

Return to Siem Reap: From AYAD to Australian Volunteer

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In the stifling heat, we're surrounded by the multicoloured umbrellas of the market sellers. One woman meticulously stacks and re-stacks her collection of bright pink dragonfruit. Another sits in a hammock above her selection of cuts of meat, half-heartedly trying - in vain - to keep the flies away by flicking at them with a plastic bag tied to the end of a stick.

The shot pans and zooms in on a group of teenagers, and Chhai starts his piece to camera.

"This is green mango", he says with a wide grin. "We eat it with chilli and salt."

He picks up the market seller's knife and strikes the mango. Nothing happens. He tries once more, and again, but this mango is a little too green - rock solid, in fact - and we all burst into laughter as he tries to prise a piece away from the fruit with his teeth, to no avail.

We're standing in the middle of a local market in Siem Reap, Cambodia, where I have been based at the Green Gecko Project since early 2010. Green Gecko works closely with 70 former street children and their 32 families, aiming to break the begging cycle for good through long term education, health and community development initiatives. The short films we are working on today are designed to help kids in Australia learn more about life in Cambodia, and to help them support Green Gecko's work through fundraising in their local communities.

I first came to Green Gecko as a short-term volunteer, teaching as part of their activities program for two months in 2009. The activities program aims to enrich the children's learning experiences and provide a holistic education in addition to their formal Khmer and English schooling through a range of subjects including library, computers, logic, creative arts and living values.

Prior to my trip, I had fundraised for Green Gecko with the help of friends, family and local Rotary clubs in my hometown of Wollongong, NSW. This gave me my first taste of applying my professional skills to support the project's work. Little did I know that less than 12 months later, I would be packing my bags to move to Cambodia on a more permanent basis. Nor did I realise that Siem Reap would become my second home.

In July 2010, I began a 12 month assignment working on Green Gecko Project's marketing and funding development through the Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development (AYAD) Program. My past experiences as a fundraiser and supporter of the organisation in Australia helped me quickly get a feel for my new role. Priority number one was to make communicating with our supporters easier and more effective, and we jumped right into improving the way we use our

website, email newsletters and Facebook page to keep them in the loop.

Other projects included sourcing locally produced and fair trade products which aligned with Gecko's philosophies for our gift shop, and fine-tuning systems for processing donations from around the world.

A good friend in Australia often jokes "are you pedalling fast enough for Skype to work?" when I jump online in Siem Reap, and I go out of my way to point out that I work in an office, with a desk and a computer, just like any other job. But when I think about it, I know the truest answer is somewhere between her extreme and mine.

Back home, I would be hard pressed to find myself negotiating tropical thunderstorms and flash flooding to get to an important meeting with donors. I doubt I would ever be caught weaving through traffic on a moto, trying to avoid potholes and cows as volunteer filmmaker Gemma sits behind me, trying to get the perfect shot of a tuk-tuk filled with children and staff. And I definitely wouldn't end up standing in the shadow of a centuries-old Angkorian era temple, sorting through traditional Khmer scarves (kramas) with my counterpart Eng Neang, picking out our favourite colours and designs for the gift shop.

After a whirlwind trip home to visit family and friends and attend a pre-departure briefing in Adelaide, the adventure continues. I've returned to Siem Reap and the Green Gecko Project as an Australian Volunteer, this time focusing on the project's community development and outreach support work.

Continuing the friendships I've made is one of the best parts about returning to work with the organisation, and something that just can't be rushed. It's Day 2 of my new assignment. So far, I've joked with the kids, practiced my Khmer with the staff and, in the meantime, caught up on the workplace gossip. One of our mums - who is now also a staff member - proudly tells me that walking to school with the kids has helped her lose three kilos, and I am just as proud that I can finally understand what she's saying!

As the power cut that started at 8am stretches into the afternoon, I can't help but wish I did have a bicycle that could power our office computers, along with a couple of fans, too. Instead, I head outside to an open-air classroom, put pen to paper, and have to admit - it's definitely not like any other job.

To find out more about the Green Gecko Project or check out its new short film resources for schools and community groups in Australia, visit greengeckoproject.org or find the project on Facebook.

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Above: Play - photo by Chamroeun Chim
Opposite page: Bokator - traditional Khmer martial art, photo by Chamroeun Chim.
Opposite bottom left: Gecko families - photo by Dennis K Johnson
Opposite bottom right: Clementina with Gecko kids - photo by Chamroeun Chim.
Previous page: Gecko family - photo by Dennis K Johnson

