

Where did you go?!

Phnom Penh, February 2007

Dasha Kusá

After Hyderabad, Phnom Penh seems like a clean green oasis. Not sure if that would be so if I came there directly from the Caribic or whatnot, but I must say that I was impressed. I expected a war torn ravished country and found it pleasant, well kept, beautiful beyond belief (countryside especially) and people are cheerful and kind. How on Earth is it possible that nearly 2 million died here over four years, I will never understand. I look at the older people in Phnom Penh and wonder what their fate was. In April 17 1975, just on the day of Cambodian New Year, the city was completely evacuated by the Khmer Rouge and the city people - the "New people" were to become the low order in the new revolutionary society. They went through hell. Four years of starvation, overworking, exhaustion, diseases... Looking into the faces of anyone who's over forty, I can't help but ponder: Where did you go? Were you sent to Battambang province? Or to the Cardamom mountains to make rice fields in un-penetrable jungle? When did they take your car or cart away? When did you realize you're trapped in this prison without doors? How did you survive that? If I look at you long enough, will I get any answers?



Adam, Dasha, and Varghese at the Initiatives of Change, Phnom Penh.

The entire country was shuffled around- people from towns were sent to villages and forests for "reeducation", to work in the rice fields until they drop dead, people from villages were in turn sent to the towns to work in factories. Complete equality. Everyone was equally miserable. Every last house and apartment in the city has a blood curdling story to tell.

But that is not something I can talk to people about. I can only guess and speculate. It's an odd and morbid fascination, studying houses and people trying to guess how many deaths of family and close friends they have been touched by.

On the other hand, I cannot say I am starving. My thoughts are starkly juxtaposed with the paradisiacal (it IS a word now) beauty of every day here. Cambodia is lush and green and ripe with fruit I have never even heard of before. My favorite are mangosteens, soft, juicy and sweet, unlike anything else I have ever had. And langsat that "look like potatoes, feel like tough grapes, and taste like heaven," as they say in Cambodia. And spiky rambutans, that look like lychees but are not.

Oh but we didn't just eat. In fact we mostly worked. Three workshops in a row. I brought reinforcements from the Henry Martyn Institute in India – in the persona of Varghese, trainer and director of the conflict transformation program at HMI. Workshops were great. One for the students of the Pannasatra University, one for the top officials from non-governmental organizations, and the last but not least one for the Cambodia-Vietnam dialogue group of young leaders and enthusiasts.



Adam Saltsman and fresh coconut in front, ocean in the background. Sihanoukville, Cambodia.

We managed one trip to the ocean. Only one day and we had to work - but it was worth it. Swimming in the ocean in February is worth almost any cost to me. Sitting under an umbrella, having just caught freshly grilled prawns, crabs, scallops, shrimp and some rice cooked in bamboo leaves, drinking fresh coconut water (every day) for dessert. Could life be any better? I always thought my colleague Adam, who lives and works with us from Phnom Penh, is so brave. Just picked himself up and moved to the Wild East. But when I saw how life is in Phnom Penh, I could barely control my jealousy. I could be brave like that anytime. Bring it!