

The Mountain

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The green patchwork of Cambodian rice fields stretched before us all the way to the horizon. A warm breeze felt cooling as our motorbike purred faithfully along the gravel road occasionally passing a rice farmer. The scenery remained unchanged until slowly a large hill could be seen jutting abruptly from the flatness of farmland. To someone unfamiliar with recent history the hill looked very beautiful. One could imagine a medieval castle or a magnificent monastery built on its summit, commanding a breathtaking view of the surrounding velvet green countryside.

Unlike Akemi sitting comfortably behind me, I was indeed familiar with its meaning. Twenty-five years before when I was a much younger man I had lived in this area. On many a lazy afternoon I had watched rice farmers work, laughing children play and hard-working mothers tend to their babies in the quiet sun. For me it had been a time of freedom, travel and youthful adventure, yet also a time of sudden change. And when life did change, it changed so abruptly I struggled to assimilate the chaos. In the space of two days, the army of Pol Pot took over the area and marched the population from their homes into the countryside, never to return. Blessed I surely was to have escaped unharmed, to be once again, many years later, driving through this beautiful countryside in complete safety.

The sound of croaking frogs could be heard as we dismounted from the motorcycle at the foot of the mountain. In makeshift bamboo shelters smiling Cambodian women were selling takeaway food neatly tied up in fresh banana leaves. Akemi as always was full joy and excitement. Unlike previous partners, she loved the adventure of far off places where few foreigners ventured. She enjoyed meeting simple village people who lived their daily lives in much the same way their ancestors had done for thousands of years. Apart from motorcycles, aluminium pots and gasoline cookers, very little had changed.

The mountain rose sharply before us. Despite the lush tropical overgrowth, we could see a steep track leading from the west to the top. To the east an intricately hewn stone stairway weaved its way down.

I accepted a guide, a young man in his mid-twenties. For a few dollars he was happy to answer my questions and show us the way. Akemi, who is Japanese, understood little of our conversation. As we slowly ascended the steep track I chatted with him about what had taken place.

About a third of the way up, Akemi became noticeably distressed. She crouched by the side of the track and it seemed she was going to be sick.

“They are so sad and they know they will die! Why did this happen??” She was already crying.

You see, this place was known as Death Mountain. A large hill completely made of

limestone caves, it was a place of extermination for thousands of people during the Pol Pot era. Akemi could feel the presence of the many exhausted people whose climb of this mountain had been their final act. Akemi could no longer cope and vomited violently into the grass beside the track. It was many minutes before we were able to continue.

At the top of the hill among trees there was a large opening in the ground. Looking down we saw that it opened into endless caverns. The prisoners were pushed over the edge to fall to their deaths below. As more fell, some of those still alive were killed by the impact of the next bodies dropping, but many would take days to die among the rotting flesh. It was all without the use of a single bullet.

The feeling I perceived was of sorrow and despair mixed with acceptance rather than anger.

With Akemi reluctantly following, we entered the caverns below. The thousands of skeletons had been removed. All that remained was a large cage packed full with the bones of the dead. We could see large holes in many of the skulls, probably from rifle butts used to quell resistance.

In my mind I heard their voices yet, unlike Akemi, I couldn't feel their pain. "Please photograph this and tell the world ... so it may never happen again." As I lifted my camera Akemi screamed in anger. "How can you take photographs at such a time?" Once I explained she walked off to a corner of the cave and sat with her head between her knees, broken and exhausted, unable to even speak.

As I stared at the mass of intertwined and broken bones, the sheer horror of it all finally penetrated my wall of numbness. From its depth a memory flashed before me of a day many years before when I was sitting in a room with two of my most trusted Cambodian friends. I was living at the home of one of them. They had just announced to me that the Pol Pot army had entered the town and the residents were afraid of what would happen if a foreigner was known to be living among them. They said some people had decided to search for me with the intention of presenting me to the army commander to protect their own lives. The second of the two friends recommended I go voluntarily to the army commander and explain I'm a simple tourist. He thought I'd probably be allowed to continue on my way. The friend I was staying with had a very different idea. He was sure that as my host his own life was also in danger. He said we must both leave immediately and try to escape through to Thailand. To leave at once, within the next hour, he would be walking away from his family, his friends and everything he knew ... forever.

This, as it turned out, is exactly what happened. There has seldom been a time in my life when a decision had so much significance. Sitting inside this cavern with the voices of the departed in my head and the feeling of death all around me, the gravity of that decision shook me to the core.

Photographs taken, we climbed to the entrance and outside. We walked through the trees to view a half-built temple of red bricks and grey stone blocks. My guide said the temple was being built to appease the pain of those who had died. Dark-skinned men worked tirelessly as we passed on our way to the stone stairway down the other side. I was glad to leave. The descent seemed to take forever. Akemi hadn't spoken a word. She followed several steps behind, her eyes looking down. The distance between us showed her feelings clearly. I felt numb yet resolute in having followed my convictions.

Fifteen minutes later we were halfway down the hill. Coming up from below was a man in his fifties carrying a large wooden backpack fully loaded with bricks. His presence was remarkable. He had the body of a 25-year-old yet an air of ageless maturity. Obviously his job was to carry bricks for the temple ... up and down all day. But it wasn't just his physique that was remarkable, it was his face and expression. On this trip we had noticed few people of his age. So many had died in the Pol Pot years—the extermination of a generation which this man had obviously survived. Not only had he survived, he had learned something; it was written clearly in his eyes. His gleaming eyes reflected tender tranquility overlaid with a touch of sadness. They were the eyes of a man who had been through so much, yet despite the horror of it all had somehow found serenity. If he had been an ex Pol Pot soldier it would have been a fitting penance, but the guide confirmed he had no such background.

Akemi had sensed his presence immediately, lifting her eyes to meet his. I could tell she was immediately attracted to him. And why wouldn't she be? He was beautiful. I don't think I've ever used this word to describe a man before. Handsome, yes, good-looking, powerful; this time 'beautiful' was the only adequate word.

There he was, full of dignity and humility doing what he must do, walking up and down the mountain with loads of bricks day after day ... as if it was the most meaningful job in existence. And it truly was. He was helping to build a temple to appease the pain of his kindred folk who had been less lucky than he. His daughter was with him and they both smiled gently as we photographed them. I wanted to embrace them both and learn his story ... yet the time wasn't right. We did hug them and then we were gone, continuing down the mountain. Somehow the energy lifted and Akemi walked alongside. In the past hour we had experienced a full circle, the extreme horror of the past, then on the other side of the mountain the complete opposite, a symbol of serenity and grace which may not have been possible without the existence of the other.

At the bottom of the mountain we were again cheerful, eating fried rice from banana leaves served by a young woman in a sarong, her Cambodian language like a song as she chatted happily to her children. Before long our motorcycle was speeding back along the gravel road with the sun slowly sinking behind the distant mountains. The countryside glowed in the soft purple-pink of the evening. I breathed deeply knowing again I was indeed blessed. I had experienced this country in war, I had experienced it in peace and I was lucky enough to avoid the fate of so many others, to be here once again in this magic land in a time of new beginnings.