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FORMERLY KNOWN AS 'TOKYO WEEKENDER', ESTABLISHED 1970 BY CORKY ALEXANDER. REVIVED 2004.



## THE FUTURE OF CAMBODIA REACHING OUT THROUGH 'VOLUNTOURISM'

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## Venturing into 'Voluntourism'

Kit Nagamura finds inspiration in the children of Cambodia.

A few weeks ago, I found myself bouncing around in the back of a van, heading toward a remote village in the Koh Kong province of Cambodia, with two teenagers, their mother, a guide, and half a dozen duffle bags of books, school supplies, sporting goods, used tape and CD players, and art materials. The village we were headed to, Kirivorn, wasn't on any of the maps the driver or guide owned, but as we zoomed past plantations of oil palms and cashew crops and graceful wooden homes on stilts, it occurred to me that a structure as large as a school would have to be an easy landmark to find.

There are lots of ways to see post-Pol Pot Cambodia. You can fly directly to Siem Reap and ogle the awesome ruins of Angkor Wat, or land at Phnom Penh and loiter along the Tonle Sap, enjoy flashes of distressed French architecture and fresh flower markets, or ride an emotional roller coaster through the Silver Pagoda, Choeng Ek (the Killing Fields), and the Tuol Sleng genocide museum. There is no shortage of tourist attractions, but if the poverty of the country inspires you to participate in a kind of 'voluntourism' instead, there are wonderful ways to go about it.

The 1970s Khmer Rouge regime all but wiped out two generations of doctors, artists, intellectuals, and educators, and left Cambodia crippled with minefields, mental and actual. Though a great deal has been done to rebuild the country's infrastructure and sense of confidence, there are still areas where know-how and education are in demand. For this reason, Cambodia offers a variety of short-term volunteer positions in fields such as conservation and cultivation management, medical services, community development, and education. While experts are especially welcome, just about anyone from high school age on can find a way to contribute during a visit to the country, and the reward — a sense of connection — is the best kind of souvenir.

Our vanload was headed for the Kirivorn School, one of the nearly 300 schools built under the auspices of the Cambodia Rural School Project. The project was the brainchild of Bernard Krisher, retired journalist and ex-bureau chief of *Newsweek* in Japan, who consolidated government funds and a grant from the World Bank to match donations from groups and individuals worldwide to build schools throughout rural Cambodia. The idea was both simple and brilliant. The price tag for each school was a mere \$14,000, and once built, the structure not only sheltered students but also established a visible, tangible proof to villagers that the government — with international backing — was investing in education across the country.

Kirivorn School was built in 2001 with money raised by students, faculty, and parents at Nishimachi International School (NIS) in Tokyo. On occasion, teachers and parents (and sometimes, it seems, volunteer biking tours such as PEPY) make reconnaissance trips to discover the current situation and needs of the school, and I was on one such excursion.

When we arrived, we were ushered into a breezy, tidy building packed to capacity with students, some in the midst of an English lesson. Our two NIS junior high school students, Jensen Hodge and his older sister Schuyler, were an instant hit — they, after all, were about



Bright smiles and bright futures. Photography by Kit Nagamura.

the same age as many of the students, and they were able to add a reality factor to the English lesson that, in itself, was worth the trip. Before the end of the visit, Jensen had everyone dancing to songs he had prepared to go along with the donated tape and CD players. "It was an awakening for me to see that level of poverty," Jensen later observed, "but I was impressed by the way Cambodian kids could find fun in the smallest things."

One of the students at Kirivorn, Li Sokhmeng (11) seemed to think I was a convenient source of fun. He marched right up, took my hand, grinned, and launched into an animated conversation. He was a natural born ambassador, with good English skills to match his outgoing spirit, and I found myself thinking if he were any indicator, Cambodia's future is bright.

While at Kirivorn, we made notes and spoke to head teacher Chhorn Chansy to determine if there were specific ways we could meet the school's current needs — a reliable water supply, better generators to support additional computers, another building to serve as a library/teacher's room were top on the wish list. I could see Jensen and Schuyler's mother, Kylie, head of the NIS parents' association Community Service Committee at NIS, conjuring up a way to check off those items.

Two days later, our crew also visited another of Krisher's projects (there are a great many, in fact): Future Light Orphanage (FLO) near the international airport at Phnom Penh. The well-run facility, directed by Madame Nuon Phaley, has a spacious compound, open air classrooms, a library, and a computer room which offers children training in internet and language skills. In addition, beautiful silk products are handmade on the premises by disadvantaged or widowed women, and make meaningful gifts. Several teachers stationed at the Cambodia Rural School Project have come from FLO, one example of the logical linkage in Krisher's various strategies to assist Cambodia.

This article barely scratches the surface of the multitude of volunteer projects in Cambodia. If you plan to visit the country, I highly recommend adding a dimension of voluntourism to your itinerary. As ninth-grader Schuyler noted, "they could be you and you could be them, and you feel like you make a real connection." If making a connection interests you, Bernard Krisher will be speaking at Nishimachi on Tuesday evening, Apr. 11 (Middle School Commons, 7pm) on "What Poor Cambodia Can Contribute to Us and our Kids, who have Everything."

Any of the following links will start you on a search for the various volunteer and aid opportunities in Cambodia. It is recommended that you contact several organizations to find one which fits your personal goals and philosophy best:

California-based Kasumisou Foundation supports Cambodian families and children afflicted with AIDS, as well as children orphaned by AIDS. You can contact the organization locally through the Kasumisou Gallery at 5-3-29 Minami Azabu (tel: 03-

3473-6058) at [www.kasumisougolf.org](http://www.kasumisougolf.org), or email Barbara or Mark Rosasco at [kasumiso@tkh.att.ne.jp](mailto:kasumiso@tkh.att.ne.jp)  
[www.projects-abroad.org/projects/care/Cambodia.php](http://www.projects-abroad.org/projects/care/Cambodia.php)  
[www.vfp.org](http://www.vfp.org)  
[www.globalware.org](http://www.globalware.org)  
[www.travel-to-teach.org](http://www.travel-to-teach.org)  
[www.volunteerabroad.com](http://www.volunteerabroad.com)  
[www.travelwithaheart.com](http://www.travelwithaheart.com)  
One of Krisher's numerous websites, with links to the others.