

# Riding the bamboo

## Brent Crane

When Matthew Trew, a Canadian raised in South Carolina, was twenty-two, he took a bus north-westward from Phnom Penh to Battambang. It was 2009 and, though Trew had never been to Cambodia, he had just finished a master's program at the University of Toronto, where he learned Khmer. With paltry funds and no plans, he had bought a one-way air ticket; the important thing was being there. But he despised the dusty bustle of the capital and, on one of his first days in country, opted for a quick getaway.

Skilled in Khmer — good enough to casually read a book — Trew hooked the attention of a fellow passenger on the bus. “He started asking me all these questions: ‘Why do you know this language?’ ‘Are you CIA?’ (which is still a question I get a lot). I told him, ‘No, I’m an anthropologist.’”

The stranger said that his friend taught at a university in Battambang and was seeking an instructor in cultural studies. On the bus the stranger made a call to his friend, who told Trew to come by for an interview. “I was like, ‘Ok, I’m gonna totally get robbed but what the hell!’” But it wasn’t a scam: that night Trew visited the school and was signed on the spot. He taught there for nearly a year before returning to the United States, for a PhD program at the University of Wisconsin. But he had fallen in love with Battambang. “This is part of the reason why, when people say, ‘Why do you work in Cambodia?’ my response is usually ‘Destiny’. Weird things like that just happen in Cambodia. Things just happen where it works out.”

We were speaking on the grounds of Chan Thay Chhoueng, a small Battambang winery, around noon. There was twinkling music, birdsong, the bubbly whir from a fountain. It is the only vineyard in the country. Battambang is full of peculiarities, and Trew takes great pleasure in revealing them.

Compared to others in Cambodia, the city is quaint, quiet and relatively clean. It is cosmopolitan, too, with influences from the Thai and French, who colonised the province, consecutively, in the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries. Battambang Khmer is distinct, as is its cuisine, and people say that the monkhood practises more seriously there. It projects a sense of quiet autonomy. “Historically, Battambang has never really wanted to be part of Cambodia. It’s always been independent or at least fought to remain independent,” Trew explained. “The Thai came; they resisted the Thai. The French came; they *surely* resisted the French around here.” For many, he added, Phnom Penh is merely another distant authority.

Now, two months away from thirty, Trew has short brown hair, a thickening beard, a belly and small bespectacled eyes. Always in long pants and a button-down, he would never be mistaken for a tourist, which is probably his intention. He exudes a kind of Nordic bookishness. Over the past seven years, he had split his life between Wisconsin and Battambang. Tourism there is the subject of his ongoing dissertation, and he intends to produce a book on the place one day. He knows every landmark, every hidden gem, every person, it seems.

For me, a lone clueless traveller, Trew was a holy grail: raised in my own culture, passionately knowledgeable and full of anecdotes, he was the ideal guide. We had corresponded when I was a reporter at the *Phnom Penh Post*. Having left that job and in the process of leaving Cambodia, I’d notified him that I



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would be passing through. He was content to show me around his adopted home. I was happy for his company.

Battambang exists in the north-west corner of the country, nearly due east of Bangkok and just west of the Tonle Sap, Cambodia’s great lake. In the heat of the day, when the sun shone punishingly in August, the streets emptied out of all but the city’s most enterprising and would not fill again until it sank. At dusk people headed to Phsar Nath, the old market, where vendors hawked greasy noodles, rubbery grilled chicken wings, charred kebabs and other mystery meats near a lazy intersection.

The French laid out Battambang on a neat grid, and most of their old structures are there, in various stages of decay. Phsar Nath, with its crumbling clock tower and peeling exterior, was the egregious example. But the relics lend Battambang a certain warmth and wisdom. I enjoyed strolling its languid avenues, past sweating store owners in old rattan chairs clutching hand fans, rows of attractive French storefronts, yellow balustrades and out-of-place Old World motifs. No one hounded me. Often there was music drifting from some hidden source, and in the morning, before the motorbikes, one could hear chirping near the slow-moving Sangkae River, which I walked along at night when the way was empty and dark. Battambang is no bastion of prosperity, but there was nothing particularly destitute about it either. Here was the temperament of the village; slow going, congenial, nonchalant, somehow urbanised without the expected complexities of urban life; I saw no gridlock, no slums, no beggars.

Trew overloaded me with information. Over two days, he took me to see a bat colony, three restaurants, a noted monastery (it had Angkor Wat in miniature; Prince Sihanouk was ordained there), two sacred caves and one sacred mountain with a cursed cave. He was eager to share his insights, often with a sort of boyish impatience, pointing out every historic landmark, relaying every folktale.

I sensed in him a need to share his findings with an engaged listener. Yet he also made clear that much of what he was telling me was, as he called it, his “intellectual property” — information he had collected through hard research that he alone had the right to disseminate. I could recognise the sentiment, even sympathise. It is common among travellers who venerate self-discovery off the trodden path. That a place can be claimed, especially by a foreigner, is a fantasy. But the reflex is real.

Certainly Trew had an academic claim on Battambang. He is one of the only, if not the only, trained anthropologist who has taken a serious interest in the place. With the help of a local assistant, Trew has conducted countless hours of life history interviews, dug through dusty forgotten archives, read everything ever published about it. He described a life of ceaseless exploration, making repeated visits to all the sites, asking questions, checking log books — he is Battambang’s eternal visitor. But his peerless efforts can also make him pompous, territorial and quick to criticise; Trew is the sort of methodology-obsessed anthropologist who might scoff at precisely this sort of article, full of first impressions and indulgent description.

Trew had one great love in Battambang: the bamboo train. It is a fascinating contraption and, in its tragic quirkiness, fully Cambodian. It consists of several trolleys, or *norries* as the Khmers call them. Made of bamboo-slatted platforms with four iron wheels and a jerry-rigged engine, each one is about 300 x 120 cm in size, big enough for around a dozen Cambodians. They ride up and down a colonial-era line of narrow-gauge track. They were designed for quick and easy deconstruction, because they have to swap spots when two meet going in opposite directions. This was a post-Khmer Rouge ingenuity, created to serve the transportation needs of an isolated populace with few cars and fewer navigable routes between towns, troubled as they were by bandits and landmines. It was the kind of solution one might devise following an apocalypse. But it served its purposes.

Eventually the train became Battambang’s leading tourist attraction, which is what drew Trew to it. He has ridden the line countless times, and everyone knew him there, from the young muscled conductors to the mothers and children hawking trinkets at both ends.

Our trolley wobbled as we picked up speed, going along a ridge walled with bushes. The young conductor had shaggy hair, sparse tattoos on thick arms and a shirt that read: “My train of thought always seems to be delayed”. On both sides of us stretched endless paddies of neon green. Swarms of dragonflies hovered at face height above the track, always dispersing the moment before impact. “It’s like in *Star Wars* when they go into hyperdrive!” Trew yelled over the rattle, his little eyes gazing coolly ahead. This was Trew’s element, banging along at high speed, only a metre or so from an ancient overgrown line. It was the happiest I saw him.

We passed over a small bridge where there was a gap in the bushes, revealing expansive views of empty country. Trew reflected on how he used to visit here to sip sunset beers with friends. It sounded idyllic.

We came to a halt to disassemble for an incoming group of Germans. The two conductors worked in perfect efficiency on our trolley as the group snapped photos. “When I first started coming here there were no tourists,” repeated Trew. Dusk was taking its time to unfold, and the air felt heavy and warm, all still but for the buzz of tiny wings. “I could get on alone.”

After years of scares, it seems that the bamboo train will finally be closing for good; in September the Railroad Department announced plans to revive the original northern route, telling operators to “look for other jobs”. As of writing, though, it is still chugging. □

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