A Trip to Angkor Wat

On August 31, 2016, 23 senior citizens from Snay Anchit village in the Chumkiri District of Kampot Province set out for a once-in-a-lifetime journey to the World Heritage site of Angkor Wat. The trip was coordinated by Nop Ess, the lead in-country coordinator for The Chelly Foundation in Cambodia. He was assisted in facilitating this trip by Khmem Samorn, who on behalf of The Chelly Foundation has been providing free English lessons to 400 students at the high school in the village.

The following is Ess’ report from the trip:

Prologue:
Once I got the go-ahead from The Chelly Foundation that the Foundation would sponsor a trip to Angkor Wat for selected elders in our village, I announced that the trip was happening. People were so excited when they heard the news that some of them went to my Mom (who lives in the village) to ask her every day when the trip would start! None of the elders in the village have ever been to Angkor Wat -- they just have heard from others saying that Angkor Wat is a very great temple in the world. They really wanted to see for themselves one day, but they couldn’t because they are so poor. Luckily, The Chelly Foundation helped make their dream come true by sponsoring an entire trip for them, including accommodations, food, transportation, gifts and other materials. My Mom was the one initially in charge of the selection of who among the villagers would be invited, because she knows exactly who were the most deserving persons in the village to make the trip who have never been to the temple before. I would like to say thank you so much to my Mom for helping out with this work.

Initial Trip Activities: To Phnom Penh
30 August, 2016: all of the villagers left from Snay Anh Chit by mini-vans to the city of Phnom Penh, where they were invited to stay in my sister’s house, before we were to leave the next day to Angkor Wat. They all arrived in the city in the morning, and had lunch and dinner in the house. Because none of the seniors had ever been to the city, their feelings were of surprise seeing the electric lighting and the tall buildings. My sisters and my aunts were the ones in charge of preparation of the food for everyone. They all had lunch and dinner together with happy feelings, enjoying the good food so much.
After having dinner, everyone was especially surprised seeing television in color! It was the first time that they had ever seen color TV. Some of them do not even have a TV at home, and if they have it they only have black and white TV. They loved watching color TV, and stayed up very late night watching! They said how this TV was so different: “People in this TV are more beautiful than people in my TV.” I told them it was all because it was in color.

The journey to Siem Riep:
On 31 August, 2016, we left to Siem Reap at 4:00 am in a 25-seat bus. The travelling took 8 hours in order to reach the town of Siem Reap. Most of the seniors were in their 70s and 80s (one being 86 years old), and none had ever taken this kind of large bus before (or any bus for that matter). They were so happy with A/C and comfortable chairs! While they were on the bus, they kept always asking for water, and I got to wondering why they kept drinking bottles of water. I thought they simply might be thirsty – but then I realized that it wasn’t that they were particularly thirsty …. they just loved drinking clear and clean water instead of what they were used to, which is water from a pond or lake.

While they were travelling on the bus, they talked about their difficult life during the Pol Pot regime. They said yjay during the Pol Pot regime, all of us were forced to do heavy work without food, and that they didn’t think they would make it. They said they were so lucky that they could survive the Khmer Rouge years. After Pol Pot’s regime, all of these seniors ended up just staying in the village of Snay Anh Chit. They have never had a chance to go to other provinces, or to the city, and they certainly didn’t know how busses like this one would be like. After taking the bus for 4 hours, we all had our breakfast along the road.

Breakfast activities:
Even though it was not in a restaurant, everybody enjoyed our breakfast, as we all ate together like a large family. After having breakfast, we continued to travel to Angkor Wat. Along the way, they all couldn’t stop talking about the history of the Pol Pot regime.

**Arrival at the hotel:**
We arrived in Siem Reap at 12:30 pm, and stayed at Kiri Villa hotel, where I had made reservations for everyone. We had lunch at the hotel before we went on further to Angkor Wat. I was surprised that some of the seniors took off their shoes before they entered into the hotel, but simply, it is the way that all poor people act before they enter someone’s house. Everybody was turning their heads, looking everywhere, and saying that the house (the hotel) looked so beautiful! It was the first time any of the seniors were in a hotel. They all took a break for one hour at the hotel and then continued travelling to see the Angkor Wat temple.

**At the Temple**
I was wondering if the older seniors, one of whom was blind, could walk all the way from the front gate to the temple, without assistance from Samorn and myself, but they all did. Actually, when they arrived at the temple grounds they were so excited and loved being at the temple that some of them ended up running around the whole of the building! Everyone was so very happy, and all of them took photos in front of the temple. They even gave a hug to the temple because they loved the temple so much! They told me they would like to have the temple remain in their heart for the rest of their lives. They said that they will tell their grandsons and granddaughters how beautiful the temple was. They went to see the different parts of the temple, and they really loved all of the artwork. They spent almost 3 hours in the temple, staying to see all the different parts of the building. They said Angkor is a holy place that all people would love to visit. They said they never thought they would have the opportunity to come. They said they had just dreamed about visiting the temple one day, but that The Chelly Foundation had made their dreams become true.

After visiting Angkor Wat, they come back to the hotel and we all had dinner at the hotel.
The next morning on the 1st of September, we all further continued our travelling, including to another temple called Angkor Thom Temple, and also to the Vimean Akas Temple, which were about 5 kilometers from Angkor Wat. The latter is an especially beautiful temple, with the face of King Jayavarman IV, the greatest king in Khmer history. He was the king who created Khmer empire.

Interviews: after visiting the temples I interviewed some of the seniors regarding our trip

Her name is Trud ("old lady Trud"), and she is 83 years old. During past days, maybe 20 or so years ago, she was a very important person in the village. She used to be a midwife, who saved thousand lives of women in Chumkiri district -- including me and my sister Nan. In the past 20 years, there still has been no doctor. So she is only one person in charge of delivering babies in the entire district. She has saved people's lives without taking any money, just only a basket of rice milling is enough for her. Everybody considers her to be a mother of all the villagers. She told me that she is very lucky that she has an opportunity to see Angkor Temple before she died. Neither her grandparents, parents, or anyone in her generation ever had a chance to visit Angkor Wat -- only her. She is very proud of herself for having been able to make the trip. She would like to say thank you so much that we made her dream become true. Trud says “I wish you good luck and good health. Please god take care of you!”
Her name is Yeourn (“old lady Yeourn”), and she is 78 years old. My Dad told me that during the Pol Pot Regime, she was a very kind person. She always shared food with everyone. I remember when I was child I always slept in her house, and I never forgot her generosity. When she heard that The Chelly Foundation would provide her a chance to see Angkor Wat, she was so excited. She said “it is a first time for me to see Angkor Wat temple. I never take the bus and and never sleep in the hotel” (laughing). When she arrived at the temple, she ran to hold the pillars of the temple with her smiling face. She said she had dreamed to see the temple for so long, but she never thought there would be a chance. Now her dream has come true, and she is so excited. She would like to say thank you so much to The Chelly Foundation for giving her the opportunity to see the temple, where she considers the holiest place she has been to in her life. “Thank you!”

Her name is Ly (“old lady Ly”), and she is 86 years old. She told me briefly about her bitter life during Pol Pot regime. She was forced to marry a man who she did not like, but if she refused she would have been sentenced to die. She has three children, all married. When my Mom came to her house to tell her about the trip to Angkor Wat, she was so excited. She has dreamed her whole life long to see the temple, and now when she is 86 years old her dream has become true. She said “it is the first time for me to see Angkor Temple, stay in a concrete house, take a bus, and drink clear water from the bottle.” She always take off her shoes before she entered the bus. Even at 86 years old, she could walk to the top of the temple without getting tired. I asked her “Can you go to the other temple?,” and she said, “Yes, I can!” I am so proud of her. Finally, she would like to say thank you so much to The Chelly Foundation that gave her this once in a lifetime opportunity to see the temple.
Her name is Vit ("old lady Vit"), and she is 83 years old. She has had a very difficult life since she was born. She is blind. During our travel on the bus, she told me briefly about her biography. She once had three siblings, but all of them were killed during the Pol Pot regime. During that time, her parents moved to live in another village while she was kept in an orphanage. After the collapse of the Khmer Rouge, her parents come back and they all again lived together. She was told a long time ago about Angkor Wat by her parents. She told me she always really wanted to visit the Angkor Wat temple. It was her dream. When she knew that The Chelly Foundation was going to take her to the temple, she was so excited. She told me that The Chelly Foundation made her dream come true, and now she is happy. During the trip, she did many things that she had never done in her life. For example, taking a bus, staying in the hotel, and taking a shower. More importantly, visiting the temple that she has dreamed about. She is 83 years old, but she was able to walk from the front gate to the final gate. Unfortunately, she could not climb up the temple steps. Still, she said it is the happiest time in her life. She would like to say thank you so much to all of us who helped take her to a place that she had wished to visit for long time.

For all of the other seniors who made the trip whom I did not have the chance to interview in depth, I know they all shared the same kind of feelings. During our two days in Angkor Land, they all smiled and laughed. It was the first time they had seen different people from all over the world. Some of them have never seen Western people because they never have gone away from their homeland.

Later that day, by 7:30 pm we all arrived back at Phnom Penh safely, and everyone got back in vans to their home village. They all said that they “will never forget the trip because it is a very good memory for us.” A week later (on 7 September), I went back to the village, and I heard that all of the seniors had told their children, grandchildren and neighbors about their trip to Angkor Wat. I suspect they will be talking about the trip for the rest of their lives!
End of the trip

—Nop Ess