

Text and photos by Roger Murphy



Cambodia is a country of contradictions. Extreme wealth and poverty exist side by side in its metropolitan areas; spectacular natural beauty and resources are threatened by pollution and mismanagement; terrifying memories of genocide linger in the minds of many citizens, those same survivors who welcome strangers with enthusiasm and smiles.

I recently returned from almost three weeks in Cambodia, traveling with 29 high school students and four other teachers from all over the United States, including two Stowe seniors Abby Towne and Hunter Grosvenor. We were part of a program called the American Youth Leadership Program, paid for by the U.S. Department of State and managed by a nonprofit student travel group, Global Explorers, based in Fort Collins, Colo.

Jordy Oleson, the program's coordinator for Global Explorers, is passionate about his job connecting students to meaningful experiences around the world. "If a person is honestly open to expanding their comfort zone, exploring unfamiliar places and looking deep within him or herself," Oleson said, "true self-discovery and an authentic appreciation of our global community will likely be the result."

In his three years with Global Explorers, Oleson has learned not all stu-

dents are ready for an expedition such as the one to Cambodia, so he said the program "looks for students who have a special kind of eagerness and enthusiasm about traveling."

This year, different groups of students went to Cambodia, Bangladesh and Costa Rica, among other places, on fully funded expeditions designed to connect American youths with students from another country, focusing on a few major issues.

Our group studied climate change, sustainable development and eco-tourism.

After an orientation session at the Headlands Institute north of San Francisco, the entire group flew to Tokyo, then to Bangkok, and finally Phnom Penh. "Traveling so far from home can be scary for some people," Abby Towne said, "but having a large group of amazing people around me was such a great feeling of support and comfort for those who felt home sick." Towne, like several other students on the trip, had never been outside of North America, some even rarely venturing beyond the borders of their home states.

Once in Phnom Penh, the ensuing weeks were literally filled with scheduled activities, which primarily fell into three categories: learning about Cambodian history and culture, meeting and working

with Cambodian students, and processing the experience.

Cambodian history is full of tales of ancient kingdoms, conquering invaders and modern conflict. Two recent events — the bombing of Cambodia during the Vietnam War and the ensuing genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge — are still a part of everyday life for many people. Signs warning of "active" minefields dot the countryside, especially in the eastern border area, and tourists come to visit the "Killing Fields," made famous in news reports of the 1970s and later by the Hollywood movie of the same name.

Abstract no more

We learned about these events as a group in some pre-trip phone conferences. We discussed the horror of it all, and wondered at a person's ability to be so inhumane, sometimes even toward members of his own family.

These discussions were in the abstract, as much learning of history tends to be. Once in Cambodia, though, we visited the sites of these atrocities, including a prison where men, women and even children were kept in chains. We saw the shallow graves and the bits of clothing and bones still emerging from the soil after a heavy rain.

We spoke to people who lived through those times and heard their stories of murdered relatives and loss. "While in Cambodia, I learned that traveling can be an emotional struggle, and that the sights I see will not always be majestic landscapes," Hunter Grosvenor said. "Instead I might find myself on the edge of tears while standing over a mass grave."

We felt privileged to be included in the healing process, but it is our history, too. As Americans, we played a role in the destruction of the country in the 1970s, and it is a remarkable people who can accept that and be willing to move on and develop meaningful relationships in hopes of building a better future.

"Never had I seen such happiness coping with such extreme poverty," said Grosvenor, reflecting on the contrasts exhibited by the Cambodian people.

Towne agrees. "You can never understand the kind of life these people live without living it with them, and I realized that on the trip, which only makes me want to travel more," she said.

Much in common

For many of us, the meetings we had with those schoolchildren of Cambodia were the most memorable parts of the trip.

You may think that there would be too much difference between American teens and those in Cambodia — different language, music, responsibilities, opportunities, etc. — but the reality is that they had a remarkable amount in common.

"I met kids in Cambodia that I got along with and understood more than kids I have spent my whole life with," Grosvenor said. "The craziest thing is that I could barely even exchange words with most of the kids I met."

Like the American teens, they had plans for when they grew up, dreaming of being doctors, teachers and farmers — and had innumerable questions about our lives in America.

We played games with the students, talked about our lives and home schools, and completed service projects, such as helping plant rubber trees that will provide income for the school.

We visited a culinary school founded by a French businessman and a traditional "Apsara" dance academy, and even had an impromptu dance party in the community hall of a rain-soaked village in the middle of the Cambodian jungle. Not surprisingly, with the ubiquity of American media and cultural influence, the Cambodian kids knew most of the American songs we played.

There were certainly other memorable moments from the trip: Everyone got sick from the food or water at one point or another, some luggage was either lost or stolen, we were often accosted by small children selling crafts or scarfs, it was remarkably hot, and the bugs were large and varied.

We slept in Cambodian homes, stepping over cows and between hammocks to get to the squat toilet in the middle of the night.

We ate fried crickets, some ate tarantulas and silkworms, and we spent countless hours on a bus in a country with no traffic rules whatsoever. We saw families riding five to a scooter, or perched on top of a cart piled 20 feet high with grass, driven by two water buffalo.

We visited the ancient temples of Ankor Wat, and laughed while bargaining for souvenirs in the market, pig heads dangling at the meat-seller's across the way.

Four of us played an impromptu volleyball match against some locals in a neighboring village on an exploratory bike ride away from the rest of the group, and by the end of the match, the whole village was enjoying the show.

Journey isn't over

Being immersed in Cambodian culture

is a far different travel experience from visiting the famous sites of Europe or going on a beach vacation.

To take part in a transformative travel experience, you need to get out of your comfort zone, and then take advantage of that opportunity to reflect on your own life and try to make sense of it all.

While many trips "end" once the traveler returns home, this trip is designed for the learning to continue.

Therefore, the final part of this experience is to undertake a community-service activity that will incorporate our learning into a meaningful project. Hopefully this experience abroad will stimulate these 29 students and five teachers to seek out more learning about other cultures and their experiences, and then discover a way to incorporate that learning into their schoolwork and extracurricular passions.

As someone who benefited from this program, and a taxpayer myself, I hope that the State Department continues to expand the American Youth Leadership Program, especially because it could be years before we can account for all of its positive and long-lasting influences.

"Before our trip to Cambodia, I was completely unsure of what I wanted to do with my life, and although I am still keeping my options open, experiencing such a

different culture than my own made me think about about the way I live and the way I want to live," Towne said.

So when people ask me, "How was your trip?" I don't really know how to answer. I've been home for more than a month, but in many ways, the journey isn't over.

I'm still excited by the fact that I can go into my kitchen and drink straight out of the faucet, or by the fact that I have a refrigerator stuffed with cold, fresh food that won't make me sick. I have a renewed sense of being grateful for my wonderful family, my rewarding job, and the choices I have.

Those are perhaps the most wonderful things I have — my opportunities and the ability to choose from them.

The best trips are the ones you never really leave behind, the ones that continue to affect your interests, motives and world view. Part of me is still in Cambodia, and Nepal, New Zealand and Ireland, and other places where I made memories I still draw from regularly.

The only difficult part of traveling to remote and out-of-the-way places is that the desire to learn and experience more is never satisfied. I'm sure I'm not the only one who went on this expedition who is already planning his next adventure.



Cambodia

Roger Murphy, a Stowe High School teacher, spent almost three weeks in Cambodia this summer in the American Youth Leadership program. Stowe High seniors Abby Towne and Hunter Grosvenor joined 27 other American students on the trip. High school seniors Abby Towne and Hunter Grosvenor travel with Stowe teacher Students from Stowe and