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Society

Bamboo Train in Battambang Province



The Bamboo Train about to start its journey. Photo provided.

By: **Murli Menon** ... December 17, 2024 , 12:00 PM

Battambang — One writes this from one's terrace facing the river at the Royal Hotel in Battambang in the interior of Cambodia.

One has returned after a once-in-a-lifetime experience, an unforgettable journey of a different kind: the adventure of cruising through acres of lush greenery in an open-air train for several hours: a close encounter with the sights, sounds, and smells of nature.

Battambang is a city nestled between Cambodia and Thailand on the banks of the Sangkae River. An interesting legend from the 10th century explains how Battambang got its name.

The word bat in Khmer means disappearing, and dambong means stick. As the story goes, a cowherd who tended cows had a magical stick. He could throw the stick at his herd and control his flock. Because of this, he was called Ta Dambong, or the uncle with the stick. Ta Dambong used to tie his cows on the bank of the river for grazing.

Ta Dambong became bored with tending cows and, one day, decided to become king. Using his magical stick, he succeeded in overthrowing the old king. The crown prince then fled to the forest and became a monk.

Ta Dambong had a dream in which he saw that his reign would only last seven years, after which he would be dethroned by a hermit on a white horse. Hence, he decided to round up all the holy men in the region and kill them. In the forest, the prince learned that all the holy men had been asked to present themselves to the king. But on the way to the capital, he met a hermit monk who gave him a white horse to look after until he returned from meeting the king.

The prince, still dressed as a monk, got on the horse, and it began to fly. As soon as Ta Dambong saw the hermit on the horse, he knew that his end had come, so he threw his stick at the horse. But the magical horse made the stick disappear and Dambong fled. The hermit king dethroned Dambong, reclaimed the throne that was rightfully his, and lived happily ever after. Thus, the city was called Bat Dambong, which in Khmer means disappearing stick. Over the centuries, the name was metamorphosed into Battambang.

The city is located on the banks of the Sangkae River, which got its name from the giant Sangkae tree, which was cut and laid across the narrow river in the days when there was no bridge for residents to cross over.

One of the unique attractions in Battambang is the four-hour ride on the bamboo train from Dambong to Teppedey. The bamboo train is known as "norry" in Khmer. Only one regular train leaves Battambang at 6 a.m. for Phnom Penh. So, the villagers have developed an ingenious device to utilize the railway tracks after the train has left for the capital. As a result, Battambang is the only city in the world where one can explore the bounties of nature while cruising along the railway tracks in an open-air bamboo train.

The norry consists of a bamboo base mounted on a pair of iron wheels that is placed on the rails. This contraption that resembles a railway trolley is powered by a small portable diesel engine. Many norries are traveling along the way and, when one comes across another, the lighter of the two is dismantled and moved to the side of the tracks, enabling the heavier one to pass.

The speed of the norry can be controlled, and it has a powerful braking system designed to stop it if it comes across another norry en route. The cruising speed is 10 kilometers per hour uphill, while it slightly goes up when going downhill. One can watch various birds nesting on the huge trees that border both sides of the track. Birds love to fly alongside the norry, and it is indeed a delightful experience to watch sparrows, kingfishers, and kites in full flight alongside one's bamboo train. After one crosses the lush green paddy fields that stretch for miles, the norry enters thick evergreen forests where the birds give way to the butterflies. Hundreds of colorfully painted butterflies flit alongside the railway tracks; watching them is a pleasure. One stops at a tiny station along the way for a cup of freshly-brewed green Oolong tea and sliced dragon fruit before continuing to one's final destination that is Phnom Teppendey, a tiny hill on which is a small temple.

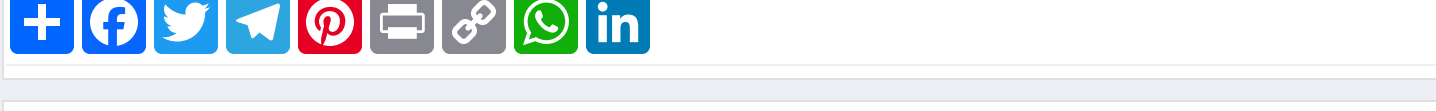
One then returns to Dambong station in the same norry after spending a few hours exploring the beautiful scenery as seen from the summit of the hill. The return journey is more exciting as the norry crawls uphill at snail's pace, providing more time to watch the variety of butterflies and birds that one encounters at every moment in this unique mode of transportation.

A feature of one's return trip is encountering another norry transporting a motorcycle and rider. One gets off one's norry that is dismantled in minutes, enabling the heavier one to pass. After that, one boards again and continues this round trip to Dambong station.

The Cambodian government is under intense pressure from vested interests that want these bamboo trains to be banned. Steps may soon be taken to prevent these local bamboo contraptions from using the unused railway tracks laid down by the Cambodian government. So, the best time to visit Cambodia for an unforgettable journey on the bamboo train is now.

Experience the magic before this simple, unique way to explore the region disappears, which may be in the next few months. This bamboo train ride is worth doing if only for the hundreds of colorful butterflies that flit around both sides of the track throughout the journey. Seeing the numerous birds fleeing alongside the bamboo train as if they were competing with it is a memory that one will treasure for a lifetime!

Also, Teppendey is an excellent place for steamed rice with garden vegetables, wild mushrooms flavored with wild ginger, and wild mint. The food was truly delicious. As a vegan since 1995, I always manage to get nutritious vegan food, even in remote corners of the globe like Teppendey. What the mind conceives and believes, it achieves!



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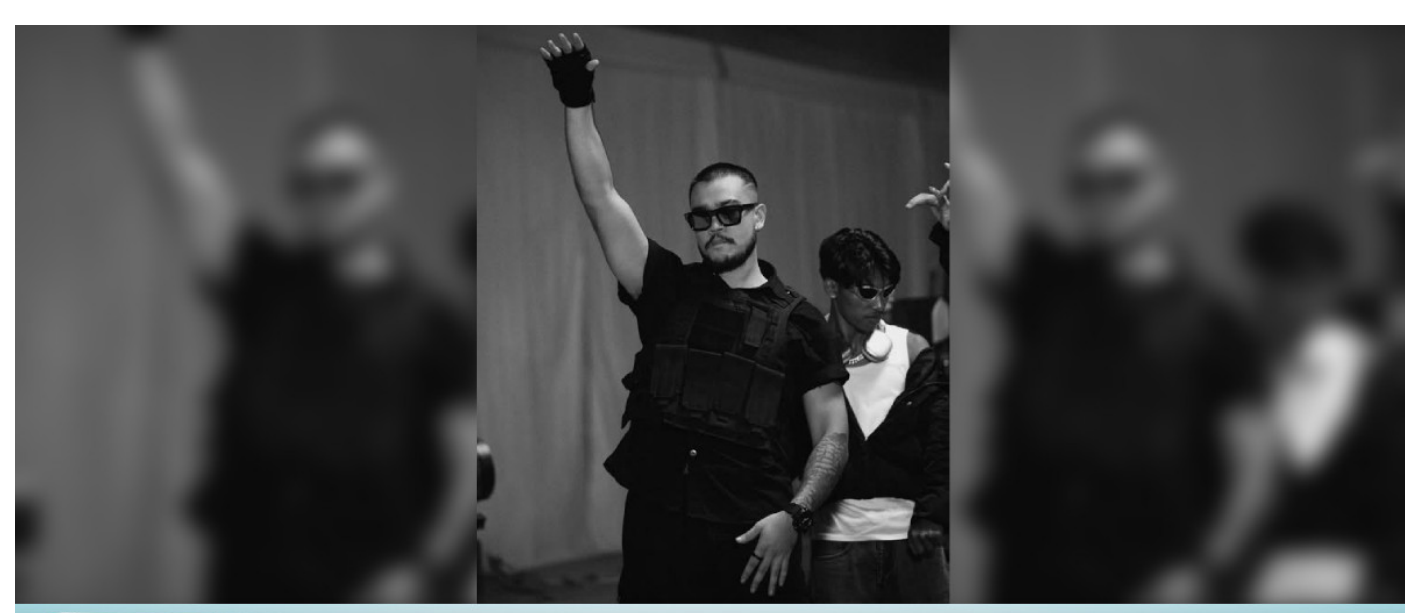
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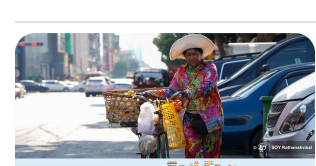
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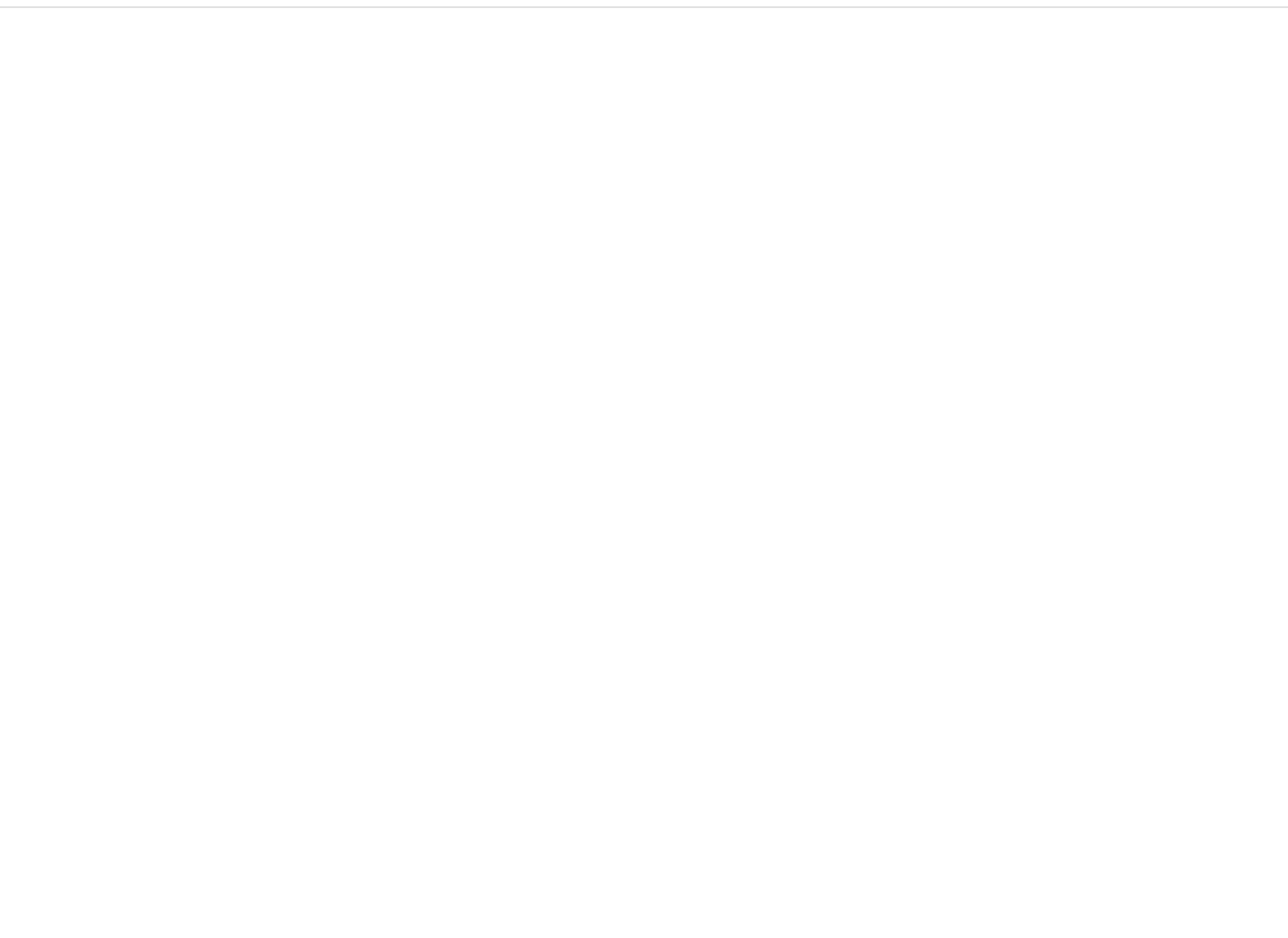


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