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THE ROAD TO CAMBODIA

In the last issue of *Australian Road Rider*, Nigel Paterson rode across Vietnam with a plan to make a land crossing into Cambodia... but it would be thwarted

WORDS & PHOTOS NIGEL PATERSON



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When you travel in the developing world, plans don't always work out like you hope. There was no way we were getting across the land border between Vietnam and Cambodia, despite having the correct visas in place... officialdom had spoken.

In a few days' time we'll have been to the internationally acclaimed and World Heritage-listed temples of Angkor Wat, we'd be riding through the countryside, towns and into the cities of Cambodia and enjoying great food, delightful swimming pools, awesome sunsets and cheap drinks. But before all that, we would have to backtrack from the border — where the Vietnamese wouldn't let us leave — and fly to Siem Reap, the city near Angkor Wat, where the crew from Cambodia Motorcycle Adventures would meet us with the bikes to continue our journey.

TRIALS OF A FIRST RUN

The boss of both Vietnam Motorbike Tours and Cambodia Motorbike Tours, Jason Thatcher, was disappointed in the development but simply worked with his crew to solve the problem, eventually packing the Vietnamese-registered bikes onto a truck



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WITH MOTORCYCLES IMPRACTICAL FOR A VISIT TO ANGKOR WAT, WE LEFT THEM BEHIND AND RODE IN A CONVOY OF TUK-TUKS



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and heading back to our starting point of Nha Trang and flying the group to Siem Reap.

"The officials wanted a stamp in the passports we didn't have," Thatcher told *Australian Road Rider*. "Never mind that the airports stopped using that stamp months ago!" The border crossing a short ride from Pleiku was quiet, with only the occasional truck crossing — it felt more like a closed border than a functional operation, but either way, we weren't getting across.

With no flights available from Pleiku to Siem Reap, we flew to Ho Chi Minh City. With our flight to Siem Reap scheduled for the following day, we were able to take in the War Remnants Museum. The outdoor area is filled with mostly American war machinery including tanks, aircraft and guns. There are also areas that depicted the imprisonment of enemies and the atrocities they were subjected to. Sobering stuff. Inside are more reasons why going to war is crazy.

The former Saigon isn't all about old wars though; we spent a lovely evening with the crew and other riders on a rooftop bar enjoying the views and delightful food and drink. The flight to Siem Reap was short and uneventful and we were settled into a modern hotel quickly.

ANGKOR WAT

Motorcycles are impractical for a visit to Angkor Wat, so we left them behind and rode in a convoy of tuk-tuks, ready for a big day's walk around the most amazing place. Massive in land area and the ambition of its builders, beautiful in its intricate carvings, Angkor Wat is one of those places that should be on your bucket list to visit while you can still walk around all day. Don't wait until you're old and frail!



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Dating back over 900 years, the temples are located within the old Khmer capital and have walls and a moat running for miles around the perimeter. It fell into disuse and was effectively abandoned for centuries, then rediscovered and restored in the 20th century, becoming the biggest and best-know tourist attraction for Cambodia.

We spent a day walking the temples, which barely scratches the surface of what's to see, but we were all keen to get back on the road, too.



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FLAT LANDS AND SEALED ROADS

I've been to Cambodia once before, a decade or so ago to do an off-road with Cambodia Motorbike Tours on a Honda XR250. The company has upgraded to Honda CRF250s and 300s, perfect for the rough roads, endless trails and river

crossings its enduro and adventure bike riding customers prefer. These high-seated adventure bikes were supplemented with a couple of other machines with lowered seats for those who needed them.

Our group, however, was a bit different, with the majority having left their dirt riding days years ago, and some never having it in their

background anyway. So it was about 98 per cent sealed surfaces for our tour, with just a couple of loose-surface detours to keep the days spicy.

Away from Angkor Wat we were the only tourists to be seen. Book a package tour to Cambodia and chances are all you'll see is Phnom Penh, Siem Reap and Angkor Wat, missing out on the real Cambodia — the flat lands of the countryside, the little kids so excited to meet the big westerners, the less-well-known ruins, temples and sights.

We visit a school which needs a little help — the toilets are old and need replacing, but there's no budget. The kids are excited and some get to climb onto the bike for a picture while the crew take donations from the riders who are grateful to know how their money will be spent, something so often missing from charity donations. Everyone is buzzing with the emotions that come from meeting children excited to meet new people.

We ride on, enjoying the adventure that is riding in Cambodia without the challenges of dirt roads. You have to still keep your wits



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A BUNCH OF ROAD RIDERS TRYING TO NEGOTIATE TALL ADVENTURE BIKES ONTO A FLAT WOODEN HOME-MADE BARGE WAS HILARIOUS

about you, as while there's a lot less traffic than in Vietnam, it can still get a little crazy.

When we make it to Stung Treng, where the first night and a rest day were originally scheduled before the border crossing issues, I immediately understand why Vietnam Motorbike Tours wanted to travel this way — a comfortable resort with a restaurant over the Mekong River and a vivid, deep-red sunset. The photographs are great but really don't do the experience justice.

BACK TO BUSY

Stung Treng is east of Siem Reap and now we were travelling south-west towards Kampong Cham and our final destination, the capital Phnom Penh. The traffic would become heavier but the sights more frequent and the food choices more varied — but I declined the opportunity to eat insects and grubs from the street vendors. I like to think I'm adventurous

with food, but the reality is I'm very much a western male who finds the idea of eating offal and bugs *A Bridge Too Far*.

The fish amok is so good it's almost worth travelling to Cambodia just for that. An incredible balance of spices which enhance the flavour of the white fish, Cambodia's most famous dish is so good I bought a packet of pre-mixed amok spices to take home.

Kampong Cham is a decent-sized city with great hotels, good food and cheap massages. After getting my back cracked and enjoying a few drinks, we went out for yet another excellent and cheap meal. Vietnam Motorbike Tours includes many meals in its packages, offering a good balance of going with the flow and choosing your own... and the food and drink is so cheap it hardly matters anyway.

When leaving Kampong Cham, we dodged around an overloaded truck with collapsed front suspension, took a local dirt trail along the river

between houses and the water, rode through lots of little towns and across numerous bridges. The highlight, in some ways, was catching the punt across the river. A bunch of road riders trying to negotiate tall adventure bikes onto a flat wooden home-made barge was hilarious, although the option was always there for the guides to manage the bikes. It was a little bit of adventure packed into the day and even though a couple of people fell over, not a lot of damage was done and it was a very memorable experience.

BACK INTO THE ASIAN CHAOS

Taking the less-travelled road and using the punt gave us another advantage — it got us away from the busy roads leading to the capital, Phnom Penh. Even while we were still passing through little towns and villages, the increase in traffic was noticeable in typical Asian style — flowing and consistent, with bikes, cars, buses and trucks all trying to keep moving while giving you just enough space.

By this stage we were all enjoying the busyness of it all. It's a delightful change to the stop-start traffic in Australian cities, where you spend so much commuting time stationary, then blast up to 60 or 70 between traffic lights or lines of traffic. In Phnom Penh you might never hit 70, but you'll rarely stop. It requires concentration

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Civil War-era building



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and experience, but you're on roads with all sorts of riders and their various skill levels, from old men who have been riding these streets since the first Honda Cubs arrived to teenagers just old enough to be allowed out with their own throttle. To visitors it feels dangerous at first — to the locals it's just the way it is.

PLAYING TOURIST

I was lucky enough to spend a couple of days in Phnom Penh before heading home. As a group we got to go out to the shooting range, where you can fire off a machine gun if you like, and then on to the Killing Fields Museum, which is confronting. What Pol Pot did to his own people when I was a child seems unbelievable to western eyes — the level of inhumanity simply unfathomable. However, it happened and Cambodia's monument to what occurred is sobering and important for people to see.

As a group we were able to enjoy some casual time together too, eating in great restaurants and reliving the highlights of what had been a great tour through Vietnam and Cambodia. The pool at the top of the hotel was refreshing, the river cruise relaxing, the drinks soothing.

When you sign up for a motorcycle tour in Asia there will be aspects that will take

you out of your comfort zone, that will challenge your way of thinking. You'll see spectacular sights and experience doing things you'd never have thought of yourself. There will be great food, hard beds, and some things might not be as simple as you're used to. You'll struggle with communication

at times. You'll meet other riders who will become friends. The riding will offer different challenges and every day will be a new adventure. Most importantly, you'll bring home memories of doing something so unusual that those who don't come with you will wish they had. **ARR**



VIETNAM & CAMBODIA MOTORBIKE TOURS

This story is about Vietnam Motorbike Tours' first Road to Cambodia Tour, the inaugural ride covering both countries in one trip. Generally, Vietnam Motorbike Tours offers road-based rides in Vietnam, while Cambodia Motorbike Tours offers adventure/enduro-style rides in Cambodia.

To see the variety of tours available, check out vietnammotorbiketours.com or cammotorbiketours.com.

Aussie Jason Thatcher has been running both for many years.