

NEWSLETTER (19) – APRIL 05.... From KIM in Cambodia xxx

Hello everyone, hope all is well for you and summer is on its way now! Here in Cambodia it is unbearably hot, about 40 degrees each day with very little breeze, although we have had a few brief spells of rain to keep the dust at bay and take some humidity from the air. It is wonderful to have electricity so I can keep cool at weekends and in my lunchtime, although somehow we managed last year with only a few hours in the evening, this 24 hour service is fantastic and I am sure that is why I can manage to sleep at night having a fan on. April is the hottest month in Cambodia and luckily co-incides with Khmer New Year (14th - 16th) where gangs of children throw water at people in the street - so that is quite nice really, as you soon dry off. However, the novelty does wear a little thin over the 3 - 5 days, so the thought of spending the new year in Laos was very appealing - although it is Laos New Year too, and the children do the water throwing there too, so we had a fair amount of soaking which was okay for me, but my camera was not too happy!



At the end of March, PFD had its first ever Staff Retreat to the beach (Kompong Som) - so all 115 PFD staff from all 5 offices made their way there on the Monday morning (leaving Chhlong at 7am, arriving at the beach 6pm - quite a trek!) It was great, well organized and good fun, plus we did actually do some work too! This picture is of the Chhlong team (minus 2 ladies with babies who were busy!), at the Golden Sand Hotel which

was very luxurious for our 3 days. We had a morning of meetings, an afternoon of sport, games and swimming at the beach, and two lovely parties in the evening. It was wonderful to stay at the new hotel - it was being built when I went to the beach in Oct 2003 - especially to have the swimming pool. Although it is very Khmer to go swimming in all your clothes, most people wore shorts and vests to go in the pool! We had wonderful food - seafood buffet (Khmer style) each day, and a great western and khmer breakfast, so you can imagine how much torture it was for me to have a bad stomach for 4 days (only my 2nd stomach upset in 18 months!). The event was to meet all the other staff and also a bit of a competition between the offices, with this in mind, Judi (who is incredibly competitive) got everyone practicing weeks before - so Chhlong team won the sack race, the volleyball and the cheer! Judi was a former cheerleader, so had all these great ideas for a cheer...in the end we all had to sing "Chhlong - don't take no jive, Chhlong - we are alive" whilst doing a routine then we all arranged ourselves into a very large human pyramid - it was fun, but strangely enough the other offices did not want to do their routines



after Chhlong's as it was SO GOOD (Judi nearly cried!). This is a photo of Chandet and I at the party in the evening - it was the first time I had blow dried my hair in ages, so quite like this photo! That night was great fun, tonnes of food, free beer and lots of dancing - even some western music was played - all rounded off by a late night swim in the pool!

Khmer New Year is the major celebration in Cambodia - everyone gets 1 week off work, but most staff take annual leave too and go home to their families for several weeks. For months now, people have been asking me what I was going to do for KNY as it is usual for



families to mix going to the pagoda with going to nice touristy places - Angkor Wat temples, the beach and any mountain or river! Everyone has to have a plan to do something at least, even if it is to visit their friends! I promised to go for a picnic at the tourist place near Kratie - where the Mekong rapids are, so here I am picture with Chhay from PFD, and my pal Saven. We drove there from Kratie on motorbikes, and met up with

Thy from PFD and his family, so we had a ready made picnic (not just water, sticky rice and mangos that Karina & I took!) It was great fun, every year when the water goes very low (about 1 - 2 foot deep), the locals build small bamboo huts that you can rent for hours or days - ready made picnic area, with water to play in. Usually it is packed with people, but a few drops of rain had scared most people away the day I went, so we had the place to ourselves! The water is really quite strong so you have to hold onto the rocks so you don't get swept away, unfortunately the water is about body temperature, so not quite as refreshing as I hoped, but the motorbike journey home was nice and cool! The only thing about the journey home is that a toilet stop was needed, so we stopped at Thy's house and just as we were about to leave, Thy's sister and nieces asked Karina and I to dance for them!! Bear in mind it was 6:30pm, and we were all still wet - the CDs were soon on and a small table and flowers were produced for us to dance around, so we duly did, but made sure that we got the whole family dancing too! Anyhow, 3 dances later (and plenty of photos!), we left and went to a restaurant to end the day off. The next day I headed north to Stung Treng to meet up with Nikki and Rebecca who are VSO volunteers there. I should also mention at the stage that Karina and I got to go to a rather unusual party on the Saturday night in Kratie - a plastic party, where at 9pm we were wrapped in plastic wrap and had to play games in the street... Now this was another of Joe's brilliant ideas, unfortunately not many people attended (maybe from fear?), so Karina and I did our best to join in without bring disrepute to the name of PFD!!

Stung Treng is a nice place, only about 30kms from the border to Laos, and quite a remote place really, but now benefiting from a rather nice road from Kratie which has

turned the 7 hour journey to just 3 hours. Previously the best way to travel there was by fast boat up the Mekong, but as there is now a regular bus service from Phnom Penh to Stung Treng for \$10 (the boat costs \$10 from Kratie!), the boats are now not running - maybe they will again in the rainy season if the road becomes difficult. In Stung Treng there is a huge bridge being built which crosses the Sekong river, therefore will provide a direct route from Laos to Phnom Penh, which is a major development in the transport routes of Cambodia. The only thing not so good about Stung Treng is the electricity situation at the moment, it used to have 18 hours of electricity and now only has about 4 hours, which is pretty tough at this time of year. Nikki and Rebecca are doing their best to cope and not grumble too much, especially to me as we coped in Chhlong with 4 hours for over 1 year, but never the less, it is easier to manage with when you know no different, than when it is taken away! We therefore planned to spend time together at Khmer New Year but wanted to go somewhere cool - so Laos was top of the list, Nikki and Rebecca did their homework and we arranged visas etc and we planned to travel on the Wednesday. Tuesday we would be busy, Nikki & Rebecca had planned to start the decorating of the children's ward in Stung Treng hospital - so the paint and brushes were bought and it was arranged for 25 children and a talented artist to attend to spruce up the drab white walls to make it "child friendly", being Khmer New Year there were no in-patients, so that made the job much easier! We all practiced drawing pictures, then in one morning, the kids were let loose in 3 rooms to brighten them up - it was great, all the rooms looked great - especially the one I worked in as we ended up with a beautiful dolphin, flowers, butterflies and a rainbow...made me feel more cheerful, unfortunately the scary dragon in one room was enough to give nightmares until he was painted in nice bright colors. All in all, it was very successful and I am sure the children who have to stay in hospital will be very happy with all the effort, all brought about from the money raised in the sponsored cycle ride in November! The playground built already in the hospital grounds is lovely, and we are about to do the same in Chhlong with the money that my kind family and friends sent!

So onto Laos - we left Stung Treng on the Wednesday morning, we took a taxi into Laos, stopping at the small wooden cabins that were the Cambodian & Laos border authorities and unfortunately had to settle for a \$2 bribe in Laos, though Cambodia had not asked for any money at all. We then hooked up with a minibus to take us north to Pakse, where we then hoped onto a bus to take us to 'Tad Fan' resort (hopefully meaning a little cool!) - it said in the sacred Lonely Planet that this area of the Bolovan Plateau was cool, with waterfalls and coffee plantations to visit...so we went there! Good luck was on our side as there was a bungalow free for us to stay and it was a good price and very nice indeed - so we booked in

for 2 nights, and planned to go on one of the organized treks. The bungalows were all dotted along a pretty path overlooking the Tad Fan waterfall, and there was a nice restaurant and bar to relax in. The hot shower and blankets on the bed were a dead give away that the LP had not lied and it was blissfully cool there. We went for a lovely long walk in a government coffee plantation one day and the next went on the trek to the top of the Tad Fan waterfall. The trek was good, but after laughing at the suggestion of bringing 'leach socks', we all wished we had when leaches were all over the place and kept attaching to our feet (sandals not recommended really!) One guy on the trek had on long trousers, trainers and socks, but when he started bleeding from his thigh, we knew that he had been unlucky with the leaches - probably down to our guide Ling frequently checking our feet for horrid little suckers!



This photo is at a different waterfall where we could go swimming - it was quite the tourist place, but the water was so cool and refreshing, a great place to do a leach check!! We moved onto the town of Pakse that afternoon, it was very quiet there probably because of the holidays. We spent our last day in Laos at the pretty small town of Champasak which was lovely, despite lots of kids soaking us as we travelled along the road - we went to a small temple what was thought to be similar to Angkor Wat temples. Then home to Cambodia where the Laos border guards were very drunk celebrating the new year, they covered us in powder and water, made us dance and drink beer and even then still charged a \$2 bribe each to leave Laos...whilst Cambodia no bribe again - it was nice to be home, even if it is hot! We took a speedboat to Stung Treng and got back to coping with the heat!

Take care and be happy in all that you do..... All my love, Kim x