

A few years ago I went hiking in Cambodia with some friends. I went along as a tourist to see for myself how a people live whose culture has, over the centuries, ascended to the absolute pinnacle of human development before disappearing into the deepest crevasse, or simply being forgotten. I didn't want to have to form my impressions of Angkor Wat – once the biggest city in the world – by peering over the shoulders of armed bodyguards through tinted glass. I wanted to marvel at its edifices, hidden deep in the jungle, the same way everyone else does. I wanted to try and understand what kind of people built such a place, which at its peak, with a population of one million, was twenty times larger than London. And what we found, this little group of backpackers of ours, exceeded our expectations a hundred-fold.

No one in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, could tell us for sure how many million live there today. But guess how many sets of traffic lights there are in the city. One! We even managed to stumble across it. Strangely enough, that lone traffic aide was more of a trouble-maker than an enforcer of any kind of order. The first day we were there we had no idea how we were meant to cross a ten-lane highway which was being traversed by everything from donkeys and tuk-tuks to the latest model Hummers. There wasn't a pedestrian crossing to be seen. You either had to risk it and dash across whenever it seemed safest to do so or give up crossing the road altogether. On our second day there we steeled ourselves for an attempt. To our surprise, not once did we find ourselves in any real danger – the flow of traffic, moving in a kind of Brownian motion, simply drove around us, quite unconcerned. Of course, no one was travelling very fast: with only a couple of streets in the city being sealed, there was no chance of anything moving at much more than a dawdle, and even the biggest 4WDs pootled along at little more than 30 km/h, barely outpacing the donkeys. We soon realised that there was only one traffic rule in this country: "I won't hassle you if you don't hassle me." Allegedly there are fewer accidents in Cambodia than in some developed countries.

Which is lucky really, since as far as we could tell there was no medical help to be had anywhere in the country. Good luck to anyone who found themselves outside the city at night and got into any kind of trouble – you could be absolutely certain that no help was or would be coming. Some people we knew were telling us about an American tourist who was exploring the country on his motorbike when he got into an accident and fractured his shin: his life was saved by the US \$60,000 he and his friends scraped together to fly a helicopter in from Thailand and get him seen to by doctors in Bangkok. Another story we heard was about a French chef who was driving in the dark beyond the outskirts of Phnom Penh one night when he ran into a herd of cows (it's not like they have to wear reflectors!) and rolled his car into an adjacent field. Having lived in Cambodia for a number of years by this point he was only too aware that rescue would not be on the way, so he spent the next few hours texting friends around the world to say 'goodbye'. By the next morning he was dead. The strange fever that the local mosquitoes spread, which can only be treated through a cannula transfusion of liquids, kills thousands of Cambodians every year, whereas foreign diplomats and the like who are infected are hooked up

to a drip in their neighbouring country and cured with a minimum of fuss.

I would never have thought that the legacy of this one-time French colony – the grand villas that stood empty after the terror of Pol Poth – would become a home to 10-member families living in single rooms with little or nothing to adorn them than the tarpaulins covering the doors and windows. There isn't a single power station in Cambodia, so this impoverished nation uses the world's most expensive electricity. Ironically, it was the first country to make a complete transition to energy-saving light bulbs. In the evenings, whole families, sometimes even several, gather in the one room that has a next-to-nothing-watt bulb, or a flickering television. If you drive through these places in the dark, you'd swear you were on the moon or Mars or somewhere. How a people of whom 80% subsist on as little as a cup of rice a day express any joy or happiness and keep on adding to their numbers is a complete riddle to me. I spent two weeks in the country, and at least half of that time I was convinced that nothing of what I was seeing was actually real. I felt like I'd been edited into somebody else's fictional account of life.

When I got back to Estonia I felt a kind of culture shock. The bleating and the moaning and the mud-slinging in the media was a rude awakening, both abhorrent and unjust. I thought back to the boy on the boat in Cambodia who'd told me, in broken English, that he'd never been to another country and probably never would, since he was so poor. But he was happy that he'd come up with the idea of offering tourists the service he was providing: taking them out to a tiny desert island on a rowboat, putting on a spread of local fare for them on the sandy beach and after a while rowing them back to the mainland. He wasn't exactly doing a roaring trade, but enough to buy himself a scooter to parade up and down the beach on at night with the other youngsters and go out for a lemonade. "This is my country," he said, as he rowed us back to shore in the glimmer of twilight. "My home."

That's the kind of attitude we could probably do with more of – remembering that Estonia isn't some self-effacing creature to revile and imprecate with crushing consistency. It's our country. It's us. Our home. Home's not somewhere you crash about with muddy feet. It's not somewhere you make enemies of one another. Home's a loving place; a safe place. It's a gift from our forefathers. It's our castle – one we keep for our children. Estonia is our home.

Happy Independence Day!