Episode 108 Transcript

5 Day Cambodia Itinerary: Phnom Penh to Siem Reap

The Global Travel Planning Podcast with Tracy and Doug Collins

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Tracy: Sunrise over Angkor Wat, a Cambodian wedding, and a bus across the border with a flat tyre along the way. In this episode, Doug and I share our 5 days in Cambodia from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap, the experience we would happily do over again, and the practical things worth knowing before you go. Hi everybody and welcome to this week's edition of the Global Travel Planning Podcast. I'm here once again with Doug.

Doug: Hi. Hello.

Tracy: In this episode, we're going to chat all about our trip to Cambodia, which we did, we fitted into our whole trip around Asia a couple of years ago. And we have recently recorded the episode all about Vietnam and figured since Cambodia was the next part of the trip, it would be a really sensible follow-on episode to do to chat all about Cambodia. So that's what we're going to do in this episode. So if Cambodia is on your to-visit list, this is a great episode.

Doug: And it should be.

Tracy: Yes, it absolutely should be. So let's talk about why Cambodia and how it fitted in. So, basically we had already by this point been to Japan.

Doug: Yes.

Tracy: South Korea.

Doug: Yes.

Tracy: Vietnam.

Doug: Yeah.

Tracy: And then Cambodia was obviously the next obvious place, destination to add into our itinerary. So, when I was planning all of that, I was kind of considering what was the kind of sensible approach and how to get from each of those destinations. Our end destination for the whole trip was actually the UK.

Doug: Yeah.

Tracy: So, from Cambodia, we went to Thailand and flew to the UK. So basically we had in total 5 full days in Cambodia, which doesn't sound very much, and it wasn't, and it's definitely somewhere we want to go back to.

Doug: Oh, most definitely, yes.

Tracy: So should we talk about the first bit, talk about how we actually got to Cambodia?

Doug: Yeah, well, we took the coach called the Giant Ibis from Ho Chi Minh.

Tracy: Yep.

Doug: And you book this well in advance. It was seamless.

Tracy: It was a really good trip, actually. And I think we'd spoken to Ros and Alan, who are kind of our Vietnam travel experts, and they had said they'd done the bus. I'm sure that's what, and I was like, well, we've done enough flying, let's catch the bus. And obviously you see a little bit more. And I know we talked about this in the last episode where we talked about Vietnam, so it was something we'd highly recommend you do because it wasn't expensive.

Doug: That's right.

Tracy: It was really comfortable.

Doug: It was.

Tracy: And we got to see a bit more of the countryside.

Doug: Yeah.

Tracy: So obviously we get asked quite often about kind of visas and how we organise it. We actually paid as we got on the bus for this, didn't we?

Doug: We did, yes. Again, it was straightforward. We weren't sure exactly what the process was going to be, but we were talked through it. It did become quite easy.

Tracy: Yeah, because there are some options when you're going to Cambodia for visas, but because we're going over on the land border, basically what you do is you've got to pay in US dollars. So we handed over the US dollars as we got on the bus, and then as we approached the border, they took our passports and they organised the, I think it was like a 30-day visa for Cambodia. So it was really seamless. It was a really seamless exercise, honestly. The only kind of, I guess, bit of drama we had was that we had a flat tyre.

Doug: Yes.

Tracy: But that was easily sorted.

Doug: That's what I'm saying. We didn't have to change the tyre, which, you know, change the wheel, which made it even easier. But we did have to get off the coach. And just talking about passports, you do have that heart-stopping moment when you're handing your passport over to somebody and then you see all the passports leaving the coach. But that was no problem. There's no issue.

Tracy: No, really easy. It came back sorted. Not a problem whatsoever. So that was our kind of introduction into Cambodia via the coach. Very easy. So, we stayed in Phnom Penh for a few days, which I still struggle to spell. I keep having to remind myself how to

spell it because I keep forgetting that H at the end. But we stayed in Phnom Penh, and we stayed in a really lovely hotel.

Tracy: So, once we actually arrived on the Giant Ibis bus, I had arranged a tuk-tuk to pick us up.

Doug: That's right.

Tracy: Because it's a bit crazy and it's a bit busy. You arrive at night, and later on in the evening, and it just made sense to have somebody picking us up. And you also have to keep an eye on your luggage when you get off the bus, because they did mention that sometimes this is where the luggage can get stolen. So we were off that bus, grabbed the luggage, and basically the guy was standing there with our name on.

Doug: Yeah, it was very straightforward. Before the coach comes to a stop, you see lots and lots of people everywhere, tuk-tuks. It's just quite chaotic. But we stepped off. There's the guy with your name on a board, and if I said 5 minutes between getting off the coach to leaving, I'm possibly exaggerating.

Tracy: Yeah, I think it was literally a few minutes. I think we were the first just about gone, to be honest. I think so. So what I would say is the hotel we stayed at was fantastic. It was a 10 out of 10 hotel stay, and that was the Plantation Urban Resort and Spa. Beautiful pool area, like a private little sunroom that you had and steps into the pool. I'll put pictures in the show notes. It was fabulous.

Tracy: It was absolutely fantastic. So we arrived and decided that the next day we would just literally have a day to do a bit of work, sit by the pool, just relax a little bit. As I said, the hotel also had a spa, so we made use of having a massage.

Doug: That's right.

Tracy: Remember, I was still kind of recovering from not being very well in South Korea and in Vietnam, so it was a lot better, but it was still good to kind of pace yourself. And I think that's something important when you're organising a longer trip, is that you do need some times where you kind of just reset, stop, reset, just have a day where you're just basically chilling out, and that's what we did.

Doug: Don't look at where you are.

Tracy: Yeah, and that hotel was the perfect place to do it. And we ate in the hotel that night, food was superb, staff were amazing, so really enjoyed that. Now, the 5th of December, so the next day, bearing in mind again, it's very hot at this time of year in Cambodia, we arranged to be picked up in the morning by a private guide.

Doug: Yes.

Tracy: We went off to the Royal Palace and then the National Museum of Cambodia, which was really interesting.

Doug: It was really good.

Tracy: And then we had the most difficult part of the time when we visited Cambodia, and we went to the Genocide Museum S-21, and we went to the Killing Fields.

Doug: Yes.

Tracy: Just incredibly hard.

Doug: Yes, yes, there's no easy way of putting it. It's a tough experience, but one I'm glad that we did.

Tracy: Yeah, absolutely. And a few people had said not to do S-21 and the Killing Fields in one day, but to be honest, I think I'm glad that we did it that way. And then we spent the afternoon back at the hotel because really there's a lot to process. There's a lot of very confronting information. The whole, it's just everything is gonna be confronting. Everything you hear is gonna be confronting. Prepare yourself for that. I absolutely say you need to prepare yourself for that.

Tracy: I did not take any photos or any videos. I haven't, that just isn't,

Doug: Me neither.

Tracy: No, I think it's very difficult places that you're visiting, and it's just something that you just have to consider, prepare yourself for as best you can. Even if you have, it's still going to be difficult. I think that would be something I'd say, if you're going to do that, just be aware that you're probably not going to feel up to much for the rest of the day.

Doug: That's right.

Tracy: So, that was our day. The private guide was excellent. I'm glad we had a private guide because he could explain a lot. We could ask him a lot of questions and for clarification about things.

Doug: So prepared as well, I think.

Tracy: Yeah, yeah, I think so. He was good and explained a lot of stuff, and I'd say you could ask him a lot of questions. So I'd highly recommend. I will actually put a link to that. We just booked that through GetYourGuide, but I will put a link to that private guide because it was absolutely worth it. He picked us up from the hotel and dropped us off at the hotel as well afterwards. So that was something that I'd highly recommend. So then the next day was the 6th of December.

Tracy: So I guess we'd arrived the 3rd, had the day on the 4th not doing anything, the 5th, like the more difficult day. And then the 6th, we decided at that point we were transferring up to Siem Reap. So when I arranged the itinerary, I booked a private transfer.

Doug: Yeah, that's right.

Tracy: Again, so that was quite a long drive up.

Doug: 5 hours, I think.

Tracy: Yeah, from Phnom Penh up to Siem Reap. Really lovely driver. Again, organised that through GetYourGuide. Wanted a private driver just because we could stop off when we wanted to, which he stopped off quite a few times along the way. And then again, we could ask him questions about living in Cambodia and what it was like. Very friendly guy, very comfortable journey. Yeah, not expensive. I mean, again, people fly often between

these.

Tracy: I'm like, I wouldn't bother, honestly. You see far more from a train or in a car than you do by flying.

Doug: Most definitely.

Tracy: Yep. So yeah, we stayed in the Memoire d'Angkor Hotel. It was fine. A little bit jaded, the hotel. Hopefully it's been done up a little bit since we were there, but we enjoyed it. But where it was located was absolutely fine. Again, staff were really lovely, and we weren't too far to get a tuk-tuk to the Siem Reap Night Market. So that was the first night when we arrived.

Tracy: We came in, freshened up, had a look around the area. I think actually you'd lost the screw out of your glasses, and that's one of the things that happens when you're travelling and you're like, oh, what am I gonna do?

Doug: Yeah.

Tracy: And guess what? There was an optician's right next to the hotel.

Doug: There was.

Tracy: But since then, one thing we have learned is we take a little kit with us because Doug and I both wear glasses, and if I don't have my glasses on, I can't see anything.

Doug: That's right.

Tracy: So we take a little kit with us now, don't we? Which includes a few spare little screws inside it, a little screwdriver. Because you learn from that going, oh, what are we gonna do? But as I say, luckily, the optician next door was lovely.

Doug: I was just gonna say, it's a strange topic for including in our podcast, but yeah, the optician and his wife, they were both absolutely lovely. We did not understand a word of each other's language. I do remember that.

Tracy: And it was just using, I think, Google Translate.

Doug: Yeah.

Tracy: But I think sharing tips like that, because if you wear glasses, you'll understand the desperation you feel when they come apart and you're like, what am I going to do?

Doug: I mean, I recognise it as a near miss. So, you know, since then we've carried a tiny little glasses repair kit.

Tracy: Yeah, exactly. So that's one of the things we kind of learned at that point. So we also met Lieb, who was going to be our driver for the next few days. And Gevorg from LikeLocal organised basically our itinerary in Siem Reap very kindly. And so Lieb came basically to organise the next day with us because we were going to do what everybody goes to Siem Reap to do, going to Angkor Wat and to the whole complex to see everything. We had to have a very early start the next day.

Doug: It was early, yeah.

Tracy: Like 4:15 AM early. Like, this is early. I am not a morning person.

Doug: No, but it was worth it though.

Tracy: It was fantastic. So Lieb picked us up, drove us in the tuk-tuk.

Doug: Yep.

Tracy: Which was great. I've got some fantastic video. And then he went and bought the tickets.

Doug: He did.

Tracy: Now I think the tickets are like, there's some like 1 day, 3 days, 7 days in Angkor Wat. So he bought the 1 day ticket.

Doug: Yeah.

Tracy: Because as I say, this is our first visit to Cambodia. We will be going back. So Lieb went and bought the tickets and then basically took us into Angkor Wat, where we went for sunrise. We were not the only people with that idea.

Doug: You could say that, yes. It was rather busy.

Tracy: It was incredibly busy. There's a lot of people who go to, obviously it's one of those iconic moments, iconic shots, to see the sunrise over Angkor Wat. So we did that, it was fantastic. And then we had a look around Angkor Wat itself, which was mind-blowing. It really is mind-blowing. It is just a fantastic place to go and explore. I was so excited to go. And then we went and had breakfast with Lieb, and he took us back to the hotel around about 11, I think it was.

Doug: That's right, yeah.

Tracy: Yeah, and basically we had a couple of hours rest. So, if you're gonna get up early to go see the sunrise, I would recommend that, especially the middle part of the day, because it was so hot.

Doug: It was.

Tracy: Really hot. We went back to the hotel, had a few hours rest, had a few hours snooze, had a swim, and then Lieb picked us up again in the afternoon. And then we went back to explore the rest of, obviously not all of it, 'cause it's huge, but a lot more of the complex.

Doug: That's right.

Tracy: So basically, we went to see Angkor Thom. We went to see where the Moon Raider, it's not Moon Raider.

Doug: Tomb Raider.

Tracy: Tomb Raider movie was made with a tree that goes through kind of like the building and the walls. And it was absolutely incredible. And Lieb took us from one of the different temples to another temple. So we didn't have to kind of, because it's quite a big distance between them to walk it. So I would say though, kind of tips for Angkor Wat is,

and for that whole complex, is you think very carefully about what you've got on your feet, because a lot of it's uneven ground. You kind of go up and down steps where it's uneven.

Doug: Lots of shale paths.

Tracy: Yeah, yeah. So, you've got to be quite sure on your feet. Take water, have a hat, put sun cream on.

Doug: Most definitely.

Tracy: Because it is an incredible experience, and I'd like to go and explore more of it.

Doug: Yes.

Tracy: I feel like we've got a taste, and obviously Lieb took us to all the main places.

Doug: Yeah, that's right.

Tracy: I remember actually, I stayed in the tuk-tuk at one point, and you went to one temple. I think you had to walk up a lot of stairs. Oh, very, very steep steps, and one step that you've got to do on all fours. Yeah, I saw you go. I was like, I'm not going up there. So I just stayed in the tuk-tuk. I was like, you can do that. Lieb and I can hang out for a bit while you go to that.

Tracy: But yeah, so there is a lot to do and see. So honestly, book, have a local take you around. So we had Lieb, and hopefully I've still got Lieb's information that I can share in the show notes because he was fantastic.

Doug: He was fantastic. Yeah, he really was. His English is fantastic as well.

Tracy: Oh yes. So after we went to see more of Angkor Wat itself, the whole complex, we went on to a silk weaver's house.

Doug: Yeah, it was a contrast to what we'd done the rest of the day and the day before. So yes, this was a fantastic experience.

Tracy: You absolutely threw yourself into this.

Doug: Well, of course. Yeah, you know, if you're going to do this sort of thing, you've got to do that.

Tracy: Yeah, and this was another experience organised by Gevorg from LikeLocal, so we could actually meet the locals. Because again, as I mentioned in the Vietnam episode, you don't meet what people are kind of generally working doing.

Doug: Yeah, and their community, you don't see.

Tracy: Yeah, so actually going and spending the time at the silk weaver's house and meeting them, and then we had dinner with them.

Doug: Yeah, and their nephews and their family coming around, and it was just amazing.

Tracy: Just fantastic. Absolutely such a privileged experience to have that. And then after that, Lieb took us back to the hotel. It was a bit hairy driving through some of those lanes in the dark.

Doug: Yes, that's right. Yeah, but Lieb's confident.

Tracy: Yeah, absolutely. But I will mention you had a go at weaving.

Doug: I did, on a frame. And guess what? It's harder than it looks. Much harder than it looks.

Tracy: Yeah, you just got straight in there and had a go at it. And I've got some great video of you having a go trying to do the weave. And again, highly recommend this sort of experience.

Doug: There was a big smile on my face, I think.

Tracy: Yeah, you thoroughly enjoyed it. I did it eventually. They did convince me to have a go. But yeah, it was just brilliant. Again, fantastic experience. And that was followed up on our last full day actually in Cambodia, where we went to a Cambodian wedding.

Doug: Again, it was a privilege to be there.

Tracy: Which was amazing.

Doug: I loved it.

Tracy: So we were on a table with, I think there were probably about 8 of us on the table. And so when we went in, we met the bride and groom. I think they got married the day before because Cambodian weddings go on for a few days, and this was kind of like the big party where they had everybody from the village and family there. It was amazing seeing the food being prepared.

Doug: 'Cause the food was prepared outside to the side of where all the tables and chairs were. Yeah.

Tracy: And these massive, great big pots for rice. Massive, great big woks. It was incredible. And I went over and I was talking to the ladies doing all the preparation for the food. And then there were multiple courses that came to the table.

Doug: And the people sitting at each table, that was quite fluid as well. People moving tables to go and talk to other people. And we were attracting a few people to come and talk to us.

Tracy: Yeah. People wanted to come and ask us about where we were from, why we were here, did we know the bride and groom? Yeah, it was just fantastic. Got up, did a little bit of dancing.

Doug: Is that what you were doing?

Tracy: Well, yeah, I'm not the best dancer, but, you know, it was again an incredible, incredible experience.

Doug: I loved it.

Tracy: So, we were there for a few hours, and then after the wedding, it was still in full flow when we left, but we'd been there for a few hours, and luckily we did have Lieb with us to help with the translation. And then we left and we went to do a boat trip to Kampong Floating Village, and then out onto the lake, which was an incredible experience.

Doug: It was, again, a contrast in the different scenery and the different villages.

Tracy: Yeah, this village on stilts, literally this floating village, and the kids were jumping off the houses into the river where it meets the lake, just incredible to see and experience. We went through past the village, went out onto the lake for a little bit, and then back in. And now we did a kind of small boat trip. There was a larger boat trip, but they wanted cash, and that's another thing I want to say about Cambodia, make sure you've got cash and US dollars in cash. So we didn't actually have enough cash with us to pay for the bigger boat. So we took the smaller boat.

Doug: We did.

Tracy: And also we didn't have any bug spray.

Doug: Yeah, that's right, because it was going to go on into the evening, when you needed it.

Tracy: So we decided, so I guess next time I probably would do the bigger boat trip. I think it would be really good. But honestly, the small boat was fine.

Doug: It was.

Tracy: It was a really good trip. And did Lieb come with us on the boat? I think he did. Yeah, he came out on the boat as well with us, which was just fantastic. So that was another amazing day. The next day, unfortunately, we were flying out. So we flew to Bangkok. So it was actually just at the point, I think the new Siem Reap airport at that point had literally just opened a week before.

Doug: Yeah, I think it was.

Tracy: Yeah. So it's a little bit out of Siem Reap. So we got Lieb to organise a driver to pick us up at 6 AM.

Doug: It's about an hour away.

Tracy: Yeah. So you can do it by tuk-tuk, and I've heard about people doing it by tuk-tuk, but we were like, no, we'll have a driver, air-conditioned car.

Doug: Yeah, we were leaving at 6 AM as well.

Tracy: Yeah, it was an early start. So we headed off and flew off to Thailand. Cambodia absolutely captured my heart, actually. I think it really is one of those destinations that I've got in my top 5 want to go back to.

Doug: Most definitely.

Tracy: And I guess because we were there only 5 days, we've got a taste.

Doug: Yeah.

Tracy: Now Vietnam and Cambodia are obviously combined quite often, and they do go really well together if you're going to do a multi-country trip across Asia.

Doug: So if we're doing both countries again, I would not hesitate to take that bus again.

Tracy: Oh, absolutely. I would definitely do that, 100%, because it was really good. Now, we talked a little bit about money. Now, we knew we were going to lots of different countries in Asia, so we'd already got cash. Now, we had got US dollars for Cambodia.

Doug: We did, that's right.

Tracy: But we did need a bit more. Now, in Cambodia, they're very picky about this, so US dollars are accepted or wanted, but they've got to be very clean notes, no folds in them, no tears. They inspected them very closely before accepting. So we did get some money out of an ATM. Now again, you'll get US dollars out of the ATM, but they do charge about $3 or $4 per withdrawal. So get a decent amount out if you're going to want it.

Doug: Yeah.

Tracy: And make sure that you do have US dollars before you arrive in Cambodia, because you're going to need it for the visa anyway, if you're going to buy it as you cross the border rather than getting one before you arrive. You'll quite often get the local currency, the riel, I don't know how to pronounce that, R-I-E-L, back when you give in US dollars, but that's fine. We just kept some of those because they do accept that as well.

Doug: Yeah.

Tracy: But again, just be aware that if you do bring in US dollars, don't fold them up.

Doug: Yeah.

Tracy: Don't fold them. They don't like folds. So, keep them flat, keep them clean, and use them because we were asked for cash quite a lot. For example, the boat trip, we couldn't do the bigger boat because we didn't have enough cash on us. And also for tips as well, you do tip in Cambodia. So having some cash for tips is really useful. I was going to say a few tips about the trip. Is there anything you can think of off the top of your head?

Doug: Be prepared for some early starts if you're going to Angkor Wat. So albeit it gets very hot in the daytime, it could be a bit chilly first thing in the morning. So if you're going by tuk-tuk, a bit of a thin cardigan or something, or thin fleece, which we should have done. Keep some bug spray with us at all times, which we didn't do, but we did stay hydrated. So we did have plenty of fluids and Lieb was actually on that case as well. I think he had some drinks as well.

Tracy: Yeah, water. You absolutely need to keep hydrated because it's so hot and humid. I think it felt hotter there than anywhere else we've been. It was incredibly hot. And especially because when you're in Angkor Wat, there's no shade. So that's absolutely no shade. So either have a hat, or take an umbrella to keep the sun off because you will get burnt.

Tracy: And make sure you reapply sun cream.

Doug: Yeah. And another tip is, which you'd probably do anyway when travelling across different Asian countries, the power sockets are different between countries, so make sure you have the correct adapters.

Tracy: Yep, and I also had an eSIM which I could use. I got like a global eSIM for Asia, so there was no problem going to Cambodia and using that as well. I will say as well, tuk-tuks are available everywhere, and we would just catch the tuk-tuk from outside the hotel down to the night market, and then when you're down at the night market, there's plenty of people there who will take you. We just agreed the price before we got into the tuk-tuk. But again, that was no problem. Plenty of tuk-tuks around.

Doug: Yeah, that's right. I think we had the same tuk-tuk driver. I think he waited for quite a while and we had the same guy back, I think.

Tracy: I think so. But there's plenty of tuk-tuks. Now just briefly talk about the food, because I actually really enjoyed the food in Cambodia.

Doug: Vietnam and Cambodia, I enjoyed the food actually. There's some really nice things. I think we had some nice spring rolls and things like that.

Tracy: You had some fish. I remember you had a fish dish that you really enjoyed, and they had that when we did the home visit as well.

Doug: That was in Vietnam.

Tracy: Yeah. And I know in Cambodia as well, the fish at the wedding. We've got some pictures of that because I don't eat fish, so I wasn't having any of that, but there was some local fish and white fish.

Doug: Yeah, yeah, it's incredibly tasty.

Tracy: Yeah, but I remember the food being very good in Cambodia and I really enjoyed it. But I remember that you liked the fish in particular because I'm not that keen. But yeah, the food was very good, very fresh, very tasty. Again, when we went down to the night market, there were plenty of places to choose for food there as well.

Doug: There really was.

Tracy: Yeah, yeah. So absolutely no problem. So yeah, go would be my recommendation when it comes to Cambodia. And join it up, as I say, do it with the Vietnam trip as well, and it's a pretty easy trip to organise.

Doug: Yes.

Tracy: Yeah. So I guess that brings us to the end of our 5 days in Cambodia. Everything we mentioned today, the Giant Ibis bus, the hotels, LikeLocal, all of our tips for money, visas, and Angkor Wat can be found in the show notes at globaltravelplanning.com/episode108. Now, if you missed our Vietnam itinerary episode, that's the one to listen to next, as this trip followed on from that. And then if you want to go back further, there's our whole Japan itinerary. We've still got to do the South Korea one, and the link is in the show notes for that as well. Now, if you're at the early stages of

planning a trip like this, do grab our free Global Trip Planner at globaltravelplanning.com/tripplanner. It's the 5-step workbook Doug and I use for our own trips, with the checklists and itinerary templates included.

Tracy: And if you've enjoyed this episode, please share it with a fellow travel lover who has Cambodia on their list. But I guess that just leaves me, Doug, to say until next episode, happy global travel planning!