

ADVENTURE

BY RACHAEL OAKES-ASH



Slow Boat to Angkor

A newly minted outfitter combines action, relaxation, and a good cause on Cambodia's waterways

chickens. Only three hours into an eight-hour riding excursion around central Cambodia, we find ourselves lost in a maze of backcountry trails, pig pens, and chicken coops. Lost, maybe, but far from complaining. The countryside that we've just begun traversing is an exotic blend of jungle, rice fields, smiling locals, and Buddhist temples. And I have the pleasure of exploring it thanks

THE VILLAGERS STARE AT US IN DISBELIEF. I DON'T BLAME them, really—it's not every day that five foreigners dressed in full motorbike leathers and helmets storm your paddock and scare the

GOING WITH THE FLOW **Cruising the Tonle Sap River** aboard the *Dragonfly*, a refurbished ferry.

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to Cambodia's latest boutique tourist venture, Jungle Journeys, headed up by Australian duo William Norbett-Munns and Nick Brunninghausen.

Munnsy and Brunno, as they call themselves, began Jungle Journeys as an alternative to traditional luxury travel where tourists enjoy the finer things in life, but are often removed from their surroundings in the process. "The idea with Jungle Journeys is to get guests to rough it, in style," says Brunno. Earlier this year, they launched *Dragonfly*; a luxurious, converted four-berth river ferry designed to take adventurers along the Tonle Sap and Mekong Rivers for motorcycling excursions into the heart of Cambodia.

The real motivation behind the venture, however, came from the local community.

Having spent close to 15 years in Cambodia, Munnsy and Brunno wanted to "do their bit" for the country they had adopted as home. Together with Ride Aid (an organization that raises funds for Cambodia's poor through motorcycle expeditions across the country), Jungle Journeys has made it their mission to raise money to build a second boat—a floating clinic equipped with motorbike ambulances, designed to deliver medical supplies and educate villagers in remote communities. The concept is modeled on the Lake Clinic launched in mid-2008 by Dr. Jon Morgan, an American physician who first stepped onto a boat in Cambodia back in 1994 and has since dedicated a number of years to the Angkor Hospital for Children.

"Our dream is to bring a more efficient and effective means to administering healthcare and education to the Cambodian people," says Munnsy. Floating alongside the river villages on a renovated ferry might seem voyeuristic, but Munnsy says that the point is not just to look, it's also to interact. "We plan to allow guests to cooperate with the clinic and contribute where necessary," he says. And then, of course, there are the adrenalin-charged excursions he leads to explore the country and meet the locals.

WHEN MUNNSY AND BRUNNO ACQUIRED THE DRAGONFLY, she was a worn-down tub in severe need of an overhaul. Over the space of seven months they remodeled and refurbished the 25-meter-long boat, turning her into a floating retreat decked out with rich, dark woods and finished with bohemian flair.

Topside, the rooftop daybed wraps around three sides of the boat and is strewn with a sea of embroidered cushions. Each of the four berths below echo the same sort of comfort, with quilts and pillows in exotic



DECKED OUT Clockwise from above: Cooling off between bike trips; Munnsy and Brunno of Jungle Journeys; an off-road encounter.



fabrics, billowing mosquito nets, en suite facilities with rain showers, and a rank of plantation shutters at river level to let in the cool breeze; the best two have private terraces. Meals are just as inviting as the decor: platters piled high with passion-fruit pancakes and scrambled eggs with smoked salmon, among other treats. But, I'm not here to revel in my cabin or the spoils of the kitchen. I'm here to meet the

locals, and maybe discover my inner daredevil in the process.

The *Dragonfly* has docked at Oudong—the royal capital of Cambodia from 1618 to 1866, but now little more than a bustling fishing village on the Tonle Sap River. This is the launch point for our biking adventure. Having spent some time making documentaries for the World Enduro Championships, a high-octane off-road motorcycle race, Brunno is itching to get back on two wheels, and has the bikes ready and waiting for us when we disembark. The locals have come out to watch as we leather up, rev our engines, and look forward to the day ahead.

Despite the dust, there's something exhilarating about seeing a country from the back of a motorcycle—I feel intrepid even when we're riding along paved roads. But true courage is needed when we head off the beaten path. The full throttle of my bike's 250cc engine, not to mention the off-road trek tires, comes in handy as we negotiate winding paths through the jungle that surrounds the Oral Mountains. Kids run alongside waving for a stretch. And then we're lost; stumbling around farms and scaring villagers tending to their livestock. This is the Cambodia that I came to see, even if it's not part of our official itinerary. At this point, Brunno takes a back seat and our Khmer guide, Tommy, takes over, asking for directions in his native tongue.

Our final destination is a remote waterfall whose name Munnsy and Brunno are keeping a secret. But we're taking our time getting there, what with being lost and the regular breaks for water and cakes from roadside stalls. An hour or so after we map our way off the farm, the waterfall suddenly appears out of nowhere. We've just navigated a hair-raising rocky incline enveloped by thick jungle, and the cool spray from the cascade is a welcome relief.

After five hot and dusty hours of straddling the bike, it's time for a dip. A gourmet lunch spread is waiting when I finally emerge from the cool water, whipped up by the *Dragonfly's* onboard concierge, Matthew "Swiftie" Swift.

Three hours later, I'm propped up—freshly washed and comforted with gin and tonics and canapés—on the deck of the *Dragonfly*, watching the sun sink into the calm waters of the river. As the last of the light fades, I begin to feel strangely emotional. After the day of dust, sweat, and tears, I feel as though I've forged a new bond with my fellow crew of bikers. I feel as though we've



FREE WHEELING Exploring central Cambodia by dirt bike.

shared an experience that will never be replicated in quite the same way again.

Although ours was a single-day adventure, Munnsy and Brunno operate three different seven-night cruises, using the *Dragonfly* to ferry guests between points along the Mekong and Tonle Sap. Their Hidden Angkor journey takes you along the latter, past floating villages to Siem Reap and the temples of Angkor via Cambodia's great lake, Tonle Sap. Another experience takes you offshore with Cambodian islands and beaches on the radar. Naturalists will love exploring the Mekong on the third cruise, which guarantees sightings of the rare Irrawaddy dolphin of Kratie.

The days are broken with thrilling bike excursions, memorable meals, and even a few massages, thanks to the onboard therapist. Other excursions include bird-watching, mountain biking, jeep rides, and kayaking, and British photojournalist Nathan Horton has started offering Jungle Journeys' guests unique "photo safaris."

But as the *Dragonfly* churns through the nut-brown waters of the Tonle Sap on her way back to Phnom Penh, I'm content just lying back on the deck, waving at kids frolicking on the muddy riverbanks, and watching the real Cambodia go by. ☺

Phnom Penh-based Jungle Journeys (855-92/296-886; jungle-journeys.com) offers seven-night adventures from US\$2,999 per person, including meals, accommodation, and bikes. For more information on the Lake Clinic and Ride Aid, visit lakeclinic.org and rideaid.net, respectively.