



BAMBOO TRAIN IN BATTAMBANG

Memorable ride
among colourful
birds and insects.

By Murli Menon

One is writing this from one's river-facing terrace at Royal Hotel in Battambang in interior Cambodia. One has returned after a once-in-a-lifetime experience and unforgettable journey of a different kind. The adventure of cruising through acres of lush greenery for several hours in an open-air train! A close encounter with the sights, sounds and smells of nature.

Battambang is a small town nestling between Cambodia and Thailand on the banks of the Sangker river. There is an interesting legend from the 10th century about how Battambang got its name

The word *bat* in Khmer means to disappear and *dambong* means stick. As the story goes, a cowherd who tended cows, had a stick which was magical. The cowherd could throw the stick at his herd and control his flock. For 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 the king. Using his magical stick, he succeeded in overthrowing the old king and the crown prince fled to the forest and became a monk.

Ta Dambong had a dream that his reign would last only for 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. Back in the forest the prince came to know that all the holy men were asked to present themselves to the king. But on the way to the capital, he met a monk, who gave him a white horse to look after till the hermit returned after meeting the king.

The prince still dressed as a monk, alighted from the horse which began to fly. As soon as Ta Dambong saw the hermit on the horse, he knew that

his end had come and threw his stick at the horse. But the magical horse made the stick disappear and Ta Dambong fled for his life. The hermit king dethroned Ta Dambong and reclaimed his throne that was rightfully his and lived happily ever after. Thus, the city was called *bat dambong* which is Khmer for disappearing stick. Over the centuries, *bat dambong* metamorphosed into Battambang which is the present name.

THE SMALL TOWN

Battambang is a small town located on the banks of the Sangker river. The Sangker river got its name from the giant sangker tree which was cut and laid across the narrow river in the days when there were no bridges, to enable residents to walk across to the other side. One of the unique attractions in Battambang is the four-hour ride on the bamboo train from Dambong to Teppendey. The bamboo train is known as *lorie*





or *norie* in Cambodia. There is only one train which leaves Battambang at 6 a.m. for Phnom Penh.

The villagers have developed an ingenious device to utilise the railway tracks after the train has left for Phnom Penh. The *norie* consists of a bamboo base mounted on a pair of iron wheels which are placed on the rails. This contraption which resembles a railway trolley is powered by a small portable diesel engine. There are many *nories* travelling along the way and when one comes across another *norie*, the lighter of the two is dismantled and moved to the side of the tracks, allowing the heavier one to pass. Battambang is the only town in the world where one can explore the bounties of nature while cruising along the railway tracks in an open-air bamboo train.

The speed of the *norie* can be controlled and it has a powerful braking system, designed to stop it if it comes across another *norie* en route. The cruising speed is 10 km. per hour uphill, while it slightly goes faster while going downhill. One can watch a variety of birds nestling on the huge trees that border both sides of the track. Birds love to fly alongside the *norie* and it is indeed a delightful experience to watch sparrows, kingfishers and kites in full

**PHNOM
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EXPLORING THE
BEAUTEOUS SCENE.**

flight alongside one's bamboo train.

After one crosses the lush green paddy fields which stretch for miles, the *norie* enters thick evergreen forests where the birds give way to the butterflies. Hundreds of colourfully painted butterflies flit alongside the railway tracks and it is a pleasure to watch them. One stops at a tiny station along the way for a cup of freshly brewed green Oolong tea and sliced dragon fruit before proceeding to one's final destination which is Teppendey.

Phnom Teppendey is a tiny hill which is home to a small temple and one returns to Dambong station in the same *norie* after spending a few hours exploring the beautiful scene as seen from the summit of the hill.

The return journey is more exciting as the *norie* crawls uphill at snail's pace, allowing more time to watch the variety of butterflies and birds that one encounters at every moment of this unique mode of transportation.

A unique feature of one's return trip is an encounter with another *norie* transporting a motorcycle and rider. One gets down and one's *norie* is dismantled in minutes allowing the heavier one to pass after which one continues one's round trip to Dambong station.

The Cambodian government is under intense pressure from vested



interests who want these bamboo trains to be banned and steps may be taken in the near future to prevent these indigenous 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 pleasure becomes extinct within the next few months! This bamboo train ride is worth it, just to see the hundreds of colourful butterflies which flit around both sides of the track throughout one's journey. Flying alongside the numerous birds, who seem to compete with the bamboo train, is a memory which one will treasure for a lifetime!

Also Teppendey is a great place for freshly steamed rice with garden vegetables, wild mushrooms flavoured with wild ginger and wild mint. The food is delicious. What the mind conceives and believes, it achieves!

We

We all have an unspeakable secret, an irreversible regret an unreachable dream and an unforgettable love...!!