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An Uneasy Resting Place

By JUNE SHIH

"I ADMIRE you," our guide, Bun Naht, said as we climbed onto the bed of a pickup truck. "Most of my tourists just want to see Angkor Wat. They don't go to the Khmer Rouge areas. I think you are very lucky."

Foolhardy, more like. Our destination was Anlong Veng, the northern Cambodian town where Pol Pot eluded justice for nearly 20 years after his bloody Khmer Rouge regime was overthrown in 1979. My boyfriend, Josh, and I had heard during our visit to Cambodia last July that the government was planning to develop the area into a full-blown tourist attraction, featuring the ruins of Pol Pot's bunker, the site of his cremation and more than a dozen similarly macabre landmarks.

The first few travel agents in Siem Reap just laughed when we told them where we wanted to go. But finally, a French-owned adventure travel company agreed to provide us with a guide, driver and truck.

We had some misgivings. Were we really going to spend the weekend in the heavily mined Cambodia jungle, risking malaria and tense stares from former guerrillas - just to eyeball the ashes of an unrepentant mass murderer?

As we pulled away from our hotel, Bun Naht, a delicate, smiling young man, asked if another passenger could hitch a ride with us. "My auntie would like to go see old friends. She used to be Khmer Rouge," he said, pausing before adding, "but she's very nice now."

"Uh, sure," we nodded.

"Auntie" turned out to be a wrinkled, middle-age woman in a straw hat and flowery red dress. Flashing a full set of black-stained teeth, she climbed onto the truck bed without saying a word. "My auntie says she was just a cook for the Khmer Rouge," Bun Naht said.

Like most Cambodian families, Bun Naht's had suffered in "the Pol Pot time." His father, a teacher, was taken away by the Khmer Rouge and never heard from again, Bun Naht said; an older brother had been beaten so viciously that he lost both legs and became mentally disabled.

"I still don't trust the Khmer Rouge," Bun Naht said. His uncomprehending aunt stared into the distance.

The scars of the past are visible everywhere in Cambodia, especially on the 75-mile ride from Siem Reap up to Anlong Veng. All along the road, red skull-and-crossbones signs warned "Danger! Mines!" in Khmer and English. Every few miles, a thin man missing a leg would appear on the road, walking with crutches, or riding a bicycle.

The paved road quickly gave way to a deeply rutted red-clay highway. Heng, our driver, spent the next four hours weaving between potholes, gassing the engine across sparsely planked bridges, and coaxing our truck across muddy ravines. Every so often, another pickup, piled dangerously high with goods and passengers, sped past, spewing clouds of dust onto our hair, glasses and clothes.

We lurched past shabby wooden stilt houses and parched, yellowing rice fields. By Hour 3, the villages had tapered off into a forest. The sky was a clear baby blue, the foliage a deep green. A kaleidoscope of butterflies dived in and out of the forest and lingered in the air above the road.

"This area used to be all Khmer Rouge," Bun Naht said, frowning. "There was lots of fighting here until four years ago."

With wide red-clay avenues and timber cabins, Anlong Veng evoked a Wild West frontier town. Disheveled children barely older than the babies they held in their arms stared at Josh's video camera. Women in sarongs and shirtless men followed our movements with their eyes. We had been warned that people in Anlong Veng would be different from other Cambodians. And many indeed seemed quite severe - unlike their countrymen to the south, who with their easy smiles had been unfailingly friendly.

Trying to sleep that night was like trying to nod off in an intermediate circle of hell. We had checked into the best guest house in town and were given a room with a 15-watt bulb, a sagging double bed, a bloodstained mosquito net and two flimsy electric fans.

At midnight, the generator went out, killing the fans. Our sauna of a room turned into a broiler. Unwilling to risk malaria, we had worn long sleeves and pants to bed. With nary a breeze through the night, we found ourselves turning every few minutes - like meat on a frying pan.

The next morning, we drove out of town, up a steep, rock-strewn road that was countless times worse than the one from Siem Reap, toward the main Khmer Rouge sites. We asked how Pol Pot would have made this journey. "With a Land Cruiser," our guide said. Of course.

Two hours, scores of "Danger! Mines!" signs and a military checkpoint later, we were atop the mountain - and walking the ruins of a large concrete bunker. The Ministry of Tourism's blue sign said simply, in Khmer and English, "Pol Pot's House - Please Help to Protect This Historical Site." There was very little to protect since the house had long ago been sacked by Cambodian troops. All that remained were an outer wall, a concrete floor with grass growing through the cracks, a brick room and a concrete basement. A rusted

and broken film reel lay in the grass. I wondered, what kind of movies did Pol Pot watch? Cheerful pink and red flowers grew along the outskirts of the home, while cattle grazed in the front yard.

Bun Naht broke the silence: "I think Pol Pot was very good." Maybe his English wasn't as good as we thought it was.

"You think he was good? He hurt your family!"

"Yes, but if he didn't come stay here in Anlong Veng, all this land would have been taken over by Thailand," Bun Naht said. We strained to grasp the logic that said a few extra miles of territory were worth as many as two million lives.

Perhaps because of the language barrier, or an unwillingness to speak frankly, no one provided a satisfactory answer to the questions that troubled us most: Why were these Khmer Rouge sites tourist attractions? Weren't they glorifying an evil man?

"The Khmer Rouge is part of our history" was the most common answer. "Because then tourists will come to Anlong Veng" was another. We had indeed, which made it hard to argue.

We followed Bun Naht down a dirt path into the nearby woods, and soon came upon a crude, huge, empty concrete basin: Pol Pot's swimming pool.

Heng disappeared for awhile. Worried, I kept listening for mine explosions. He returned eventually, with a shirt full of lemons and the cuttings of an unknown tree. Soon everyone but Josh and me was eating the fruit of Pol Pot's garden.

Just as our interest began to wane and our bodies began to succumb to heat exhaustion, we arrived at the marquee sites. We were met by a small man in green Cambodian army fatigues. Pok had been recruited by the Khmer Rouge when he was a boy, and eventually became one of Pol Pot's last bodyguards.

Now 35, Pok wore the uniform of the government he had spent his youth fighting. "I stay here so when the tourists come, I can help," he said. "I will tell the tourists not to go to the mined places."

Trailed by a bigger man in army fatigues who turned out to be his own bodyguard, Pok led us past wooden shacks, uniformed men napping in hammocks, piles of shrapnel and rusty mines, to a sheet-metal shed built over a pile of gray ash, barbed wire and trash - Pol Pot's final resting place.

When he died, in April 1998, the Khmer Rouge unceremoniously threw his corpse onto a pyre of trash and tires. Later, a tin shed was built over the remaining ash, and visitors place offerings outside it: incense sticks inserted into Thai beer cans, plastic water bottles, potato chip bags.

The line between trash and tribute or condemnation was hard to distinguish. Someone had pasted a yellow newspaper photo of the cover of a French book on Pol Pot called "Le Bourreau du Cambodge" ("The Executioner of Cambodia") on the shed's main stake. While we stared at the ashes, Bun Naht's aunt fetched the last of our lotus leaf and rice lunch, and quietly placed it in front of the shed.

Ashes and litter under a sheet-metal roof. This was what we had come to see.

We thanked Pok and his bodyguard for their time, handed them each a pack of cigarettes and a tip, climbed back into our truck and rode back down the mountain.

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