



# Our guide for volunteers and visitors

## Introduction

Savong's School is a small rural volunteer school near Siem Reap, the tourist town near Angkor Wat Cambodia.

The purpose of the school is to give local rural children language skills in English and Japanese so that they may have better work prospects in town when they graduate. The school also organizes university scholarships for the top students so that they may be supported through a degree programme.

Siem Reap is a bustling town, but the rural hinterland around it is one of the poorest regions in all of Cambodia. The school helps disadvantaged children in poor households to improve their prospects and reach a higher potential. It is supported by overseas donations, and is assisted greatly by volunteers who come and teach.

Volunteers are encouraged, and they enjoy a very positive experience—but as is true with most things; the more prepared you are, the more you get out of the experience. So this guide is designed to help prepare you better for volunteering at Savong's School—or, for that matter, at any other school in Cambodia.

You are about to embark on an amazing experience!



## Where are we?

Savong's School is 12 kms due East of Siem Reap, right at the top of Tonle Sap lake in the map above. For a closer look, see overleaf.

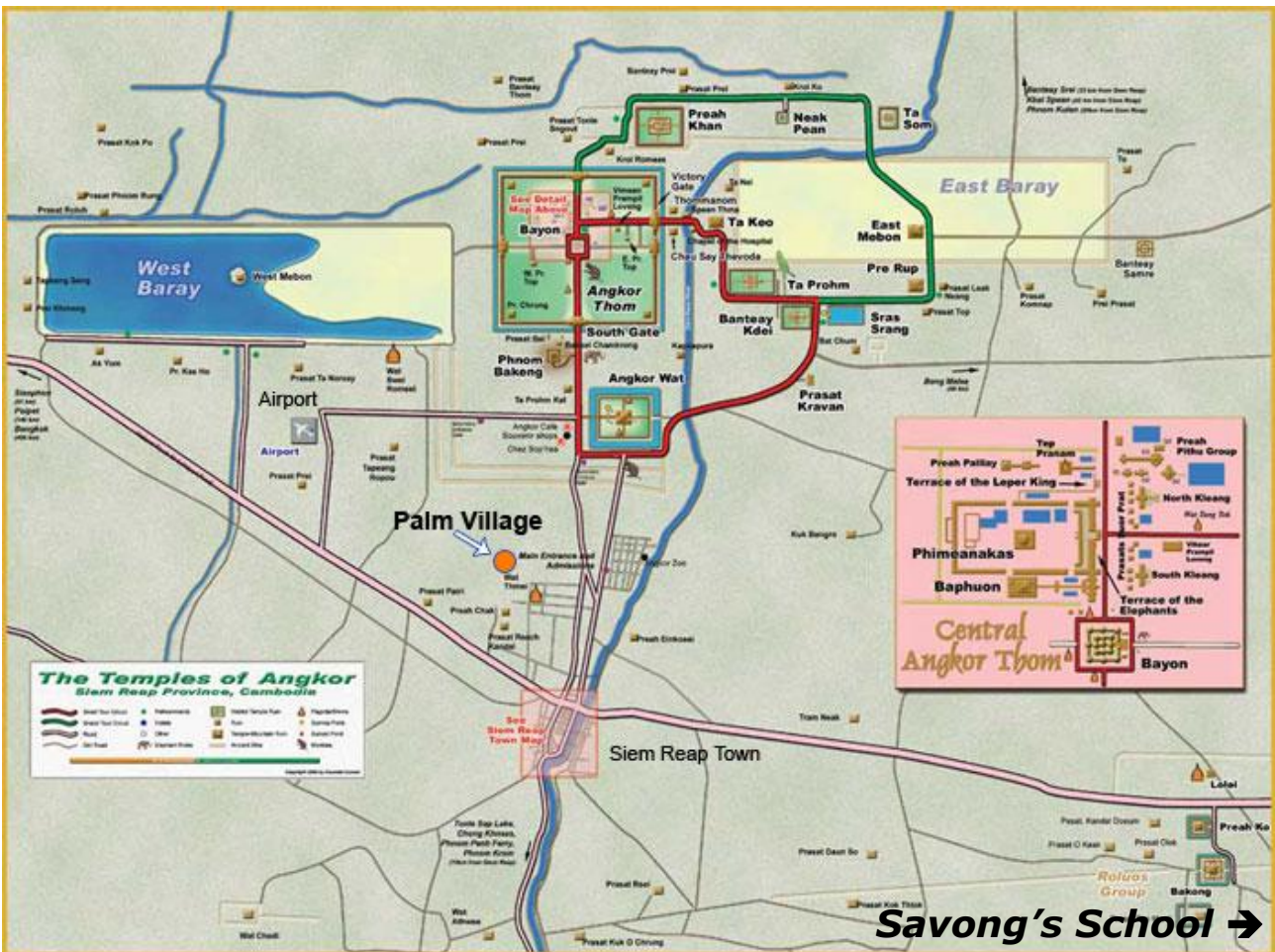
## Meet Savong

Savong (pictured with his wife Aneed) grew up in the years following the Pol Pot disaster. Those were years of poverty. His father, formerly a monk, was one of the individuals who later collected the bones and skulls and human remains at the Siem Reap killing fields.

Despite these memories, the focus is on the future, and Savong—like many Cambodians—is committed to helping the next generation get ahead. Where Savong had to work as a young child, now he works to help poor rural children get a full education and strong employment prospects. He's quite a driven individual, strongly motivated by his past.



He began by building a classroom on the side of his dad's house, and from this he shared his dream with overseas supporters who helped him realize his vision to serve children in the countryside. The school was built in 2005 and each year adds more services (computer teaching, scholarships, an orphanage) to assist local students.



**Savong's School →**

*We're right on the edge of the map.*

## WHERE ARE WE EXACTLY?

Savong's School is about 14kms due east of Siem Reap. That isn't far, but locals—at least those on motorbikes—seldom travel fast, so the journey out of town is around 25 sedate minutes.

If you're heading out of town you'll go around 12 kms along No6 Highway, the main road that, were you to stay on it, would take you to Phnom Penh, 5 hours away (in a speeding car.)

You'll go out past the markets and the main shopping strip of Siem Reap. This is where most business takes place well away from the palm trees and tranquility of the town's old French Quarter.

Now you enter the countryside, though you'll see how Siem Reap is beginning to really sprawl. The kilometers roll by. Look out for the big military base in the distance to your left. My personal landmark is the man who makes wooden beds, under a grove of trees. He has a horse and cart to deliver these. It looks like a pleasant life. He's located right before the turn-off to the Rolous Group of temples—the oldest collection of all the Angkor temples.

So just after the bed maker we turn right, off No6 Highway and down a dirt road—sometimes very pot-holed - and it winds its way past little rice farms, the Bakong monastery and ancient Rolous temples.

Now we turn down a another dirt road and—well there we are. The sign for Savong's School stands at the entrance to a 50 metre right of away and there, through the green gates is the school. You ready to teach?





## Getting to and from the school

The best way to get to the school is by tuk-tuk. Thanks to a very generous donation by an Australian couple, the school has its own tuk-tuk, and by phoning Savong +855 12 531 037 he can arrange to have you, and friends, picked up from wherever you're staying in town.

We're a school and not a free taxi service, so we do have a fixed charge to cover petrol and costs. This is \$10 return for one person, dropping to \$4 return, each, if there are 4 people.

## Is it possible to stay at the school?



Just occasionally a backpacker volunteer stays at the school for a total immersion experience. Conditions are very basic to say the least, and space is not always available so for the most part we don't yet *promote* this option.

Mia, *pictured above*, is a Japanese volunteer who stayed for 8 weeks—and loved the experience, really becoming part of the family with Savong, Aneed and their two daughters Visa and Suna.

## Where to stay?

If you're planning to stay in Siem Reap you're spoiled for choice. The town is brimming with hotels, guest houses and restaurants of all types to suit all budgets.

They range from the 5 Star paradises at \$500 a night through to the no-frills backpacker hostels that charge as few as \$6 a night.

This is up to you. What we can recommend when you're checking out your options on such sites as Trip Advisor (<http://tinyurl.com/286l39f>) to look around at the B&Bs because most represent terrific value.

Cambodia is the kind of place where every tuk-tuk driver has a cousin who knows the best place etc etc...and we're no different.



Savong has a good working relationship with Sor Phoun Villa, a new locally-run guest house that charges \$US15 - 25 per night for a clean room, air-conditioned with TV, (CNN, BBC) hot and cold water, shower and - downstairs - internet access. I've stayed there myself (I'm the writer of this guide - and a traveller who does not enjoy roughing it.) and can recommend Sor Phoun for being exceptional value. If you're looking for cheaper, there are \$10 rooms with fan but no air-con. Call me soft, but the aircon is essential for travellers not used to the hot Cambodian temperatures.

If you happen to book here, and do it via Savong, then the school gets a commission.

But our first golden advice is simple: stay somewhere that suits your mood, your occasion, and your budget.



## Operating hours

Savong's School runs a main afternoon shift each five days a week. The Savong School afternoon shift runs from 1:30-2:00pm in the afternoon until 7:00pm in the evening. It is a 5 hour stint, quite hot work - but a good stretch of time to run cohesive lessons. Sunday is a rest day.



*There will be a mixed age group in your classroom.*

## Cultural Tips

Cambodians are easy to relate to. Countless tourists have referred to the famous Cambodian smiles and remark on the friendliness of the people as they welcome you into their lives.

In that context it is easy to feel so at home that you forget a few local protocols.

1. Dress respectfully. While on holiday you may be in a casual mood—and the heat will encourage you to wear singlet, or (females) short shorts. Well please—not at a Cambodian School. Dress reasonably professionally and not provocatively.
2. Shoes off at the door. That applies to people's homes, and to the school classroom.
3. Try not to point! There you are, in the classroom and you've asked the class a question. "Yes, you...have you got the answer?" And there you are, pointing, western style, with your index finger. In Cambodia that's considered quite rude. Try to indicate with the flat of your hand.
4. Even ruder: pointing at somebody with your foot.
5. Working with kids, you may well be inclined to give them a pat of encouragement. Well, if you must, a pat on the shoulder is okay—but a pat on their head is not polite.
6. You may have a young monk or two in the class, dressed in their orange robes. Their presence certainly adds an unexpected dimension to your experience. Treat them with respect as you would the other students. But a note for females: you are not to touch a monk.
7. Try and learn a few useful words in Khmer. Please and thank you are a good starting point.

Westerners come over as amazingly direct: quick to get heated, inclined to argue. So show patience. That means listening carefully, thinking about what was "not" said, and being sure *not* to talk over the top of others. Phrase criticisms (for example of a child who has got the answer wrong) in a positive way. "Good try! Almost there!"

The overriding rule is really easy. Simply show respect.

## Weather

The Siem Reap climate can be described as tropical with seasonal monsoons, and the weather is warm year-round. There are four distinct seasons - broadly split into the rainy season and the dry season.

- November to February. Cooler and dry.
- March to May . Hot and dry.
- June to August. Hot and wet.
- September to November. Cooler and wet.

The really rainy months are June and July and then, after a slightly drier August September and October : the height of the wet season and when Cambodia is at its most photogenic. During the wet season major monsoons can sweep through the region and cause flooding and disruptions to land and air travel.



*Locals are well adjusted to absolute wet times—be sure to pack clothes that are easy-dry, and don't bring your fanciest footwear.*

## Health



We've communicated now with dozens of volunteers and heard their stories. One of the biggest anxieties about a journey to the region is about health.

Well, a good recommendation is to get preventative health jabs before you go to Cambodia. Hepatitis A and B, tetanus and Typhoid are all risks. Malaria is the other main risk, though the only preventative treatment is to take Malaria tablets with you on the journey.

All these jabs make things sound worse than they are—but because of the rare case of contracting something serious (and the really serious consequences if you do) you are far, far better to be prepared.

Most travellers discover that in the tropic you need to drink copious amounts of water—and taking bottled water with you wherever you go, is recommended. Local bottled waters are fine.

Because of the risk of dehydration, tablets or powders that boost up your salt levels can be useful: think of those isotonic tonics that runners and cyclists use. They're good.

The big one, really, is the risk of getting stomach upsets and diarrhoea. Many visitors suffer this AFTER they have left Cambodia. Bring those disinfectant hand-wipes, and bring over-the-counter medications such as Imodium to help stabilise your stomach.

By day, and night wear insect repellents to ward off the mosquitoes. Malaria is present in Cambodia, and around wet-season there are a million ponds and puddles with larvae just waiting to hatch and seek your warm, delicious human blood.

Overall in our informal poll of visitors:

- Most have suffered diarrhoea and stomach upsets.
- Only a thin minority have encountered anything worse.

Read up your travel and health guides. We won't get started here on such topics as STDs and AIDS.

## Savong Orphan Centre



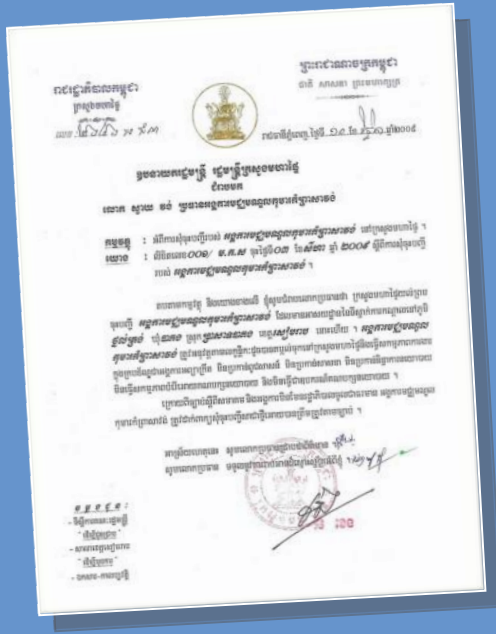
In 2008 the school project was extended significantly with the addition of a small orphanage the Savong Orphan Centre near the school. Strictly speaking, most of the 35 children there are not orphans—they have at least one parent still alive—but these children come from unimaginably poor backgrounds.

The need was recognised by Savong when first one child, and then others, approached him as school director, telling their stories and asking for help. For example one boy, aged 10, faced being put up for sale by his mother—a solo mum—who could not afford to feed her children. The boy would have ended up working in a cafe perhaps, clearing tables but receiving no further education.

So Savong developed the orphanage and has been building this up step by step—enrolling each school aged child at the local state school, and providing further education at his language school and through after-school tuition in an open-sided classroom built by Singaporean visitors.

The orphanage was registered by the Ministry of the Interior (*Left: how's your Khmer reading?*) in 2009 and has seen a number of projects designed to give the children better living conditions (running water from the big stainless tank, electricity from the generator, an under-cover kitchen area, the classroom, the fish farm...)

For many visitors to the school, it is the work—and the children—at the orphanage that steals their heart.



## The Savong Orphan Centre



John on the left, Christina (with the hat) in the middle . A meeting of tribes in 2008 that led to the building of the new orphanage.

John and Christina Quill are USA residents, and had independently met up with Savong in 2008 while on a back-packing holiday in Cambodia with three of their children.

It was on this tour that they not only visited the school, but they were shown an empty field and told of the need to build a home for the needier children at the school.

When they returned to the USA they forwarded the funds for this building, and it was constructed within a few weeks. The Quills are the last people to seek personal glory and they characterise the quiet giving nature of many visitors and volunteers to Cambodia. Christina works in health care, and her ambition is to one day return to Cambodia perhaps to work in the Children's Hospital while John teaches.



## Sponsoring children at the orphanage

If you visit the orphanage you may have your heart really moved. One is not conscious of the poverty of their backgrounds so much as their exuberance and charm.

Children are sponsored, and the monthly cost to feed them and look after them is \$US30—or a dollar a day. On top of that, the local state school charges for their education—and this comes to \$15 per month or 50 cents per day.

At present not all children are fully sponsored.

In our view the most pressing need for funding at the project is not necessarily for capital items (schools and children's homes always need stuff of course) but to help meet the month to month running costs. At the same time, the SOC has been working to become more self-sufficient in terms of growing its own food and relying less on donations.

## Donations

There's no getting around it, all visitors to volunteer projects in Cambodia are expected to give something—whether it is money, time or other resources. Cambodia is an ocean of need.

When you visit it is good to work out a donation amount that is comfortable for you. Savong understands that backpackers, for example, are on a budget—and he values your time as much as anything.

There are three ways to give really.

1. A direct cash donation.
2. A purchase of goods—for example offer to buy books or needed goods to the value of \$x.
3. Via the [www.savong.com](http://www.savong.com) website where we have PayPal facilities. This may be a lump sum or you may feel you'd like to give a regular amount each month.

One tip to get over the awkward “money conversation” is to raise this yourself, right up front. “Savong, I'd like to visit the school—and we'd like to donate \$60.” Be direct and up front about it.

Donations made via PayPal go to a bank account in New Zealand run by a registered charity: The Cambodian Rural Schools Trust - and this entity will give you a receipt. Informal gifting within Cambodia generally isn't receipted.



## Communications while in Cambodia

Cell phone coverage is very good in Cambodia, especially around Phnom Penh and Siem Reap thanks to the wonderfully flat landscape. As with other Asian nations, locals have jumped directly from no-phone to mobile. If you're staying in Cambodia for any length of time, then purchase a local phone—it will save you a whole lot, for example if you're contacting the school, orphanage or other contacts in Cambodia. At the end of your journey you can always donate the phone.



Internet access in town is pretty good—and while most guest houses have a PC for internet access, you can also use the internet cafes in town for around 50c to \$1.50 per hour.

One caution—if you're taking a stick drive to the internet café or swapping files anywhere, make sure your system has virus protection. The Cambodian information highway is awash with pirated software and deadly malware - so be careful.

## Ghosts at the school?

Cambodians have a lively belief in spirits, and generally when new buildings are put up, provision is made to build a small spirit-house on the property—a small shrine where offerings are made to appease and thank local spirits.

At Savong's School locals report that there is definitely a friendly ghost—an elderly blind woman—who is peaceful and seems happy enough with the school on her property. However the gates at the school were put up after other ghosts—young people, joking and drinking—kept entering the school grounds.

Some 95% of Cambodians share Buddhist beliefs—and the ceremonies and protocols of Buddhism have helped glue the country together after the trauma and impoverished aftermath of the Pol Pot regime.



*Left: one of the boys at the SOC, Buntheourn. When his grandmother died he had his head shaved and wore robes for a week of fasting and prayers. Savong's school is not overtly religious, however when you visit, be aware and considerate of local beliefs.*

## FACT FILE: SIEM REAP PROVINCE



Savong School is located in Bakong District, part of Siem Reap province. Visitors to Siem Reap town may be forgiven for thinking that the global economy has worked wonders for local wealth. With land prices skyrocketing and the business sector growing; clearly some people are doing nicely.

But step out of town, by even a few kilometers and the story is absolutely different.

Last year I spoke with a woman at the main vegetable market on Number 6 Highway—a bustling morning market where vendors stake out their spot as early as 4:00am in the morning having cycled in from the countryside. The woman was quite typical of the vendors—she had vegetables for sale—and she was both at the mercy of the weather, but also of the spot prices and demand from the townsfolk, who in turn are reliant on the highly erratic tourist sector. Some weeks this woman could earn \$30—but on other weeks her turnover might be as low as 20,000 Riel—or just \$5. The situation for her family is typical of the mostly rural population in the district.

According to 2004 Government figures, some:

- 9% of households have toilet facilities.
- 8.6% of households have electricity.
- 30.7% of households have safe drinking water.
- Some 65.7% of households have none of these amenities at all.

In 1998 (the previous Census—the next results will be from 2008) *most* (but not all) of Siem Reap province was identified as having more than 75% of the population below the official poverty line while in 2002 the estimate incidence of poverty in Siem Reap was 54% - that is some 356,000 people of the estimated 660,000 population: the highest poverty rate of all but 1 of Cambodia's 24 provinces.





Above—preparation of food at Savong Orphan Centre, New year celebrations.

## BE AWARE OF HOLIDAYS

When you book your visit to Cambodia, be aware that the Khmer year is festooned with many holidays that might take your by surprise. For example Khmer New Year is in mid-April, and in the last half of the month schools close, many families return to their homelands and services generally slow down.

The other really big holiday is Pchum Ben in late September—a time of thanksgiving to ancestors, and again a fortnightly break.

### CAMBODIA HOLIDAYS 2011

Jan-01	International New Year Day
Jan-07	Victory Day over Genocidal
Feb-18	Meak Bochea Day
Mar-08	International Women's Day
April 14, 15, 16	Khmer New Year Day
May-01	International Labor Day
May 13, 14, 15	King's Birthday, Norodom Sihamoni
May-17	Visak Bochea Day
May-21	Royal Plowing Day
Jun-01	International and Cambodian Children's Day
Jun-18	King's Mother Birthday, Norodom Monineath Sihanouk
Sep-24	Constitutional Day
September 26, 27, 28	Pchum Ben Day
Oct-29	King's Coronation Day, Norodom Sihamoni
Oct-31	King's Father Birthday, Norodom Sihanouk
Nov-09	Independence Day
November 09, 10, 11	Water Festival
Dec-10	International Human Rights Day



## FACT FILE: SIEM REAP PROVINCE

### FOCUS ON LITERACY

literacy is a serious issue in Cambodia and in Siem Reap's population of around 660,000 people, including children, some 114,000 adults are believed to lack even basic reading or writing skills. This is an estimate based on commune databases which gather local information. A measure of illiteracy is the number of people who sign their ID papers with a thumbprint in lieu of a signature.

According to UNESCO figures, females are more likely to go uneducated. Across the nation some 45% of adult females lack reading and writing skills, compared to 25% of males.

The problem is self-reinforcing also. Around 80% of the poor—those who live below the official, and very modest, 'poverty line' - are in households headed by individuals with little or any schooling at all.

This is an especially serious problem in Siem Reap province where 55% of the population are aged 14 or under and where 75% of households are below the poverty line.

Based on those figures around 225,000 Siem Reap children under 15 are at serious risk of entering adult life without reading or writing skills: a third of Siem Reap's total population are facing serious risk of illiteracy.

There is concerted investment in education by the government, but the Minister of Education is on record as saying that the overseas funded sector (Savong's School is one of around 600 overseas funded schools in Cambodia) is vital to ongoing development. In Cambodia there is a shortage of skilled teachers. The average number of students per teacher is 41, though that number doesn't account for the high percentage of school-aged children who simply do not, or cannot attend schools.

## SCHOLARSHIPS

Starting in 2010, Savong School introduced full university scholarships for the "best of the best" students paying for four years study including enrolment, living allowance, transport to and from university, and a lap-top computer. Cost is about \$US1,200 per annum per student: a terrific way to give deserving students an undreamed-of opportunity in life. Each year we plan to support an additional 4-6 students.

## HOW TO BOOK YOUR PLACE

Booking your place as a volunteer at Savong School or SOC or medical clinic is easy.

The first step is to work out a realistic schedule for yourself, and then check this against our Volunteer Booking Calendar on the [www.savong.com](http://www.savong.com) website. Sometimes there are peak periods when there are already other volunteers committed, and if things are too crowded then one option is to find another place — and Savong works closely with other ethical NGOs so he is able to recommend alternative places.

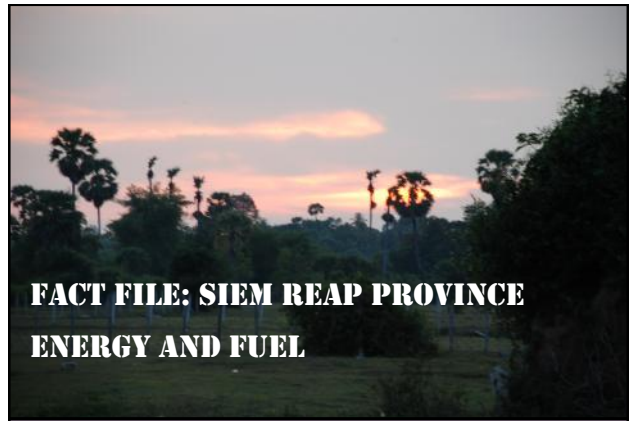
The second step is to fill in a Volunteer Information Sheet which asks you a number of questions and helps the team in Cambodia “get to know you” a little before you arrive. You can download this sheet from the [www.savong.com](http://www.savong.com) website—and just email us a copy.

We also need a scan of your passport, and this is becoming a common child safety strategy in Cambodia. Please don't take offence at this.

During the run-up period before your stay in Cambodia we're here to answer questions and help you prepare.



*We introduced the Volunteer Booking Calendar so that you may check out whether your plans coincide with everybody else's —and so we can pencil in your plans. You can find it on our website.*



## FACT FILE: SIEM REAP PROVINCE ENERGY AND FUEL

Savong School is located in Bakong District, part of Siem Reap province which despite the tourism boom based around Angkor Wat remains the second poorest province out of 24 in all Cambodia.

What do they use for lighting and cooking? In the west we take household energy for granted, that's for sure. Electricity is there at the flick of a switch. It is relatively cheap. But in rural Cambodia the fuel and energy needed for cooking, lighting or other household appliances is a really expensive component of the household budget.

The figures for household lighting tell some of the story. In Cambodia, outside the cities, just 8% of home lighting is powered from the national grid. By contrast 17% is battery powered—and a typical system is for a village to have one businessperson making a living by charging car batteries and for households to swap charged batteries for their discharged batteries, for a dollar or two.

Meanwhile 70% of households use kerosene lamps for lighting.

Cooking is the big user of fuel however, and in Siem Reap 93% of households use firewood for cooking. A small percentage use charcoal. This is expensive, and increasingly so, and wood is going to be in increasingly short supply in years to come.

Vietnam has faced a similar crisis and one increasingly used option is the development of bio-gas generators, using animal manure. Tens of thousands of these units—cess pits with a domed 'collector' have been installed successfully. So far there does not appear to be a similar program in Cambodia. Another solution is to install wood stoves with a much more efficient design - and again, initiatives along this line are apparent in Africa, but not so far in Cambodia.

## YOU WANT TO HELP...BUT NOT TEACH?

The school, orphanage and medical centre have plenty of need for non-teaching volunteers. Whether you have a practical bent (there are always things to construct—and the fish farm and chicken farms) or if you have a medical background (assisting at the health clinic with our local GP, Doctor Sokunthea is a valuable experience and she needs people to assist) there are non-teaching roles here.