

# Cambodia Expedition 2013

After months of planning, departure day for the exotic country of Cambodia had finally arrived. The atmosphere was charged with excitement however tears made an appearance as we bade farewell to family members whilst commencing our three week journey. After watching endless movies during the flight, 15 Woodford girls stepped off the plane to be greeted by a waft of hot air and swarms of mosquitos. Whilst slapping the bugs off our bare skin at every opportunity we all realised that the following weeks would prove to be a summer very different to our previous ones. Our expedition consisted of three different phases. Phase 1 enabled us to explore the city of Siem Reap and acclimatise to the environment. The 1<sup>st</sup> day was used to finalise the itinerary for the trip and the 2<sup>nd</sup> to become accustomed with Cambodian culture.

The need to get grips with Cambodian culture in our eyes gave us an excuse to weave our way through the market squares, ignoring the challenging aroma of fish as we haggled with shopkeepers for gifts and general necessities. The team, content with their purchases, had high spirits for the next phase - the trek. Three days of physical endurance combined with a lack of facilities proved to be a very challenging period. However, from west end musicals to the latest rap songs we managed to sing and boost team spirits through the days' treks uniting the team as we "harmonised" confident that we had the X factor.



Feeling as fit as ever, we all scrambled back onto the coach to return back to the urban Cambodia. Days were spent learning about the devastating history of the country and about the lives of the Cambodians. However, the project phase gave us an insight to what life is really like there. We travelled to the village of Tatai ready to make a difference to this community. All the girls felt a sense of sympathy as we saw for ourselves the living conditions of many. The project phase consisted of building toilets and more pleasantly a vegetable patch in order for the villagers to sell their products to neighbouring villages. 5 days of hard work followed as we all worked through the downpours of the monsoon. Covered in mud from head to toe - each girl modelled their mud masks as they put heart and soul into making a difference.

The children from the village arrived every day and were ecstatic when they received their presents which consisted of toys, educational books and sports equipment. Football matches against the village children commenced every day at 9am and this gave the toddlers a chance to show off their Manchester United kits. Some girls used their new colouring pencils to draw portraits of the team to show a sense of appreciation whilst the others played hairdressers. The last day of the project phase arrived, the community thanked us for our help as we said our goodbyes to the children we had bonded with. We sat on the coach, waving as the children blew kisses, feeling a great deal of sadness on leaving the village. This phase of the expedition was the most life changing experience for the whole team. We left Cambodia with a great sense of gratitude and a completely different attitude towards life.



The team gleefully boarded the plane back to London. The bonds we formed and the life skills learnt will never be forgotten; our independence has grown and we all wished we could turn back time to start the trip once again. We were lucky to be offered such an opportunity but even luckier that our parents allowed us to go. Those three weeks of our lives changed us as people and made us more aware of the world around us and how lucky we all are to be here right now wearing clean clothes, able to read and write and receiving a free education. Personally, what changed my perceptions was the fact that the children although wearing the same clothes and sleeping with a leaking roof never showed any sign of discontent. The community as a whole were very positive people and co-operated with each other yet here we become exasperated over the smallest hurdle in life. If you ever have the chance to go on an expedition please take the opportunity because we promise that there is no greater joy we have ever experienced than helping someone in need.

**By Natasha Patel 12 BQ on behalf of the expedition team.**