

Title:

Cambodia Taxi Chaos - a Leaf, a Radiator and a MacGyver Moment

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Summary:

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Article Body:

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Cambodian Taxis

Having spent two weeks in the relaxing beach town of Sihanoukville, I was getting bored and so were the three chaps traveling with me. It was time to head to the supposed chaos of Phnom Penh and eventually Angkor Wat. Despite the legendary reputation of Cambodian roads, the owner of our accommodations told us the road to Phnom Penh was smooth as glass. For twenty U.S. dollars, a local taxi would get all four of us to the city without incident.

Around noon, two Australians, an Englishman and myself crammed into a Toyota Camry with our backpacks and miscellaneous junk. Our driver was a good guy, smiling constantly. We did have a communication problem since he spoke about two words of English and we only spoke English. The road, however, was as smooth as promised and we congratulated ourselves on our stroke of luck.

For about an hour, we cruised through the placid Cambodian countryside. It was difficult to imagine the chaos that must have occurred when the Khmer Rouge was in power. There really wasn't much to see beyond the occasional village. About half way through the trip, the lack of any sizeable towns became a concern.

In the proverbial middle of nowhere, our driver pulled over to the side of the road and turned off the car. Since we couldn't verbally communicate, much finger

pointing was undertaken. Were we lost? Did he want more money? Was he going on strike? What the heck was going on?

Eventually, we foreign idiots were able to decipher that the car was overheating. Lest you think us complete idiots, I must mention that the temperature gauge wasn't working. Regardless, our driver popped the hood and our smooth trip came to a cracked end. Steam poured from a half-inch crack next to the radiator cap.

Road site assistance seemed an iffy prospect in the middle of Cambodia. I mean, you couldn't really call your car insurance company.

Me: "Hi. My car is broken."

Operator: "Okay, we will send someone out. Where are you?"

Me: "Um, somewhere in the middle of Cambodia."

Operator: "...[hysterical laughter]... Click."

The driver looked at us. We looked at him. Simultaneously, we all started laughing. What else could you do? We were in the middle of nowhere, the radiator was shot and it was 60 miles or so to Phnom Penh.

Looking back, I can tell you that Cambodian taxi drivers are a committed and creative group. We sat on the side of the road, contemplating the fact that we were about to have a much more authentic Cambodian experience than any of us had planned. Mysteriously, our driver had gone off into the brush on the side of the road. After a few minutes, he returned with a dark green leaf and a big smile.

Putting MacGyver to shame, he proceeded to patch the crack in the radiator using only the leaf and tube of superglue. We all moved back as he applied the superglue to the boiling hot radiator, but nothing went up in flames. After allowing for a suitable amount of time for drying/praying, all we needed was water.

Although admittedly not a car expert, I do know pouring cold water into the radiator of an overheating engine is a bad idea. MacGyver, err... our driver, didn't bat an eye despite our extensive arm waving. With a big smile, the water went into the radiator as we watched in horror. The only question was what would happen first, the leaf patch bursting or the engine seizing up?

Well, you can guess how it turned out. Not only did we make it to Phnom Penh, we

later learned the radiator had two other leaf patches on the bottom. The road had been smooth, but my nerves were still shot. One way or another, the roads of Cambodia will get you.

At least I have ample ammunition to mock MacGyver fans.