

HELP Cambodia Trip Report 2024

Our annual Cambodia immersion trip took place in November 2024, departing Sydney on Saturday 9 November and returning Saturday 23 November. The tour group consisted of ten people, spending 8 days in Siem Reap and 4 days in Phnom Penh.

Everyone on the trip has contributed to this report.

SIEM REAP

Water Festival

The Water Festival is a centuries old week long celebration across the country that marks the end of the rainy season. There is a very festive atmosphere along the banks of the Tonle Sap river, running through the centre of town, involving hundreds of food stalls with live music and boat races .



Kampong Phluk Water Village

(by Ann) What an introduction to a Cambodian water village. In iconic blue tourist boats we motored past houses on stilts over the water, boats the only mode of transport, fishermen netting tiny fish then using a spinning drum to extract them from the net so that the fish can be dried and then eventually made into a paste sold in the markets. The lake is so big you can't see the other side and at one point there is a mangrove which we were paddled through in canoes to enjoy the cool tranquillity. Of course the pagoda (temple) is on higher ground and elaborately decorated with images from Budda's life.



Heartprint

Heartprint Hub activities

(by Steve) It was a remarkable experience for us privileged few to participate ever so briefly in the lives of these young Cambodian children. Breaking into five distinct groups in activities such as craft, technology, numeracy and language, health and fitness and mindfulness. We acted as mentor and teacher and felt a connection with each of the students. Smiling and laughter were a constant part of the day. The children responded so positively at the end of our sessions with song, short dance and celebratory hugs.



We were able to glimpse the massive positive impact that Heartprint brings to the community, offering hope through their focus on the importance of education and treatment of everyone with respect and dignity. It truly was such a worthwhile experience that we are inspired to share and promote this project. If ever there was a need for such positive action in perhaps the poorest Asian country, Heartprint shows how and why. Changing lives and creating better outcomes in the earliest years using the best possible and focused methods. This was a fantastic opportunity for us all.

Heartprint House Build #116

(by Deidre) We visited the building site for House 116 to find the Heartprint team welding the wall frames. The foundation slab edged in small bricks and filled with aggregate had yet to be cemented but the building's frame, upper floor and roof were in place.

Two days later, we returned for the contract signing and handover. With list in hand Nary, the housing project manager, limited our purchasing of housewarming gifts at the local market.

With shoes off, we all sat on the newly cemented and hastily readied ground level now spread with our recently purchased floor matting. The contract was signed with thumbprints and smiles.



As the family spoke no English, Nary translated our wishes for their happiness and their future. It was an emotional time to be present at the handing over of this house donated by Sunrise Rotary Club, Wagga Wagga to a market flower gardener, his wife and son.

Period Pants and Tools for Heartprint

The Wagga Wagga community contributed generously to our call for Period Pants and building tools prior to our trip. We were thrilled to be able to hand over 99 pairs of period pants and box full of tape measures, work gloves, safety glasses and drill batteries.



The Bygone Hotel

Heartprint founders, Gary and Wendy O'Brien, run the Bygone Hotel as a social enterprise to help run their Community Centre, employing locals and providing hospitality training. The small hotel is an oasis in the Cambodian heat and the restaurant provides delicious local dishes.

Ankor Wat

(by Vinnie) Early morning start at 04:30 and tuk tuk ride to Angkor Wat. Arrived with throngs of visitors to watch a beautiful sunrise over the massive temple, then we had a local guide take us through several temples and panels of carvings. Considered to be the world's largest religious structure, the temple was built in the 12th century, with the entire complex covering 400 acres. The city of Angkor was the royal centre for the Khmer empire which ruled most of mainland SE Asia from 802 CE to 1431. How such a massive structure was built in its location with stone imported from elsewhere in the country by hand is unfathomable. There is a massive system of artificial canals and reservoirs incorporated into this, which must have assisted transportation of materials once established. The engineering is impressive. The carvings on the stone are intricate and in the thousands, there are numerous stories to be told. Inspiring.



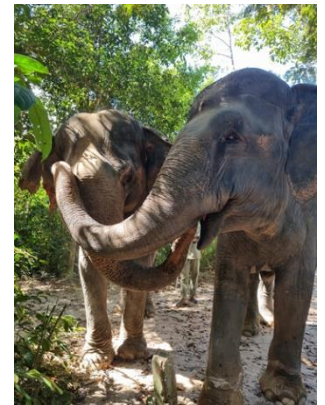
APOPO Visitor Centre apopo.org



Cambodia is one of the most land-mine-affected countries in the world. For over 25 years, APOPO has worked to clear landmines, now using scent detection animals, nicknamed 'HeroRATS', to help rid the world of landmines – returning safe land back to communities.

Kulen Elephant Sanctuary

(by Vinnie) An hour's drive from Siem Reap, took us to the foothills of Mt Kulen where we visited the Kulen elephant sanctuary. Here elephants previously used for tourism, are allowed to retire gracefully in 1100 acres of forest. They hope to pioneer a breeding programme and encourage forest conservation and protection of elephants. The surrounding farmers grow food for the elephants thus providing work for them in addition to the elephants eating native vegetation. We were able to walk with them and feed them in their natural habitat. To be so close to these majestic creatures was a unique experience.



Lotus Farm

(by Deidre) The Lotus Silk Farm was founded by an ex-pat Frenchman in 2003 as a social enterprise dedicated to preserving traditional Cambodian crafts through the sustainable production of lotus silk textiles and products. The Lotus is an aquatic plant mainly cultivated in Asia and used as a food, ornamental plant and in traditional medicine as it has antioxidant, antibacterial and anti-inflammatory properties.

We attempted to roll lotus yarn from the strands of fibre released when the stems of the flowers are cut and snapped, created gift paper from lotus mulch, rolled incense sticks, and made a lotus seed bracelet followed by a boat trip through the lotus plants and water lilies. Sadly, none of these items could be brought home to Australia.

Piset's rural village visit & Elderly Care Program

The HELP Cambodia team met Piset a few years ago when he was a tuk tuk driver in Siem Reap. He now lives on a farm in a rural village and in addition to farming, he does some amazing work with his local community.

(by Emma) The team travelled 3 hours to Piset's village where he opens his home to teach English to the children of the village. The team spent hours meeting the children and teaching them new ball games and worked together with Piset's family to prepare rice paper rolls for the village children before class. The group then visited the Grannies in the village that are supported by Piset and a wonderful Australian charity called Building Community Cambodia. Piset shared how supporting these grannies enriches their lives with food, emotional support and dignity.



Kulen Mountain

(by Peter) Last Day in Siem Reap. Our group visited Kulen Mountain with our tour guide Piep. The site is regarded as the birthplace of the Khmer Empire. Walking along the river we learned about the 1000 Linga carvings etched in the riverbed. The Cambodian people regard the waters as holy. On to a climb up the stairs to see the Sacred Reclining Buddha. Then on to the waterfall for a swim and relax. Some market shopping on the way out where we all enjoyed a deep-fried banana.

PHNOM PENH

River Cruise

After a long day in a minibus travelling from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh, it was a welcome relief to go on a Mekong river cruise where the group enjoyed dinner with unlimited beer and picturesque views of the sunset and city lights.



Silk Island

A small island in the middle of the Mekong, Silk Island is home to many Cambodian families that weave silk, as well as a community run silk farm where visitors observe the silk making process from caterpillar to finished products.

Killing Fields & S21 Genocide Museum

The Killing Fields and S21 Genocide Museum are a rather confronting and sombre record of the events of the Khmer Rouge Regime in the late 1970s which devastated Cambodia. A visit highlights just how resilient and happy the Cambodian people are.

DCC school

(by Ann) After much anticipation we arrived via tuk tuk at DCC school to be met by loud cheers from within the school. Very soon we were allocated to a group of students to take us on a walking tour of the local village. I noticed an indoor volleyball stadium, many houses and the usual Cambodian stalls at the front of many of the homes. The children were very excited but there were a mixture of demeanours ranging from shy to confident.

Back at the school we were soon encouraged to take a seat in preparation for the special concert featuring many of the students showcasing their English speaking and Cambodian traditional dance. The two hosts introduced us to a number of the senior students who gave us some insights into Cambodian culture, also demonstrating their excellent English. The dancing was graceful and enhanced by the costumes. The concert presented by the students on the first visit was well prepared, enthusiastically presented and included many interesting insights into Cambodian culture. I also realised that the younger children in the audience had made a special effort in wearing their best clothes that day. Talking to the students afterwards, they were all so grateful for the opportunities the school provides to them. Now that it has been established for some years, the opportunities for senior students to contribute in the junior classrooms is relished.

The second day we observed the junior classes which were run by senior students, assisted by middle year students, which involved reading, writing and speaking English. The students were all very well behaved and attentive. It was revealing to see the contribution that this year's donations make when each child was presented with a uniform and supplies for the next school year. Speaking with the students I gained an appreciation for how different their circumstances are to the world I live in, and how grateful they are for all that DCC school offers them, including support when food and clothes are in short supply. This was my

first visit to the school and the respectful and appreciative relationship between Bhopal and his team towards HELP Cambodia was very evident.

(by Genevieve) It was great to meet Sreypich, the girl who I sponsor and have written to for a few years. She was very shy but was happy to talk with me a little. Later I asked the lady who helps the students write the letters, whether what I wrote was too complex or my emails were not frequently enough. She said that my emails were very special for Sreypich, and she remarked many children came to her office to see if they had a email, because it is a high point for them. She remarked some children had very little support or interaction from their parents, so our emails were something positive from an adult. I was stunned that my brief notes to Srey were so important to her.

So this is just to encourage everyone to write to their sponsor child! I find that if I spend a few minutes when I first see the email from her then I can write some simple interesting information for her. Then I have to spell check everything! As of course this is an important English lesson for them.

(by Emma) Visiting the DCC school has filled my heart with so much and joy! It was truly wonderful seeing the school for the first time and meeting the incredible DCC community. From the moment we walked into the school and were greeted by cheering students, it was evident how excited the students were to share their time with us, and this set the tone for the evening. I loved every moment of watching the group be “dragged” down the street by skipping children and spending time dancing, playing games and enjoying their spectacular performances they put on. It was evident that the DCC has brought so much enrichment to the students’ lives, and they are so incredibly grateful for the opportunity HELP Cambodia has given them.

I am in absolute awe of the incredible amount of hard work the HELP Cambodia committee has done over the years to build a school from nothing to now such a beautiful/lively school with students graduating and going to university. After seeing the school and meeting the DCC community I am now aware how much a student sponsorship can change a student’s future trajectory.

I am really proud of HELP Cambodia.

(by Peter) My first experience visiting DCC in Cambodia. Arriving and seeing all these young children so excited to see our group, greeting us and holding our hands and taking us around the streets near their school was such an eye opener. Meeting the children and connecting with us was such a high for me. The performance the school put on was fantastic. Thank you HELP Cambodia Wagga.



If you would like more information or are interested in joining us on our trip to Cambodia in 2025, email help@helpcambodia.com.au or call Kathy on 0411 453 016
www.helpcambodia.com.au
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