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Rev zen

Cambodia by motorbike



INSIDE SPECIAL REPORT: 20 PAGES OF CRUISING

Cover story



I am not here to lounge on the top deck on the wraparound day beds supping exotic cocktails, I am here to get dirty.



Wheels of fortune



Getting down and dirty in Cambodia is an attractive prospect when a Dragonfly awaits, writes **Rachael Oakes-Ash**.

Some destinations are best seen on the back of something. In Vietnam it is the bicycle, Egypt the camel and in Cambodia it is the motorbike. Not just any old motorbike, a giant, throbbing, 400cc Honda engine, fuel-guzzling off-road beast that dines on small children for breakfast.

You could trek these wild jungles on foot but you are likely to lose a limb with stray landmines left over from the genocide era of the Khmer Rouge. Don't let that put you off – the people of Cambodia may have been raped, pillaged, starved and beaten down by Pol Pot and his men from 1976 to 1979 when a quarter of the population was killed but that has not stopped them smiling, and often.

The open and generous hospitality from beaming folk in the hovelled back streets of Phnom Penh is humbling for a city gal used to traffic-light road rage in a supposedly civilised and developed world. But back to the bike.

Ewen McGregor, and his lesser-known mate Charley Boorman, have done their bit to take dirt bikes from bogan to beautiful with the success of their *Long Way Round* travel documentary. The best pals rode 32,000 kilometres around the globe in 115 days, recording every frustrating and elating moment in this worldwide hit.

Cambodia has its own Ewen McGregor, Kiwi meister William “Munsky” Norbett-Munns with his Hollywood good looks and passion for engines. I am here to meet him and his Aussie business partner, Nick “Brunno” Brunninghausen, for a Jungle Journey, which I am told involves McGregor-style antics.

Like most expatriates in Asia who are not on corporate relocation packages, the boys found themselves lost and in love with Phnom Penh's dust-ridden streets and balmy bygone-era nights. In their former lives Brunno filmed a leg of the world's elite Enduro off-road adventure race in Africa, while Munsky worked on superyachts in the Mediterranean before setting up the bars at Sydney's Icebergs, Bondi Social and Chicane. They share a commitment to helping the

Cambodian people. Cambodia is non-government organisation (NGO) central: for a country the size of a postage stamp there are, apparently, more than 650 NGOs offering their “services” to help the citizens move from poverty to sustainability.

It is a quagmire of bureaucratic red tape and do-gooders mixed with genuine charities making a difference, including Australians Geraldine Cox's Sunrise Children's Village orphanage (www.sunrisechildrensvillage.org) and Scott Neeson's Cambodian Children's Fund (www.cambodianchildrensfund.org).

If the boys wanted to stay in Cambodia it made sense to combine their love of engines with their love of the local people.

Enter Jungle Journeys and the mighty Dragonfly. This former river ferry has traded in its vehicular cargo for the high life. The Dragonfly is set to take cashed-up intrepid travellers with style

Throw them on a bike, then see what they write on their postcard home.

along the Mekong River from Phnom Penh to the great lake of Tonle Sap and the temple of Angkor Wat in Siem Reap.

It is a brave man, or men, who launches his tourism operation with a travel journalist on board. Luckily this journalist adjusts to “Cambodian time” during a four-day stay in the cowboy town of Phnom Penh. My hard-earned lessons in the “school of patience” come in handy as we set off a day later than scheduled due to a lengthy riverside wait. Central Cambodia is intrepid and unpredictable, so travellers need to be flexible and come prepared.

Munsky's eye for style and his and Brunno's seven months of toil is imprinted on the Dragonfly. He has managed to create a floating den of boho adventure chic. Each of the four berths on this lady of leisure have dark wood shutters to let in the river breeze.

Add flowing mosquito nets over comfy beds, rich elaborate fabrics from Australian designer store Bliss and ensuites with giant rainfall showers. The inside tip is to book a cabin at the back with open terrace doors leading to a private deck. Expect gourmet all-day catering, including passionfruit pancakes and bacon and avocado toasties for breakfast, and an on-board masseuse.

A natural host is hard to find, which is why the boys have employed Matthew Swift as river concierge and Western guide. The son of an Australian consulate-general he has grown up in diplomatic circles and knows how to remain ahead of the guest. The boys call him Swiftie but I call him Dip for diplo-Matt.

Have I mentioned the bikes? Apparently I am not here to lounge on the top deck on the wraparound day beds supping exotic cocktails – I am here to get dirty. We have pulled in to the town of Oudong, the former Cambodian capital, and a crowd of onlookers are making God knows what of my fellow bikers in their Darth Vader-style get-ups.

There is Nathan Horton, photographer extraordinaire known as “Bond” (for his resemblance to Daniel Craig), Dip, rev head Brunno, American Matt, Khmer guide Tommy and a couple from New Zealand, Tommy II and Lizzie. With my pick of hunky men to hang onto as I ride on the back, I start with American Matt and trade bikes and blokes along the way. So far, so good.

We are in real Cambodia now with just roadside shanty villages and street hawkers selling their wares. As we head towards Oral Mountain we soar through fields of rice paddies in lush greens made brighter by the nightly rains. I am not afraid; far from it, I am free, waving with wild abandon and pure joy to the giggling children running roadside, passing temples that guard killing fields and the constant reminders of this country's disturbing history.

We stop off at a mountain temple then head off-road deep into bushland riddled with pathways

worn down by farming folk. I now know what it is like to really ride, to choose your lines carefully, to have confidence in the rider's skill to keep us upright and alive.

There is something meditative about going off-road, focusing on the path ahead and nothing else. It clears the mind. That is how five hours pass in the blink of an eye, stopping in towns of 10 people, one pig, a horse and a stable of chickens. We stop off in a “retail strip”, if you call three grocery stands on a dirt road a shopping centre. I sit on a wooden platform and am entertained by two children brave enough to approach this dirt-covered white woman with wild helmet hair.

The rest of the day is spent in manoeuvres over wooden bridges and rocky gradients to make it to the jungle waterfall where we all dive in, fully clothed, before heading to Kampong Chhnang, the home of floating fishing villages. And there is our lady, the Dragonfly, waiting with a candle-lit massage room, cleansing cocktails and a gourmet meal under the stars. Sigh.

It is not all bikes and madness, but we do spend the next day drag racing on a deserted airfield.

Jungle Journeys' plans include photographic safaris with Nathan Horton and there is talk of yoga retreats and helicopter-dirt-bike combos, kayaking trips and mountain biking.

However the company evolves, the boys will raise funds for Dr Jon Morgan's clinics (www.lakeclinic.org) to help bring much-needed medical attention to villages.

In a few short days on the river I am dirt-bike obsessed. I am also utterly charmed by this country and fearful for its future, lest it go the way of Thailand's big-budget tourism. I can't help but think my final destination, the temple town of Siem Reap, is purpose-built for tourists who bus in from the airport on group tours and say they have “done Cambodia”. Throw them on a bike, I say, then see what they write on their postcard home.

The writer was a guest of Thai Airways and Jungle Journeys.





ev it up ... (clockwise from far left) dirt-biking is a great way to see Cambodia; the accommodation aboard the dragonfly; taking a leap into the Mekong; the ever-smiling kids; floating down the river; a local woman fishing near Angkor Wat.

Photos: Getty Images, Nathan Horton, Rachael Oakes-Ash



> TRIP NOTES

■ **Jungle Journeys** has six-night, seven-day dirt bike and boat adventures with meals and berth included from \$US2999 (about \$3730). Bikes provided, petrol extra. See www.jungle-journeys.com. Added extra: Nathan Horton has a 10-day photographic journey with four nights on the Dragonfly, two in Phnom Penh and three in Siem Reap beginning October 13 for \$US2500. For details, see www.nathanhortonphotography.com.

■ **Getting there** Thai Airways International flies from Sydney to Phnom Penh via

Bangkok from \$1550 plus taxes. See www.thaiairways.com.au or phone 1300 651960.

■ **Staying there** Raffles in Phnom Penh provides for time out poolside after a day in the city's madness. Head to the hotel's legendary Elephant Bar at sundown. From \$US170 for a state room including breakfast. See www.affles.com. Finish up at Siem Reap at the Hotel de la Paix for impressive service and design with an artistic twist. From \$US330 a night. Phone 1800 251958 or see www.slh.com.