

Living

with the past

Chris Mathews finds that terror has become tourism in Cambodia



In a dusty field just outside Phnom Penh, a solitary Buddhist monument houses the skulls of 8,000 people. Disinterred from mass graves nearby, the bones remain unnamed, for no one is able to identify these anonymous victims of the Khmer Rouge. Welcome to the Killing Fields of Cambodia: testament to tyranny and major tourist attraction.

As Cambodia slowly modernizes, its capital remains a unique, strangely charming city, yet oddly unassuming. In truth, one of the most striking things about Cambodia's capital is its lack of obvious tourist attractions. There is little to recommend Phnom Penh to visitors because there is very little in the way of stunning architecture, no famous monuments to pose in front of, no classic *stupa* or towering *wat* to awe and overwhelm.

There is, however, one thing that Cambodia's capital has in spades, as the skull-filled memorial testifies: a rich history of pain, misery, and genocide. From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge's unique take on socialism attempted to turn the entire country into a primitivist agrarian death camp. Under the leadership of the barbarous Pol Pot, the increasingly paranoid regime caused an estimated two million Cambodians to be shot, stabbed, starved, and worked to death.

In a display of deepest irony or, depending on your perspective, tragic pragmatism, the sites associated with the Khmer Rouge's reign have now become Phnom Penh's major tourist attractions, and since the country has opened to visitors, these sites now provide much needed income to an increasing number of the city's population. Welcome to the latest iteration of atrocity tourism.

On the streets of Phnom Penh, *moto* (motorcycle taxis) drivers gleefully call out, "You go to killing fields? I take you!" It's a mark of how impoverished the nation is that the Khmer Rouge's genocidal rampage is now a major source

of income. The young men in the city – at least, those with some ambition – spend up to four hours a day learning English in order to capture the lucrative tourist dollar.

The first place any budding guide will take you is Tuol Sleng, a Khmer Rouge prison where 14,000 people were tortured and exterminated. It is hard to believe that this run-down, almost rustic former school slumbering in a central

The ground is pock-marked by the sunken earth of excavated mass graves, many now adorned with signs saying how many bodies were disinterred

Phnom Penh side street is actually the site of four years of torture and Maoist-inspired butchery. It is now peaceful, with birds chirping in the background framed by the dull noise of the city. One particularly chilling room is full of photos of the victims, many surprisingly young for supposed anti-revolutionary conspirators. Another displays the instruments used to torture them.

Tuol Sleng Museum is a simple facility: A basic office sits at the entrance where tickets are bought and guides (English, Japanese, Chinese, Khmer) can be organised. The rest of the site is much as it was when the Vietnamese "liberated" it in 1979; the high walls are still adorned with coils of barbed wire.

Horrific though it may be, Tuol Sleng was merely a way-station to the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek. Located 20 minutes from the city center, the Killing Fields sit in a quiet rural area. The ground is pock-marked by the sunken earth of excavated mass graves, many now adorned with signs saying how many bodies were disinterred: 166 here, 450 there. In the centre stands the memorial stupa with its 8,000 skulls, arranged in five-year age groups – the closest anyone can get to individual identification. All were killed by blows to the head; the Khmer Rouge weren't about to waste bullets on counter-revolutionaries.

Like Tuol Sleng, the area is disarmingly calm. Schoolchildren approach to sell postcards and happily pose for photos for a few cents each. Their behavior is indicative of the country as a whole. Predominantly Buddhist, Cambodians have learned to live with the horrors of the past and let the wheel of life turn inexorably. Their poverty means that many have turned to their country's darkest years in order to find something to offer foreign visitors, and this form of tourism of has become a major industry. Choeung Ek is simply the most famous of numerous similar sites throughout Cambodia.

Yet the Khmer people are quietly resigned to their history and seemingly have no qualms about this phenomenon, having calmly accepted the economic need to do whatever they can to improve their lives. As a result, Phnom Penh is a strangely paradoxical city for visitors: relaxed and inviting, yet largely focused the wages of genocide.

Given the number of one-time Khmer Rouge members quietly living out their lives in sleepy villages, it is tempting to believe that Cambodians would prefer to let karma sort these aging criminals out in the next life. In the meantime, the county does what it can to work through its bloody history. The death and pain of Cambodia's past, though, will probably continue to be one of Phnom Penh's main tourist attractions. κτo

GUIDEBOOK REVIEW

LUXE CITY GUIDES are a series of mini pull-out pocket books aimed at the higher end of the market, darlings. They select "the best" and are updated twice a year. While the concept is a good one, Luxe falls short in execution, mainly because they seem to be hedging their bets on the target readership.

Each guide includes recommendations for accommodation, restaurants, entertainment, activities, and shopping, shopping, shopping. They usually give a good sense of décor and atmosphere for each place. They pack a lot of information into a very compact fold-out, so they would suit those on a short business trip or travellers making a city stopover for whom money is not an obstacle. In addition each guide includes

brief but useful tips like medical help, festivals, climate, telecommunication and dangers, and also shopping itineraries.

Another positive point is that the guides are about three quarters the size of a Lonely Planet city guide, and much lighter. However, there are no maps and no transport information, only addresses and phone numbers. Some of the restaurants and bars are entered twice under different categories – surely, a waste of space.

The most disappointing aspect of the guides is the language. The Hanoi guide leads with, "Want no fuff, no crap, just the best of the best? Well, who's your daddy?" They describe the water puppet theatre in Hanoi as "cheap as chips and silly as a tit on a fish" – needlessly wordy for a compact guide and inappropriate. In the Ho Chi Minh City guide, they go as far

as describing the Quan An Ngon restaurant thusly, "It's like Pamela Anderson's bra in here, big and packed." They are spot on when they say the guides are "brutally frank, and sometimes, frankly, brutal."

At the end of each guide there is this invitation to give feedback, "Got a bee in your bonnet, a flea in your ear or a baguette up your bum about something in the guide? Don't just sit there like a damp bra, let us know." My advice: Get rid of the annoying clichés and sexist remarks and make the language more suitable for your readership. To be "brutally frank," at \$9.00 per guide, travellers are better off going for a \$14.99 Lonely Planet "best of" city guide that includes much more information plus maps, and excludes the gutter-talk.

JENNY HALL