



CAMBODIA LANDMINE MUSEUM

By William Morse

Introduction

The Cambodia Landmine Museum is a small, 4-gallery museum situated inside Angkor National Park in Siem Reap, Cambodia. It was originally located along the Siem Reap River, near the entrance to the Angkor Wat temple complex. It was moved to its current location in 2007.

It was founded by ex-child soldier Aki Ra to tell tourists about the continuing landmine problem in his country and to assist in his personal mission to remove as many of the landmines from the ground as possible.

Its buildings display examples of the types of landmines found in Cambodia and give a history of landmines in Cambodia along with the history of the nearly 35 years of constant warfare the country suffered from 1975 until 1998, when fighting ceased with the death of Pol Pot, the leader of the Khmer Rouge.

The Story of Aki Ra

It attempts to educate tourists not only about the landmine problem in Cambodia, but across the globe as well. The story is told through the experiences of Aki Ra, who was stolen from his family at the age of five, became a soldier at ten, and fought for most of his life with the various armies that warred against each other in the country, fueled by the provision of weapons from external sources.

Aki Ra began laying mines at the age of ten. Captured by the Vietnamese around the age of 13, he fought with them, and then the Cambodian Army in the late 80s. By his early twenties he was a seasoned veteran. He went to work for the UN, clearing landmines in the early 90s and found

he was good at it, and decided to make it his trade. He returned to the villages where he had fought and began removing landmines with his bare hands, defusing them with homemade tools, and bringing the casings home. His house became the first Landmine Museum.

Tourists heard about his collection of landmines and defused ordinance. They came to see it and the original Museum was founded. The government of the country was not pleased with this ragtag Museum full of old weaponry, nor were they happy about Aki Ra's unorthodox method of removing them. In 2006 they ordered his Museum closed, and required him to secure a license if he wanted to keep it.

The Cambodia Landmine Museum and Relief Center

The Museum was moved to its current location in 2007 with the assistance of a Canadian charity, the Cambodia Landmine Museum and Relief Fund, founded by documentary film maker Richard Fitoussi. They assisted Aki Ra in his licensing, and in raising the money for the purchase of the land and the construction of the complex. With the establishment of the current Museum and its move toward self sufficiency, the Canadian charity was dissolved in 2011.

The Museum also contains a residential center, referred to as the Relief Center, where (as of April 2012) over three-dozen at risk

children are housed, educated, and ultimately given a university or trade school scholarship. Originally all children living at the center were landmine victims. But the country has gone from several thousand victims a year to just over 200 in 2011. The Relief Center now houses children from small villages who are landmine victims, polio victims, were born without limbs, are HIV positive, abandoned, orphaned or come from poor families. The Relief Center contains a school, where the children are helped with their Khmer studies, a computer lab, a library, a playground, a kitchen, an art room, and a physical education building. All children attend public school.

Objectives of the Cambodian Landmine Museum

The Cambodia Landmine Museum exists for three reasons:

- 1) To tell Aki Ra's story: that no matter who you are, whatever your background and education, you can make a difference
- 2) To teach the world the horrors of landmines
- 3) To care for the children in its charge

The Museum is self sufficient. Funds raised from ticket sales, shop sales, and donations from tourists allow the Museum to operate and care for the children in its charge. The Museum and Relief Center have a staff of 14 with 5 working full time at the Museum and the rest of the staff at the Relief Center. All are paid a livable wage.

The Relief Center has an English language program that is run by staff members from the United States. The program accepts qualified, pre-screened volunteers. To abide with international child protection guidelines, the Relief Center does not allow tourists to visit or photograph the children living at the center.

The Landmine Museum serves as a tool to assist children from small villages whose families cannot care for them because of physical disabilities, be they born with disabilities or caused by injuries from landmines, abuse, or disease. It also assists in raising money for Aki Ra's second NGO: Cambodian Self Help Demining (CSHD).



The Cambodian Self Help Demining (CSDH) NGO

CSHD is a demining NGO. It clears landmines in small, what it refers to as 'low priority', villages around the Museum and in other districts and provinces of Cambodia. Currently, about 10% of the funding for CSHD is provided by the Landmine Museum. The balance comes from a group of Vietnam Veterans from Australia, the Vietnam Veterans Mine Clearing Team (VVMCT), an American charity, the

Landmine Relief Fund (LMRF), and the United States Department of State.

As of April of 2012 CSHD had cleared over 950,000 square meters of land, returning nearly 10,000 people to land that had been killing them.

Self Sufficiency and Impact

The Cambodia Landmine Museum is managed by Cambodians (Khmers) as a NGO. It is run by Cambodians for Cambodians. As its management is Khmer it is one of the great examples in the country of what Cambodians can do for themselves. Its sister NGO, CSHD is also Khmer run. Its name Cambodian Self Help Demining, was chosen by Aki Ra to tell the world that Khmers can do anything to which they put their minds, if given the opportunity.

The Landmine Museum and CSHD, which is an integral part of the story, have impacted the lives of thousands of its fellow citizens, all for the better.

Conclusion: Looking Forward

Future projects include a farm which will teach local farmers modern farming techniques, and ultimately a second Relief Center for elderly villagers, who lost their families to war, and have no one to care for them.

Tourists visiting Siem Reap and the Angkor Temples learn much of the rich history of ancient Angkor. Visiting Phnom Penh they see the horrors foisted on the country by decades of undeclared war.

The Landmine Museum tells the story of the aftermath of war, and the future of the country, how they can help, and what one man's vision has wrought.

About the Author

William Morse and his wife work with and for Aki Ra and his staff at the Cambodia Landmine Museum as staff members. William is the International Project Manager for Aki Ra's demining NGO (Cambodian Self Help Demining), both organizations are run by Aki Ra and his staff. They are Khmer NGOs.

More Information

Please see:

<http://www.cambodialandminemuseum.org>

<http://www.landmine-relief-fund.com>

<http://www.cambodianselfhelpdemining.org>

Contact Mr. William Morse, Project Manager, at:

Bill@landmine-relief-fund.com

info@CambodianSelfHelpDemining.org