temple, and a Race Against Mosquitoes

As I left the bustling city of Phnom Penh, I found myself navigating through the chaotic Monday morning traffic. It always takes some time to adjust to the constant flow of vehicles and the need to trust the traffic around me. Once I cleared the city limits, I followed a narrow path along the serene Bassac River. A sign directed towards Chisor Mountain Temple caught my eye, prompting me to change my course to the west. To my delight, I stumbled upon the ancient ruins of this 11th-century temple perched high on a hill, accessible by a lengthy staircase. Despite the heat and swarms of mosquitoes, I persevered and was delighted to reach the remains of this old temple. However, my battle with the mosquitoes eventually forced me to cut my visit short. By the time I finished, it was already late afternoon, but I decided to cycle to the next village, which was only 30 km away.









The Predictable Highway and the Slow Days Beside the Kampot River

Again, the Main Road to Kampot was a dead boring affair. That said, the road was new, wide and in good condition, so I shouldn't complain. It's just that I don't like such predictability. In any event, I stuck to the main road and soon landed in the lovely riverside town of Kampot. I've visited Kampot on many occasions and this time I chose to stay in the village. Good Morning Kampot Guesthouse was an ideal place to stay, as it was slap-bang in the centre and right on the river. It also offered spacious budget rooms on the upper floors with a restaurant below. Reviews stated that the food was excellent; I think whoever wrote those comments must have been British, as it was so bland I had to ask for a portion of fresh chillies to make it more palatable. LOL

I paid for two nights and thus rose slowly the following morning. With no plans for the day, I handed in my laundry as whenever I have a chance of having my laundry done for a dollar, I can't resist. I did truly little the rest of the day except visit the Kampot market as no one can be in Kampot and not go to the market or buy the famous Kampot pepper, known as the best pepper in the world.

I was up early to collect my laundry, but the lady couldn't find it and asked that I return later. There wasn't much to do in Kampot, so I took my bicycle and cycled to the old fishing village on the opposite side of the river. Much later, I returned and was happy to find my laundry was located. I was so happy that I treated myself to Nachos & Gaugamela in Kampot Alley, where noodles are still handmade, and something is always steaming in a pot.











The Minefield Road: Mud, Madness, and a Brothel for the Night

After doing almost nothing for two full days, I felt pretty energetic and was eager to get underway. I had no specific plan and contemplated going to Sihanoukville.

The day started with a lovely scenic ride, and I was happy to be out on the bike. This euphoria, however, came to a grinding halt when the paved road abruptly disappeared after approximately 25 km. It was not a disaster until I realised this was no ordinary dirt road but one that had been neglected for years, and I thought it resembled a minefield (not that I knew what it looked like). In any event, I persevered, bouncing over the potholes and slip-sliding through the muddy patches. Conditions worsened as the day progressed, and I had my eye set on the junction 20 km away, believing conditions would improve from there. I clawed onto the handlebars for dear life, and after 5 km, I stopped to take a breather, feeling happy I managed 5 km. My wrists and arms felt shaky, but I returned to the bike, determined to reach the main road. And so it went until I reached the junction.

It was already quite late, and instead of going to Sihanoukville, I decided to head straight to Srae Ambel. You can imagine my surprise when I found the road (although paved) in dreadful condition, busy and narrow. So narrow was the road that two trucks could barely pass one another, let alone avoid bicycles or motorbikes. Motorbikes mainly used the no-man's land next to the paved road, and I followed suit. This was no easy ride, as the no-man's land wasn't meant for vehicles and was, by then, potholed and muddy. I was in this mess and had to persevere. The continuous rain didn't make the ride any more manageable. Once, I stopped for coffee to get out of the rain and rest my wrists, but I still had a way to go and soon got back on the bike.



A new road was under construction, making the way one huge construction site. The hills at the end of the day left me gasping for air, but I pushed on. 5 km from Srae Amble, the weather came in again, and I pedalled like a woman possessed to reach the town before the storm broke. I reached the town just as raindrops started falling and pulled into the nearest Guest House. I was relieved I made it, but soon discovered it was a brothel, LOL, not that I could care less as I was far too tired to be concerned about that.

The Impassable Road and the Kindness of a Seatless Bus

I was optimistic that the new road leading to the border would be completed, but unfortunately that wasn't the case. Despite my determination to continue, the mud clogged the chain and gears, forcing me to stop and clear the wheels. What a mess! Seeking advice on the road conditions ahead, I stopped at a roadside eatery, only to be informed that the road was impassable for a bicycle. Although I usually take such warnings lightly, I decided to heed the advice this time. I was directed to a bus, where I was surprised to find no seats, just an open space. As we traversed the bumpy road, the driver and his companion were incredibly amiable, even buying me a coffee and offering water and a baguette. Initially told that the journey would take seven hours to cover 125 km, I was relieved when we arrived in Koh Kong after just 5 hours. I paid the driver 50,000 riel for the ride, which I thought was a bargain. He seemed content with the payment and even offered me change, which made me chuckle. Afterwards, I cycled around town searching for budget accommodation and found Rene's Pasta Bar & Guesthouse, which offered a fan room for only \$11. The room was sparkling clean, the staff helpful, and the food delicious. I couldn't be happier.



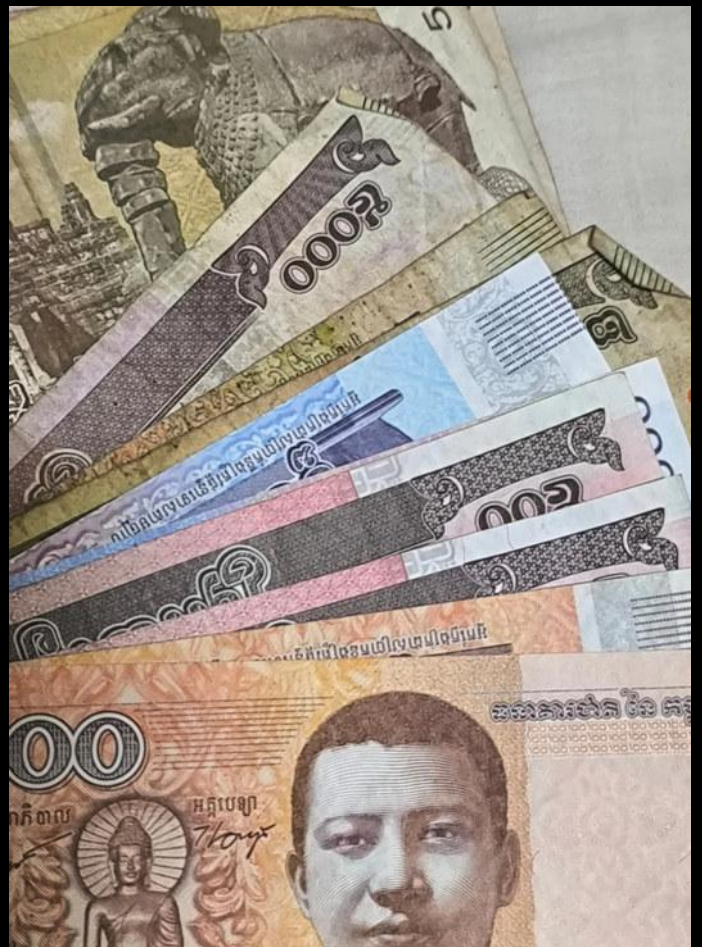
The Border Where Rain Becomes a Country

Morning in Koh Kong held me the way a soft hand lingers on a shoulder — gently, insistently, as if asking me to stay. The room was too comfortable, the air too forgiving, and every small task stretched into a kind of slow ritual. But the bags were packed, and momentum — even reluctant momentum — has its own gravity. I strolled to the money exchange, watching the last of my Cambodian riel transform into Thai baht, the way one life quietly becomes another.

The border was only ten kilometres away, but borders are never measured in distance. They are measured in waiting rooms, in fluorescent lights, in the slow shuffle of passports across counters. By the time I stepped out of the immigration office, it was past noon, and the heat pressed down like a hand on my back. Ninety kilometres to Trat suddenly felt like a sentence rather than a plan.

Epilogue

By the time I reached the coast, the mud had dried, the bruises had faded, and the chaos of the journey had settled into memory. Cambodia had once again revealed itself in layers—its rural rhythms, its relentless roads, its quiet acts of kindness that arrive just when you need them most. I left the country the same way I travelled through it: slowly, gratefully, carrying the dust of its backroads and the warmth of its people with me. The long way south had been unpredictable, exhausting, and utterly worth it. And as always, the road—imperfect, generous, and alive—had the final word.



About this Blog

This blog documents my ride through Cambodia en route from Laos to Thailand. There are numerous roads, and the route described in this blog is not necessarily the best. If you intend to use this as a guide for your own cycle tour, please bear in mind the following points:

The distances

Please note that the daily distances I record may not always be the shortest route, as I occasionally deviate from the main path. However, the daily kilometres recorded were accurate according to my odometer.

Time of year and date

This blog covers my visits to Cambodia in October 2024. It's important to note that many things may have changed since then. The roads may have been improved or fallen into disrepair, and the places I stayed in might have been upgraded or demolished.

Insurance

A travel insurance policy is essential to cover loss, theft, and medical expenses. However, some policies might not cover certain activities, such as scuba diving, motorcycling, and trekking. It's important to carefully read the policy to make sure it covers the activities you plan to do.

Clothing

During a cycling holiday, we spend most of our time riding, so having high-quality padded cycling shorts is essential. You can wear any comfortable footwear while cycling, but I suggest sandals for more casual riders. Summers in Bulgaria and Turkey can be sweltering, but winters and higher-elevation areas can be downright freezing, so pack accordingly. Don't forget to include personal toiletries such as insect repellent and anti-chafe cream. Lastly, I strongly recommend wearing a cycling helmet for safety purposes.

The bicycle and equipment

When it comes to choosing a bicycle for your needs, the most important thing is comfort. I use a mountain bike with a Merida frame, Shimano Deore components, Alex rims, and Schwalbe tyres. To carry my belongings during the ride, I use Tubus bicycle racks and Ortlieb panniers, which can be a bit pricey, but are worth it in the long run. It's essential to know how to fix a punctured tube, and it's also convenient to have a phone holder on the handlebar for navigation purposes. I use Organic Maps or Google Maps for this. A handlebar bag is also a must-have for carrying a camera and other items you may need throughout the day.

Recommended further reading

Lonely Planet: The e-book is less expensive and a handy guide.



About Cambodia

Capital City

Phnom Penh is the capital of Cambodia and was once known as "The Pearl of Asia."

Currency

Cambodia has a dual currency, the Cambodian Riel (r), and the US\$, which is widely accepted for larger purchases.

Language

Cambodia has a single official language: Khmer. Nearly 90% of the country's population speaks it. English is understood in larger tourist areas like Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

Religion

Buddhism is Cambodia's official religion. Approximately 97% of the country's population follows Theravada Buddhism, with Islam, Christianity, and tribal animism making up the remainder.

Location and size

Situated in the Southwestern corner of the Indochina Peninsula, Cambodia has an area of 181,040 sq km, extending 730 km Northeast to Southwest and 512 km Southeast to Northwest. It is bounded on the Northeast by Laos, on the West by Vietnam, on the Southwest by the Gulf of Thailand, and on the Western side by Thailand.

Population

Cambodia's current population is 16,458,385, and it ranks 117th in population density.

Internet coverage

Internet services are also widely available, particularly in town areas.

The Rule of the Khmer Rouge

Between 1975 and 1979, the Khmer Rouge controlled Cambodia with an extreme form of Maoism. In the process, more than 2,000,000 Cambodians were killed, leaving the country in economic and social ruin. Today, Cambodia is slowly rising from the ashes.



About the Author

Hailing from the city of Cape Town, South Africa, Leana's journey into the world of cycling began not with years of training but with a single bold decision. In 2005, driven by curiosity and a spirit of adventure, she entered the Tour D'Afrique—a legendary mountain bike race stretching from Cairo to Cape Town. With little cycling experience, Leana purchased a bicycle, flew to Cairo, and set out on a route that would take her the entire distance from Cairo to Cape Town.

Returning home, Leana found that the rhythms of ordinary life could not compare to the freedom of the open road. The call of adventure proved irresistible, and in March 2007, she and her companion, Ernest Markwood, embarked on a journey that would evolve into a round-the-world cycling odyssey. Though they began together, the road eventually led them to discover their own unique directions—both in travel and in life.

Leana's travels have taken her across Africa twice, through the Middle East, Europe, the United Kingdom, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, the Indian subcontinent, China, Southeast Asia, and Australia. Her wanderlust then carried her to Ushuaia, Argentina, from where she cycled the length of South, Central, and North America over several years. Along the way, she explored many of the world's larger islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

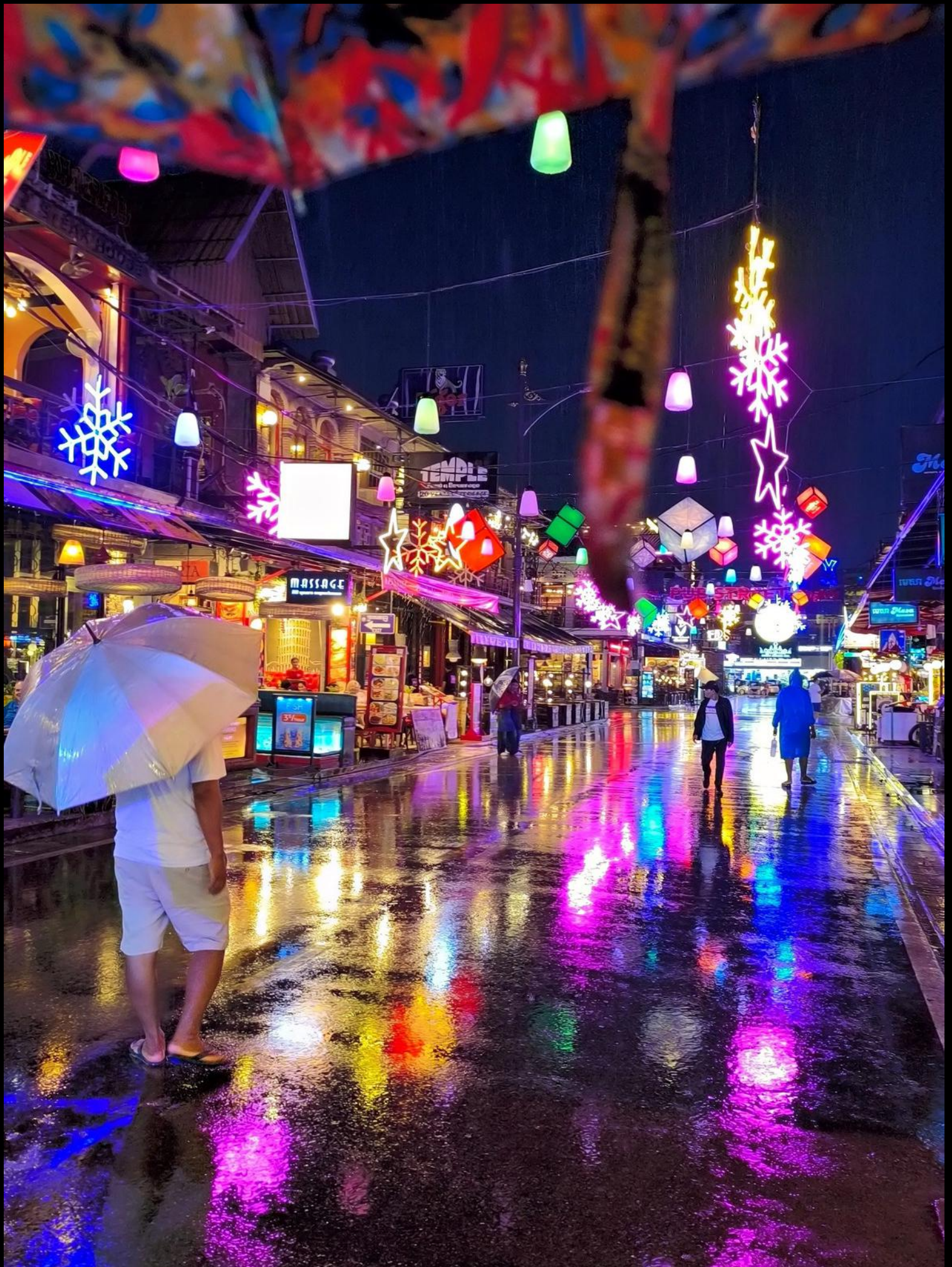
Today, Leana continues her adventures in Southeast Asia, ever inspired by the promise of new horizons and the enduring joy of life on two wheels.













**It's not a race. It's a journey in which neither the distance cycled,
nor the destination is of any importance.**



