

footloose

Train to Cambodia

The four-hour ride on the 'bamboo train' from Dambong to Teppedey offers a close up and personal experience of rural Cambodia. By Murli Menon

A unique experience deserves to be shared and I'm writing this sitting on the river facing terrace at the Royal Hotel in Battambang in interior Cambodia. The adventure of cruising through acres of lush greenery for hours; a close encounter with the sights, sounds and smells of nature, is indeed an unforgettable journey of a different kind.

Battambang is a small town nestled 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 had a stick with magical powers. The cowherd could throw the stick at his herd and control his flock. For this he was called Ta Dambong or the uncle with a stick. But when Ta Dambong became bored with tending cows, he 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. One night Ta Dambong had a dream



that his reign would last only 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 had been asked to present themselves before the king. On the way to the capital he met a hermit monk who gave him a white horse to look after till after latter returned after meeting the king. The price, still dressed as a monk, mounted the horse which began to fly.

As soon as Dambong saw the hermit on the horse, he knew his end had come and threw his stick at the horse. But the magical horse made the stick disappear and Dambong fled for his life. The hermit king dethroned Dambong and reclaimed the throne that was rightfully his and lived happily ever after. Thus the city was called Bat Dambong or disappearing stick.

Over the centuries, Batdambong metamorphosed into Battambang, which is its current name. The Sangker river on which Battambang stands 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 cross the river.

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 'lorie' or 'norie' in Cambodia. There is only one regular train service that leaves from Battambang at 6 a.m. daily for Phnom Penh. But the villagers have developed an ingenious device to utilise the railway tracks after the regular train has left for Phnom Penh. The norie consists of a bamboo base mounted on a pair of iron wheels that are placed on the rails. This contraption, which resembles a railway trolley, is powered by a 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

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GETTING THERE

The nearest international airport to reach Battambang is Phnom Penh International Airport. The bus is the easiest and most popular way to get to Battambang. This 291 km trip takes 5 hours and costs 16000 Riel (Rs 200). You can also travel by taxi. Shared taxis from Phnom Penh to Battambang cost 24000 RIEL (Rs 300) per seat and take about 4 hours. The train is available on weekdays only. The ticket costs 12500 Riel (Rs 155).

WHERE TO STAY

The Royal Hotel at Battambang is a value for money proposition by Indian standards. A standard double room without air-conditioning costs 20000 Riel (Rs 250) per night.

bounties of nature while cruising along a railway track 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.

Travellers can watch a variety of birds nesting 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 flight alongside one's bamboo train. After you cross the lush green paddy

fields that stretch for miles, the norie enters thick evergreen forests where the birds give way to the butterflies. Hundreds of colourful butterflies flit alongside the railway tracks and it is a pleasure to watch them. You stop at a tiny station along the way for a cup of freshly-brewed green Oolong tea and sliced dragon fruit before continuing to your destination, which is Teppedey.

Phnom Teppedey is a tiny hill that is home to a small temple and you returns to Dambong station in the same norie after spending a few hours exploring the beautiful scene from the summit of the hill. The return journey is more exciting as the norie crawls uphill at a snail's pace, allowing more time to watch the variety of butterflies and birds that you encounter at every moment of this unique journey.

The Cambodian government is under intense pressure from vested interests that 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 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! **btw**

