



Shifting shapes

For those living on the Tonle Sap lake in Cambodia, faith is fluid and addresses are ever-altering

Continued on page 14





From far left: The "one dollar" kids of Tonle Sap brandishing reptiles; boats double up as homes and market places; kids have an early training in the ways of tourists

Shifting shapes



Continued from page 13

Our first evening in Siem Reap, we venture into the Tonle Sap lake. We are there for a 'sunset tour' of the floating village Chong Khneas on the lake. Tourist trap, I mutter darkly beneath my breath as our boat wades across the shallow muddy waters of the lake. At regular intervals, boats pull up next to ours, with men and children, mostly children, offering to sell everything a thirsty traveller could need, from cold drinks to massive coconuts for the "sweet coconut juice Khmer special".

Daring entrepreneurs

We finally give in when the most daring of them all jumps into our boat from the speed-boat that her dad has got close to ours. The stunt

leaves us speechless, reminding us of similar scenes from Hindi movies starring Ajay Devgan — all just to sell us a lukewarm can of Coca Cola. We pay her, mainly out of respect for her entrepreneurial spirit and she takes the money with a shy smile, poses for my camera and jumps back into her boat. As we watch, father and daughter disappear into the distance, possibly in search of the next tourist boat.

Ten minutes on the water later, the village comes into view. We see homes built on boats and barges, men lazing on hammocks stretched across the breadth of the tiny boats, old women with sharp beady eyes selling flowers and vegetables and little boys rowing across the placid waters in little plastic and tin tubs.

Some of the homes seem to have their own tiny pier attached to them, four to five boats tied

around the huts; they bobble around in the calm waters, as if in eager anticipation of the evening's outing.

Liquid currency in a tourist trap

We pass the floating school (my boatman says the school has a floating basketball court too, though I cannot see it then), and just when I think I have seen — and heard — everything, the floating cathedral, well, floats into view. It is a jigsaw puzzle of colours and geometric shapes, boats painted in bright blues and greens, protected from prying eyes by fading but cheerful orange and pink curtains.

Right in the middle of the lake, we hop on to a 'restaurant' which doubles up as a crocodile farm, and are directed to the roof-top two flights up rickety wooden stairs. From the top, we watch in silence as the sun sets in the distance, and

lights come on slowly in the boat homes all around.

The Vietnamese refugees who have made their home on the waters of the Tonle Sap (translated locally as the 'great lake'), are nomads in their own right, their lives dictated by the rainfall, water levels and currents. It is stunning to see how they have adapted to life on the water: A few homes even sport TV antennae, powered by a centralised power station carrying car batteries!

Suddenly, we hear the clamour of "one dollar, mistah" from a boat that has pulled up close to ours. There are three children on a small boat. "You want to play with snake?" they ask, carelessly brandishing the reptiles around their necks like so many rubber hoses.

The one dollar kids of Cambodia are famous for their insouciant demands from tourists. As we start our way back to shore, the tinny voices — "You buy banana, mistah?" — follow us in the dim darkness of the lake as life floats by casually around us.

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CAMBODIA



VISITOR INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Fly to Siem Reap from Bangkok on fantastically cheap Bangkok Air or take the long way by road from Thailand. You can also fly to Phnom Penh and take a bus or even a boat down to Siem Reap.

The Tonle Sap is about an hour's drive in a taxi or more exotic tuk-tuk (local autorickshaw) from the city centre. There are several tour operators inside the city who organise boat trips for \$15 (Rs 687) to \$30 (Rs 1,375).

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Tonle Sap is the largest lake in South East Asia and is home to over 5000 people living on boats or on temporary stilt houses. The "great lake" joins the Mekong river at Phnom Penh by way of the Tonle Sap river. During the rainy season, the water from the Tonle Sap flows back into the lake, causing serious flooding, as the lake expands to up to four times its length. As the waters rise, entire villages move inland along narrow channels for the next few months. By October, when the rains finally stop, the villagers move back "home" to the lake, their boats and fishing nets.

