



WHERE THEY LIVE

Will Capel '95

Sihanoukville, Cambodia

A series about alumnae/i who live off the well-beaten path



Sihanoukville is a city of contrasts, which is one of the reasons Will Capel '95 loves living here. Jammed city streets near deserted beaches; new construction a block away from traditional stilt houses, cows and SUVs. Old customs meet modern technology in this distinctly Cambodian city struggling to find itself in a new era of openness. From behind crumbling 1960's facades, Khmer karaoke blares full volume, while motorcycles zip to-and-fro past hordes of commuting school children.

The mototaxi—a single driver on a small moped—is the chief mode of public transportation; the passenger hops on back and off they go, dodging potholes and often soaked by monsoon rains. Not far from this intense bustle, but seemingly a world away, vendors sell drinks from small huts on the beautiful beaches that ring the Sihanoukville peninsula. On weekends, these peaceful havens overflow with vacationers from Phnom Penh, who swim in fully-clothed Buddhist modesty.

Called Kompong Som, or “Moon Bay,” in Khmer, Sihanoukville—named for the country's formerly exiled King Sihanouk—became Capel's home in April 2001. After six months of backpacking in Asia, the Illinois native was ready to leave and find work in Australia or New Zealand. Remembering a hand-painted illustration in an atlas he'd had as a child, he decided to make a final stop at Angkor Wat, ancient temple city and masterpiece of Cambodian archi-

ture. Arriving in Cambodia, he met some other expatriates who convinced him to stay.

In October of that year, Capel opened the Casablanca Bookstore and began to employ the do-it-yourself ethic he attributes to punk rock and his years at S.L.C. “There wasn't a group in Sihanoukville to work for kids' rights, so we started one,” he says, referring to M'lop Tapang, the advocacy program for homeless children he helped found.

The organization was a natural outgrowth of the Starfish Project, started by friends two years prior; utilizing matching grants, Starfish aids Cambodian nationals in meeting such emergency needs as boat repairs, surgery, and vitamins for the severely malnourished. With amounts that might seem small to Americans but are astronomical for the average Cambodian, Starfish Project and M'lop Tapang can have a profound impact on people's lives.

Amidst a tropical garden of lush trees and magenta bougainvillea, Capel's bookstore and the two nonprofits form an interdependent web of commerce and social service with the Starfish Bakery Café in a traditional Khmer stilt house on one of Sihanoukville's peaceful back lanes. Like the city itself, the house is a place of contrasts: The first floor has been finished with walls stretched between the stilts, while the café sports a traditional thatched roof, and the second floor is topped with red tiles. Together, the café and bookstore, both for-profit enterprises, hire and train disabled Cambodians identified by Starfish Project and pay the rent and utilities for all four entities, freeing the largely volunteer-run nonprofits from overhead. Capel regularly

buys donated books from Starfish Project for resale in his shop, providing the organizations with a steady source of two-to three hundred dollars per month and himself a modest income. It's a unique arrangement, Capel says. “The book shop provides my livelihood, while M'lop Tapang and Starfish are what keep me interested and engaged.”

Still, the city of contrasts is engaging in its own way. An embedded rural lifestyle within the city proper—people keep farm animals in small gardens just yards from the

main roads—occasionally adds a bizarre element as cows stray into the paths of Land Cruisers carrying government officials. Capel recounts once watching a cow fly through the air, end over end, land with a thud, then

stand up and amble away chewing its cud—while the front end of the SUV that hit it was crumpled like a wad of paper.

During the hot and muggy rainy season, which begins in May, ominous clouds roll in off the ocean and suddenly break open, releasing walls of water that empty the bustling streets in minutes. In October, the air cools, the rain subsides and all of the countryside glows the brilliant “rice-green” particular to this corner of the world. In the evenings, magenta and orange sunsets steal focus from the verdant paddies before giving way to clear, black, star-filled skies.

“I don't miss living in the States much,” muses Capel, “mostly for the reasons I love living here. You learn to get by on a lot less...and I like the challenges. Here, results seem to have more impact—it is possible for one person to make a difference.”

—Gillian Gilman Culff '88

