

Free education for children in rural Cambodia

SAVONG SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

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New Children at SOC—Recent floods have increased the number of needy families.



The significant flooding in October that hit Thailand and Cambodia left many local Bakong families in desperate straits—with crops wiped out and the prospect of real hardship ahead.

As a result there has been an intake of a few more children at the SOC including 10 year old Panhavut (pictured above.) He says he'd like to become a doctor.

How do these families find the SOC? A lot of this is done via networking, with families knowing somebody who knows somebody...and with agencies talking to each other in an effort to find places for needy children.

The children at SOC all have at least one parent—which is why we downplay the widely used term “orphanage.” The SOC acts as a safety net, and effort is made by Savong to ensure that these children get to see their kin. Earlier this year for example, a journey was made with a number of children (who came from out of the region) to visit their families. Local children occasionally stay over with their families, but it is notable that they enjoy life at SOC and the schooling opportunity they get here. We wish Panhavut and his new friends the very best.



Scholarship students make progress

One of the real successes this year at Savong School has been the implementation of the scholarship program which provides the next step for top students who otherwise would not be able to afford completion of T12 schooling, or enrolment at University.

The five winners this year, who in the interim are being funded \$25 per month to attend the local Bakong High School to complete Y12, are making good progress.

Recently we caught a slice of life with this photo—recording the receipt of the monthly scholarship using the widespread “thumbprint” receipting procedure.

Meanwhile the scholarship students at university have been doing well— all passing their courses from their first year at university, and each thoroughly involved in the daily life of Savong School as assistants, and as mentors for other students.



Letter from Duncan.



The photo on the below is of Pom Sen, Savong's younger brother and university student. It was taken at an optometrists office in Siem Reap, and it signifies something quite big to me. Look at those shots on the next page too. They could have been taken in any optometrists office, anywhere in USA, or Japan, or Europe.

In 2007 when I visited Savong, the bridge of my own reading glasses managed to break, and I searched high and low in town for anyone who might adapt the lenses to new frames or even to sell me some cheap standby optical glasses. The nearest anyone could point me was a market where a man sold abibas (that's how they were spelt) sunglasses for a ridiculous price of one dollar. Incidentally I bought these and they managed to explode off my face—they snapped in mid flight—precisely 20 minutes after I purchased them. For my reading glasses, the only help came at the ACLEDA Bank where a teller, feeling sorry for me, lent me the roll of sellotape so I could temporarily fix the bridge of my glasses. Alas, in the hot climate the sellotape positively oozed and my glasses kind of slid down my face. It was one of those little personal travel nightmares.



But here it is, 4 years later, and now Savong School and SOC is providing optical care for scholarship students, including Pom Sen, and for teachers and for the SOC children. Professional care is available, and Savong has taken the stance that this care shall be provided freely to the people in the care or employ of the organisation.

Glasses have a symbolic value in modern Cambodia. I've noticed that the students at our school have a real fascination with these. In fact they rather fancy the look of wearing

specs. These aren't just a style accessory: they symbolise something—modernity perhaps, or higher learning.

In the 1970s, unfortunately, glasses symbolised the same things—and under one of the many crazy and brutal Pol Pot inspired laws of the country, people could be arrested merely on the pretext of wearing glasses. Glasses? They meant you were an academic and deserved punishment. So an everyday implement, an optical aid, became a source of danger.

To many of us who have grown up in societies where glasses have been widely available, glasses are a source of frustration. I'm a guy who constantly leaves his glasses around the place. At the cinema. In a store. They are a reminder that both my eyesight and my memory are far from perfect.

But such thoughts are a luxury I realise. If glasses are only now easily available in Cambodia, we still have to remember that an eye test costs more than the monthly income of a third of Cambodians, and that the eye-glasses present an insurmountable financial obstacle for most people.

How many young students are struggling because they need glasses? How many adults live in a blurry world where literacy is irrelevant because you can't see the words?

I'm glad Savong is providing eye care. Such a move is wholly consistent with his desire to show respect and support for his staff, and to remove obstacles that stand in the pathway to a better education.



Above—scholarship student Sochon chooses her look.

Child profile— Van Ream



Ream is 13 years old and has recently joined the SOC. His parents are very poor farmers who live half way between Siem Reap and Poipet which is on the Thai border. They are unable to afford the boy's education and they want to see him reach his potential. He's ahead of most children his age—currently studying in Grade 7.

Savong says he has adjusted very well to life at SOC, he's confident and popular - and loves playing football.

Ream says that one day he would like to be an Engineer.

He has an older brother and a younger sister.

News briefs from Savong's projects

A few of the recent happenings at the school, the SOC and the medical center

The medical center recently received a visit from a long-term supporter, Dr Colm Power from Ireland and one of the things he discussed with Dr Sopheak was the availability of suitable pharmaceuticals. This is one of the many reasons we value the visitation from medical professionals who can 'talk shop' and discuss treatments. Thank you Colm.



Flood relief. In October massive flooding hit SE Asia and our TV news was immersed in footage of Bangkok under water. Without detracting from the massive damage and the loss of life in Thailand, the



news media gave scant coverage to the floods in neighbouring states including Cambodia where floods wiped out the rice crops and livelihoods of thousands of farming families. The waters receded fairly quickly, but the damage was long lasting. It was good to see the local Red Cross get fully involved. And it was especially good to see Savong respond also by appealing to supporters for assistance - not for the school and SOC - but for the local Bakong community where

the Siem Reap branch of Red Cross had identified hundreds of families in need as a direct result of the flooding. Savong raised \$2800 and with Red Cross purchased rice and food supplies to provide relief for over 100 families. The handover ceremony was on October 25th.

Bloody School! Some 92 students at Savong School signed-up to donate blood for the local hospital following a pep-talk from Savong about giving back to the community. So in October the local blood collection unit from the hospital arrived and set up stretchers and taught the students about the need for blood donors and about how the blood is used to save lives. Then it was donor time— with some students swooning and others acting with bravado as they watched their precious corpuscles fill the blood bags. The event is set to become an annual ritual at Savong School.



West Baray connection. Community leaders in West Baray, by the lake which is near the airport, have asked Savong if it is possible to provide language schooling for some of the older children—in order to enhance their work prospects. The answer has— thanks to a kind donor—been to provide a daily bus service for these children. Taking them to school each day. This week these children have been provided with Savong School t-shirts.



Eye Checks. In the picture here is Voan one the left, the computer teacher at Savong School. And on the right is Sochon, one of the first four scholarship students. Both were experiencing eye-strain recently so they were recently treated to eye-check-ups, and prescribed glasses. The good news is that optometrists and opticians now work in Siem Reap and professional care, of good quality, is now available. However for

most Cambodians the \$50 check-up is very expensive, and the cost of new glasses—\$120— simply out of reach. What an opportunity for a 'far seeing' NGO! In any case it was decided that staff and scholarship students (and SOC children) will all be provided eye-care where necessary, so they can get on teach or be effective students. On that note, those who know Gruoch (pictured earlier last year at the SOC), will be delighted to learn that her eye operation in September was a complete success.



Bookmark these sister websites and spread the word!

SAVONG FOUNDATION- www.savongfoundation.org This website is beautifully designed and provides supporters with news

SAVONG SCHOOL - www.savong.com This one has a focus on the school, but includes news, links to visitors and is one of the fund raising channels with a PayPal button.

SAVONG ORPHANAGE— www.savongorphanage.com This one is managed by Savong and he posts news and events in the life of SOC.

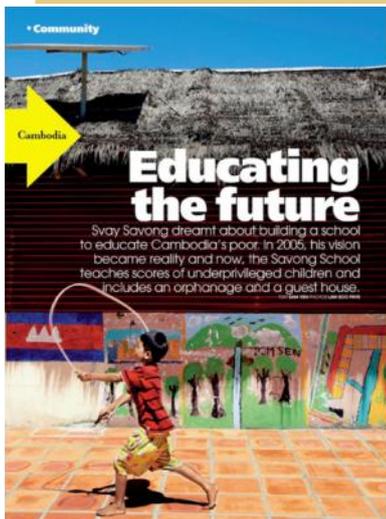
And **Savong_School** is on Twitter too.

Sister Orphanage



A new orphanage that has recently opened in Siem Reap is the Happy Sunshine Organisation—largely sponsored by Austrian fund-raisers. They hired Savong as an adviser to help them navigate the local red-tape and registration, and to find good builders for the project which boasts a very handsome set of buildings on a well-landscaped campus.

Savong retains involvement with the project, and the sister relationship between Happy Sunshine and SOC was cemented on the opening weekend when children from both organizations attended one big picnic at West Baray—the lake out near the airport.



IN THE PRESS.

Left—this month Malaysia Airlines featured a story about Savong in their in-flight magazine *Going Places*.

We will locate a copy if we can and post this on the www.savong.com website however there is an iPad version already downloadable.

<http://app.net/goingplaces>

BOOK REVIEW: RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL GUIDE TO CAMBODIA

Responsible travel has been the subject of heated discussion in the blogosphere for two years, and tales—such as that of the religious zealot who kidnapped Haitian children following the earthquake—are a reminder that good intentions are not enough. The nature of the help that we non-Cambodians provide is wide open to questioning. For example there are many people who believe that volunteering is plain wrong and that every time we visit, and then depart, we inflict more pain on disadvantaged children. I don't buy that argument— which boxes all children into the 'victim' category— but the edges of right and wrong here are not black and white.

For that reason I purchased this volume, a clearly written guide, to seek a second perspective.

The volume, at 102 pages, is compact yet full of information about Cambodia: it's history, geography and it's needs.

Best of all, it lays out an ethical platform for tourists who wish to make a difference and want to do so effectively. For example it offers clear advice about whether to give to child beggars (don't!) and the rights and wrongs of haggling with vendors. As the book points out: a dollar to us is just a dollar—but to the vendor it is much more significant.

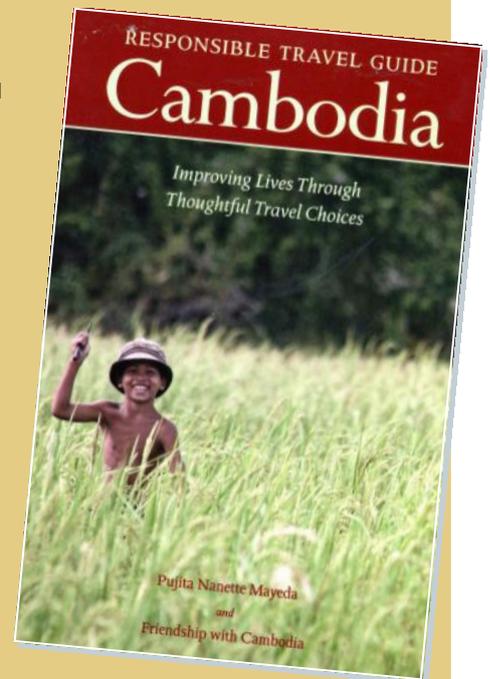
The volume describes a number of very good and ethical organizations that visitors might like to support and while our own organization is not among this selection (there are hundreds of NGOs in Cambodia) what I find interesting is the rationale and thinking behind those that have been selected. Many mirror the values and objectives that Savong

expresses—especially the importance of providing educational opportunity to children as an ultimate method of breaking the poverty cycle.

Look out for this book, authored by Pujita Nanette Mayeda and with *Friendship with Cambodia*. It is well worth a read before your next visit.

Some of the details in the book will date. It was first published a year ago, and I can spot one NGO that no longer exists; but that's a very minor quibble.

The main thing the book does is provide a framework for thinking about ethical tourism.



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