



Running in Kampong Thom, Cambodia

As mentioned in the fall SERR newsletter, my volunteer post with Voluntary Service Overseas is in Kampong Thom, Cambodia as an advisor to the Department of Fisheries. This is a provincial capital on the east-side of Tonle Sap Lake about halfway between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. Although I frequently travel to those more exciting cities, I am

in Kampong Thom most of the time.

The urban center of Kampong Thom is small. There are a few hotels, guest houses, government offices, restaurants, shops, and a market-place. Leading away from it there are many quiet roads that quickly transition from suburb to village as you move away from Highway 6, which cuts through the middle of town running north-south. Slicing Kampong Thom east-to-west is the Sen River, which flows into Tonle Sap Lake.



My routine running route is a loop around the paved part of town, across the old bridge (reserved for pedestrians), along the dirt road following the Sen River upstream, around a short loop at the half-way point, and back by the same route to my house. There are few buildings after the half-way point, but there is a wonderful vista looking out across miles of flat rice fields, punctuated here and there with palm trees and hills in the distance. Rice was recently harvested, so now the fields are brown; very different from the rainy season when everything is green. In most of Cambodia, it is difficult to grow more than one rice crop per year where the terrain is flat. During the dry season, there is little water available for irrigation. Kampong Thom doesn't look like Bali, for example, which is terraced and green all year.

My route was based mainly on the number of dogs encountered. Norman Lewis, traveling in Indochina after WWII, describes the Cambodian dogs better than I can:

“There were many baleful looking dogs, like miniature hyenas with wrinkled snouts and foreheads; almost hairless and sometimes tail-less. Each house possessed one of these small, ugly creatures, which seemed to lay claim to a certain area round the house and therefore advanced with a hideous snarling and yapping when one entered it. One was then escorted with furious menaces to the boundary of the next cur’s territory and so passed on down the road. The dogs never barked at Cambodians.” (A Dragon Apparent 1951)

Some Cambodian dogs are not that ugly or territorial, but many residents now have more than one dog! However, according to a Cambodian proverb, “Barking dogs seldom bite.”



Finding a place to run was easy, but there isn’t a critical mass, like there is in Juneau or Phnom Penh. Therefore, to avoid stares and giggles, as well as the heat, I run at about the same time as in Phnom Penh, 5:30 AM, just before the sun rises. Only a short portion of the run is really dark. The first mile about has street lights and the sun is up on the return trip. The sun rises fast in the

tropics, it’s like opening the curtains. Approaching bicycles, motorbikes, horse carts, cow-carts, and other things while running on a dark road can be a challenge. Cow-pies appear as dark spots in the road. Motorbikes usually have headlights; but some drivers don’t turn on their lights or they have dead batteries. In Phnom Penh, you can be ticketed for driving with your headlights turned on during the day (unless you’re a very important person), but there is no law requiring headlights at night. Nevertheless traffic is light and I give hazards a wide berth; it feels safer than sharing the road with Winnebagos.

It’s amazing how many people are up already. In addition to this being the cool-windy season, this is generally the wedding season. Weddings are big affairs; music starts playing on the pagoda loudspeakers even before I get out of bed to run. Microphones and speakers are indispensable adjuncts to all social occasions. Traditional Cambodian music is similar to gamelan. It sounds quite repetitive and some of us westerners rudely refer to it as ‘tingle-tong’. It gets old after a few hours.

Besides me, a few other people are out for exercise early in the morning. Very few people really run, most are walking with their arms pumping. There are usually groups doing aerobics on the old bridge and in the park strip by the river. Shops are also opening and the market is already coming alive. Lots of people are going to school or work already. English classes start at 6 o’clock (to accommodate workers). Often people will trail me on their bicycles in order to practice a few English phrases. In addition to horses and cows, there are all sorts of farm animals; horses, pigs, water buffaloes,

chickens, ducks, and cats. (Small horses are very appealing, but the cats are pathetic little creatures with bent or missing tails.)

If you are in the neighborhood, join me for a pleasant run in the Cambodian countryside.