

## **Report for 2025 HELP Cambodia Trip**

**1/11/2025 – 14/11/2025**

First up; a huge thank you to Kath Wallace for giving us such an amazing experience. Her care, organization, humour and especially her patience in shepherding us around were truly exceptional. Each day was a combination of social enterprise experiences, Cambodian travel experiences and plenty of fun.

We flew into Siem Reap and spent the next 8 nights there. The Bygone Hotel run by Heartprint was our sanctuary. As the only guests, we made the most of the pool, the wine, the cocktails and the beer each afternoon before heading out again.

Whilst in Siem Reap we had the opportunity to visit and experience a range of social enterprise projects. The Kulen Elephant Sanctuary with the comedic guide Seth, not only benefits the elephants but employs people from the surrounding community as well. The Lotus Farm does the same for local women—turning lotus stems into the softest, finest silk through an incredibly detailed process. The canoe tour through the lotus fields was... interesting and a bit wobbly!

Day 4 was one of the highlights. We visited Piset's village, where his passion for helping his community was inspiring. We chatted with the children in their schoolroom, enjoyed a delicious lunch together, and watched them ride off on bikes that were clearly far too big. But best of all was visiting Stage 1 of the "Mother House" funded by HELP Cambodia, and meeting the first resident, a beautiful 81 year old great grandmother caring for her two 8 year old great granddaughters. The bus trip home was long and windy, down muddy and potholed roads but we took the opportunity to test our quiz skills.

Day 5 was a big day. Wendy and Garry from Heartprint had already outlined the long list of programmes that they run - English lessons, financial literacy, hospitality training, house building, women's groups, an outlet to sell the women's handiwork, baby bundles and education support for children aged 3 to university. They are in the process of building a new community centre where there will be a café, a computer room and eventually a hairdressing school.

In the morning we accompanied them to the market to buy supplies for house number 138 which we were going to hand over later. It was a simple, one room house on stilts built in four days for \$US2000 by the Heartprint build team with the family's help. The thumbprint signing ceremony with the recipients, a grandmother, her 2 daughters and 3 grandchildren and Wendy and Garry was very moving. The family's joy was obvious.

Later we met Darrel Steer, from the Cambodian Clean Water and Sanitation project. I have never met a man so enthusiastic about septic tanks. Darrel's project is about so much more than septic tanks though. His motto is "sanitation, education, dignity and safety" Provide clean sanitation and you reduce the occurrence of stomach upsets that keep children out of school, you provide dignity and safety for women in particular, who no longer have to risk squatting in the field. He was so enthusiastic to show us his toilets that we missed our slot at the Apopo Landmine Centre!



Day 6 took us back to the Heartprint school where we had a great time playing with the children - pickle ball, tangram puzzles, human knots, tunnel ball and more. The children laughed their way through the activities. We saw Heartprint's simple but effective way of teaching financial literacy and witnessed the enthusiasm of everyone involved.

This was a busy schedule, but we still found time for some great food – Sister Srey restaurant supporting landmine removal and the Haven restaurant training students from Heartprint, were favourites.



Although the famous sunrise at Angkor Wat didn't show up for us, the temples themselves were still magical and awe inspiring. The huge tree roots wrapping around the temple ruins gave everyone a chance for their inner Lara Croft moment. We also made it to the Apopo Centre to see the landmine detecting rats in action. Landmines are still a major problem in Cambodia.

Lastly who could forget the amazing skills of the performers at the Phare Circus and the tranquil canoe tour of the Kampong Phluk water village where the houses and shops are on stilts and the children play in the

water in large tin washing bowls!

And so to Phnom Penh - another long bus trip with quizzes!

The Killing Fields and S21 prison were deeply confronting and a sobering reminder of Cambodia's recent history. They stood in stark contrast to the resilience, determination, joy and warmth of all the people that we met.

Silk Island continued the theme of local people helping local people but the focus and highlight of our days in Phnom Penh were our visits to the DCC school. The welcome was extraordinary. The children's joy, enthusiasm and pride in their learning were beautiful to witness. They value the lessons at the DCC so much that even the youngest turn up in the afternoon despite having already attended 'Cambodian' school.

The dances on the first evening proudly showed off their culture and the senior student presentations showed off their English language skills. The insights into Cambodian culture that they provided, the interaction between the senior students and the younger ones, the diligence that every single one of them brought to their lessons and the sheer joy with which they played our games, danced with us, hugged us and laughed was mind blowing.

Bophal and his wife have created something truly special with the support that HELP Cambodia has provided. We were each presented with a beautiful handmade wreath that took 3 months to create. The number of students going on to university and giving back to the school is a testament to the success of the school. It was a privilege to be able to present the children with new backpacks, school uniforms and school supplies.

It was wonderful to see how much the donated glasses, laptops, games, and clothes that we had packed our suitcases with were appreciated. A big thank you to everyone who contributed.



Finally, massages, markets, (so many markets!), the organized chaos of our tuk tuk rides, lunch on the bank of the mighty Mekong, the friendship and humour within our group, not to mention the shared wine around the pool, all added to an unforgettable trip. So again a massive thank you to Kath, our intrepid Captain. (Ruth)

### **Some Reflections by Other Trip Participants.**

No matter whether people are on the poverty line or not, the people of Cambodia are happy overall. From the littlies at the DCC to the elderly on receiving their very modest housing, you could see the joy showing. I now understand why the starting point of having clean water and sanitary toilets is so important in ensuring that children are able to attend school with reduced medical issues as a result. As "Dunny Darrel" stated which applies to all the projects we were privileged to see, "helping one family might not change the world, but it can change the world for that family."

Kathy's leadership ensured the wonderful camaraderie of the crew throughout the trip and no doubt promotes the reason why charities such as HELP Cambodia exist. (Peter)

As our second trip, it is impossible to go past the happy smiling faces of the children, in the schools, on the street wherever.

It was special to hand over the house, I have watched so many handovers on Facebook and never imagined to be able to be there in person. Such an extra special time for the recipients.

I am amazed at how Heartprint just keeps growing, adding more and more experiences for their children, learning not only English but money management, computing and so many life skills.

All the people who give so much of themselves, both Australian and Cambodian, for the people of Cambodia are an amazing example of compassion. Something we should all strive to do. It was great to see that the DCC school is progressing and giving the students the opportunity to go on to university. (Gail)

As first time observers Terry and I felt that HELP Cambodia should be justly proud re the results of its support in both Siem Reap and Phnom Penh. Whilst each enterprise has a different approach, the support given has enabled progress with obvious positive results. (Lois and Terry)

My first introduction to HELP Cambodia was about 10 to 12 years ago when Darren and Kathy put forward a request to our Rotary Club for some funding for the DCC school. I think most of our members weren't sure exactly how this money would benefit the children.

I thought going on this year's trip was an opportunity to see firsthand how the funds were used and at the same time enjoy a holiday in Cambodia.

Well, the trip exceeded all my expectations by seeing the joy and friendliness of the children we met, experiencing the sights and history of Cambodia and meeting and enjoying the company of new friends I met on the trip.

Every area we visited was worthy of further funding to help improve their lifestyle. The building of new houses was a very important project and being involved with the handover of a new home to a family was very rewarding.

The memory of eating lunch of local chicken and fish and warm beer with a local family on Silk Island on the bank of the Mekong River will stay with me forever.

But I thought the tour with Darrel Steer ("Dunny Darrel"), for Cambodia Clean Water and Sanitation Project was high on my list as in Cambodia there is "Water, Water everywhere and not a drop to drink". So clean water and clean toilets is a must.

The highlight for me was our last night at the DCC School and integrating with all those happy, laughing and affectionate children. (David)

Although this country is extremely poor, just emerging from the terrible conflicts of the '70's and '80's, the abundance of happy smiles and waves as we passed by shows a people of great strength and tenacity. The effort to get an education to better their lives is encouraging. I felt quite overwhelmed at times, just from their obvious struggle but also determination.

I'll never forget this trip. (Anne)

To be part of something bigger than yourself - heartwarming.

To give when life tends to be about taking - humbling.

To feel the joy and the wonder of happiness given and shared with others - a memory for life.

To experience a world so far apart from our own and see how even just a little makes a big difference - no words.

To my fellow travellers - sharing this time was a joy.  
To the one(s) that made it possible - forever grateful. (Mary-Ellen)

On Tour with HELP Cambodia & our fearless leader - "Captain" Kath.

The opportunity to travel in a small group to explore Cambodia, visit the DCC school and some of the social enterprises that HELP Cambodia have partnered with was too good to resist.

This trip started out as an adventure for me - but it quickly became so much more.

We were fortunate to experience the works of another charity – 'Heartprint' and the many arms of their endeavours... providing a Community Hub for children, building homes for families in need, funding and providing a well for water, and toilet facilities. It is incredible to see the difference this can make to a family. (Just ask "Dunny Darryl" – that is another adventure & charity - toilet & well 1001 complete!)

An initiative of HELP Cambodia was to bring some wooden toys, towels and funds to support these efforts too. In Siem Reap we enjoyed accommodation for our group at The Bygone Boutique Hotel. Another Heartprint initiative where the staff are trained in hospitality. It felt like home for the duration of our stay. Important to note that some of these students are also studying at university.

We learnt about the history, visited tourist attractions, markets & had expert guides to inform us along the way. The highlight for me was the time spent with the children -The 'Rock Star' welcome we received at the DCC school was overwhelming! So much joy in anticipation of our arrival. We were treated to a beautiful evening of entertainment by the children, a village tour, and an afternoon of activities devised by our group.... such a lot of fun to interact in this very special school over 3 afternoons.

So many different experiences on this trip to Cambodia – one word describes the experience & the people - JOYOUS!

I thoroughly enjoyed the experience, being able to contribute even in a small way - and in the company of some wonderful travel companions.

A well thought out and organised trip – Thank you 'Captain' Kath & the HELP Cambodia team. (Cassandra)

I've been thinking so much about the trip, and the memories are still so vivid and tender — honestly, the whole experience felt transforming.

What struck me most wasn't just the hardship, but the dignity, creativity, and sense of responsibility people showed toward one another. There was such a strong current of hope running through everything, even in the toughest places.

With so many young people - half the population under 30 - I couldn't help feeling that they're the ones who will shape Cambodia's future. You can almost sense the potential in them.

I also came away with a much deeper appreciation for organisations like HELP Cambodia and Heartprint. I saw firsthand how much impact they're having through education, safe housing, and giving families a real chance. They're genuinely helping shape a whole generation. The problems might seem enormous, but I realised that meaningful change doesn't have to be wide — it can be deep.

NGOs like the Cambodia Clean Water & Toilet Project are making huge changes in people's lives. Honestly, I didn't expect to be moved by a toilet - but standing there, seeing what it meant to that family, it suddenly felt huge. Go Dunny Daryl.

What these groups are doing isn't "charity" in the usual sense. It's giving people the tools, dignity, and structure they need to build their own futures.

Spending time at the schools was a real highlight. The way the kids welcomed us - like we were superheroes - was so humbling. Not because of anything special we did, but simply because we turned up. That alone meant something to them.

So thank you, Kathy. My experience confirmed for me that I want to live more simply and give more generously. And it means a lot that I got to share it with you and a great group of people on our trip. (Lyn)