

THIS IS THE TEXT OF THE DAILY BLOG AS POSTED ON FACEBOOK DURING THE TRIP. FOR MORE PICTURES PLEASE CLICK ON THE FACEBOOK LOGO AND SCROLL DOWN.

DAY 1: After 26 hours, over 12,000 miles and the customary gin tonic: (travellers to Cambodia over the last 15 years will appreciate that one) we have finally arrived in Siem Reap to be met by our fixer/translator **Chin Sang**, driver Mr Bin and local guide **Channa** who presented us with traditional welcome bracelets made from frangipane - a fragrant reminder we really are in the Far East. And so to the hotel for a much-needed shower, clean clothes and sleep. It's been a very, very long day. Tomorrow to Battambang and the real work of the trip begins. Night night.



DAY 2: After two hours rearranging the assorted items brought with us (toiletries, biros, water filter spares, gifts, 30 inflatable footballs etc) we are on the road to Battambang for a 4pm meeting with **Karuna Battambang Organization**. This is a Cambodia-registered NGO (non

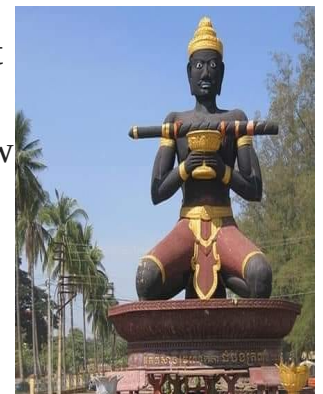
government organization) overseeing the social programmes run by the Catholic Church in this part of Cambodia and who we hope will be able to assist Support Cambodia in various practical ways. The huge statue of 'The Stick Man' greets us on the approach to Battambang, the second city of Cambodia where the wide boulevards and French-inspired architecture alongside the Sanke river make it a



pleasant, cosmopolitan place.

After several attempts to get the car into the church compound, we abandon it and walk to our meeting. Our great friend **Dr Nhor Chamrom** (she runs the Health Centre here) has come to join the meeting which takes place at the new coffee shop dedicated to the memory of Sister D'Ath who did such wonderful work here.

Walking to dinner in the city later, the devastating effect of COVID-19 on the tourist industry becomes clear - it's SO quiet with even well known restaurants closed on a Friday night. But it's lovely and warm and so nice to walk around at night without a jumper.....!!!



DAY 3: To start the day, a visit to the Toul Tanout garment factory, set up as a social enterprise by the Prefecture and now under the umbrella of KBO. It's a huge and highly efficient operation providing employment for disadvantaged workers, 40% of whom are people with a disability. Jumpers in a range of qualities, colours, sizes and quantities are made to order and the high-end range is marketed online under the brand name 'Mutitaa'. Profits go back into the factory and other social enterprises. A big thank you to **Channa and Elena** for showing us round.



Then to Ta Hen, in the countryside outside the city to visit the workshop where the material for Cambodian scarves (kromas) is woven. Like the factory, this is also a social enterprise employing people with a disability, this time just women who are all the main breadwinners in their households. The kromas for sale here are high quality and come in beautiful colours. We bought a dozen to try.....and since we hope to do some further business with the workshop, we presented the ladies with a Support Cambodia 'Karuna' Bearand a dozen footballs to share with their families.

We are so grateful to KBO staff **Rodrigo, Maria and Lucia** for giving up their time to advise us on the textiles and other matters - their help has been invaluable and very much appreciated. Muchas gracias!

Finally, after a failed attempt to locate the Don Bosco Technical School (the relevance of which will become clear on Day 5), some welcome downtime before our final day in Battambang tomorrow.

DAY 4:

Sunday morning Battambang and it's sunny (with a distinctly fresh breeze) for our 7.00am walk to breakfast. Community Mass at Our Lady of the Assumption Church is always special and it was wonderful to meet up with old friends **Om Cecile, Dam Pranya and Khunny**.

If yesterday was about textiles then today was all about water- in particular the five Support Cambodia borewells in the remote country around **Nikum** village. Although all are operational, some modification will be required to ensure the wells remain viable in the long term.

In addition, more needs to be done to encourage the villagers to use the wells regularly, not just when the local pond dries up! Thanks to **Father Rajat and Ms Poan** for taking us round.

Roads hereabouts are generally of the 'd&p' (dirt and pothole) variety but this one makes the usual standard look like the M1.

On the way back to the city we called in at **Tampoung** to check on the various projects the charity has financed there since [2016](#). It was good to see **Mr Ravuth** again and although many of the buildings are in the process of being repurposed, much of the equipment Support Cambodia have provided is still in use.

By happy coincidence, **Phorn Samoeurm**, a former student at Svay Sisophon, was in Nikum today so we had the pleasure of her company back to Battambang where she is now at university. Her kind of story makes it all worthwhile.

DAY 5: A sobering sort of day, illustrating the harsh realities of providing aid in the developing world. First, to **Prek Khpoub Secondary School**, 5 miles outside Battambang where we provided money for sports equipment and books. But it's not money they really need - it's inspiration to persuade students that school is important and the path to a better future. We have put a plan in place which may help. Thanks to **Lucia** from KBO for coming to help and to **Sansky and Ismael** for arranging the meeting. .

Then to **Reedonkao** to see the well(yes, working) and the [2021](#) toilet block, also in very good working order. Less good however, is the discovery that the villagers will only use the well and toilets when the river water dries up. It's easier to use the river water, even if it's less healthy, rather than make the effort to go to the well.



Finally, to Pailin and a lovely welcome from **Sister Vangie Dunton** and the ladies at the **Sewing Center**. And very impressive it is too. Another visit scheduled for Wednesday when we'll share more details.

Also a great pleasure to meet two of the first three students on the **Bob**

Maidment Vocational Training Scheme: Peroum and Saiee. We wish them all the best for their courses starting tomorrow at Don Bosco Technical School in Battambang. A very, very tiring day so goodnight all!



DAY 6: Today we're in Pailin Province touring the villages where Support Cambodia have done projects over the last few years. An hour out of Pailin City, mostly on 'd&p' roads, we finally arrive at **Kon Damrai Primary School** to find the morning cohort of children waiting to greet us. Our two wells there are still working and the [2020](#) Day Care Center is now in use as a kindergarten. A big new filter house is under construction (not paid for by us) and will at last make use of the beautiful (but filthy) pond that inspired Support Cambodia's initial work here in [2016](#). Progress indeed.



Next and much less encouraging, is the sight

of our community building at **Pheasabao village**, derelict and now irreparable because the owner is bankrupt and the land has been repossessed. So sad. But the women, for whom the centre was built, still meet and today they came to receive formula milk from Sister Vangie. A real positive to meet these young mums and their babies, one of them only 3 weeks old.



On the way back, we call in at several primary schools, all of which now sport brand new hand wash facilities, courtesy of the charity Samaritans Purse. This is a big operation from a wealthy NGO, dwarfing anything Support Cambodia can do. Unfortunately this is the reality of overseas aid and a change of strategy is now obviously needed. A tough morning..... and plenty of food for thought.

DAY 7: Just a half day today with three separate and very different visits.

First, to **Saom am Pou Primary School close to Pailin City**, previously unknown to us. This is a very, very poor school, 50 children grades 1-6, in an appallingly maintained building. There are two toilet



blocks: one needs pulling down, the other is solidly builtbut there's no water supply so instead of learning in class the



children take it in turns to carry water from the government -owned well 75m away on the road. This well

is for community use only so the school are not allowed to connect it to the toilets! What is needed is a new well AND the refurbishment/rebuilding of the toilet blocks.

Unlike other areas we've seen on this trip, the new NGO's eg: Samaritans Purse, are not presently operating in Pailin City and so it's very unlikely anything will change in the next 5 years. The pictures tell their own story.



All this took some considerable time to elucidate, working through a translator! So it was with some relief we moved on to **Ochra Kandal Farm** where Support Cambodia built a simple house with a well in [2021](#). So far, five families have made use of the house, specifically built to give temporary shelter to homeless people. The land is being worked (cassava, cashew, coconut) but the vagaries of the climate have meant a variable yield of crops.

Finally, back to the Sewing Centre for a lengthy discussion about needles! and the presentation of a Support Cambodia Bear - 'Metta' will keep an eye on developments at the workshop till (hopefully) we come again.

DAY 8: Pailin to Siem Reap, a journey of over 200k so travelling all day with just a couple of stops.

The first is just outside **Svay Sisophon**, for the official opening of a bridge in memory of **Bob Maidment**, former Trustee and co-founder of the charity. It was good to see **Fr Greg and Ham Sok** again and share coconut milk and sticky rice.





But the highlight of the day was **Rohal Primary School** where we received a wonderful welcome from Head Teacher **Mr Bun Sarak**, his staff and about 100 children, some of whom had stayed on to greet us with a song.

A meeting with the teachers resulted in a donation specifically to restart the in-school teeth cleaning module of the Health

Programme, suspended since COVID-19. Our other projects here: the two handwashes, one with new roof and the play equipment are all in good condition and obviously being used. We were invited to plant a tree and were presented with kromas before a lengthy photo shoot, everyone wanting to get in on the act! Rohal Primary seems a friendly, well maintained and efficient school with happy children..... that's why we come back and continue to support it.

Huge thanks to **Dr Nhor Chamrom** for making the time in a very busy day to come from Battambang to join the meeting and to all at Rohal Primary for a really positive way to finish our week.

DAY 9: Craft shopping in Siem Reap. We have limited weight on the aircraft so selecting a range of products, colours and sizes to accommodate weight and capacity allowed AND at a good price, took most of the day. But the basics are there: trousers, scarves, tiger balm, keyrings, puppets and elephants, incense and spices, though the quantity is much reduced.

Prices have risen but not all that much and as returning customers, our good friends Srey Noch and Kunthea gave us very good deals. Thanks so much girls!!!

But although the Pub Street bars seem as busy a (and loud!) as ever, generally the market is very quiet with lots of stallholders begging us to buy from them. The effects of COVID-19 on the economy is plain to see.



DAY 10: Early start to accompany Phillipino missionary Betty Millena on a visit to the Dressmaking class at the Women's Centre in Peak Snaeng Chas. It's a good 45 minutes drive from the city, about half of it on real, old-fashioned 'd&p' roads, some potholes almost 12" deep. The classes, which have been running since October, take place in wonderful multi-purpose community building, only three years old. It's airy and spacious, specifically designed for flexible use. This group of women had no

previous experience and so have started from scratch learning a range of skills adaptable to different garments and styles.

There's a lovely atmosphere here, a bit like Knit 'N Natter but Cambodian-style plus sewing! With children running round, neighbours dropping by ...and even a local man who brought in his trousers for alteration.....this feels like a real community group. Congratulations to Betty and all involved in setting up this enterprise which is presently supported by the Sacred Heart Canossian College in Hongkong but Support Cambodia hope to become involved in the near future.

The women seemed very happy to see us and we presented the group and their teachers, **Komsot and Ket Sokleng**, with a Support Cambodia 'Sothea' Bear.



DAY 11: Mission accomplished. The purpose of the trip was to check on the projects the charity has done and reconnect with our friends and contacts after three years absence and by and large, this is what we have done. Some of what we found was disappointing, a definite reality check but there were a number of positives: the Sewing Projects in Pailin and Peak Snaeng, Rohal Primary School, meeting the Vocational Training students, the weaving women at Ta Hen and the possibility of a co- operation with KBO (Karuna Battambang Organization). And it's been wonderful to meet up with so many of the charity's contacts, many of them old friends. This is vital because the success of Support Cambodia is built principally on personal relationships and the trust developed over many years.

On behalf of David Patrick and myself, a huge thank you to all those who have helped to make this trip possible, especially **Andrea and Channa of Allemagna Boutique Travels**, our **fixer/translator Chin Sang**, **driver Mr Bin** and all our friends at the various centres for making us so welcome. We will be in touch once we get home. Okoon, Okoon!!

