



More than just a
matter of

CONVENIENCE

Chris Davalle went on an adventure holiday in Thailand and Cambodia and found it a jumbo-sized trip that changed people's lives, and his own

PICTURES CHRIS & JANE DAVALLE

didn't think I would ever want to build an outside toilet or, for that matter, ever have the need for one. But even if someone had told me I would get the urge, I didn't think it would take me until I reached my sixties to answer this particular call of nature.

And I would have flushed with surprise to be told that in the week before this astounding construction feat I would be living, feeding, washing, swimming, walking with (and clearing up after) elephants.

So here I am at 61, proud and exhilarated to have ticked these two off the list of unexpected life events. I have to admit that they didn't come as a bolt out of the blue but they have left a profound legacy and a sense of achievement that I could never have foreseen.

The catalyst was a friend's approaching 60th birthday. She wanted to do something different to mark the milestone without making it more of a millstone. A trip to faraway places and a challenge or two perhaps. The solution was provided by an extraordinarily accomplished but relative newcomer to the world of adventure holidays, *We Are Bamboo*. The company, which states that it is "the next step in independent tours and adventure travel, dedicated to pushing boundaries and to redefine the term 'responsible tourism'", organises trips and volunteering from India, Nepal, Cambodia and Thailand to Costa Rica and Tahiti.

The "adventure" that floated our boat was the Two Countries visit to Thailand and Cambodia, and more appropriate to our slightly older group of adventurers it was designed for the "young at heart" - those who were 50-plus. Except in reality we became part of a group of 20 enthusiastic, hard-working, hard-playing, dedicated friends who didn't want to be treated gently and were happy not to be so.

One of the attractions was the organisation of the trip, from accommodation, meals, travel between far-flung places to guides, volunteer co-ordinators and everything else needed to ensure the days and weeks ran smoothly, and to fix things when they didn't. So apart from the flights (which were down to individuals), virtually everything was taken care of.

My wife Jane and I, plus friends Nicola and Tricia, started our three weeks of enlightenment and enjoyment in Bangkok, that buzzing, vibrant, noisy, edgy, cheap, fascinating, cultural and sometimes shady capital of Thailand. We stayed at a budget-style hotel in the middle of the city which was functional and clean but then who wants to spend time in a room when the delights of the city are beckoning. It was an evening for getting acquainted with our fellow travellers, drinking, having inexplicably deep and painful massages - and eating charcoaled scorpions and assorted fried creepy-crawlies

of near I'm A Celebrity proportions. We were 20 in total, two men and 18 lucky women, ranging from 50s to 70s but all "young at heart" in accordance with the trip's billing.

Day two was Bangkok discovery day. Temples, rivers, markets, street food - and more temples. A flurry of activity, mayhem, sounds, tuk-tuks and smells and a great introduction to a city that never seems to sleep. A day and night is never enough to do it justice.

Slightly sad then to leave and head north-east by road the 340km (211 miles) to Surin. The dust of the city gave way to flat, open rice fields (dry in March) and jungle-style mountains. Surin was a so-so city. An interesting night market, with clothes that made the bargain-basement prices of Bangkok seem expensive, but not a place worthy of a detour. Nice hotel, though, with a well-received swimming pool.

It was, however, ideal as a stepping stone to the elephants. Everything before this was just a distraction. This was the big one, literally. As volunteers we were to spend four to five days living, eating and breathing with these magnificent animals.

We Are Bamboo is playing a small but important role of protecting and improving the life of elephants in small communities and villages. For hundreds of years elephants have been used (and abused) in Thailand, predominantly in the logging industry. This was outlawed in 1989 and thousands of the animals were suddenly redundant, as were the mahouts, their keepers, who could no longer afford to care or feed them. Many were forced into the cities where the elephants became part of the tourist industry and frequently ill-treated.

This is where organisations such as *We Are Bamboo* stepped in. In an ideal world



the elephants would have been returned to the wild but this is not practical. Instead, the mahouts are given a royal grant that allows them to look after the elephants, some in sanctuaries but many in ordinary people's homes and farms. At last these animals are being allowed to be elephants again, not just working machines.

And how amazing to be part of this in some small but important way. Our group home was a homestay in a small tucked-

Chris enjoying a little down time with the elephants

away village, Tha Tum. Basic rooms with a fan, mosquito nets, Western toilets (but flushing from a bucket) and, best of all, two elephants in the backyard - mum Bank and her baby Wan-Dee. Just imagine opening your bedroom door and there they are, swaying trunks and flapping ears.

Volunteering in the village involves everything elephantine. Many hours spent in the fields cutting and stripping elephant grass for their meals, hauling it into vans ►



Jane making elephant dung paper. Below in the class room



From begining to end. Chris and his fellow volunteers get stuck in building their first toilet



►and unloading it back at the homestead. Shoveling piles of the remnants of the grass deposited by the ravenous beasts (it actually doesn't smell too bad but there's loads of it). And then the best bit: leading them for over a mile through dry rice fields and along dusty roads to the river for bath time. It's amazing how quiet these giants are when walking on their soft, squashy feet, with the occasional trumpet to split the air. But once they get the scent of the river it's all bustle

and a quickening of steps. We bathed with them, washed them, were soaked by them and played with them. And to cap it all my elephant was pregnant and I could feel the baby moving inside its cavernous chest. Golden memories.

Our days at the homestay were memorable, our team of 20 becoming ever closer with these amazing shared experiences. Food was cooked fresh every day and there were trips to an elephant sanctuary, graveyard and

temple, we made elephant poo paper, had cookery lessons (yes we washed our hands first) and we drank copiously every evening.

Within days we had seen two sides of Thailand, immersed ourselves in local culture and felt privileged to have helped, in some small way, to make sure these animals have a secure future.

It was then time to cross the border into Cambodia. Instant change of scenery, buildings, roads and general infrastructure -

a country obviously much more down on its heels than Thailand due to its recent, violent and horrific history.

It was in stark contrast to the newish, clean, air-conditioned luxury of our hotel just outside Siem Reap where we were to spend the coming days, part sightseeing but mainly volunteering. A welcome retreat from the heat and dust of our community work - in my case Project Toilet.

A 45-minute drive down dusty roads and

“While we sweated in the sun, others sweated in the classrooms. Schooling in Cambodia is pretty much a hit or miss affair”

past local markets took us to a small village - and one of the poorest in the area. Homes on stilts, animals and chickens pecking the dirt, water from a pump paid for by another charity. But no toilet.

It was here that seven of us (plus our project leader) would take four days to build one - from the bare earth upwards. Local families had hitherto resorted to wandering into the fields to answer the call of nature so this would be a major contribution ►

► to hygiene and well-being.

This is where *We Are Bamboo* really showed its teeth. They paid for and provided all the building materials and tools and we provided the labour, albeit helped by a few villagers. It was blood, lots of sweat, and tears... of the emotional variety, shed by two men and five women.

To be frank it was hard, tiring, arduous work but none of us shirked our roles in the heat of the midday sun. We can now all claim to be bricklayers. The quality would not cut much muster on most Western building sites but the structure was solid and square - and went up surprisingly quickly. Then there was the rendering and skimming, everyone desperate to have a go. We dug huge concrete waste holding tanks into the sand - digging from the inside out and being hauled out when they were the required depth. We worked as a team, cajoling, encouraging and laughing with the locals at our sometimes inept skills.

By the end of the fourth day the toilet was roofed, doored and ready for, er, action. The families that were to use it were emotional in their thanks and praise and our tears mingled readily with theirs. We felt elated, honoured to have helped this poor community. We had left our mark, literally, by adding our painted handprints and names on the outside walls, along with a cartoon panda designed by my wife, Jane.

While we sweated in the sun, others from our group sweated in the classrooms. Schooling in Cambodia is pretty much a hit or miss affair. The state education system exists but many of the children do not attend on a regular basis, as they have to stay at

“So slowly, very slowly, Cambodia is crawling out of its dark days”

home and help their families earn a living or are forced to sell trinkets and goods on the streets. *We Are Bamboo* and many other voluntary groups have sponsored private schools where children from six upwards have the chance to learn skills that will help them to find jobs, learning English, maths and computing skills. They can attend up to three hours a day, and are often provided with food and healthcare.

The New Hope school where our team of volunteers were based is again in one of the poorer districts of Siem Reap. All the lessons are conducted in English and each class is made up of boys and girls of differing ages and abilities. This produces considerable challenges for the teachers and the support from native English-speaking volunteers is invaluable. Whereas we builders came back after a day's work physically tired, my wife

and the other teachers returned mentally worn out - but equally buzzing and stimulated. The appreciation from pupils was clear - the team finished their four days with rounds of hugs and armfuls of paper gifts and pictures, some of guns and tanks - a bitter reminder of Cambodia's recent past.

On a positive note, a number of the tour leaders were taught and had progressed from this school. It also has an on-site restaurant where older pupils could learn all aspects of the catering trade. It opens its doors to paying guests at lunchtime and evenings, which brings in valuable money and gives students practical experience.

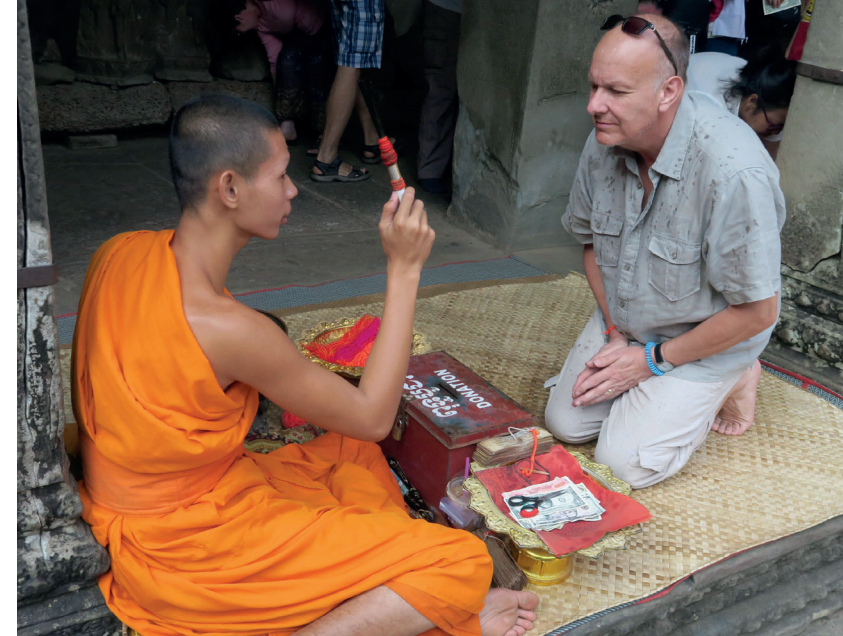
So slowly, very slowly, Cambodia is crawling out of its dark days. These past nightmares are laid bare no more disturbingly than in the killing fields and death camps in Phnom Penh, where our trip took us after our

volunteer days. Here the utter ruthlessness and murderous wanton destruction and rape of the country and its people by the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot is a livid scar and memorial to those who died and suffered. As you walk through the bare rooms of the S-21 death camp you can almost hear the screams of the thousands who were tortured and murdered here. You read how the residents of this huge camp were sent to work in the fields and, for one in four, to their ultimate deaths. The mountain of skulls are a reminder of inhumanity at its very worst. Most disturbingly, this was happening in the 1970s, when I was young, free and able to do what I wanted.

All the more reason why I, and my fellow travellers, felt it was right and fitting to try and give something back to help those who suffered and are still suffering from this



Food with a sting in the tail. Jane about to enjoy a scorpion on a stick. Right, Chris receives a blessing and below, the crew setting out



distressing and appalling period of recent history.

Heartwarming to see, then, the smiling faces of its people. Always a big smile, a friendly greeting and the feeling that things can only get better. This country has so much to offer and so much to see. Include in this the magnificent Angkor Wat temple in Siem Reap, seen as the sun rose, and the many other surrounding temples, now crumbling but majestic in their size and structure. We saw the sun set along the Mekong river and the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh.

Our final days together were spent on the beach at Sihanoukville, to the west of the country. A lovely boutique hotel, soft sand, lovely food, swimming with luminescent plankton. But sadness even here. The beaches awash with plastic discarded by a population that does not have the resources or money to

recycle, and building sites for casinos and hotels, by the Chinese, for the Chinese, with little benefit to its native Cambodians. The country is changing in many good ways but this is not one of them. What little money is being generated in the country is being sucked out into foreign pockets.

All this sounds gloomy, and in many ways it is. But to experience this country, to meet its people, to help them, to hear them, to see what it could be given a huge slice of good fortune for a change is a life-changing experience. *We Are Bamboo* made it happen for me and the rest of this group of 20. Organisation was exemplary. Its staff efficient and friendly. Not a holiday so much as an experience. And no higher recommendation that 10 of the 20 are reuniting to do a similar trip to Vietnam next year. Give it a go. It may change your life, too. ■

Need to know

We Are Bamboo offers its two-week Two Countries Young At Heart trip on numerous departure dates. The cost is around £1,100 including all accommodation, most meals, transfers, guides, entrance to attractions and tips. A one-week extension to Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville, again including all the above costs, is around £500. Flights have to be arranged separately but return fares with Cathay Pacific start at around £500. Many other airlines fly to Bangkok and Phnom Penh. *We Are Bamboo* www.wearebamboo.com