

Ain't No Glass Slippers in Cambodia



Forty years old, free, white and female and here I am, backpacking solo in Southeast Asia. Huge raindrops fall in gray, unending sheets as I land at Pochentong International Airport in Phnom Penh on a rainy Saturday afternoon. I share a taxi into town with a few selfless but gorgeous doctors from Medecins sans Frontieres. Should I fake appendicitis, I wonder, as my stomach rumbles its Delhi Belly refrain. Too late – the doctors get out at their clinic, flashing humanitarian smiles, and I continue on with the driver until he slows and parks in front of a huge puddle. Behind the puddle lies the mother of Cambodian guesthouses,

the Capitol Restaurant and Hotel, my destination.

I climb up a dark narrow flight of stairs to the office, and ask for a room. The only vacancies are the \$3 basic rooms without shower or toilet. Not exactly luxurious, but I am assured of being upgraded the following day to the \$4 suite with toilet, shower and balcony. All the rooms, the manager grandly informs me, come equipped with fan and four poster bed with mosquito net canopy. I pay the \$3 room charge, dump everything on the bed and hurry outside to the sad, beckoning streets of Phnom Penh.

One week later, while searching for

peanut butter in a downtown minimarket, I meet a group of American officers, part of the US delegation assisting Cambodia in roadbuilding. Over the past decade, numerous countries have aided Cambodia in demining, roadbuilding, and restoration of ancient temple sites. The Americans ask how I'm managing in Phnom Penh. When I describe my "luxurious" surroundings, they invite me to join them at the pool of the Sofitel Cambodiana where they are stationed, courtesy of US taxpayers.

If the Cambodians seem focused on their 'here and now', the expatriate community embraces the good life even more heartily. Three locales are popular with the expats

Writer's Desk

by Raquelle Azran

in Phnom Penh: the No Problem Café, the Foreign Correspondents' Club and the Sofitel Cambodiana Hotel. All are tastefully designed to erase reality. The Café boasts a pool table while the FCC offers gin and tonic and black leather settees, but the Sofitel Cambodiana is the ultimate in escape therapy, with plush carpets, subdued lighting and impeccable service.

The switch from grubby Capitol backpacker to Sofitel Cambodiana poolside lady of leisure is disconcerting. It takes me a few minutes to refocus, much like going from boardroom to bedroom. So here I am, sipping fruit juice on a chaise lounge, far away from poor, battered Cambodia, when I hear a conversation in French about problems with an English translator for an official dinner that evening.

With blatant chutzpah (nobody knows you, so you can't make too big a fool of yourself) I turn around, introduce myself and admit to overhearing their conversation. "I would be honored to translate for you," I offer in my rusty French. "That would be marvelous, Madame," the two gentlemen reply. "Dinner is at 8 o'clock this evening. Are you staying here, or may we collect you from your hotel?" Having them show up

at the Capitol in a fancy car doesn't seem like such a great idea. "I'll meet you here in the lobby at 7:45," I say.

Only after bidding the French gentlemen farewell and sauntering toward the pool exit does it hit me: I have nothing to wear! Jeans and an "I dig jazz" T-shirt don't seem appropriate. I need a fairy godmother, or her local rep.

"Take me to Psar Cha," I tell the cyclo driver. "Quickly!" At the market, near the stalls selling textiles, women stitch away at ancient foot-powered sewing machines. I tap one of the seamstresses on her shoulder. Out of my pouch I pluck pen and paper, and quickly sketch a long straight skirt and tunic top. She nods her head in understanding. Together, we choose a bolt of green raw silk with gold embroidered borders from an adjacent stall, and after successful haggling (her, not me) with the cloth merchant, the two of us return to her work area. Surrounded by giggling women, I strip to my underwear so my seamstress can take measurements.

"I need this clothing in three hours," I pantomime. The ladies giggle their agreement.

Three hours later, the outfit is ready. I try it on, to the approval of the sewing ladies, pay the \$18 bill and voila - one has what to wear, as they say in French. As for shoes, Nike Airs just don't look right and there ain't no glass slippers in Cambodia, so I wear my flip-flops.

The dinner goes splendidly - interesting people, great food and my translation is, in fact, quite credible. I find myself seated next to the economic and financial consultant to the Royal Cambodian Government, whispered to be an illegitimate son of the King of Cambodia. As the evening draws to a close, I accept the profuse thanks of my hosts and à la Cinderella, quickly exit.

Returning to the Capitol by cyclo through the deserted, unlit streets, I pinch myself to make sure it isn't all a dream. My fancy attire and the prince's business card in my pocket assure me I am totally awake. ✨

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Azran has been widely published. Some of her accomplishments include her short story 'By the Roadblock of Bethlehem' which was awarded honorable mention and published in the *International Herald Tribune* literary supplement of the Middle East edition (2002). Her work has also appeared in publications such as *The Writing Group Book* (Chicago Review Press, 2003), *Aunties: Thirty Five Writers Celebrate Their Other Mother* (Ballantine Books, 2004), the Culture supplement of the *Haaretz/International Herald Tribune*, *Yuan Yang*, a Hong Kong based literary journal and the 2009 *Tel Aviv Short Stories anthology*.

