



**HARSH REALITY:** The S21 building in Phnom Penh.

PHOTO: PICASA



**RECENT HISTORY:** The Killing Fields and S21 may look fairly innocuous now but the Stupa monument with more than 8000 skulls on display is a stark reminder of the atrocities.

# In the footsteps of suffering

The grim history of Cambodia's S21 building and Killing Fields must never be forgotten

I WANTED to visit Cambodia to see the terrible S21 building, the school, turned detention centre by the Khmer Rouge where so many souls were tortured and killed during the regime's four-year rule. And I wanted to visit the Killing Fields where thousands were executed and tossed into mass graves.

I know this is grim but it is recent history and I believe if we can, we should visit sites such as these to help ensure the terrible deeds of the past will not be forgotten.

That's my theory, but a lot of fellow passengers on the Pandaw Mekong river cruise didn't feel the same way

and chose not to visit these sites when the ship stopped at Phnom Penh. Fortunately Pandaw River Cruise management understands the sensitivity and gives the option of a tour of Phnom Penh's Russian Markets as an alternative.

So into the dreadful S21 building in the centre of Phnom Penh went half of the passengers with a guide who showed us into rooms where innocent souls were taken, photographed and tortured. I was braced for horror and while it was emotional and shocking, it wasn't as horrific as I'd expected. The school is now a museum and the grounds are

grassy and neat and somehow take away some of the terror.

But the photographs of innocent people, especially young mothers with babies, were particularly haunting. One of the few prisoners to survive the detention centre was an artist and he had painted pictures of the tortures – the most confronting thing in the museum for me.

After touring the prison we drove about half an hour to the Killing Fields.

Surprisingly this place, also now a museum, was tranquil and serene. It was late afternoon when we arrived and the sun was going down, the air

soft, still, balmy.

Butterflies and birds flew all around us, and where the executions took place and where each of the mass graves had been discovered, stood a little temple of remembrance.

In the centre of the park/museum was the Stupa monument, filled with skulls, more than eight thousand of them, all sitting staring through their vacant eye sockets on layer upon layer of shelves reaching so high up most were beyond sight.

It's not a place you would want to go to more than once, but an important place to visit in Cambodia.

– Ann Rickard



PHOTO: PICASA

**RIVER LIFE:** The activity on the banks on the Mekong River is powerfully distracting.

# Spoilt on the Mekong



**Ann Rickard** learnt a great deal on board Pandaw

A CRUISE is a cruise is a cruise. And we like cruising very much. But when it comes with great cultural insight, it takes enjoyment to a whole new thrilling level.

On board the colonial-style Pandaw ship with its wide promenades and enormous sun/observation deck, it might be about comfort and being thoroughly spoilt, but on the mighty Mekong River the activity on the banks is powerfully distracting.

Our cruise, from Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam to Siem Reap in Cambodia has taken us past small villages, floating markets, cat fish farms, vast wetlands, monasteries, rice mills, factories and stilt houses by the hundreds.

It's been fascinating and fortunately Pandaw River Cruises includes daily shore excursions in the cruise price.

This is a chance to get into the villages, watch the locals at work, to experience traditions, customs and river life as no amount of land touring could manage.

Each time the Pandaw anchored, we



**CULTURAL INSIGHT:** A bullock ride through the rice fields.

transferred into traditional sampan boats and sailed canals to peek into the lives of locals through windows in ramshackle huts built over the river.

Each shore excursion outdid the last: In Sa Dec in Vietnam, we were shocked but intrigued by a visit to a dusty brick factory. How could anyone work in such hazardous conditions with almost medieval equipment? And produce quality bricks and tiles to export all over the world?

We trawled local food markets and wondered how the locals might cook the skinned rats for sale next to the

## IF YOU GO

Pandaw River Cruises  
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cage of live snakes and the buckets of frogs. The markets are tumultuous, full of din and commotion and motorcycles loaded with produce pushing their way through the crowds and the vendors sitting on the ground selling fresh fruit and vegetables, along with other "delicacies".

Each day gave us cultural insight like never before, and on return from each excursion, there was the warm Pandaw welcome and a gin and tonic waiting on the sundeck as the ship sailed off for the next destination.

Local spirits, wine and soft drinks are included in the cruise price; there are no extras to pay for on board Pandaw unless you choose spa treatments or international wines and spirits. The food

is a mix of local and western, using produce bought at each stop (but no rats, snakes or frogs).

The staterooms are large with spacious bathrooms. Each cabin leads out to the deck, your own space with chairs, but up on the sun deck with the barman mixing complimentary cocktails from morning until the wee hours, is the spot to sit, relax and watch the fascinating activity along the river and on its banks.

The Pandaw crew were helpful, cheerful, polite and couldn't do enough for us. Each shore excursion was so well organised passengers were off the ship and in buses, ox carts, cycles or on foot within minutes, always stocked with cold water and accompanied by local guides. Luxury, comfort, insight, fascinating countries – and free drinks. This cruise was a highlight in all our travels.

The writer was a guest on board Pandaw.