

# Little dancers make big pilgrimage



Ritual dancers perform at the peak of the sacred Preah Vihear. SUPPLIED BY NGINN KARET FOUNDATION

## Ravynn Karet Coxen

AT 4am on a Tuesday last month, two police cars escorting the two buses bound for Preah Vihear arrived at the Nginn Karet Foundation for Cambodia office in Siem Reap to pick us up.

All of the foundation's staff had requested to be part of the pilgrimage so the buses were packed with enough food and water to feed and refresh 92 people for a whole day, as well as more supplies for ritual offerings. On top of that we had a bunch of elaborate outfits and adornments for the tiny passengers we were off to collect next.

The foundation's dance and music school, the Conservatoire Preah Ream Buppha Devi, in Chhouk Sar Banteay Srey, was the spot for us to pick up the 62 little dancers who had spent the night there with Neak Krou Channou, a borann classical dance teacher.

It was still dark when we arrived so we requested that the police turn off their sirens, which they did, and keep only the cars' flashing lights on to guide our path.

In a car with my assistant, I was still working on the invocation and prayers that Krou Saroeun, our main dance teacher, was planning to chant at Preah Vihear.

After a roadside rest stop, during which the children consumed an old lady's entire stock of freshly cooked sweet potatoes, we headed off again, approaching the Dangrek Mountains.

The scenery was eerie in the mist, yet utterly beautiful. Our convoy stopped at the bottom of the mountain range as only some vehicles could manage to make it up the steep new concrete road.

Sticking together, everything and everyone was transferred into pick-ups and, after paying our respects to the spirits of the land, water and forest with incense, we set off again, this time with 20 additional police escorting us, adding to the original 15.

Midway up the mountain we stopped at a military base and a pagoda. Along with some of the other staff, I went to pay my respects and give alms to the monks and nuns.

The officer in charge of the journey then briefed us on the military situation at Preah Vihear and pointed out the base camp of 10 armed Thai soldiers, which was just a stone's throw away.

With the police and military in tow, I approached the Thai soldiers and wished them and their families well, and shared my prayers for a happy, peaceful relationship between our two countries, which, as I pointed out, both descended from the bloodline of the Khmer race.

They were quite surprised and wary, but soon smiled and chatted briefly.

Moving on, our last leg of the journey was making our way up the mountain to the incredible Preah Vihear, majestically perched on the ridge of the Dangrek, where Earth meets Heaven.

We unloaded with the help of 40 soldiers who took our various packages up and

down the tiers of the temple while the children were fed lunch under the shade of the surrounding trees.

After filling our bellies, we got the kids dressed in their white muslin outfits and adorned them with crowns and bracelets made out of banana trunk peels, arek nuts, lime, jasmine and lotus.

A moment of frustration occurred when a flock of monks arrived in seriously lavish Land Cruisers, looking more like tourists than the encapsulation of piety, what with their shoes, cameras, phones and sunglasses, each of them trying to take pictures of the children.

A moment later an important official from Phnom Penh asked to have his picture taken with the girls as they prepared for the sacred Buong Suong\* ritual.

His request unfortunately had to be declined. We apologised profusely, explaining that this was not a show nor a display meant to entertain, but rather a completely pure and strict ritual for the Gods and Borameis (mystical spirits), and had we granted his request, it could weaken the sacredness of our invocation.

The foundation is strict in that all the girls who perform the sacred rituals are virgins and pure. We also ensure that no rich fabrics are used nor any make-up, so as to reach the spiritual level necessary to evoke divine attendance.

As such, it was wonderful to see how respectful and attentive the soldiers and police were towards our spiritual journey.

In lines of four, walking barefoot on the uneven stone path, our group descended to the bottom of the temple and sat in front of the plaque that

reads "Preah Vihear Temple". We each bowed three times with incense in hand, and Krou Saroeun started the chant.

Planting the incense in the ground, the girls then started their sacred dance, which continued all the way up to the peak.

Engrossed in their prayers, they never faltered in keeping to the rhythm of the classical music being played through a tape machine powered by a car battery.

At each station of the five gopura (entrance gateway), the 62 dancers and all of the foundation's staff knelt with incense to pray and evoke the deities to descend and receive the Buong Suong with their blessings.

At the holy Srea Meas (Golden Pond), the dancers completed a loop and the two leading the procession collected its sacred water in an ancient bronze receptacle to take it back to the offering site.

Lighting candles and incense and again at the sanctuary in front of the temple's precipice, we chanted the invocation and called to all the Gods, the

Borameis, and the spirits of the royal ancestors involved in the creation of Preah Vihear.

During the last dance, lightning and storm rumbled on the Thai side of the site and the sky darkened with heavy, looming clouds of rain.

Wrapping up, we distributed offerings to the soldiers and left them to meditate on what they had experienced.

We then all climbed back on to the packed trucks to go down to the buses where the children changed back into their normal clothes.

As the day came to an end and night descended on the Kingdom, the girls were full of joy.

We arrived back at the dance school around 9pm, where their parents eagerly awaited their return.

It was certainly a long day, but one which undoubtedly touched many people's lives.

*\*Buong Suong is the term used to describe a hallowed act or rite of supplication to the deities. This dance is one of the few considered sacred enough to be performed as part of such a ritual. 7D*



**VICTORIA**  
HOTELS & RESORTS  
VICTORIA ANGKOR  
RESORT & SPA

**JAPANESE BUFFET DINNER PROMOTION**  
日本料理のプロモーション  
**10,11,12 September 2010**

Enjoy classic & contemporary Japanese creations by our Consultant Guest Chef at the Victoria Angkor Resort & Spa.



Wakame Salad  
わかめ サラダ



Yakitori  
焼き肉



Hiya Yakko  
ひややくこ



B.B.Q



Sashimi  
すし/さしみ



Tempura  
てんぷら



Selection of Sushi  
すし/さしみ

**US\$ 22.00+ / person**  
+ subject to 10% government tax

**VICTORIA ANGKOR RESORT & SPA**

Central Park, P.O. Box 93145, Siem Reap Town,  
Kingdom of Cambodia  
Tel: (063) 760 428 Fax: (063) 760 350  
resa.angkor@victoriahotels.asia  
www.victoriahotels.asia