



www.risccambodia.org

CAMBODIAN REPATRIATION SURVIVAL GUIDE

How are you going to survive in Cambodia?

The answer is entirely in your hands. You may need to make some adjustments in your expectations and lifestyle – and we don't mean to make light of these, as some will be traumatic to you and others – but you will survive. Hundreds of returnees have come before you, and help is available.

You are not alone!

What can I do to prepare myself for the future?

If you face deportation, one of the hardest parts of the process will be the uncertainty. There is no way to know when your case will move. Some returnees were already in custody prior to deportation but others were picked up from their homes or jobs without notice.

- **Save money** for your future. Whatever happens, having access to a little extra cash won't hurt. If you are deported, a few thousand dollars could go a long way toward getting you set up.
- Set up a **power of attorney** so some trusted friend or relative could manage any legal affairs if you are suddenly detained for deportation. A power of attorney would permit someone you designate to dispose of any property you own (car, motorbike, etc.), gain access to any bank accounts you have so the money could be transferred to you and handle any other outstanding legal matters according to *your instructions*. A power of attorney agreement can be quite narrow and specific (e.g. authorizing the disposition of a vehicle) or quite general. You and your legal advisor should carefully decide what is best for you, but the documents should be written up, signed, notarized and put away in a safe place long before they are needed.

- You should also **consider developing skills** that might be in demand in Cambodia. For example, certification as a barber, mechanic, electrician, plumber or computer repairman or experience as a web site designer, database programmer, audio-visual technician, cook, waiter, receptionist or telephone operator would make you more marketable than experience as a fork lift operator or work on an assembly line.
- If you have a good basic education and have good language skills, **consider getting a certificate** in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), accounting or bookkeeping. There are always jobs available for people with those qualifications – especially those who can speak Khmer and English.
- Brush up on your **Khmer language** skills (both oral and written). Many Cambodian-American communities have Khmer language classes available or you can use free online Khmer language materials. You can also listen to Khmer language broadcasts over the Internet.
- If you already read and write Khmer, you might want to **improve your vocabulary** by going to the Internet and reading contemporary Khmer newspapers and magazines. Good translators and interpreters are always in demand and are well paid.

Is it true that the US government (or the Cambodian government or some other agency) gives each returnee money for resettlement costs?

No, that isn't true. No cash is given to returnees by either government or any other agency. Funds made available for resettlement assistance can only be used to provide needed services. These funds cannot be used for cash payments to returnees.

What should I carry with me to Cambodia?

- **At least US\$20 but not more than \$100**, enough to cover phone calls and incidentals, but not enough to appear wealthy. The money you saved in the States can safely be transferred to you after you are settled in Cambodia.
- Photocopies only of **important documents** (certificates, diplomas, driver's licenses, etc.). US authorities may take away originals. Have originals sent to you later.
- **Addresses and phone numbers** of friends and family in Cambodia. Before leaving the U.S., try to establish contact with people in Cambodia who might be able to assist you in your transition.
- **E-mail addresses** of friends and family in the U.S. You will have access to the Internet and it is a fast and relatively inexpensive way to communicate.

How will I actually get to Cambodia?

Those being deported to Cambodia are usually gathered at a holding facilities in the US before being deported in Groups of 2

You will travel to Cambodia on a commercial jet. Deportees are accompanied by US Marshals including a medical officer. You will be required to speak only in English. Recent groups of Cambodian deportees have been flown to the Philippines with deportees to that country, then on to Cambodia. The flights are long and boring but otherwise unexceptional.

What happens on arrival?

When you arrive at the airport in Phnom Penh, **you will be met by officials from the Cambodian Immigration Department.** There will be heavily armed security personnel in the area but this is routine at an international airport – no reason to be nervous, it isn't for your benefit.

You will be taken to stay in the **Immigration Department compound** directly across the street from the airport where the Cambodian government processes your paperwork. You may be detained for up to six hours, and will be released only after a “sponsor” arrives to pick you up.

What are the conditions at the Immigration Department compound?

- You will receive **humane treatment.**
- You will be **able to receive visitors**, both family members and advocates who are committed to helping you through the repatriation process.
- **Staff from RISC will be permitted to visit you** in the Immigration Department compound. Returnees, like yourself, working for RISC, will be able to meet and talk with you in order to provide support, answer questions and give advice. RISC has no authority inside the compound, however, and staff enter as guests of the Cambodian authorities and will conduct themselves accordingly.
- The food served is Cambodian and is in adequate supply.
- Regardless of what you may hear, the guards and officials with whom you will have routine contact at the Immigration Department compound **have no authority to determine the time of your release.** Please keep this in mind.

What happens when I am released from the Cambodian Immigration compound?

- The Immigration Department attempts to arrange for each returnee to be **released to a “sponsor”** – usually a friend or relative. Sponsors have legal or financial obligations. It is essentially an acknowledgement that the returnee was properly released by authorities.
- If no friend or relative is available, **RISC may be able to sponsor you.**
- There should be **no fees** involved in sponsorship or in the processing of entry documents.

What sort of identification documents will I have?

The Cambodian government will give you a **letter of citizenship**. This document is the basis for all future documents that you will require. The document gives no information about any past criminal record in the US but does state that you were repatriated to Cambodia, so it is best to quickly obtain neutral ID.

You will need other documents to open a bank account, apply for a job or rent a house. So it is important to get these quickly. The most important documents are the family book, resident book, birth certificate and national ID card. From there it is easier to acquire other forms of ID (driver's license, passport, voter registration, etc). **RISC can help you secure needed documents.**

Is it true that returnees are discriminated against by local Cambodians?

- No necessarily. Returnees who make the effort to **blend into Khmer communities** are usually accepted with warmth and respect.
- Returnees who marry here are often given **quite high status** or regarded as the virtual head of their extended family because of their fluency in English and the fact that they have had experience outside Cambodia.
- Most Cambodians won't know or care you have been deported **unless you tell them** or demonstrate by your dress and behavior that you don't belong and don't want to belong here.
- Having a felony conviction may make it difficult to find certain types of jobs (as would be true anywhere).

I have tattoos – won't this be a problem for me?

- **Tattoos are not unusual in Cambodia.** Deputy Prime Minister and Co-Minister of National Defense Gen. Nhek Bun Chhay is proud of his tattoos as are a great many Cambodians. Traditional tattoos having religious significance are most common.
- Tattoos which are gang / violence / drug related in nature, or otherwise culturally inappropriate, should be kept **covered in public**. As Cambodian men keep their shirts on in public, there is not much public display of tattoos and, therefore, not much of an issue. One returnee got a job as a pool attendant at a five-star hotel. When his supervisor saw his tattoos, he was reassigned to a new position where he could wear a shirt (but he was not fired).
- If you have **tattoos on your face, neck or hands** you may be excluded from some types of jobs as would be true anywhere.

How can I communicate with my family and friends in the US?

If you don't have one already, **set up an email account** and learn how to use it. You will have access to the Internet in Cambodia.

What should I wear in Cambodia?

In the cities, people generally wear Western-style clothing; **slacks, button-down shirts, and sandals**. At home, men and women often wear sarongs. Men wear shirts unless they are at home. A man appearing in public without a proper shirt (at least short sleeves) will instantly be regarded as odd –even threatening– and may be viewed with disgust or contempt.

The wearing of shorts, tank tops, baseball caps turned sideways, doo rags, flashy jewelry, etc., in public situations will identify you as odd. The same goes for loud, aggressive, culturally inappropriate behavior. As a direct result of the way you present yourself, you may be charged higher prices, treated rudely, denied service or worse. If you wish to be treated with dignity and respect, **adjust your dress and demeanor** accordingly. Buy your clothes locally.

How can I speed up my integration process?

The customary form of greeting is **the sompiah**, and involves pressing the palms together and bowing. If you aren't already familiar with this, watch carefully how it is done and learn to do it easily and gracefully. Combined with **proper dress and polite speech** (even if your Khmer is fairly basic) the appropriate use of the **sompiah** will go a long way toward winning acceptance among your fellow Cambodians. Failure to **show respect** will instantly identify you as odd or ill-intentioned.

What if I have asthma or diabetes or HIV or some other chronic physical or psychological condition?

Medications and treatment are available but it is important that you **alert RISC staff** to your condition as soon as possible. Even if you are sponsored by family or friends, RISC will be happy to see that you and your sponsor know what services are available and how to take advantage of them.

What about the Climate?

Cambodia has a **tropical monsoon climate** with two seasons. The dry season takes place from November to February. In the rainy season between May and October, prepare for high humidity and daily, afternoon showers. Beginning at the end of July and continuing through November, flash flooding can occur throughout the country, disrupting roads, bridges and transportation. Travel to rural areas becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Average temperature range: **70–95°F** (21–35°C) April is the hottest month, with temperatures climbing up to 105°F (40°C)!

What about traffic?

Your first reaction to traffic in Phnom Penh will be that it is **chaotic**. In fact, there is an internal logic to it, but it is quite different to traffic in the States and it will take you some time to adjust to the flow. You should spend some time watching traffic from the back of a motorbike before you venture out on your own.

Attempting to negotiate Phnom Penh traffic while under the influence of alcohol or drugs is dangerous in the extreme – both to you and others.

I am Cambodian, but I don't really know much about Cambodian culture. What is "culture shock" and should I worry about that?

You need to *prepare yourself for a big adjustment* in the way you relate to people and the way they relate to you. Be careful, take it slowly, watch, listen and learn. Adjust your dress, language and demeanor to blend in with your surroundings.

You will encounter actions and attitudes you may regard as superstitious, unreasonable or just weird. Many Cambodians have great respect for the supernatural (ghosts, witches, fortune tellers, faith healers, magicians, dreams, numerology, astrology, etc.) Try not to be judgmental. Cambodians are survivors. Along with your grandparents, your parents - and you - they have survived some of the most cataclysmic events imaginable and they have come to rely on instincts, beliefs and strategies they believe have worked for them. If, for example, your Khmer girlfriend gets a new phone, then insists on buying a phone number ending in seven because she was born on a Tuesday . . . help her find one.

The experience of "culture shock" is usually experienced in four stages:

- **Enchantment** - This is the "honeymoon period" when so many things seem interesting and exciting. There is a sense of adventure and exhilaration.
- **Disenchantment** - After a few months, a sense of reality sets in and difficulties in adjustment or finding employment begin to mount. Feelings of longing for family and friends in the States may cause mild or severe depression.
- **Retreat** - Some returnees slip into heavy alcohol or drugs use or literally retreat into a bedroom or a bar and try to limit their contact with the real Cambodia. They stop looking for jobs or quit jobs they have and break off relations with friends.
- **Adjustment** - Over time, most returnees settle into positive, supportive relationships, find employment, adjust to the culture and climate and start new lives here. It is not at all unusual to hear returnees who have been here for two or three years say they would not return to live in the States if they could.

Reverse culture shock – returning to one's own culture after being gone for some time – also has its unique challenges. You may expect to be able to fit in quickly or you may choose not to fit in or the people around you may be confused that you look Khmer but don't act or sound Khmer. You may be regarded as an overseas (i.e. rich) Khmer here for a brief visit rather than a new member of the community. Crossing your legs in a certain way or stating your opinion too directly may be regarded as offensive when the same action by a foreign resident would be quite acceptable because, as a Khmer, it is assumed you should know better.

In some cases, you can actively prepare for the transition (e.g. study Khmer language and culture). In other cases it may simply be helpful to *understand what is happening inside your own mind*. These challenges are normal. Deal with them as intentionally and creatively as possible. Help is available.

What about the Customs & Culture?

- **Clothing** – Casual dress is OK, but typical gang attire or very casual attire will invite negative attention and can cause problems. Keep your shirt on in public (whether you have tattoos or not). Make a note of how other respected locals dress, and try to dress the same.
- **Shoes** – Most Cambodian wear sandals. Remove footwear before entering homes or temples.
- **Bargaining** – Common in street stalls, markets, with cyclos and motorbike-taxis. Learn to bargain with cheerful confidence and be prepared to walk away –several times – until you settle on a fair price.
- **Toilets** – Squat toilets are standard but western toilets are increasingly common.
- **Always be respectful** of elderly people and people in authority. Show respect with the way you greet them and the way you stand, sit and speak. Authorities don't always deserve your respect, but don't let it show. This is a survival guide, and a good strategy for survival in Cambodia, is to show respect even when you don't want to. Consider it a mark of strength to maintain a smile and calm composure even in difficult situations.
- **Show respect** for **Buddhist monks, temples**, images and statues and members of the **Royal family** (including their images on display in most public buildings and many private homes). This is extremely important. Any insult –intended or not– against a symbol of the Buddha or the Royal family would be regarded as offensive to all Cambodians.
- **Behavior acceptable in the US may not be acceptable in Cambodia.** Loud talk or actions perceived to be obnoxious, aggressive, rude or insulting could provoke violent reaction from locals - including armed security personnel. There have been several incidents in which returnees were beaten up as the result of a misunderstood look or gesture.
- The carrying of unlicensed **weapons** is illegal. There are police checkpoints where random checks are done. If weapons are discovered, this will result in a fine and/or imprisonment. Security forces are authorized to use lethal force against anyone attempting to flee a checkpoint – and do.
- **Dates** are given in the order day + month + year. September 27, 1978 is written as 27/09/78. April 3, 1978 is written 03/04/78.
- Cambodian **names** are given in the order family name + given name (e.g. Smith John).
- Khmer is the official language and some older people speak French, but **English** is Cambodia's second language. Cambodians are often eager to practice English with anyone who speaks it and many returnees teach conversational English formally or informally.

Is the water safe to drink?

Tap water is **not** safe to drink. Bottled water is easily and cheaply available. Many Cambodian have a water filter in their home. Good filters are inexpensive and an important way to prevent diarrhea.

What about the food?

The standard diet consists of *rice, fish and vegetables* but Cambodians love to eat all kinds of food at all hours of the day and night. Vendors selling fruit, sweets, bread and all sorts of snacks wander through the markets and around the streets attracting little clusters of schoolchildren, office workers and moto drivers all over town.

What Kind of money is used?

In Cambodia, two currencies are commonly used; the *US dollar* and the *Cambodian Riel*. \$1 = 4000 Riel. Riel is used for most small purchases, and is used more commonly in the countryside, while US dollars are used for larger purchases.



Advice from Previous Returnees

In 2013, 88 Returnees who are already in Cambodia were asked what the most important thing to tell a new returnee is.

“What is the most important thing you were (or wish you were) told when you first came to Cambodia?”

That RISC can Help

- Contact RISC Staff
- Contact RISC and they will assist you
- You can stay here until you find family support
- I was happy to see the RISC program
- There is some support to help us out
- RISC helped me a lot
- RISC will help us
- RISC helps returnees that have no family
- RISC can assist us to the best of their ability to meet our needs
- They helped me to get a job and a place to stay
- RISC had a place for me to stay because I didn't know anybody here and didn't have any family
- That we're going to help prison still
- RISC deals with people like myself - help us
- Get sponsored out of immigration from RISC

Lifestyle Warning

- Stay out of trouble
- Stay out of trouble
- Stay out of trouble
- Stay out of trouble
- Stay out of trouble
- Stay away from trouble
- Don't get into trouble
- Get situated and stay out of trouble
- To mind my own business and ask if I need help and be careful who I hang out with.
- This is Cambodia. So stay out of trouble and make the best of it.
- Don't use drugs
- Stay away from drugs
- Don't go out living the nightlife
- Don't commit crimes and don't hang out with bad friends
- Don't get caught in a fraud
- You could be locked up again
- Change your old ways
- Rest is helpful
- Pray

Be Careful

- Be careful
- Be really carefully
- Be careful and blend in
- To be careful with my surrounding and try to fit in and do good
- It's not USA
- It's a very different world than the US

Encouragement

- Welcome to Cambodia
- Make yourself at home
- Make yourself at home
- It is nice in Cambodia
- Start a new page / life positively
- Be a good person
- Find your own friends
- Mind your own business and you will be fine
- Stay focused
- Stay focused
- We are not criminals
- Survive!

Corruption Warning

- This is a corrupt country
- This country sucks bad on corruption
- This country is bad
- Be careful of scams
- Don't trust anyone
- Do not trust anyone, especially the police
- Don't give money to the police
- Be careful of immigration corruption.
- Immigration police will take your money
- Watch out for the relatives trying to get money out of you

About Orientation

- How the culture is in Cambodia
- Get a feel for this place
- Slow down and learn

Hardship Warning

- Prepare for a rough life
- It is going to be hard
- Be prepared for hardship
- About the heat!

Be Careful with Money

- Be careful with your money
- Have your money
- Manage your money
- Don't go crazy, budget
- Save money

About Employment

- Get a job
- Get a job
- Find a job and shelter
- You need a job here!
- Cambodia is really cheap labor

This guide is based on a concept developed and researched in 2002 by Mandy Lee, then an intern at the Midwest Immigration and Human Rights Center in Chicago. The current Guide has been completely re-written to reflect new information and experience, but RISC wishes to thank Ms. Lee for her initial work and her encouragement in compiling this document.