



PEPY Participant Primer

If you're traveling with PEPY, you most likely come from a more “developed” part of the world. As such, day-to-day life in Cambodia will be much different from what you are accustomed to and perhaps comfortable with. Our intent for this guide is to empower you with the information necessary to get the most out of your time in Cambodia, while also having a positive impact on the people with whom you will interact—Cambodians and fellow trip participants alike.

What to expect:

Climate: By most standards of comparison, Cambodia is a hot, humid country. We have two seasons here: the rainy (or monsoon) season, from May to October, and the dry season, from November to April. Both seasons are warmer than what people from most Northern countries are used to enduring, especially given the fact the few homes and businesses in Cambodia are air-conditioned. Average temperatures range from about 25 °C (77 °F) to about 38 °C (100 °F). January is the coolest month, April the warmest. Cambodia's climate is tropical, meaning we are close to the equator and receive more direct sunlight than most of the world.

Critters: No matter where you go in Cambodia, you will encounter bugs and geckos. The mosquitoes can be annoying (note: rates of malaria are lower in Cambodia than in comparably developed countries), but the geckos are harmless (and actually eat the mosquitoes, so consider them on your team). Other common bugs are spiders, crickets, grasshoppers, and cicadas—though you're more likely to see these bugs deep-fried and sold at roadside stands than alive and scurrying around.

If your trip includes a rural home stay, congratulations! You will experience a more authentic aspect of Cambodian culture than the vast majority of tourists ever see. In addition to the above animals, you will see cows, goats, pigs, chickens, and ducks, most of them roaming freely around the village where they live. Note: roosters in Cambodia tend to crow all the time. . . not just at sunrise!

Customs: Cambodian culture, especially in rural areas, may be more conservative than you are used to. Women are expected to keep their shoulders and knees covered. In more touristy areas such as Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, these standards are somewhat relaxed, but in rural areas and Buddhist temples/pagodas, ladies (Cambodians and trip participants alike) are expected to dress conservatively. Also stemming from this conservatism is a social code concerning public displays of affection. Hand-holding and other forms of physical contact, though permitted between members of the same sex, are frowned upon between men and women. Any male-female touching, even between married couples, is kept private.

Ninety-five percent of Cambodians ascribe to Theravada Buddhism (the rest are Muslim, 3%, and Christian, 2%). Theravada is the oldest surviving school of Buddhism and thus one of the



most conservative. Buddhist mores and practices pervade the culture, so it is helpful to familiarize yourself with some basic behavioral guidelines. Examples below.

The head is where the highest spiritual plane is located, and it is therefore holy, whereas the feet are lowest and therefore unholy. Thus it is important that you never touch a Cambodian on the head, and never point toward others with your feet (*especially* monks and images of Buddha).

You will see monks in Cambodia. They wear orange/yellow/saffron-colored robes and have shaved heads. They are not permitted to touch women, even to shake hands. If you're female, please keep at least a meter away from monks to avoid making them uncomfortable. (This requirement is not unfriendliness on their part. Most monks are very friendly, and many study English and love to converse with tourists!) In vehicles, women must not sit next to monks, as it would be difficult to avoid touching—especially in Cambodia, where transport is often cramped.

Most Cambodians do not shake hands or hug when they meet. Instead, they press their palms together in a prayer-like position (called “som-PEY-ah”) and give a slight bow in recognition of the other person. They do this when greeting, thanking, and saying goodbye. The height at which you hold your hands connotes the level of respect that you wish to show the other person. For example: you would press your hands together just under your chin when greeting younger children, higher for peers, and slightly higher for monks and seniors. (Do not be alarmed if Cambodians ask your age as soon as you've met. They are merely trying to figure out whether you are their senior!)

Cuisine: The staple food in Cambodia is white rice, and you can expect to eat a lot of it. The main source of protein is fish, though Cambodians also eat chicken and pork, and some beef. The cuisine includes tons of delicious fruits and vegetables, including morning glory (water spinach), ginger, garlic, tomato, eggplant, onion, pineapple, mango, dragon fruit, banana, and many more. Cambodian foods are typically less processed and more wholesome than those in the developed world. And while certain dishes can be spicy, most Cambodian dishes are less spicy than Thai food.

How to prepare:

As with any trip abroad, there are two keys to preparation.

1) Do your homework. Learn what you can about the place you'll visit. Read from the PEPY website, the Participant Welcome Packet, and this document. Also read up on current issues in the country and other areas of interest. With the internet, being prepared when visiting a new country is easy!

2) Give yourself the gift of physical and mental preparedness. Physically, get walking! Most of our tours entail lots of walking (and stair-climbing, when we visit temples). And if you live in a warm area, try going a few days without air conditioning to get used to the heat. Mentally,



prepare yourself for immersion in a culture that differs from your own. Food, personal space, sights, smells—nearly every aspect of life will be different. Remember, *you* are the foreigner. Cambodia may seem exotic, but once you land, *you* are exotic! Being mentally open to trying new experiences and learning from another culture will help ensure an enriching and enjoyable trip for everyone involved.

How to act:

Naturally, how you choose to act and speak on this trip will largely determine the quality of your experience in Cambodia. Moreover, as an educator/chaperone, your actions and words carry the added weight of influencing the younger participants' behaviors and attitudes. Keep this responsibility in mind. Your students' mentality toward new experiences, unfamiliar places, and challenging situations is malleable, and you are in a position to shape that mentality. Our aim at PEPY is to facilitate life-enhancing learning experiences for your students, and you can help in the following ways:

Recognize the difference between “Fun A” and “Fun B.” Our enjoyment of experiences is judged separately by our two “selves”: our experiencing self and our remembering self. That is to say, whether or not we value an experience *upon reflection* can differ from whether we enjoyed the experience *at the time*. We can have fun playing video games all weekend, only to regret the experience on Monday when we fail a test for which we neglected to study. Conversely, we could have far less fun by studying all weekend, but value the experience later when we ace the test. Fun A is in-the-moment enjoyment; Fun B is enjoyment-upon-reflection.

Ideally, your travel experience will combine elements of Fun A and B. It is important not only that travelers enjoy their time in-country, but also that they leave Cambodia with lessons learned, comfort zones broadened, and personal challenges met. Keep this distinction in mind and in speech, especially during Fun B-type experiences. Remind yourself and your fellow travelers to appreciate even the difficult moments of the trip, for these moments present the greatest opportunities for learning and personal development!

Stay present. Being mentally present is a direct application of the Fun A – Fun B philosophy. You are already traveling—do your best not to take a mental vacation! In difficult situations, it is tempting to fantasize and talk about being elsewhere / eating different food / doing other things. This form of escapism, however, cripples the present experience. These fantasy forecasts are momentary sabotages (“I can’t wait to be someplace with air-conditioning!”, “As soon as I get home, I’m going to Starbucks.”).

The more you stay mentally present, the more you will be able to appreciate the experience, *at least* upon reflection. It is also crucial that you stay *vocally* present. Saying something helps make it so. If you declare to your friends, “I’m going to jog three miles every morning,” you are far more likely to jog three miles every morning, because you’ve described a situation that you



are now accountable for turning into a reality. Similarly, you can encourage present-state appreciation through speech and attitude that reflect the group's goals.

Challenge yourself! Simply by deciding to visit Cambodia with PEPY, you've taken a huge step toward personal growth, to learning about yourself and the world outside your comfort zone. Thank you for taking this worthwhile challenge—you'll be glad you did!