



NEWSLETTER 8

January 2006

Hello everyone, welcome, at last, to newsletter 8..... A lot has gone on since I last wrote, so in order to keep this newsletter from getting too long I will try to keep things brief.

SHAUN AND DONNA'S VISIT

October saw me receive a visit from my brother Shaun and his girlfriend - which was great fun. We spent some time exploring Phnom Penh, visiting Angkor Wat and the other temples at Siem Reap, visiting the village (of course) and then headed up to Laos - a small country north of Cambodia.



From Siem Reap we travelled almost three hours on the back of motorbikes to visit a remote temple. The temple was only discovered two years ago and is still relatively untouched. The jungle has taken over much of it. It truly was like being in an Indiana Jones movie. (It was certainly worth the discomfort of such a long motorbike ride.)



We also took a boat trip out to the "floating village" on the Tonle Sap lake. As the name suggests it's literally an entire village on the water. Children who live at the village like to get into large tubs and paddle up to your boat with the hope that you will give them money. I don't believe in giving money out, but I do love playing with the beggar children so on this occasion I decided to jump into the water with the kids, much to the concern of Shaun, Donna and the boat driver. To me, it was the highlight of the day, and I don't think the kids will forget the crazy foreign woman who jumped off the boat for a long time - they also thought it was great fun.



No. 1



No. 2



No. 3



No. 4

Photo 1. - Shaun and Donna with Sovanne, purchasing a bike in the local market.

Photo 2. - Nyut was extremely happy with his new bike.

Photo 3. - Shaun and Donna bought gifts from Australia.

Photo 4. - Shaun and some village children having fun with the new water pump.

LAOS

At first I didn't think much of Laos at all. The capital city, Vientiane, had an empty feeling especially after being in Cambodia where the streets are always teeming with life. The highlight was seeing one of my photos on a billboard. Both Donna and the tuk tuk driver thought I'd gone mad



when I unexpectedly spotted the billboard. After a couple of days though we headed further north to a place called Vang Vieng, still not much life on the streets but the natural beauty of the place charmed me. Mountains, caves, waterfalls, valleys, rivers - Vang Vieng has it all, in fact I would describe it



as a fairy tale land.

We spent a week trekking over mountains, traversing through caves, bicycling across magnificent country side, canoeing down rivers and swimming in waterholes under waterfalls. One day we did a trek that involved just the three of us and our guide. He had lived in the region his entire life and so obviously knew the area very well. Our trek was to take us over a river, through rice fields, over a mountain into a valley, up another mountain where we would climb up through a river bed to a waterfall and back again, but on the return journey, rather than go over the mountain again we went through it - in a cave.



A day or so earlier we had canoed down the river so I knew there was a suspension bridge. When we booked the trek I asked nervously if we would have to go over the suspension bridge. I was told no, we wouldn't. Well surprise, surprise, after starting the journey by trekking through a village and some fields we came to the river and, much to our horror, the suspension bridge. I still don't know how I actually managed to get over that bridge. It was one of those situations where there really was little choice. Poor Donna - she is uncomfortable with bridges, creepy crawlies and confined spaces - this trek contained all of those things in abundance.



Going through the cave was amazing. Our path was lit by bamboo torches, our guide carried one at the front and Shaun carried one at the back. To be honest I think Shaun was also a little uncomfortable as I had to keep telling him not to follow so closely as I kept feeling the heat from his bamboo fire torch on the back of my neck. Donna wanted to know if there was another way back that didn't involve going through the scrub which was full of creepy crawlies. "Yes", said our intrepid guide, "but we will have to walk through a little bit of water." What he failed to mention was that the "little bit of water" was actually the river! "Oh well", I thought as I stood at the edge of the river, "at least we don't have to go back over the suspension



bridge".

VISIT HOME

I spent all of November at home having a lovely, but hectic time catching up with family and friends. I managed (thanks to my sister and her hubby) to pay a surprise visit to my Nana in Melbourne. A quick trip to Toowoomba followed to see the exhibition of the children's art work from the Land Mine Museum at Siem Reap. Then I was off to Tamborine Mountain to attend a wedding - congratulations again Pip and Don. My Mum also declared that on November 14th our whole family was going to celebrate Christmas early. We put up Christmas decorations, gave out presents and sat down to a big Christmas feast. To me, it felt just like the real thing and I went back to Cambodia feeling like Christmas was over.

CHRISTMAS IN PHNOM PENH

Christmas morning saw me meeting up with my friend Ingrid, and heading off to Church. The children from the Love in Action orphanage were singing and dancing as part of the Christmas celebrations - a lot of joy and fun.



Ingrid and I then headed off to a local restaurant for lunch with about 10 other people, including Robin and Mick from the Sunshine Coast who were travelling through Cambodia, Andy, also from the Coast, who had recently arrived to do volunteer work at the orphanage, as well as some girls from New Zealand who were also visiting the orphanage.



I spent the afternoon and evening with the kids at the orphanage. Can you imagine the chaos of approximately 50 children all receiving their Christmas presents at once. Once again, lots of fun and excitement. Their gifts had all come from the generosity of donors.



Prasat Char Village



The first picture above shows a boy holding a rat that was going to be cooked and eaten (fortunately we weren't invited to join in the feast).

You can see in the middle picture that some of the children's clothes are nothing more than rags. I intend to take out lots of clothes next time I visit.

Blankets

After being in Laos and then in Australia for a month I was very keen to get back out to our village and see how things were going. One of the first things I noticed when I got back from Australia was that the temperature was quite a bit cooler. Not cold, by any means, but the evenings were chilly enough for me to use a blanket. I immediately thought of the people in the village because I knew they didn't have blankets. So my first task was to buy a stack of blankets and deliver them to the approximately 20 families that I consider to be the poorest. They were extremely grateful.

Gifts from Australia

I returned from Australia loaded up with toys for the village children. (Thanks Mum and Mrs Schmidt.) The children in the village had never owned any toys and I think the photos below speak for themselves.



Sovanne's English lessons

Sovanne is doing well. Thanks to your donations I have been able to pay for him to resume his English studies. As our work with the village expands I find we are having communication problems and he was very keen to improve his English - he just couldn't afford it. He now attends English classes five nights a week.

A new school room



There's nothing like starting off the year with big plans. As I've mentioned before, one of my main goals is to try and get every child into school. Several people, whose children don't go to school, have told me that the school was full and they weren't accepting any more students. I decided to visit the school myself to find out if this was true. It is indeed the case. The school only consists of two rooms and they are both overcrowded. I've made some initial enquiries with the village

master and relevant authorities and it seems there are no plans in the near future for the authorities to expand the school. So that brings me to goal number one for the year - to build a school room. At present I'm brainstorming the different options we have to build another room. One of my ideas is for me (us) to provide the materials and have the villagers build it themselves, but volunteering their labour for free. I feel that having them build it themselves will make them proud of it and feel like they own it. The only problem with this idea is that the villagers don't understand these concepts and when I suggested they might offer their labour for free they just couldn't grasp why I wouldn't pay them.

Vegetables, tools, water pumps, etc.

It was very exciting to come back and see how much the vegetables had grown. Some of the villagers have even been able to sell some of their produce.



Picture No. 1 - This child was just happy to play with the cans of seeds we provided.

Picture No. 2 and 3. - Not too long ago this land was just uncleared scrub and the family had no vegetables at all.

Picture No. 4 - The guys who make the water pumps for us. He actually uses a twig instead of a key to start this motor bike.

We continue to put in water pumps and now that the wet season is officially over we are looking at putting in concrete drainage systems around each pump.

We've now also bought a number of bicycles for different families. The bikes are not just used by the children to get to school, but are also used as sources of income whether it be to transport vegetables to the market, or to collect and sell firewood, or to travel into Siem Reap to work on construction sites (a one hour bike ride). I intend to provide a lot more bikes in the near future.

As well as working on long term sustainability issues with the villagers I continue to try and meet their immediate needs. There are a few families that are so poor that at times they have nothing to eat. I provide them with sacks of rice.

NEW YEAR'S EVE AND A ROYAL WEDDING

I'm certainly living a life of extremes. About a week before New Year's eve I received a call from Hoknym, the manager of the photography and production company I do some work for, informing me that I was going to get the opportunity to go inside the royal palace. The King's niece was getting married and I'd been chosen to photograph the wedding. WOW it was really an amazing experience and I felt honoured to be chosen.

The bride was Her Royal Highness, Princess Rattana Devi and she was marrying a French Military Officer, Ansiou LaPlaneta. The wedding ceremony was a very traditional Cambodian affair which took place early in the morning at the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh and was attended by members of the Royal Family, the Prime Minister and all the other top ranking government officials, as well as guests from all over the world. After the ceremony which lasted around three hours, everyone moved over to the Royal Throne Room where the Bride and Groom received a blessing from the King.



Photo 1. The wedding ceremony was rich in Cambodian traditions and customs.

Photo 2. Family photographs with the King.

Photo 3. The wedding clothes were quite magnificent.

Photo 4. Her Royal Highness toasting with the Prime Minister and her Father.

Photo 5. My trusty assistant, Chun, and myself at the end of the evening (exhausted!).

The reception took place in the evening at the residence of the Bride's parents. It was attended by about 800 guests and they were entertained throughout the evening by traditional Cambodian musicians, singers and dancers. There was a fireworks display which was supposed to occur at midnight but due to impending rain the fireworks went off at 11.00 pm. It was a very magnificent and beautiful occasion.

Her Royal Highness and Mr LaPlaneta also gave me permission to sell the photos to the media. To that end I made contact with a media agency in France and subsequently we have 6 pages of photos in the current issue of Point de Vue magazine! Very exciting!