

# THE WORST ROAD ON EARTH

• PAUL MITCHELL

I'd heard all the stories and assumed that they were, like most travelers' tales, blown way out of proportion. And even if they were accurate—I'm a seasoned traveler, how difficult could one dirt road be? I was soon to learn a new meaning for the word "difficult." But I'm getting ahead of myself; the dirt road came later, much later.

I was on a whirlwind tour of Thailand and Cambodia, which would certainly have been much longer had my companion not had some pressing prior commitments back home. We were attempting to soak up thousands of years of two distinct yet intricately interrelated cultures in a little more than a month. Now, I'm not one to ever recommend a short trip — I'm the kind of person who'll head off for a month and come back a year and a half later still wearing the same shirt — but when it comes down to it, you go however you can go, even if it has to be a package deal (though the mere thought sends chills down my spine). This was not a package deal, but we did have an "it's Wednesday, therefore we're in Sihanoukville" itinerary that was as tightly packed as the proverbial tin of sardines and left little room for stopping to smell the roses.

The soon-to-be-related run-in with the worst road on earth came toward the end of our brief but adventure-filled jaunt. We'd already dashed through the tragic beauty of rapid industrialization that is Bangkok; the simultaneously untouched and over-touristed traditional cultures and

landscapes in northern Thailand; the unspoiled island paradise of Kho Chang; Phnom Penh, Cambodia's fledgling capital where anything can be brought, for a price; and Angkor Wat, probably the second-most famous of the seven wonders of the ancient world, even though it's not on the official list.

After the jaw-dropping, eye-popping wonders carved in stone at Angkor, it was time to head back to the polluted streets of Bangkok for a quick present-shopping spree before

facing the day-long journey that would bring us back to the so-called glories of Western civilization. There was just one obstacle remaining in the way of

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an incident-free and exceedingly enjoyable trip — the worst road on earth.

I do not bestow this distinguished title lightly — Cambodia's National Highway 6 is indeed the hands-down winner in the category of the world's worst attempt at road-making. It runs from Siem Reap to the Thai border town of Poipet and is one long nightmare of potholes and mud, motorbikes and trucks, death and decay: a microcosm of the whole country. It's not that the Cambodian people simply don't care about the state of their infrastructure, it's just that history has taught them that every time they build it up, someone will come along and tear it down.

Cambodia has a long and sad history in which imperialists and insane radicals followed on the heels of invaders and conquerors, all of which have left their legacy — mostly negative — on the country and its infrastructure. The French colonials, the American army and the Khmer Rouge all vie for the title of "most oppressive" in Cambodia, but no matter who you favor to win in that particular competition, Cambodia has been the clear loser every time.

If you happen to find yourself in Siem Reap and you want to go to Thailand, there are only two options: land or sky. Plane tickets are expensive and, for budget travelers, out of the question. So the road it was. With that decided, the next question was the best or most interesting method of navigating our chosen medium. Once again, there were two options. We could take a private bus for tourists only and be charged in U.S. dollars, or we could go the local way: pile into the back of a pick-up truck and bounce our way to Thailand. How could we sleep at night if we didn't choose the truck?

The "at your service" man at our guest house was delighted with our chosen mode of transport, and I seem to recall a mischievous glint in his eye when we asked him to reserve us a couple of spots for the next morning — life is always in perfect focus after the fact. We were promised a truck that wasn't "too full" and, sure enough, it was empty when it swung by to pick us up at dawn. That was soon to change. We took off, happily spreading out in the tray, but we hadn't gone more than half a mile when we stopped at a gas station and our world changed dramatically. As soon as we pulled over, what seemed like a thousand people swarmed the truck. When the dust settled, there were six people (all locals) and an infant inside the cab, including the driver and his sidekick, and 12 of us (how I wish I was kidding) in the

tray. It actually wasn't as bad as it might sound, once you established your sovereign authority over the few square inches you were allotted, but the jam-packed situation made possible what happened next.

Somewhere along the way, as we bumped, jostled, squirmed and crammed, the very small fingers on the very small hands of the very small woman sitting behind me were able to expertly cut a very small hole in the lining of the back pocket of my pants, sneak inside, slice open my money belt, take out the contents, sort the cash from the rest, pocket the cash and put the rest back.

How could all this have happened without me noticing? You might well ask. How could I sit there blissfully unaware in my cramped wonderment as this mini master-thief relieved me of the immense weight of my wallet?

I've been asking myself the same questions. I like to think I'm a pretty-aware individual, but who really knows? The one thing I can say for sure is that my assailant was certainly very good at what she did.

To continue the story: We were forced, for no apparent reason, to change trucks in a village about 30 miles from the Thai border, at which point I became aware of the theft, but by then my assailant was long gone with my lunch money. She had taken all the cash I was carrying — a mix of U.S. dollars and Thai Bhat totaling around \$100 — but had left me my passport, which was to come in handy at the upcoming border crossing. She also left me my traveler's checks, credit cards and the continued use of my pants without the immediate aid of a good tailor. She had effectively destroyed my money belt, along with my confidence in the particular style I had become accustomed to in the past few years.

The devastating poverty that had surrounded me since I set foot in Cambodia made coming to grips with the conflict of feelings that the theft brought on much easier. Desperation can lead people to do all sorts of things that they might not otherwise be capable of or able to justify. The hundred dollars or so that I lost on that truck ride would have supported my travels for a week and a bit, but would have fed that woman's family for at least a month, probably two. This, along with my knowledge of the crippling lack of social infrastructure country-wide and the fact that she only took what she could use, rather than the whole lot, which would have been easier for her and far more problematic for me, makes it more understandable.

I could even see myself doing the same thing in her position. I do not

consider myself rich (at least not monetarily), but her social situation and mine are worlds apart — more than from First to Third. If any evidence of the difference in our situations is required, my presence (as a tourist) in the back of a truck in Cambodia carrying \$100 in my pocket should be sufficient.

I had experienced first-hand the actions of a desperate woman, but I had also witnessed the dignity of a person who, while attempting to make her life a little less precarious, did her best to not make mine more difficult than it needed to be. I could respect that, and I silently wished her well.