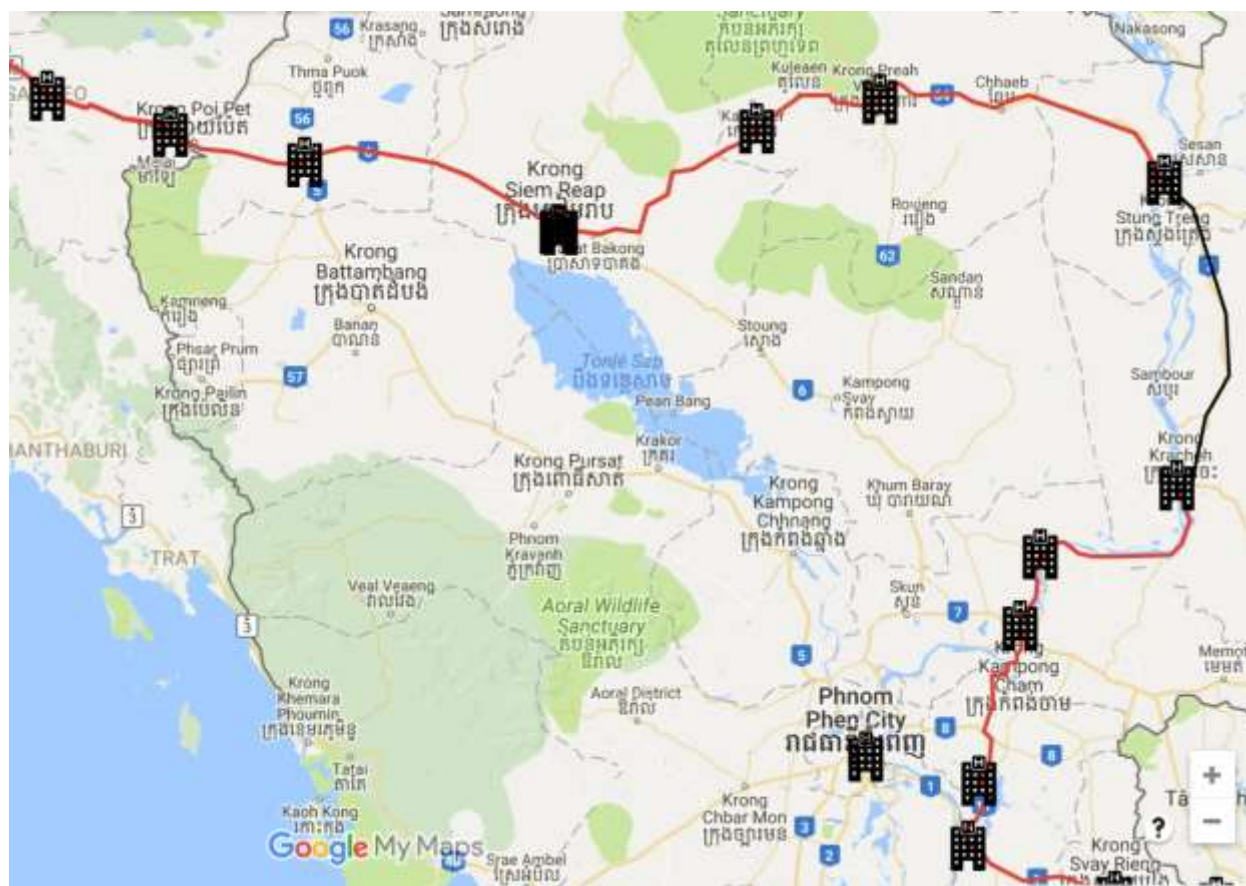


## Season 8 – Part 3. Out of Siem Reap



Fr 3.6.2016, day 327. Into the Cambodian Hinterland (Siem Reap – Koh Ker, 104 km)

Again it was one of those days that we didn't do much else but bike. We had breakfast in the outskirts of Siem Reap. Gradually we left the noise and traffic of Siem Reap behind us. We stopped at a nasty tourist trap for an overpriced shake and coke (food was outside of our budget) when we saw another touring bicyclist pass by. He stopped and we got chatting to him. He was from Ecuador, travelling by himself, and had biked from Bangkok to China and Tibet then down into Vietnam and Laos into Cambodia. It was nice bumping into a fellow touring cyclist!

We then gradually left the larger roads and came into very rural areas. Also, very poor areas where there were only simple wooden huts with no running water or electricity and young mothers, often with six or even more kids, would be sitting in the shade, while the older kids and men were probably out somewhere trying to earn some money. Despite the poverty every single child gave us a cheerful wave shouting "hello, hello!" often the came running out after us. Definitely not begging or expecting us to give them candies or something. We would in any case never ever hand out candies or money and we sincerely hope that no one else ever does.

In the afternoon, we got caught by tropical downpours. We managed to escape the first cloudburst under a tin roof together with a bunch of locals who were also seeking refuge. We then biked off again and were soon drenched by a second downpour.

We spent the night in a very simple guesthouse in a small village run by a very talkative lady, unfortunately she didn't speak a word of English. Luckily a gang of very smartly dressed young guys who were on their way to a wedding could help us out with the basics.

She offered to store our bikes in an unused room and as I helped her making space we had a very long conversation, me speaking Swiss German while she spoke Khmer. Somehow we managed to communicate!

We had a wonderful room with two windows looking out over a green field. A wonderful cool breeze blew straight through the room. Unfortunately, the breeze brought all sorts of bugs into the room. As we were settling down for the night Siria noticed that the bed was literally crawling with tiny little bugs. We spent some time wiping them off the sheets, but they seemed to be crawling up out of the mattress. I decided to take some precautions and put my mat onto the bed and slept in my silk sleeping bag. Siria took some more extreme measures: she mounted our tent onto of the bed, artistically hanging it up with some rope, then she unzipped the mosquito net and crawled in. It was really quite funny!











Sa 4.6.2016, day 327. Along quiet roads (Koh Ker – Preah Vihear, 58 km)

The day proved to be quite uneventful, we got up quite early, found we had not been eaten alive by the bugs, packed our bikes and headed off eastwards. We had breakfast of rice and fish soup in a small village, fixed a puncture in Siria's tire in front of a huge crowd that was following our every move with utmost interest and arrived in the quite large town of Preah Vihear at about lunch time. We had a great soup and rice and checked in to a guest house and spent the afternoon doing nothing much. There was a balcony in front of our hotel room and it was great sitting there watching the afternoon rain clouds slowly closing in accompanied by the odd bold of lightning. Then it started to rain, as usual.

We went to the same place for dinner, Green Restaurant. It seems to be some sort of youth support project. In any case the food was excellent.













Su 5.6.2016, day 328. Long long ride with stomach problems (Preah Vihear – Stung Treng 148 km)

We got us quite early, went to our usual restaurant for breakfast, getting some funny looks as we were there yet again! We then headed off. The road was mostly flat and we had a bit of tailwind helping us along. The country side was mostly agricultural, often with stretches of freshly cut and burnt forest. Again the countryside was really impoverished, tiny huts with no electricity or running water and lots and lots of skinny children. All the kids seem to be trained to wave and say hello to bicyclists and it seems quite a bit of a hobby. Sometimes if they spotted us early enough, they would come running out onto the road and run along with us screaming “Hello, hello, hello!”. It was certainly fun for us and seemed to be harmless play on their part.

After about 80 km we stopped for a noodle soup at some roadside restaurant, that seemed to be frequented by truck drivers. There were a couple of locals playing cards and there was also some action movie running that had the guests riveted. We didn’t have the energy to go through our usual “No meat!” routine as the lady spoke no English whatsoever, so we eat what was served. Unfortunately, there was some really nasty meat and liver in the soup. I ate some of it, Siria wisely pushed it to one side.

I hadn’t been feeling all to good all day, but managed to get along, but after the soup things started to turn for the worse. I had to stop a couple of times to try and vomit and to lie down for a bit. I could hardly summon the energy to bicycle and had difficulty focussing my vision. We were only about 15 km from the place where the boats over the Mekong to Stung Treng leave, so that gave me motivation to push on. Slowly slowly we advanced and finally arrived at the turning to where the boats leave. We were not sure if there still were boats over the Mekong as recently a new bridge had been opened about 5 km downstream. We asked a couple of people, some seemed to say no boats, but then one made the sign of a longtail boat and pointed down the road, so assumed that there were boats and biked the last 3km down to the river. When we got there, we found there were no boats. We’d have to bike all the way back to the main road and take the bridge, another 15 km at least. At this point I was desperate. I lay down on a little bench, I really didn’t think I could ride another 15 km and briefly thought about just camping in the little park where we were. Also, it was past 5pm and slowly getting dark. Finally, we started biking again and then suddenly I had to vomit, I didn’t even have time to get off the bike. Soon there was a bunch of people standing on the porch watching what I was doing at their front gate. It was a bit embarrassing, but I instantly felt better, and so quickly got on my bike and rode off. Looking back, I saw the family still staring at us and also a dog, happily wagging his tail while he licked up the mess I had made.

We finally made it over the bridge and into town. We took a room with ac and I was so relieved just to lie on the bed.









Mo 6.6.2016, day 329. Recovery day (Stung Treng, 0km)

I slept like a log and woke up feeling significantly better. In the late morning we took a stroll to a place called Guitar Milk, which turned out to be quite a funky place with little bamboo huts on sand, there was even a huge mural of a blue ocean and white beach. The place had certainly seen better times and seemed to be a favourite hangout for the local school kids. We had a delicious banana shake and I was relieved that it stayed down.

I spent most of the afternoon sleeping while Siria started collecting all the stuff we would need for the Chinese Visa. A full itinerary is required complete with confirmed booking of all hotels along the way. Absolutely ridiculous! Everyone just makes fake bookings on booking.com or similar. I really wonder what sort of stupid bureaucrats come up with such absurd requirements.

We decided that we would take a bus tomorrow to the next town, as it would again be a 140 km ride and I was really not sure I would be up to it, so we pre-booked the ticket and went for some dinner after



admiring a truly spectacular sunset over the Mekong. There was a quite a nice place that also served porridge with fruit, I thought this would be something that my stomach could just about support and it turned out to be perfect.

Tu 7.6.2016, day 330. Bus trip south (Stung Treng – Krong Kracheh, 0 km)

The guy we bought the bus ticket from the night before was there waiting for us and brought us to the bus. When I saw the size of the luggage compartment I was quite pessimistic that we could get everything inside. The guy who sold the ticket buzzed off on his bike and the bus driver was totally unhelpful. So we started pushing the bikes in, finally I had to remove the front wheel and also disassemble the trailer, but amazingly everything fitted inside. This is exactly the reason why I hate taking the bus! We got to Krong Kracheh by about 9 am, unloaded our bikes again being watched by a completely unhelpful and uninterested driver and assembled everything. When we were finished I was completely dirty and dripping with sweat. We biked around in circles through the town a bit before settling down in an excellent place for shakes and a baguette, then a coffee, a waffle, then some more shakes. We then biked off to look for a place to stay. It was early afternoon and we could see a black wall of clouds coming towards us. Soon there were squalls of wind as well and just as we finally found the place for the night the storm hit us. Again, it was an excellent place that Siria had found for us with a large open balcony. It was divine sitting there watching the storm coming in over the Mekong. The place also served pizza, and these were also excellent, freshly made and baked in a real pizza oven. After the rain had started it didn't stop, it poured all afternoon and all evening, so we basically stayed put and did a bit of organizing: Vietnam Visa, itinerary to Phnom Penh, itinerary into Vietnam and again long discussions about our plan after Vietnam. China? Taiwan? Japan?







We 8.6.2016, day 331. Lovely ride down the Mekong (Kratie – Stung Trang, 95 km)

We had a delicious breakfast of omelette with freshly baked pizza bread overlooking the Mekong. Then we packed up and headed off. We mostly rode along the small unpaved road that went through all the villages dotted along the bank of the Mekong. At times, it was really muddy and slippery due to the rain that had been falling all night. Again, the kids seem to have made a hobby out of “western tourist spotting” and soon our arms were tired of waving back at all the kids. We sometimes stopped to have some fun with the kids, who were fascinated by our bikes and the kite board and all the flags. I was also quite surprised that the majority of the villages seemed to be predominantly Muslim.

We stopped at quite a nice place overlooking a little creek for a late breakfast / early lunch. There was a large brand new Unicef SUV parked outside and inside a guy in a spotless Unicef shirt, dark sunglasses, expensive smartphone and camera was having a coffee. This again made me think of the usefulness or uselessness of all the NGOs (or No Good Organizations) that -for me- have turned into huge bureaucratic cooperations that primarily serve their own purposes. Cambodia seems to be suffering from a true epidemic of them and I often wonder how much good they really do. If, when you are poor, people in shiny white SUVs come and build schools for you, is this not an incentive to stay poor? Especially if you can siphon off and pocket a good portion of the cash? Also, what is more important, a school or a good teacher? What can a school do without a good teacher? Nothing. What can a good teacher do without a school? I think a couple of stools under a shady tree make a fantastic classroom! So why does everyone want to build a school? This is simple. Because nice photos of the school can be printed in glossy brochures. In my opinion any aid that involves paying money to the locals should be illegal as the money ends up in the wrong pockets and gives the wrong incentives. The only aid that should be permitted is labour and education. And by education I certainly do not mean western education with emphasis on mathematics, natural sciences and computer sciences. People here in the rural areas must re-learn what they have forgotten, namely self-sufficiency and sustainability. We passed so many dilapidated huts and severely malnourished kids in midst of a freshly deforested field. Why not grow some bamboo and make clay bricks to build a nice new hut? Grow some palm trees to make a nice roof? Collect the rainwater? Build a composting toilet instead of shitting straight into your drinking water supply? Grow a shady fruit forest to provide jackfruit, mango, banana, papaya, nuts, whatever you want? Get rid of the flea ridden dogs that hang around everywhere and keep a couple of chickens and a pig or two? I really think that the main problem is that people simply do not know how to help themselves. They don't need some NGO to come and build schools for them to learn maths and English.

Again at 2pm sharp dark clouds started forming, soon there was thunder and lightning and the heavens opened up. We took shelter in a workshop with a grandmother who looked about 35, her son who looked about 18 and his 2-year-old daughter.

The storm soon passed and the sun came out again and we pushed on. The sky soon turned black again and we increased our pace to try and get to the ferry over to Stung Trang before the second deluge. The ferry -to our surprise- was quite a substantial car ferry and it knocked us back 30 cents for the two of us and our bikes. We arrived just before it departed and I gingerly rode down the steep mud road, barely able to keep my bike and trailer under control. Siria -being more sensible- pushed her bike.

The only guesthouse in town was quite a big and completely empty place. We got a room for 5\$ right beside a cage housing a very proud and loud voiced cock. It was fascinating just sitting there in the

courtyard watching the comings and goings. Soon two huge pigs arrived on a motorcycle (it is anyway fascinating what people are able to transport on motorcycles!) then some guy arrived who wanted to buy the cock. The price was 5\$ and I really hoped he would close the deal for the sake of a good night's sleep, but in the end he didn't. I also thought again of the story of the touring bicyclist we had read about who was travelling with his chicken. Why not, actually?

In spite of the threatening sky and lightning and thunder it didn't rain much, we took a stroll down into the village, walked along the promenade overlooking the river, had quite a nice stew and rice and bought half a kilo of delicious mangosteens.





















Th 9.6.2016, day 332. Enjoying civilization! (Stung Trang – Campong Chang, 35 km)

We had some crackers for breakfast and set off for the short 35km ride to Campong Chang. We checked in to Thomas' Homestay. He is a Cambodian who fled to France during the Khmer Rouge time. We sat down together for a long chat where he explained all that happened according to his point of view. It was interesting for me to hear how he blamed everything on the Vietnamese. Of course I don't know the details of all that happened here very well, but I am so tired of people pointing the finger at this or that group of people and saying "THEY are to blame!". Unfortunately, this nasty fashion seems to be becoming more and more popular all over the world.

In Campong Chang we found a fantastic café with excellent coffee, brownies, müsli, shakes, even home-made granola and yoghurt. Rice and noodles are fine, but sometimes a taste of home feels so good!

We had a bit of a potter around town, a cruise ship had just arrived and the place was quite full of young Americans who were on a sightseeing by bike trip. Quite an impressive sight was a colossal bamboo bridge over a side arm of the Mekong. Really quite an incredible construction. To round off our "home-comfort" day we had a pizza in a place run by a French guy from the Bretagne. The pizza was absolutely delicious!

Back at the Homestay we joined Thomas on his balcony for some watermelon and long chats, while watching a huge thunderstorm slowly approaching, flashing with spectacular lightning.











