

Digging Deep with Cynthia Brian

Jungle fever

By Cynthia Brian

"The human spirit needs places where nature has not been rearranged by the hand of man." ~Source Unknown



Cobras, roots, and the encroaching jungle were tamed at the ancient temple where "Laura Croft: Tomb Raider" was filmed. Photos Cynthia Brian

Completely covered by tangles of roots and vines, it is only in recent years that many ancient grandiose brick and sandstone temples were rediscovered in Cambodia. These monumental structures, built on top of one another for over seven centuries as capitals of the Khmer Empire, have survived the passage of time. The jungle swallowed cities and palaces constructed of wood leaving only skeletal remains and inquisitive monkeys. The bustling, colorful life of the Angkor civilization was left to the imagination and research of historians, explorers, archaeologists, and me.

If you ever watched the 1991 film, "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider," you glimpsed the unexcavated and unrestored temple of Ta Prohm completely reclaimed by the jungle. Immense trees grow like magic out of stone walls and through roofs. Our guide told us that visitors were allowed to explore the ruins only in the past few years because this area was occupied by cobras, many as long as 20 feet. To

deter these venomous serpents from continuing to nest here, lemongrass was planted, and it is keeping the poisonous snakes away.

Southeast Asia is uncomfortably hot and humid. The jungles are wild and untamed. The flora is bright, beautiful, and bizarre. Palm, coconut, banana, mango, papaya, jackfruit, passion fruit and breadfruit plantations fill the landscape alongside the never-ending fields of rice. Most villagers don't have running water or indoor plumbing; the banana groves serve as their toilets. Nothing is wasted. Every part of a plant is used for food, shelter, fire, clothing, furniture and other life necessities.

Both in Vietnam and Cambodia, water lilies and lotus flowers grow magnificently in the waterways. Although the two are often confused, water lilies have pads and flowers that float on the surface of the water while the lotus flowers and leaves rise a foot to several feet above water. The various colors of the lotus flower retell tales culturally revered. Because lotus flowers grow in murky water, an unfurled white lotus refers to purity of body, mind and spirit. A red lotus boasts of love and compassion. The favorite pink lotus tells the story of Buddha and the many legends surrounding him. Purple represents mysticism, royalty and spirituality. Lotus flowers are gathered and made into spectacular art pieces delivering the spirit of enlightenment and good fortune to those who embrace their grace and beauty.

Betel leaves and the areca nut are important symbols of love and marriage in Vietnam. A groom's parents will begin the conversation with the potential bride's parents by offering areca nut chewing. In Vietnamese weddings the leaves and juices are used in the ceremony. Betelnut is a stimulant and mind-altering substance. It is also known as "the scourge of Asia" because it causes oral cancer.

Rich in protein, calcium, potassium, iron and other nutrients, the leathery, prickly Jackfruit is considered to be a miracle food with the potential to supply an entire family a complete meal. Grown in every garden, mangoes are a main staple of daily diets, considered one of the most important fruits for improved wellness. They are low in calories, filled with vitamin C, A, B6, and beta-carotene, important elements to fighting cancer, regulating diabetes, aiding in better eye sight, digestion and clear skin.

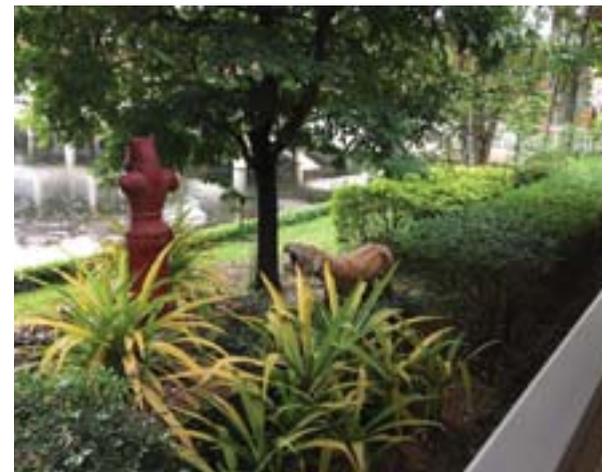
Golden Shower trees were laden with buttery yellow flowers bringing light and cheerfulness to pathways, hills and cemeteries. One of the most beautiful, yet prickly

plants I witnessed was the Crown of Thorns, an ever-green cactus (*Euphorbia Mili*) that blooms year round in hot and sunny locations. It requires very little water, has spectacular scarlet, pink, yellow, white or salmon colored bracts, grows to three feet or more, and is covered in one-inch spiky thorns. We can grow it outdoors or as a houseplant, however, as gorgeous as it is, definitely keep it away from children.

In the Mekong Delta, floating villages and traditional houses on stilts line the banks with residents laboring and living the way they have for centuries, harvesting what the great waters provide to survive and earn a living. Baskets and mats are created from river reeds and water hyacinth, ancient boats advertise their crops for sale with the fruit or vegetable speared on top of a high pole, floating fish farms supply fresh seafood, while floating markets sell just-picked produce. Sampans are made by hand from felled "Sao" wood, a very water resistant variety of oak.

Discovering the smiling, resilient people and the tranquil lush landscapes untouched by the hands of humans in Southeast Asia, inspired me to pause, breathe deeply, and appreciate this wild environment, once a hotbed of warfare and genocide. Without interruptions from phones and internet, I calmly disconnected from "civilized" chaos to welcome the wonders of essential nature. Spending time meditating in solitude and having a water blessing by monks awakened my sense of gratitude for the gardens of life.

Although I never encountered a tiger, I was consumed by jungle fever. ... continued on page D14



A meditation center on a lake in the jungle outside of Phnom Penh.