



Ponheary Ly Foundation

Volunteer Orientation



Greetings from Cambodia!

Firstly, Some basics!

Cambodia is a developing country, recovering from decades of civil war, genocide, and occupation. During the Khmer Rouge era, all infrastructure was destroyed along with all the schools and hospitals.

Change is rapid but there is still a very long way to go. The disparity between the towns and the countryside is ever widening as towns prosper and villages do not. 80% of the population of Cambodia lives in the countryside and for the majority, life is a daily struggle.

We encourage you to read up on the [History of Cambodia](#), especially the last 40 years, before your visit. You'll have a much easier time understanding what the country is up against and why.

Ponheary Ly Foundation is based in Siem Reap, the service town for the Angkor Complex. It is very well served with good restaurants and pubs. It is a relaxed and friendly place that is very safe, although the usual precautions apply.

Increasingly, the selection of shops is diverse and most things for your everyday needs are available.





The Guesthouse

Seven Candles Guesthouse, owned by Ponheary and her family, is where volunteers must stay.

The guesthouse is home to three generations of the Ly family and the whole family works hard to ensure that your stay is as comfortable as possible. There is always someone at reception to answer any queries that you have and to help with any touring information you require. The PLF office is also always manned by someone who can help with any PLF-related questions, concerns or ideas during office hours, on the ground floor of Seven Candles.

The guesthouse is situated on Wat Bo Road, which runs parallel to the river and is about a 10-minute walk from the Old Market. The rooms are comfortable and clean. All have an en-suite bathroom, a/c, fan, a mini-fridge, hot water boiler and tv with international cable and DVD player. Breakfast is available at extra cost, but there is no obligation to eat at the house. There are many good restaurants to be enjoyed up and down the street. In your room, you will find suggestions for our restaurant picks in Siem Reap. There are three large communal verandahs that are comfortably furnished for the guests' use and these are popular places for socializing and enjoying a cold drink while making new friends.

There is a selection of books, a DVD library, and computers for communal use. There is a hotel with a lovely saltwater swimming pool a couple of doors away that our guests can use for free if they buy a drink. There are bicycles to borrow for exploring. The housekeepers provide next day, ironed laundry service for \$2 per kilo. WiFi is provided free of charge. You'll also find the volunteer closet on the ground floor across from the office chock full of supplies you may need.





Your Health

This is a brief overview of very important health information. The vast majority of our volunteers come through without any medical issue, though it is not uncommon to experience a bit of diarrhea as your stomach adjusts.

Hospitals and Medicine in Cambodia

It is a MUST that all volunteers have travelers insurance that includes medical evacuation and agrees to our Contract with Volunteers and Visitors. We have, so far, been involved in four separate medical evacuations, so these things do happen and we want to be very clear about how to avoid disaster. Volunteers should be moderately fit and in good health as our working conditions can be basic and the heat can be intolerable to some. If you have any health concerns, please check with us first. We are happy to discuss the details of either policy with you.

DO NOT under any circumstances go to a local health clinic should you become sick without coming to us first. There are some good clinics, let us direct you. It is estimated that 80% of all pharmaceutical drugs in Cambodia are counterfeit; not only useless but often toxic. It is important that you bring any essential medicines with you.

IF you need to purchase any medicines when you are here we recommend the UCare Pharmacy. There are three locations, one on Pub Street, one at the Lucky Mall, and one on Sivatha Boulevard; we are happy to help direct you.

You should check with your doctor what inoculations you need well before your travel date. Malaria and Dengue Fever are rare but still a reality, and precautions against mosquito bites should be taken. Should you develop a high fever accompanied by a headache or rash while you are at the house, please let us know sooner rather than later.

Water, Hydration, Hygiene

Use bottled water for drinking and brushing teeth. It's okay to shower in the tap water. It's important to stay hydrated in the heat. You may want to consider bringing re-hydration powders, which are also available to buy in Siem Reap. Drinking fresh coconut water is the very best thing for staying hydrated.

You can't wash your hands often enough. Gone are the days of amoebic dysentery with every meal, but your hands are still probably your worst enemy for getting sick. Bring hand sanitizer with you and use it. It's a good idea to be tested for TB upon your return home. Be careful of any head-to-head contact with children at school, a good many of them have lice.

Take a day rest if you need it. This is not a place for heroes.

Dogs, Cats, Monkeys

Leave dogs and cats alone, do not pet them or approach them. They are not the house pets you are used to. Should you be unfortunate enough to be bitten by one, you will need a course of anti-rabies shots. These are available at the International Hospital. There are monkeys around some of the temples. They are incredibly devious and have been known to steal snacks and cameras from unsuspecting tourists. Never approach them and never feed them as a bite from one will also necessitate an immediate anti-rabies course.



Cultural Do's & Don'ts

The Cambodian psyche is dignified, friendly, polite, optimistic and humorous. Smiles and laughter abound. Losing your temper is the easiest way to lose respect and trust. Confrontation is not acceptable and leads to a loss of face and future avoidance. Always maintain your dignity and show respect by smiling and using humor to deflect a difficult situation.

You will hear “yes” to almost any question, even if the answer might actually be “no”. Be aware of this display of politeness and form your questions with some forethought. Respect that everyone here has gone to great lengths to learn your language so it’s helpful for you to speak slowly, simply and with a posture of patience and friendliness.

Ask before taking photos – In Cambodia a smile is often a sign of shyness or discomfort, so don’t ever presume it’s okay to take a picture of someone. Ask first – if you receive a nod along with a smile, feel free to snap away!

Dress

Cambodians are conservative and dress modestly. Even in the hottest months, they will wear jeans, sweaters, turtlenecks, and/or scarves. You certainly don’t need to wear a sweater in such heat, but you should be dressed modestly as well. Shorts are acceptable but should be below the knee. Mini skirts, skimpy tank tops and low-cut tops are not acceptable in the countryside. Shoulders should be covered, especially when visiting the Temples and absolutely when teaching. Around town you will see many tourists dressed in skimpy clothing but, as a savvy traveler and representative of PLF, you should be as sensitive to your surroundings as possible.

Bodily Gestures

Do not touch anyone’s head or point your feet at anyone. Cambodians are not “touchy” people with people they don’t know well. Refrain from physical contact, especially anyone of the opposite sex unless they initiate it. Most Cambodians are uncomfortable shaking hands and men should not touch women at all. Public displays of affection are not polite between men and women, but you will see two men arm in arm or perhaps even slow dancing together. It does not carry the same connotations as it does in the west.

Beckoning someone with your palm up is considered aggressive and to beckon with one finger is sexually suggestive. Therefore, always beckon someone with your palm facing downwards. Above all else, keep a smile on your face and a relaxed attitude, no matter what. [Click here](#) for our Child Protection Policy

Buddhism

The majority of Khmer people are Buddhists and their faith permeates all areas of life. There are five pagodas on Wat Bo Road alone. You are free to wander around these and, indeed, the monks will often engage you in conversation to practice their English. Please be respectful to the monks at all times. Women specifically should never touch a monk, hand things directly to a monk or even brush past one on the street.





Visas are available on arrival at Siem Reap or Phnom Penh airports as well as various border crossings. Bring cash in USD and a passport photo. Note that your passport must have six months validity left on it and two blank pages.

Tourist Visa: Cost \$35usd. Valid for an initial period of thirty (30) days and may be extended for another 30 days once only. After which, you must leave Cambodia and then re-enter on another visa. Overstaying an initial tourist visa should be avoided unless it's only a day or so, at a \$10 per day fee.

"Ordinary" Visa: Cost \$40usd. Initial period of validity thirty (30) days but then it may be extended, and re-extended, for a fee, virtually indefinitely without leaving the country.

If there is the slightest possibility you would be staying more than 60 days, get the business visa on arrival. The 6 & 12-month business visa is multiple entries. All others require a border crossing to renew past 60 days.

The US dollar is the de-facto currency. The Riel is used for smaller transactions and for small change. There is no need to get local currency at the airport or the border, particularly as the rate will be very bad. Dollars are accepted everywhere in Siem Reap. Cambodia is largely a cash society and credit cards are only used at some shops, hotels, and restaurants, but don't count on it.

There are ATM's in Siem Reap dispensing USD but you should notify your bank that you will be in Cambodia before you leave home. Seven Candles does accept credit cards. There are no coins in Cambodia. If you bring dollars into Cambodia, please note they cannot be torn or mutilated.

Also, Riel cannot be exchanged outside Cambodia so use or exchange any that you collect along the way before you leave the country.



Examples of Costs

Tuktuk ride in town \$2

1-day Temple Pass \$37

3-day Temple Pass \$62

7-day Temple Pass \$72

Local Beer <\$1

Meal \$2-20

Coffee- Western/Local \$1- \$3

100 BW Copies \$1.25

Phones and Wifi

Mobile phone coverage in Cambodia is very good. You can purchase a local SIM card for just a couple of dollars. You can buy a local sim card and 4-5GB of data for less than \$10usd. Let someone at the Seven Candles front desk handle that for you. Skype is always an excellent option too, especially if you buy a \$10usd skype credit and use the call-to-phone feature.

There is wifi at the house but the bandwidth will not be what you are used to. There are three computers for communal use on the verandahs. Feel free to bring your own devices; the wifi is accessible from all the common areas, and the café, the rooftop as well as the rooms. Wifi is available at most of thecafés and bars that foreigners frequent around town.



Culture Shock

Culture shock happens. Some prior knowledge about the conditions of the country will help alleviate this. Above all, you need to have a positive, flexible attitude or you may find your stay in Cambodia rather difficult. Siem Reap is one of the poorest provinces in Cambodia. Although the town, with so many tourists, has a veneer of prosperity, the countryside, where you will work, has almost no electricity, access to clean water is not the norm, there are very few latrines and the poverty is grinding. You will see dirty, undernourished children every day. They are still just children, please remember this.

Local approaches to work may seem very inefficient to you. Try to have an open mind, avoid criticism and be aware that there are different ways of doing things and that West is not always best. You may find the attitude to animal husbandry somewhat shocking. If you're a dog lover, prepare yourself. You may find, especially in the countryside, that children are not always treated with kindness. Try not to judge. Try not to bring your ideas of "how it should be" to the equation. Do your best to find solidarity whenever and however you can.

It cannot be stressed enough the enormous cultural differences between the westernized city of Siem Reap (where you'll be staying) and the very traditional way of life in the villages (where you'll be working). Please be sensitive to this at all times. Be open with yourself and your privileges. It's okay to feel uncomfortable, in fact, you should. [Click here](#) for an insight to the value of Volunteering.

Child Sellers and Beggars

It is estimated that there are over 1,500 children living and working on the streets in Siem Reap and the Angkor Temples. All of these children are increasingly abused and/or exploited either by their handlers or sex tourists. Visitors often unknowingly increase their vulnerability. We ask PLF volunteers to NOT BUY ANYTHING FROM CHILDREN on the streets, or at the temples. YOU SHOULD ALSO NEVER give money to begging children or to any adults using children to beg. If you want to buy trinkets on the street or at the temples, please buy from ADULTS ONLY. Many of these children you meet are rented out by their parents for a pittance and are controlled by an overseer. DO NOT support or sustain child labor and exploitation with your gestures that have the right intention but the wrong effect. The best thing that could ever happen to these children would be if all the tourists collectively decided to stop transacting with them entirely.

Adult Beggars & Scams

You will encounter plenty of adult beggars in Siem Reap and you'll have to use your own judgment about what to do in every situation because they are all different. We would encourage you, whether you give or not, to always have a posture of compassion for those who are living on the edge in a place like Cambodia. Yes, it can be tiring but it doesn't cost you anything to be polite.

There is currently a scam around Pub Street where women borrow babies to beg outside certain convenience stores, asking for formula, which people go into the store and buy and then the woman sells it back to the store owner for half price. Again, please do not encourage begging, especially when children are used to do it.





Tuk Tuks

The most common form of transport is the tuk-tuk. PLF has regular drivers who will do so much more than drive you around. They all speak English and will help to translate in your class and generally assist in any way necessary. There is a charge of \$15usd per day for your roundtrip transport to school. You pay the driver directly at the end of every day. If there are other volunteers working at the same school, you are encouraged to share a driver and split the cost, though we can't always guarantee this as an option.

If you have time before or after your class and want to visit the temples or any other nearby attraction your driver will be happy to take you. If you would like your driver to take you anywhere that is too far afield, or not covered by his day rate, he will make it plain what that extra charge is. All of the drivers affiliated to the house are great friends of the Foundation. They help out, voluntarily, behind the scenes, whenever there is anything that needs doing. They are part of the PLF family and they will soon become your friends too.

Bicycles

There are bicycles at the house and you are welcome to use them for free. There are certain "rules of the road" that are a little unusual so you should get a short briefing before heading out. The bikes have locks on them and you should use them as the theft of bicycles is fairly common, especially around Pub Street and the Old Market. If a bike disappears during your watch, you are liable for replacing it and they cost \$38. Riding a bike in Siem Reap and the surrounding countryside, including the temples, is a pleasure that we highly recommend.

If you need help with transport to other destinations in Cambodia, the front desk is happy to help and there are also a couple of good travel agencies that can assist you as well.

Weather

November to February is the "cool season" and precipitation is rare. The humidity is gone and early mornings and late at night can be cool but never cold. If you're teaching this time of year, it makes sense to have a long pair of pants and perhaps a windbreaker or at least a long-sleeved shirt in case of a chilly morning.

March to May is the "hot season". It will not rain at all. It will be exceptionally hot, humid and very dusty and does not cool down much in the night. The rivers dry up and boat travel becomes arduous. The upside is that there are fewer tourists.

June to October is the "rainy season". It will rain a little every day, mostly in the late afternoon and late at night. Temperatures are still high but the rain helps cool things off. October sees the heaviest rains.



Theft and Safety

Like anywhere, there is opportunistic theft in Siem Reap. If you leave something laying somewhere it probably won't be there when you come back for it, same for your bike if you leave it unlocked on Pub Street, it may not be there when you come back. But chances are extraordinarily slim that someone is going to rob you at knifepoint. Women are usually safe walking around, even at night, although the usual precautions should be taken. Don't wear flashy jewelry or flaunt your cash. Bag snatching is known to happen, where they will rip your bag or purse off your shoulder, even if you're on a bicycle, tuk-tuk or moto. Hold your belongings close to you or better still don't carry a bag. When in doubt take a Tuk-Tuk home, don't walk home alone.

There is security at the house at the front gate from sundown to sunrise. Luggage locks are a very good idea while traveling point to point, and you should not put anything in your check-in luggage (aboard buses, boats or planes) you can't live without.

Never Forget These Points:

- Don't do drugs in Cambodia. At all. Ever.
- Don't buy artifacts. Don't take stuff from temples, not even a random rock.
- Avoid the roadside snails sold as snacks, no matter how adventurous you're feeling.
- Don't get drunk and/or disorderly in a PLF t-shirt. You're wearing a name on your dirty shirt that is recognized and respected in the community. You will be excused from the program if we hear this.
- Cambodia is a haven for sex tourists and pedophiles. If we have any sense that you are having any inappropriate contact with children or prostitutes we won't hesitate to notify the local authorities at once. Do not go with any children to their homes, or anywhere for that matter, unless part of a PLF organized outing.
- Single men will be approached by prostitutes regularly in Siem Reap. You should be aware that it is estimated that 75% of all "bar girls" in Cambodia have HIV. Behave accordingly. You should also be aware that most bar girls are "observed" by local thugs who will use any opportunity to separate you from your wallet. Be careful out there, nothing is as it seems.
- The guesthouse is essentially a homestay with Ponheary's family, please act accordingly.



At School

A PLF t-shirt must be worn at school and dress should be otherwise modest. Lightweight pants are a great option, shorts should reach to the knee, and shoulders should always be covered. You should never wear a hat indoors.

There is no smoking on school grounds. You should be punctual for your classes and respectful to the Khmer teachers. You should wind up your class at ten minutes early to allow the children to clean the classroom before continuing onto their next class. Set a good example at all times.

Student Behavior

You will find that the children are very well behaved in class and anxious to learn. It would be rare if you had to, but do not tolerate any bad behavior. You'll find your students, bright, engaged and fun. You should be the same.

Cambodian schoolchildren like to 'help' each other; some might call it cheating. There is a great emphasis here on "sharing knowledge" which is understandable given the fact that it is in such short supply in these rural areas. This propensity toward "helping" will be challenging for you when you're trying to see who knows what, but please just relax. Our job is not to change Cambodian culture.

It is normal to have extra students, not part of your class, listening and looking through the window, sometimes even participating. You can spend time trying to shoo them away but it won't work. They're curious! But, work with the other staff on hand to make sure the students in the classroom are the ones on your roster, we are trying to implement a sense of order in the classroom.

Classroom Content

It is a condition of our 501(c)3 status with the US Government and our agreement with the Government of The Kingdom of Cambodia that politics and religion are not to be discussed, at school or in the villages where they are located, while working with The Ponheary Ly Foundation. Breaking this rule constitutes a serious breach of trust between our organization and the communities with whom it works.

Betraying that trust potentially jeopardizes our 501(c)(3) status and our relationship with the Ministry of Education. For this reason, proselytizing in any way or criticizing the government either verbally or in writing will necessitate your immediate removal from the PLF's program.

Child Protection

We are committed to the safety and well-being of all children involved in PLF projects. We recognize the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Cambodia acceded 1992), and maintain a zero-tolerance approach to child abuse. In order to protect children from harm, abuse, and exploitation, we have a Child Protection Policy that you will be required to sign upon arriving in Siem Reap.

This policy includes a Background Check requirement for all potential volunteers from your respective country of nationality or residency. Pending the acceptance of your application, a member of PLF staff will contact you to advise you on the steps that you need to take to comply with this requirement.





What to bring:

All of your normal medications. Some people bring their own antibiotics, but they are available here and much cheaper. Bring a simple first aid kit with bandages, Neosporin, alcohol wipes, and anti-itch cream.

All hygiene products: lotion, soap/body wash, deodorant, sunscreen, toothbrush, toothpaste or you can buy all of that when you get here but it's not usually available at guesthouses. Women's sanitary products are available here but many people bring them from home.

Please bring the appropriate clothing! Men and women need to keep thighs and shoulders covered at all times when you are in the countryside. Even if you're swimming. Even if it's hot. At all times means at all times.

A PLF T-shirt should be worn any time you are engaged with students. Wearing them at school means the kids will feel more comfortable with you and you will be viewed/treated differently. It also means you need to behave appropriately while representing our organization in the community. You will be given one shirt on arrival and can buy more if you like for \$5 each.

A hat is also useful in the sun.

A sweater in the cool season. It can actually be a bit chilly in a tuk-tuk going through the forest early in the morning in December and January.

A rain poncho in the rainy season (May through November) available in Siem Reap for \$1.50

Mosquito spray should contain DEET, no more than 30%, no less. In the countryside, you should stay protected at all times. In the city, particularly at dawn and dusk. If you decide to take antimalarials be advised that in this area, malaria is drug-resistant and the World Health Organization recommends Malarone, not Doxycycline. If you take antimalarials, you still need to worry about Dengue Fever, so mosquito protection is a must.

Teaching materials. We have a supply closet stocked with materials from previous volunteers, but make sure to prepare ahead and bring any supplies/materials you need for your planned activities. Many things are available in Siem Reap if you don't want to carry them over, but we should review your materials list with you before you leave home

Bring sturdy shoes that dry out quickly and allow your feet to breathe. (Keens & Tevas seem to be perennial favorites).

And finally...

Ponheary, Lori, and the entire family and PLF team are always open to talking and answering your questions. Don't be afraid to pop by for a chat! We have a lot of thoughts about what your time here means. Read more about our philosophy on the value of volunteers.

We have learned over the years that volunteers find their time much more rewarding if they become invested in spreading the word about their work and the Foundation with friends, family, and social circles well before, and hopefully after, their time with us in Cambodia. Don't be shy about owning what you're doing in Cambodia and give your network an opportunity to support you in that effort!



Useful Information

[Phnom Penh Post](#)

[About Cambodia, UNDP](#)

[Angkor Wat](#)

Recommended Reading:

[The Geography of Thought](#)

[Cambodia's Curse](#)

[The Gate](#)

65.3%
Under age 30

1,036
GDP Per Capita (usd)

63.6

Life Expectancy at birth
(HDI 2013)

80%

Rural population

5.8
Years
of schooling

45.9%
Population living in
poverty