

Commentary...

A window on enigmatic Cambodia

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
Correspondent

In our memorable virus-altered odyssey of Southeast Asia, Cambodia was a planned stop on the travel segment that preceded Holland America Cruise Line's notorious cruise to nowhere aboard the cruise ship *Westerdam*.

Since the cruise had been scheduled to conclude in Shanghai, China, we had no idea that, more than three weeks after arriving in Cambodia, we would gratefully return there as seagoing refugees, because it was the only country that would permit us to dock. For, as we later learned when we blithely sailed off into the South China Sea, the cruise industry would be essentially shut down by the coronavirus pandemic.

Prior to visiting Cambodia, my limited knowledge of the country was principally rooted in footnotes to the Vietnam War and to the terror of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s, which I became acutely aware of because of working with a survivor of the mass genocide, which exterminated a quarter of the country's population.

On this initial visit to the country, however, my attention was first drawn to the small, colorful fishing boats plying the country's waters and to my first-ever sighting of an Indo-Pacific humpback dolphin. The one I saw in the inner harbor was quite large — perhaps 10 feet long, an off-white color, with dark speckling.

Ashore in Sihanoukville, our port of call, the sights were rather jarring. From the harbor, the city appears prosperous and robust. Up close, it's a far different story. Cambodia is very third-world. As it turns out, many of the majestic high-rise buildings are merely hollow, abandoned shells. The streets were all dirt, waiting for the coming rains to turn them into muddy quagmires. Every street looked to be under construction, completely torn up, with open dirt trenches in front of all buildings, water

and sewer pipes lying on the ground. But no construction was taking place.

A dramatic city rebuild had been underway, with billions invested by China. But Cambodia revised its gambling rules to China's displeasure, and China simply abandoned the city in mid-project. Huge casinos and fancy hotels were left half-built, often without windows and doors, or with walls only partly in place. The result is something resembling war zone wreckage.

Sadly, even when the construction boom was in full swing, our guide told us that the local Cambodian people did not benefit greatly because China brought in its own contractors and Chinese workers. We met several people who had visited Sihanoukville a few years ago, and they described a beautiful, quiet, and relaxed resort city on the beach — a far cry from the current scene of squalid urban blight.

Our guide told us that the average wage is about \$1.50 per day, but fisherman can make \$6-10, so it's prestigious work. One of our principal stops was to view a fishing village in full operation. As we elbowed our way through crowds, narrow streets, passages, docks, and warehouses, the sights, sounds — and smells — were quite vivid.

In today's Cambodia, literacy is on the rise. During the reign of the Khmer Rouge, education was deemed a threat to despotism and the educated and professional classes were systematically executed or enslaved and worked to death. Ethnic, religious, and other minorities were also eliminated. As a result, by 1979, literacy was reduced to about 15 percent.

In 1979, the neighboring Vietnamese were so appalled by what was happening next door that they invaded and swept the Khmer Rouge from power. Since then, education has received a great deal of emphasis, and literacy has climbed to about 53 percent. In that same span of 40 years, life expectancy has risen from 52 to 63. Still, we were

warned that people might try to touch us, since old people are considered lucky and are so rare here. Poor vaccination rates have contributed to the short lifespans, but the World Health Organization has been working to improve that, as well.

In Sihanoukville, we also visited a large and congested downtown market, reminiscent of those in Tijuana; but the goods are more oriented toward actual consumables rather than tourist junk. Also, the vendors are not even slightly aggressive; instead it may be difficult to get their attention.

Of note were the so-called "wet markets" with live animals and sea creatures. Such Asian markets are widely suspected to have been the breeding grounds from which sprang the COVID-19 virus and the ensuing pandemic. Curiously, however, if the government is to be believed, the virus statistics for Cambodia are astoundingly low (fewer than 130 cases and no deaths). While Cambodia has taken relatively aggressive measures to combat spread of the virus, there is also evidence that the government is suppressing the actual numbers and arresting people who speak out about it.

Before returning to the ship, we visited a beautiful city beach, where we spent some time relaxing and enjoying a taste of the resort atmosphere that reportedly existed only a few years before. Our last stop was at a temple, where we learned that religion in Cambodia is



PHOTO BY CRAIG EISENBEIS

Kathi Eisenbeis tries to blend in with the crowd on the grounds of a Cambodian temple

something of a blend between Buddhism and Hinduism. In general the mood in the city was quite festive, as everyone was gearing up for the Lunar New Year. Although the actual event was still four days in the future, we learned that these celebrations carry on for weeks.

Our unexpected, and somewhat desperate, coronavirus-fueled return to Cambodia three weeks later, was the subject of my second article about the *Westerdam's* "Ghost Ship" cruise and can be viewed at www.nuggetnews.com.

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