



## Off the Rails in Phnom Penh: Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja

By Amit Gilboa

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Phnom Penh is a city of beauty and degradation, tranquillity and violence, and tradition and transformation; a city of temples and brothels, music and gunfire, and festivals and coups.

But for many, it is simply an anarchic celebration of insanity and indulgence. Whether it is the \$2 wooden shack brothels, the marijuana-pizza restaurants, the AK-47 fireworks displays, or the intricate brutality of Cambodian politics, Phnom Penh never ceases to amaze and amuse. For an individual coming from a modern Western society, it is a place where the immoral becomes acceptable and the insane becomes normal.

Amid this chaos lives an extraordinary group of foreign residents. Some are adventurers whose passion for life is given free rein in this unrestrained madhouse. Others are misfits who, unable to make it anywhere else, wallow in the decadent and inviting environment. This unparalleled first-hand account provides a fascinating, shocking, disturbing and often hilarious picture of contemporary Phnom Penh and the bizarre collection of expats who make it their home. As they search for love in the brothels or adventure on the firing range, Phnom Penh Journey follows them into the dark heart of guns, girls and ganja.

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## **Off the Rails in Phnom Penh: Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja** By Amit Gilboa **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"There is a beast in all of us, but in Cambodia that beast is let out into the open," says Amit Gilboa of the country he calls a "fiction writer's dream". The Bangkok-based Gilboa's debut book, *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh*, is not a work of fiction, however, even though it reads like one. It is a racy, disturbing, fantastic, and sometimes funny account of the exploits of a motley group of expatriates in 1990's Phnom Penh, who spend their days visiting \$2 brothels, eating ganja-topped pizzas, snorting heroin and shooting rockets at firing ranges. -- *South China Morning Post*, April 4, 1999. By Kavitha Rao

As a literary genre the travel narrative is often genteel to the point of yawn-inducing boredom. Maybe that's why first-time author Amit Gilboa's recent book, *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh*, is causing such a stir in Southeast Asia. Just one glance at the subtitle--"Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja"--tells you his hellish holiday in Cambodia will unfold more like a gonzo rant from Hunter S. Thompson than an erudite essay by Paul Theroux.

Gilboa spins a fascinating if somewhat fractured tale about a beautiful country whose people have been ravaged by decades of turmoil.

With its mix of random jottings, bizarre character sketches and diary entries, Gilboa's account plunges readers into the center of the Khmer storm. -- *Time Magazine*, February 1, 1999. By Jeffrey Ressler

The book is phenomenal. On a scale of the amount of muck raked it must come very high in the annals of reportage... The book...is by turns attractive, repulsive and frightening but never boring. I found it hard to put down, and will never forget it. -- *The Nation*, Bangkok, August 30, 1998. By Simon Johnstone

The debut work of young writer Amit Gilboa is a helter-skelter low-life travelogue through that neighboring madhouse named Phnom Penh. A book easy for old hands to dismiss as immature or nave, it's invigorating, exciting, packed full of fun and infectious youthful exuberance. -- *Bangkok Metro Magazine*, September 1998. By Ian Crawshaw

#### About the Author

Amit Gilboa was born in Israel, grew up in America, and currently lives in Bangkok. Over the past 10 years, he has studied in China, entrepreneured in Viet Nam, worked and researched in Cambodia, and written in Thailand, as well as working as a consultant in Washington, DC. Gilboa is fluent in Chinese, Khmer and Hebrew, and proficient in Thai and Vietnamese. While in Cambodia, Gilboa developed customer service training for Royal Air Cambodge, began a call-back partnership, and sold airline tickets, as well as teaching English and learning Khmer. In addition to his recent book about Cambodia, Gilboa has published numerous articles in North American magazines and newspapers. Gilboa is a 1991 graduate of Wesleyan University.

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Almost immediately, I became committed to the idea of investigating this madhouse of a country and its foreign-born inmates. I wanted to understand the details of this country which seemed to consist entirely of the perversion of what would be called 'normal' in many other societies. I also wanted to understand the

attractions that this country held for the people who chose to come here to live. Finally, I was determined to successfully relate all of this to those who have never been to Cambodia.

Between September 1996 and October 1997, I made several more trips to Phnom Penh, each time taking about a month off from my less-than-explosive journalistic career in Viet Nam. The standard place to eat and sleep for backpackers, low-budget visa runners, and also many longer-term residents in Phnom Penh is the sadly misnamed Majestic Restaurant and Guesthouse. During my visits I spent my time, using the Majestic as a base, learning about a range of extraordinary lifestyles from the people who were actually living them. I talked with them over quick breakfasts before their classes, and over long lunches before their brothel trips. I listened quietly as they talked in groups, and I interviewed them earnestly one on one.

Most of my conversations revolved around the sensationalistic aspects of living in Phnom Penh, and all of these are addressed throughout this book covering: The bizarre political system, and the anarchy and violence that result; the permissiveness and recklessness regarding sex, AIDS, and drugs; the ease with which the foreigners earn money from the Khmers; some interesting observations about the foreigners of Phnom Penh; and observations on the Khmers themselves. While these chapters detail the more outrageous aspects of life in Phnom Penh, there are other, more subtle facets of living in the Kingdom of Cambodia that make it a mind-altering experience. It was these subtleties, as much as the sex, drugs and violence, that entranced me to Cambodia.

Khmer culture undeniably accommodates one of the world's greatest artistic traditions. No matter how many times I go past the Royal Palace, it never ceases to amaze me. The beautiful colors, the intricate patterns, the four giant faces looking out from the top of the central tower. It's as if, just by appreciating it, I'm somehow a part of this monumental culture.

As millions of tourists and travelers will attest, the massive size and incredible artistry of Angkor Wat, the country's greatest monument, is an easy way to understand the glory of the Khmer Empire and the cultural heights it reached. But the strength of Khmer culture is not limited to monuments. I have traveled all around East Asia and the popular radio stations play American rock and roll, or dreadful local imitations of American rock and roll. Cambodia is the first Asian country I have been to where I actually heard mostly traditional music. And the music itself is so beautiful, the way they slide up and down the scale, all in these mournful minor keys. The very traditional music is played on an ensemble of musical instruments including gongs, bells, drums, and various other string and percussive pieces. As a person not usually given to romanticizing "exotic" cultures, I was totally unprepared for the effect this strange and exquisite music has on me. Whenever they start playing, I always feel as if some part of me is being transported to a mythical Angkorian kingdom of princes, warriors, dancers, and gods.

The clash between this traditional culture and the modern world is part of the energy of Phnom Penh. A journalist remarks that, "This is a society that's been through hundreds of years of agrarian feudalism, twenty-three years of civil war, ten years of Communism and isolation, ten years of foreign occupation, and then the world just flipped a switch and turned Cambodia into this democratic, capitalistic, open, developing country. You think there might be some tension created?"

The fact that the process of Cambodia's 'development' is still in the early stages is clearly an attraction for many. One is constantly jarred by the contrasts. Wealthy generals drive by in Landcruisers or BMW's flanked by bodyguards, past cyclo (three-wheeled pedicab) drivers who own nothing but the cyclo and one change of clothes. While the generals own two or three villas, the cyclo drivers actually live in their cyclos because they can't even afford to rent an \$8-a-month shanty. There is an overwhelming rawness that confronts the visitor; the trash in the streets, the little children running around naked, the dust, the unpaved roads, and the shacks. And among all of this one regularly chances upon a beautiful wat (Buddhist temple)

rising up into the sky. While stunning in its own right, the sight is even more amazing in the middle of all the shit that surrounds it.

Similarly, many people cite their own bizarre reasons for finding Cambodia so interesting. A long conversation I had with a tourist provided the subtitle for this book. He expounded about why Phnom Penh is nothing less than a real-life version of the movie *Apocalypse Now*. "Think about it, *Apocalypse Now* and *Heart of Darkness* [the Joseph Conrad novel on which the movie is based], are built on the premise of what happens when people live without the normal restraints of society. That's exactly what we're seeing here. The foreigners here have absolutely nothing stopping them from behaving completely irrationally, and completely without judgment or inhibitions. I'm telling you, it's no coincidence that they put Colonel Kurtz in Cambodia."

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Brian Wilson:**

This *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh: Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja* book is just not ordinary book, you have after that it the world is in your hands. The benefit you have by reading this book will be information inside this reserve incredible fresh, you will get information which is getting deeper you read a lot of information you will get. That *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh: Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja* without we know teach the one who looking at it become critical in thinking and analyzing. Don't possibly be worry *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh: Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja* can bring any time you are and not make your handbag space or bookshelves' turn into full because you can have it with your lovely laptop even telephone. This *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh: Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja* having very good arrangement in word and also layout, so you will not really feel uninterested in reading.

#### **Celia Robertson:**

Spent a free time and energy to be fun activity to accomplish! A lot of people spent their down time with their family, or their own friends. Usually they doing activity like watching television, about to beach, or picnic inside the park. They actually doing same every week. Do you feel it? Do you wish to something different to fill your free time/ holiday? Can be reading a book may be option to fill your cost-free time/ holiday. The first thing that you will ask may be what kinds of book that you should read. If you want to attempt look for book, may be the publication untitled *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh: Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja* can be excellent book to read. May be it can be best activity to you.

#### **Ann Bland:**

A lot of people always spent all their free time to vacation or go to the outside with them loved ones or their friend. Were you aware? Many a lot of people spent they free time just watching TV, or playing video games all day long. If you want to try to find a new activity that is look different you can read the book. It is really fun in your case. If you enjoy the book you read you can spent the entire day to reading a publication. The book *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh: Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja* it is extremely good to read. There are a lot of individuals who recommended this book. They were enjoying reading this book. In

case you did not have enough space to deliver this book you can buy often the e-book. You can m0ore effortlessly to read this book from a smart phone. The price is not very costly but this book has high quality.

**Arthur Johnson:**

A lot of people said that they feel fed up when they reading a book. They are directly felt the idea when they get a half regions of the book. You can choose the book Off the Rails in Phnom Penh: Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja to make your reading is interesting. Your skill of reading ability is developing when you including reading. Try to choose basic book to make you enjoy to study it and mingle the feeling about book and reading through especially. It is to be 1st opinion for you to like to available a book and study it. Beside that the publication Off the Rails in Phnom Penh: Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja can to be your friend when you're really feel alone and confuse with what must you're doing of their time.

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