

*The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Cambodia
July 2013 Issue No 57*

What's Inside...

- *My time and life on Koh Rong Samloem*
- *4 Weeks in Paradise*
- *My first Dirty Weekend work*
- *Mondulhiri, a Precious Natural place in Cambodia*
- *Donation to Home of Hope*
- *Cambodia Marine Conservation Project June 2013*
- *Photo of Dirty Weekend at SFODA*



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The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Cambodia
July 2013 Issue No 57

My time and life on KohRong Samloem

Upon arriving in Cambodia, I was feeling only two things; excitement beyond comprehension, and fear of the unknown. Honestly, I didn't know what to expect- this was going to be my home for the next three months, it was a big step to make. Also this was the strongest of any foot prints made in my life. During my placement on KohRong Samloem, I was presented the opportunity to learn, teach and dive. After completing my Open Water and Advanced Open Water dive courses I was assigned to the Reef Team, commencing what was going to be a three month long contribution towards protecting, nurturing and conserving the beautiful underwater world surrounding the island. Moreover this was the beginning of my big adventure of discovering this part of the world. Within my first month I had successfully learnt all of the different survey target species as well as the necessary methodology to survey, for both Reef and Seahorse. Between all of this, including my time in the water and participating in on-land activities, I began to build friendships with the local people in the M'Pay Bay community. Through these friendships I learned more about their culture than I had ever thought was possible. It was and still remains the main thing that really ignited my appreciation for people such as my new friends, as well as my motivation to do as much as I could possibly do to help the local fishing area. Through accomplishing this, I would be continuing to support their village. There is not one friendship I have made here that I will ever forget (shout out to the boys: Bok, Roh, Bo, Kinee, Wom and Sam Neng).



However, my time spent in Cambodia wasn't always 100% about having a great time with my friends or for that matter, 100% about conserving just the reef ecosystem and the organisms inhabiting that area combined with the teaching. The core of the project, or perhaps you could say at the heart of the project was data collection from the seahorse surveys- which always, always provided a good laugh about the sand and the crazy and weird things we would find in random places, all to assist in continuing to move towards the protection of these astounding creatures unique environment out on the Corral. This also contributed to reestablishing the endangered seahorse population beneath the surface of the incredible tropical waters.

Through being a part of this, my eyes are now open to a new world, the complete opposite of which we live in on land. I have seen things that most people wouldn't have even dreamed of seeing in their lifetime, which I give all credit to my placement.





The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Cambodia
July 2013 Issue No 57

From this I have officially fallen in love with what my new home is – the various depths of the ocean, the lovely creatures living on the seabed, and the feeling of complete bliss provided by being surrounded by the water and all of the strange, hilarious, insane, beautiful and caring people in the world (including all of the volunteers I have had the pleasure of meeting and becoming friends with, most of all the following individuals; Ali Barlow, Emma Robertson, Alison Liew, Kim Hanlon, Lorna Song and all of the Tiny Ponies).

I will remember this place, the people and what this opportunity to volunteer has done for me, and to me forever. Until next time and the next installment- Catcha Guys.

By: Amelia (Milly) Bartlem

4 Weeks in Paradise

I wish I had better words than just amazing and unforgettable to describe my month with the Marine Conservation Project on KohRong Samloem, but that's exactly what it was. I arrived in Phnom Penh on a Saturday morning and stayed the night waiting for some other diving volunteers to arrive. I was immediately welcomed by staff and volunteers at the apartments and invited out on a sunset cruise of the Mekong River. After a long bus ride on Sunday, we spent the night in the beach town of Sihanoukville, and headed to the island Monday morning.

The first week passed by very quickly as I was immersed in the Open Water diving course. I had no diving experience at all and truthfully, I had always disliked swimming and being underwater, but part of doing this project for me was to be adventurous and try new things. Between learning theory and doing underwater skills, I quickly became comfortable with diving and ended up falling in love with it.

After certification, I started going out on reef surveys to learn the fish species prevalent in the reefs surrounding KohRong Samloem, but a few dives in, I switched to seahorse surveys on the corral. Although I chose to switch to seahorse, I'm really glad I got to spend some time with the reef team because knowing some of the fish made snorkeling and weekend fun dives much more fascinating. I soon learned the seahorse survey methodology and on my first dive shadowing the seahorse team, I saw a seahorse!





*The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Cambodia
July 2013 Issue No 57*

These creatures are incredible and learning about them has made me more aware of what they are up against and what we can do to help them. Outside of diving we also did community projects around the island like teaching English to the village children twice a day, beach cleanups and working on the school playground. We worked hard during the days diving, surveying and completing the other projects, but spent relaxing evenings hanging out with other volunteers watching movies, playing cards, dancing in the village and hammock-ing.

On weekends, we had the option of staying on the island or going to Sihanoukville. Staying on the island meant time to do fun dives, maybe a jungle trek, swimming on Long Beach or just lounging in a hammock. Heading to mainland meant satisfying burger cravings, maybe a massage, and most importantly wifi to upload pictures and write blogs for family and friends to live vicariously through your travels!

Somewhere in my last two weeks, I completed my Advanced Open Water certification, surveyed with the seahorse team, attended a village wedding, did a jungle trek, and said numerous island farewells to new friends at the end of their project time. Soon, it was my turn to leave. Saying goodbye to this gorgeous island and all its wonderful people (volunteers, staff and locals alike) was incredibly difficult, but I'm so grateful to have done this project. It was an eye opening experience that reignited my passion for travel and adventure, and although I was a mixed ball nerves and excitement in the weeks leading up to my departure, I can now say I have absolutely no regrets about my time in Cambodia.

By: Jessica Yiu – Diving and Marine Conservation project





The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Cambodia July 2013 Issue Nº 57

My first Dirty Weekend work



It has been my first week in Cambodia when I got invited by other volunteers to join what's known by the "Dirty Weekend". Even though I had no idea what it could be, I agreed to it, believing for sure it will be something interesting.

On an early [Saturday morning](#), Seang, our social manager, came to our apartments with two tuk-tuks and some supplies. She had two buckets of paint and many many brushes. So I learned then, that we are going to an orphanage to paint. We went to Sacrifice Families and Orphans Development Organizations (SFODA).

SFODA is an orphanage in Phnom Penh that has around 72 children from various ages. It helps them grow up to become healthy, educated adults in Cambodia.

The moment we got there, you feel a squeeze in your heart when seeing all these kids playing happily around. One child also started running after us wanting to play.

Few moments after, more volunteers arrived from the other apartments in Phnom Penh.

Now the fun started. Despite feeling tired from partying on the night before, and despite the strong shiny sun, all volunteers were carrying a fun cheerful spirit to start working. Seang split into two teams. One team painted the pillars in the main hall and another team painted the walls outside. And even though for most of us it was the first time we carried a paint brush, I think we ended up doing a fine job.





The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Cambodia July 2013 Issue No 57

Afterwards, we had lunch and the director of SFODA asked us to paint the pillars in other rooms as well. We started painting and one volunteer even climbed on a ladder to reach the top of the pillars. The kids were so happy having us. One boy was taking pictures of us the whole time. At the end of the day, he promised to send me the pictures by email. Few days later, he actually did. It was an amazing and very rewarding experience. This orphanage relies financially on donations and sales from the art work that kids learn and do. So it was nice to add some color into it.

Moreover, this was a great opportunity for all volunteers to get together and have some fun as well. For me, that was the first day I meet the volunteers from different apartments and since then we ended up being close friends.

I encourage all volunteers in Cambodia to participate at least once in the dirty weekend. Though you may end up full of paint, head to toe, but it was very well worth it.

By: Hala Ayoub



The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Cambodia
July 2013 Issue No 57

Mondulkiri, a Precious Natural place in Cambodia

Hillary Swann has visited Mondulkiri with a group of volunteers; she would like to share this weekend trip on this blog. Hope you like it. To the eye, the main street of Mondulkiri does not seem like much. Filled mainly with guest houses, restaurants and various other venues; a tourist could not be blamed in thinking that Mondulkiri is merely a small part of what Cambodia has to offer. But it is outside the borders of this small town and into the jungle where the true beauty of Mondulkiri becomes apparent. From the heart of Phnom-



Penh, the lush jungles of Mondulkiri is a six hour bus ride through Cambodian farmlands and up into the mountains. Upon arrival our team's first decision was to find the highly recommended Green House Guest House. It was in their restaurant, located further up the road that we found our tour guide, and soon to be our biggest aid in finding the wonders of Mondulkiri, Sam Nang. After a quick introduction we were immediately given the opportunity to travel with him into the jungle the very next day. Elephant washing, jungle trekking and waterfall finding were words passed around and immediately met with enthusiasm. Our newly found friend gave us an hourly run down of the next day, told us the time to meet him, reasonable prices and was gone.

At 8am the next day we were greeted by a large, air conditioned van along with packs of water, food and our tour guide. Immediately we were off to start our day of jungle trekking. To those of you who have never come face to trunk with a real life elephant, it is an experience that can barely be described. These huge creatures were soon to become our favorite part of our entire day. We were given the opportunity to feed the elephants some of our fruit supplies; given our excitement our bananas for the day were soon exhausted. We were given a brief history of the area, their people and what we were about to see and we were off for the day. The elephants walk with what can only be described as a wobbly gait. Their slow progress throughout the jungle gave us the opportunity to enjoy the sights, sounds and smells of our encompassing environment. Throughout the journey into the jungle we had Sam Nang constantly supplying us with facts about the elephants and capturing photos of our amazing experience.





The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Cambodia July 2013 Issue Nº 57



Forty five minutes later we arrive at an opening along a rushing stream. After being brought into the water, we are then given the opportunity to follow the elephants into the water and help wash them. The fun starts when the elephants begin waving their trunks in excitement from the cool water and simultaneously spraying us. After drying off a surprisingly large lunch, cooked traditional Mondulkiri style, is served to us within small wooden huts. Lunch is shared between elephant riders, drivers, tour guides and some other group who had just finished a jungle trek. This range of people and the sharing of the food creates an ideal atmosphere, back grounded by the sounds and sights of the lush Mondulkiri jungle. Everywhere is green within the jungle along with a bountiful of mud. We walk back the way we came with the elephants to visit a minority group who make their living within the jungle. After an explanation of the people and their lifestyle we are given the opportunity for-

half hour jungle trek. Geared with hiking shoes and water, we agree with unadulterated enthusiasm. The jungle is filled with sights and sounds that cannot be found unless you are shown by a local. The beauty is found underneath its tall trees and through the views you receive upon every hill. Mondulkiri comes alive through its jungles, it is here that you see why people live in and off the jungle.

After our hike we are treated to the sights and sprays of the Bousra Waterfall. Being over 30 meters in height it is something to take a travelers breath away.

We are constantly looked after with facts of the people, the land and opportunities for group photos by our ever informative tour guide. Who having seen our exhaustion from our jungle trek takes us to a coffee farm. We are shown the various fruits and vegetables harvested on the farm and are even given the opportunity to sample some of them.

Although the rain ruined our plans for a visit to the Sea Forest and another waterfall, we are promised to be shown them tomorrow at no extra cost.

To any traveler who plans to visit Mondulkiri, you will definitely sleep well after your first jungle trek. The next day, as far as the eye can see and true to its name we are taken to the Sea Forest. It is here that one may find the peacefulness of Mondulkiri and have the urge to never leave.

Trees of deep greens are stretched out before you and all you can feel is a great sense of wonder. We are treated with the same kind of amazement after a visit to a smaller waterfall that is open for travelers to swim in.





The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Cambodia July 2013 Issue No 57

Sadly our weekend had to abruptly end due to commitments in Phnom Penh but it was during the goodbyes that we realized how much we had been given by one tour guide. Sam Nang is a local with his heart and soul firmly planted into the belief that Mondulkiri is one of Cambodia's most beautiful natural gifts. His knowledge of the lifestyle, the people, history and nature of Mondulkiri is truly touching. With every speech and information he supplied us with over the weekend we came to see Mondulkiri through his eyes.

I would highly recommend Mondulkiri and our tour guide to anyone who wishes to discover the hidden secrets of Cambodia. Although not as widely known or advertised, Mondulkiri is a part of Cambodia that cannot be missed.

By: Hillary Swann

Donation To Home of Hope

We took donation to Home of Hope on Thursday 11th July 2013, the donation was fundraised by our 2 Week Special group in December 2012, it has six sacks of rice, 48 cans of sweet milk, 60 cans of Mackerel in Tomato Sauce and 12 jars of nutrition powder.

Brother at Home of Hope appreciated it and thank so much to the volunteers and Projects Abroad.





*The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Cambodia
July 2013 Issue No 57*

Cambodia Marine Conservation Project – June 2013



The volunteers were able to conduct 32 seahorse surveys this month, which meant they celebrated this success with some extra fun and exploratory dives. Volunteers who worked hard all month were able to explore some areas around the island and look for seahorses. The reef team has successfully surveyed 25 of their 49 GPS points around the island. They are excited to explore new areas and new volunteers are keen to get trained and be part of the survey team. We also welcomed Nicola to the team, who is joining us for nine months on a special nudibranch project and staff as well as other volunteers have already started to help her collect data.

Conservation Projects

Seahorse Surveys

During June we surveyed 32 seahorse points and found that a large proportion of seahorses found were female. Some juvenile sightings were also exciting and all of our dives, whether surveys or training, were successful in finding seahorses. We explored some of the deeper areas of the seahorse habitat and although we weren't finding seahorses at 18 m, we did spot pipefish, bamboo sharks and cuttlefish. This data will go directly to the second quarterly report for 2013. The volunteers, while collecting the initial data, are also involved in the statistical analysis portion of the report. Looking at the findings and determining the effects of the protection and illegal fishing gives volunteers some insight into the cause of the project and the work we are able to do in creating a marine protected area. Because of the survey success we had another opportunity to explore the island for the presence of any seahorses in less regularly dived locations. One group of divers found four seahorses and when diving further around the island a lot of dives turned into reef cleans.





*The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Cambodia
July 2013 Issue No 57*



Reef Surveys

Emma and her team successfully surveyed 25 of the GPS points extending around the island. Some of our one month volunteers were also trained in time to survey before leaving, and we also had some long term volunteers who make up the core survey team and are excited to be contributing to a comparative study. This will help us determine the effectiveness of the community fishing area and the differences in coral reef health as well as fish and invertebrate populations.

This data will contribute directly to a comparative study where the findings will be produced in a final report. This will help us better monitor the area in future as well as contribute to creating a marine protected area around KohRong Samloem.

Clean Ups

We had some storms during June which meant that the volunteers were busy maintaining the beach and surrounding areas. We also kept up our reef cleans by snorkeling at shallow reef sites, as well as taking extra rubbish bags around the island on the reef surveys. A lot of volunteers are keen to visit the areas around the island in order to keep the reefs clean and healthy.

Community Projects

Teaching

Many of the kids are still excited to learn and speak conversational English and some of our volunteers, including Kori and Eveline, are still excited to teach them. We are conducting more lessons in the village and on the beach in order to make the lesson more interactive. This gives the volunteers a chance to get to know the village and the children.

Community Playground

The recent completion of the playground means that each week we are maintaining it and keeping it clean. The heavy rain has washed some of the sand away and volunteers are keen to add extra sand, clean the surrounding area, and add some fresh paint.





The Official Newsletter of Projects Abroad Cambodia July 2013 Issue No 57

Other news...

We welcomed our long term volunteer Nicola to the project this month. She will be joining us for nine months on her dissertation project focusing on nudibranchs. Staff and volunteers are keen to help her out by collecting photos and extra information on the nudibranchs they spot on each dive. Due to them being present at both reef and seahorse sites, it is bringing to volunteers together on some common research.

By: Ali Barlow
Project Coordinator, Cambodia

Photo of Dirty Weekend at SFODA

