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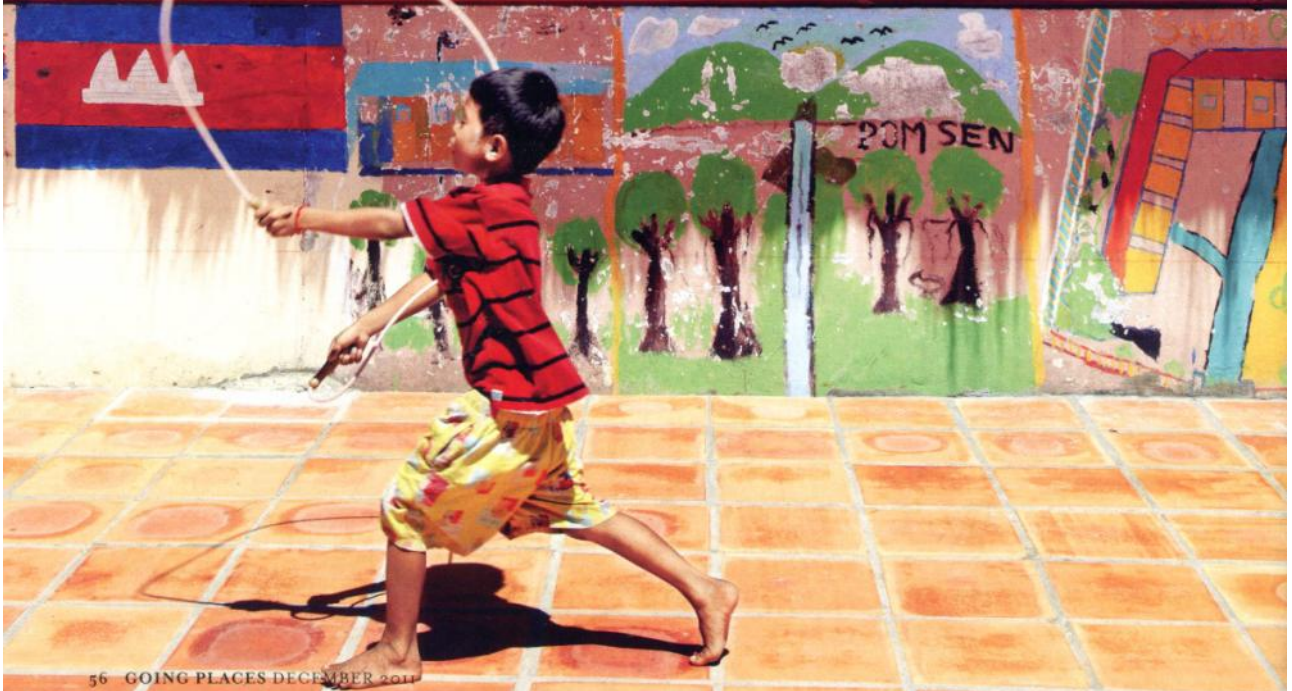
• Community

Cambodia

# Educating the future

Svay Savong dreamt about building a school to educate Cambodia's poor. In 2005, his vision became reality and now, the Savong School teaches scores of underprivileged children and includes an orphanage and a guest house.

TEXT SAM YEN PHOTOS LAW SOO PHYE



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(Clockwise from left) Children at the Savong School listen attentively to the man who started it all, Svy Savong; a teacher at the Savong School corrects the students' homework; education at the Savong School is free and is aimed at supplementing government education; (facing page) a resident child plays in front of the Savong Orphan Centre

In Cambodia, it is not only children without parents who live in orphanages. Old-fashioned beliefs and the lack of contraception usually mean families include a dozen or more children, and with so many mouths to feed, many parents are forced to give away some of their children to temples and orphanages to ease their financial burden.

Svy Savong is a 32-year-old Cambodian who knows all too well the realities of poverty. The founder of the Savong School was born to a rural family in Siem Reap as the seventh of 11 children, he grew up poor and there came a day when his parents could not afford to keep him. At that point, Svy decided to move out of the family home into a nearby pagoda and assisted the Buddhist monks in their daily duties in exchange for food and lodging.

It was here that he picked up English, taught to him by a monk. After a year of living at the pagoda, he was asked to become a monk; he initially rejected this offer as the initiation rites required the family to throw an expensive celebration,

which was something they could ill afford. However, Svy's father managed to borrow some money to allow him to fulfil the rites to becoming a monk.

During his time as a member of this spirited community, Svy learnt the importance of an education. Though life at the pagoda was austere, he learnt much – both in Sanskrit and English. He decided to return to being a civilian after three years, but spent another year at the pagoda honing his English skills. Then he went home in search of a job and although the jobs he took on were agrarian – clearing grass, odd jobs on farms and helping his mother sell food – he had bigger plans. "My dream was to build a school. Why? Because I want to give education to the poor in Cambodia's countryside," Svy says. He started out teaching English to his brothers and sisters in his spare time, and eventually roped in children from the neighbourhood to join the classes in his father's house.

A New Zealander named Duncan Stuart happened to come across the class one day and volunteered to teach for three days. He bought stationery and books for use at the school, and came to be part of the young Cambodian's dream. Inspired by Svy's ideals, Duncan, along with Yoshikazu Tsuji and Makoto Kimura from Japan (who both also discovered the school in the same way), supported Svy in setting up the Savong School in 2005.



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#### Built on dreams

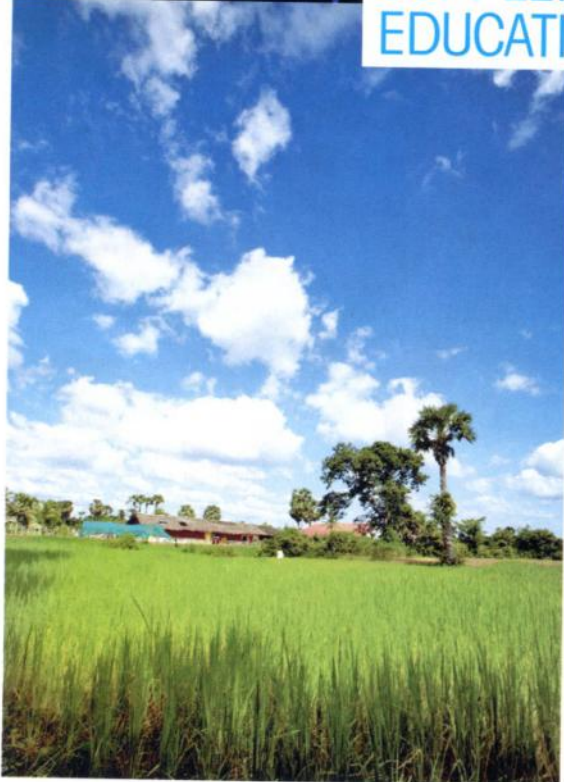
Today, Svy's dream is built on great foundations.

It consists of three separate buildings – the original school and an orphanage, both located within a stone's throw of each other near the Roluos Group of temples 15km east of Siem Reap. There is a new school-cum-orphanage building in the Chreyay commune 6km southeast of Siem Reap. The original Savong School is has become a local landmark, with ▶

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## EDUCATION AT THE SAVONG SCHOOL IS FREE. IT IS MEANT TO SUPPLEMENT THE GOVERNMENT EDUCATION PROGRAMMES



13 full-time teachers looking after over 900 students in five classrooms. The medium of instruction is predominantly English, but there are also classes conducted in Japanese and Korean as Siem Reap is a popular destination for tourists from these countries.

Education at the Savong School is free. It is meant to supplement the government education programmes, so school-going children will attend 'regular' school in the morning and come to Savong in the evening. The school premises is bustling, full of rowdy, energetic children who are incredibly serious about their education. From a basic set of three classrooms, the support of new donors and volunteers has allowed the expansion of the school to include a new building, extra classrooms, a library and even a computer centre for the children.

Further expansion plans are in the works in spite of concerns about it getting too big: The school is located in an area which is part of the Angkor Archaeological Park (housing a circuit of the three Rolous temples – Preah Ko, the Bakong and the Lolei) and thus construction is rigorously regulated. But permission to expand is in the process of being obtained, and Svay knows exactly what he wants to do with the extra land. Pointing to an empty plot surrounded by verdant paddy fields behind the school, he says: "There. That is where I will build a new school."

(Facing page) Children at the Savong School learn songs to boost their vocabulary; verdant paddy fields surround the Savong School in the outskirts of Siem Reap; (right) lessons are taught by either full-time teachers or by visiting volunteers, like Johannes Binder from Austria (below)



### Children of vision

A bumpy 200m ride away is the original Savong orphanage. Known as the Savong Orphan Centre (SOC), it was built in 2009 with assistance from the Quill family from the USA. Here, over 37 children are looked after and fed by generous donations. Education is provided directly at the centre, and most children also attend government school and lessons at the Savong School. The orphanage is a riot of activity and energy; guests arriving in a *tuk-tuk* are inevitably mobbed by the children who are eager to practise their surprisingly-good English. A visit is always gratifying. A chance to make a difference, no matter how small, in the lives of these children is immensely satisfying.

**99 East Golf Club**, designed by renowned architect Ross Watson and managed by Troon Golf, now has 9 holes open for play together with a completed clubhouse and pro shop. It is set in stunning golfing terrain, with the full 18 holes due for completion in the middle of 2012.

The masterplan covers a large tract of sea facing land and is the first development in Langkawi to integrate resort facilities, residential properties and leisure, all designed with low density and ecological sustainability.

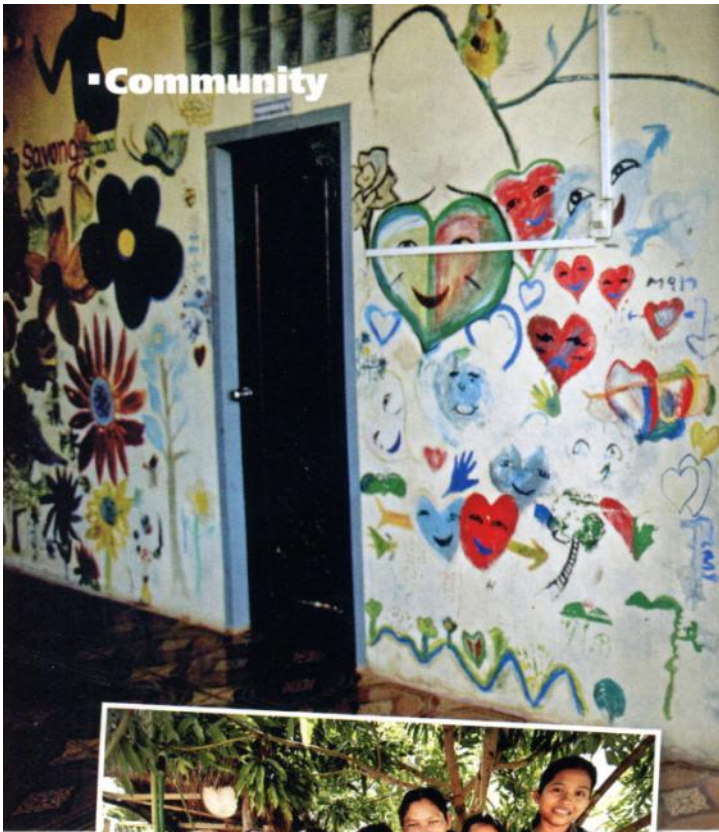
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The same energy reigns at the New Savong School and Orphanage, located some 8km away from the original buildings. Supported by Dominik Laister and Christoph Einfalt from Austria, the new site was built in 2010 because expansion of the old school was restricted by the government, but the new centre was also a way to expand Svay's dream. It currently houses 28 children, who study in a single classroom administered by one teacher. Like the old school and orphanage, the ages of the children range from 6 to 18, but they are all united by their backgrounds and a desire to learn.

This school isn't the end of Svay's big plans. Over the next decade, he wants to add more buildings, bedrooms and classrooms in all of the sites, as well as expand the disbursement of scholarships to fund placements in high schools and universities. Language expansion is also on the cards; Svay hopes to add Mandarin to his school's syllabus soon.

At the Savong Orphan Centre, there is a whiteboard in the dining area. On it is a chart highlighting what the orphanage needs. Some are luxuries, like a computer and a printer, but most are basic necessities – 25kg of rice to feed the children

each month, wood to build/repair furniture, firewood to power the kitchen. It costs about USD2,000 per month to fund the orphanage. For the Savong School, the sum is higher – USD3,000 – with the bulk going to teachers' salaries and scholarships. At the new school, the monthly bill runs up to USD2,000. Much of the costs are covered by monthly donations coordinated by Svay's steadfast friends and supporters – Duncan, Yoshikazu, Makoto, the Quill Family, Christoph and Dominik – but with so many mouths to feed and minds to inspire, it is never quite enough.

### Giving and learning

Volunteers are crucial to keeping Svay's centres going. An average of 250 volunteers arrive each year, and most are housed at Savong's DMS Guesthouse (DMS stands for 'Duncan, Makoto and Savong'). They spend varying amounts of time teaching and interacting with the children.

Johannes Binder from Austria found out about the Savong School from Dominik. "I had always wanted to travel in Asia, so I jumped at this opportunity," he explains. "Teaching the kids here is a bit of a challenge...there's a syllabus and textbooks but because the children are of different ages and capabilities, it's hard to focus on a regular lesson for the whole class. It's been rewarding, though. I have learned a lot about the country and its culture. I haven't really learnt anything about myself yet, but I still have a month, so maybe I will!"

Fellow Austrian and fresh graduate Viktoria Soder has just come to Savong School. "I don't know much about teaching, but I'm sure I will learn as I go along. Enthusiasm is the most important thing. So far it's been an eye-opening experience,"



(Facing page from top) A teacher talks about the Savong School in front of a wall painted by the students; despite their difficult circumstances, children at the Savong Orphan Centre always find a reason to smile; (right) education materials like computers and stationary are funded by generous donors



she says. "I did not expect the people here to be so poor; its one thing read about it, but to see it is different. Everyone has been very friendly and I'm looking forward to volunteering!"

### A brighter future

It was perhaps written in the stars that Svay's dream would be realised in the vicinity of the magnificent Angkor temples. The Angkor Empire was once sprawling and mighty, with over a million people housed within the city of Angkor Thom. Modern Siem Reap is a city of 180,000 people, and in 2010, it received over 1.5 million tourists. They are drawn by the mystical ruins,

and the tourist dollar has been a boon to the town; in fact, the fate of an entire generation who had grown up impoverished has taken a turn for the better. Svay too has been a force of change in a city where so many have had so little for so long. Making a difference isn't hard. All it takes is a little bit of effort, and the determination to follow one's dream. ☺

**+** Besides volunteering, monetary donations are also welcomed. See the Savong School websites for more details and [www.es-ist-gud.com](http://www.es-ist-gud.com)



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