

FINANCE TOUT TERRAIN

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TRAVEL

After using the city of Bangkok as our jump-off point in South-East Asia a number of times, we're leaving for good in early January. We've become very attached to the city, and this departure represents the beginning of a new stage in our Asian adventure. So it is with some excitement that we get back on our bikes to cross, for the second time, the labyrinth of the Thai capital and the nearby countryside.



Crowd scene at the Phnom Penh market

It takes us only two days to reach the border with Cambodia. Once past the customs post and the casinos in the international zone, we only have to travel a few kilometres to see the difference in wealth between the two bordering countries: dust, little stalls by the sides of the roads, fields as far as the eye can see and sporadic traffic; it's a far cry from the comfort, the industry, the modern cars and the excessive scale of Thailand.

From Poipet, on the border, we move on to Siem Reap, 150 km away, dominated by the famous temples of Angkor; then Phnom Penh, the capital, 350 km further on; and finally the Vietnamese border, another 150 miles away.

We endured rain during our training in the South of France, dramatic climbs in Nepal and Laos, and heat in India.

Here in Cambodia, the enemy is the wind!

And what an enemy! The vast plains of Cambodia, where vegetation is scarce, are ideal places for the wind to unleash its full force on us poor athletes. We pedal hard, but the feeling that we're not making any headway persists, and a day's trip of 80 km on the flat becomes as exhausting as if we were cycling at high altitude. The only solution that provides a few moments of respite: a paceline. Whoever is in front absorbs all the energy from the wind and the other two can rest a little, until it's their turn.



Benjamin takes a well-deserved break on the road to Phnom Penh

On our arrival in Siem Reap, we get to enjoy a sunrise over Angkor Wat, the largest religious building in the world, followed by a one-day visit, the minimum necessary to fully appreciate the richness of this historic site. The Angkor temples are the famous ruins of a civilization that once ruled the whole of South-East Asia: the Khmers. Hundreds of buildings, of unequalled size, beauty and state of conservation,

are scattered in a dense jungle, and bear witness to the scale of the Cambodian territory a thousand years ago. The presence of tourists (lots of them) does not spoil the beauty of this unique site. After Siem Reap, we set off for 3 days of cycling, during which we set our new record for kilometres travelled in one day: 130! As we approach the capital, the arid landscape of fallow rice fields, scattered here and there with a few timid palms, gives way to grassy plains that bear witness to the proximity of the Mekong River. The difference is really striking; there is pretty much nothing else like it anywhere else in the country.

Johan's father is waiting for us in Phnom Penh, and, for one evening, gives us all the comfort we could possibly have dreamed of during these last 4 months. It's also in Phnom Penh that we meet with 4 Microfinance Institutions (MFIs) and 5 of their micro-enterprise customers.



The FTT team in front of one of the many temples of Angkor

These meetings are once again an opportunity for us to meet local dignitaries, to deepen our knowledge about the country, and for us to be able to safely visit "sensitive" areas where tourists almost certainly do not go.

The city houses the Tuaul Seng museum, a former Khmer Rouge concentration camp. A visit to this museum provides a bitter taste of what horror can be: it's hard to imagine that such events could have occurred only 30 years ago (1975-1979). Cambodia has a difficult past; you only need to talk to its people to realize this. The French colonization was followed by the Vietnam War, then by the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge – including a genocide that culminated in 2 million deaths – then by the Vietnamese occupation until the early 1990s.



A group of children playing cards at Angkor

And yet, we left Phnom Penh with a sense of optimism for this country, in which we can see intensive modernization.

Three more days of cycling, and we reach Ho Chi Minh (Saigon), in Vietnam, where we are writing these lines.