

Cambodia: Pedal to the mettle

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By Kerri Jackson



The main temple at Wat Slaket. Photo / Kerri Jackson

Silver has crossed my palm. Or, more specifically, my wrist. And being fatally attracted to shiny things as I am, silver - in a metaphorical, American dollar sense - is soon crossing the palm of the Cambodian girl now eyeing me expectantly.

I'm in a small silversmith village about two hours' drive north of Phnom Penh, on the potholed, bustling NH5 highway to Battambang in Cambodia's northwest.

The city is another bone-rattling four hours away by bus, so this is certainly not the fastest way to travel between the country's two largest cities, but it is a fantastic way to see the rural back blocks of this country. From the emerald-green rice paddies to the clusters of slow-moving oxen, this is a very different Cambodia from the hustle and edginess of Phnom Penh. The only similarity is the motor scooters which beep and toot their way along the highway - although here they're laden with livestock rather than school children.

Then there are the small villages, like this one where our bus stops to load up with silver. Each village between Phnom Penh and Battambang seems to specialise in a craft or industry, whether it's this exquisite silversmithing, pottery, stone carving, or silk farming and weaving.

Each is a small hive for tourists, but they are still a better place to buy your treasures than the heaving markets of Phnom Penh if you want "buy-from-the-manufacturer" bargains.

So it is that our bus now resembles a blinged-out Priscilla wagon, at least on the inside, as it wends its way into Battambang.

This city of some 140,000 people is an elegantly wasted place - comprising just five named streets and a beautiful collection of ramshackle French colonial buildings - located along the meandering riverbanks of Stung Sangker.

Today Battambang city works as a hub, servicing the surrounding agricultural region, home to what it claims is the country's best rice, and a fledgling tourist industry. Visitors come here for the French architecture but stay for the easy pace, the friendly locals and the beautiful scenery.

The vast market seems to take up the entire centre of town. It's a sometimes sobering, olfactory-challenging introduction to Third World food storage and preparation but mostly it's a thriving community centre. With vendors selling everything from fish, meat and vegetables to ready-made snacks, clothing and bicycles, this is the beating heart of this small city.

Once you've explored the town centre there's plenty to see in the surrounding areas. And one of the best ways to see it all is by bicycle.

Cambodia is as flat a country as you're every likely to find, making it perfect for pedal-powered sightseeing. However, temperatures can be scorching, so a word of advice: start your trip early in the day to avoid pedalling through the searing heat of the midday sun. We learnt that the hard way.