



An Ascendant in Scorpio: Dark Tourism in the Kingdom of Cambodia, a Travelogue

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Abstract

An eight-legged dark tourist with a freshly starched pith helmet, Sydney's travels in Cambodia take him to the small town of Skuon, where people snack on fried tarantulas. The trip to Skuon, however, becomes more than just a tropical dark tourist tick box; instead, transforming into a sweaty pilgrimage into the crevices of Sydney's ravaged psyche. During Syd's journey, he must embrace his fears and ingest the beast within or forever wallow in the purgatory of his shadow self and its eternal torments. Caught in a web of vampiric arachnids, he must be careful not to become prey, tempted by the sordid touristic pleasures of the war-torn Kingdom. This travelogue, of the psyche and Cambodia, influenced by the genre of magical realism, is accompanied by images generated by Canva AI.

Keywords: magical realism, travelogue, dark tourism, Skuon Cambodia, fried tarantulas, Canva AI image generation, tropical tourism

An Ascendant in Scorpio

Spiders can fly. Three hundred kilometres from shore, sailors have reported a phenomenon termed ‘ballooning’. Why does a spider carefully work the finger-like organs of their spinnerets, attach a strand of silk to the shingles of a rooftop, and then sail into the atmosphere? When mother would like to eat you, the wind sighs with the promise of escapism—escape to a place where one might have the chance to begin the cycle again, becoming both breeder and murderer, sensitive and secretive. Four a.m. in a hotel; daddy long legs with his belly against the shower curtain.

Figure 1. *Hotel Room*



Image created by author using Canva AI generation tools, 2025

An ascendant in Scorpio with Mars in the tenth house at the time of my birth—at first, I was sceptical when a friend told me I belonged to the arachnid family. But after a while, things began to ring true: cunning, shrewd, good fortune and tragedy, a tendency to disappear into the shadows and secretly plan things, turbulent unstable

periods, passion overriding intellectual limitations, and a destiny with many critical decisions flickered with moments of bravery. For years I was only vaguely aware, until I heard of a town in Cambodia where people captured underground tarantulas and devoured them as delicacies. It was then I began to study my ancestors with a sense of melancholy. The more I read, the more I realized there were others like me. They were hiding in the petals of lotus blooms, molting their exoskeletons in darkened rooms, somersaulting into the jaws of life without breath as if they had always known.

I combed my hair and buttoned my shirt, packed my bag, and waited for a strong wind. When I thought nothing was happening, I found myself lifted above the tree branches, limbs slightly fluttering—ballooning through the atmosphere; the eyes of a huntsman, a sick wave of nausea, confused and exhilarated, drifting towards the border gates of Cambodia. My limbs were stiff, but my brain functioned perfectly to perform the tasks of an ordinary man. The sun shone through the weeds which grew along the border gates, and I wondered how many insects were bundled up in webs waiting to be sucked dry. Cambodia was cruel and intriguing—perfect territory for ballooning spiderlings. I crawled inside my hotel room, dislodged the thread from my spinnerets and peered out the curtains. A couple of motorbike drivers were waiting patiently as a group of karaoke queens chatted and motioned to my whereabouts. I finished my beer and took off my clothes, lay down, and pulled the bedsheet over my head.

My Cambodia become-one-with-the-spider mission was a disaster. I should have known when my backpack flew from the rear of the minivan at a hundred and twenty kilometres an hour, nearly taking out a motorcyclist, and filling my bag with shaving cream. That was the beginning—an introduction as to how things could go wrong. The mamasan at the first shack I encountered was throwing down cards with a cigarette burning between her lips like a funnel web with deoxygenated hemolymph pumping through her book-lungs.

“You want lady?” she asked, silk twisting from her betel nut stained lips.

“Nah... just give me a beer and a glass with some ice. It’s as hot as hell out there!”

A hostess with acne-pocked skin pulled a beer out of a plastic tub, put a frosted glass filled with ice on the table where I sat, giggled and sat on my knee.

“You want number one boom boom?” she asked, stroking the scopolae on my thighs.

I'd done my research and was aware copulation often resulted in death. Sure, there were ways to trick a paramour—such as doing funny dances, secreting pheromones to sneakily drug her into a stupor while depositing sperm, or even wrapping her in silk and presenting her with a gift like a nice worm or a fly—but as much as I may have had an Ascendant in Scorpio, I couldn't bring myself to step inside the mamasan's shack and have my cranium injected with digestive enzymes while a creature sucked out my juices and turned me into a flaky desiccated shell. I picked up my hat and fired out a thread, climbed inside a minivan and headed towards the capital of Phnom Penh.

He was a wolf spider, a long-legged gangly beast with a patchy beard; it was as if someone had hit him on the chin with a hatchet and split his scraggly beard in two. He wore an old grey sweat-stained shirt—tight around his belly and sagging pecs—and kept shifting in his seat as if his nuts were too big. He babbled about the services he was planning on hiring—justifying them with hollow rhetoric—then just as I was about to tell him what a pathetic creature he was and how he should seek professional help, the door of the minivan swung open and in climbed two goofy crab spiders, followed by a colourful jumping spider in a blue and green stripy hat. The crab spiders climbed into the back and didn't say a word, but the jumping spider rarely passed on a pause. The wolf spider eyeballed him with contempt.

"Yeah, right, you think the locals are pretty honest. Heh, let me tell you, I've been traveling around South East Asia for six years and if there's one thing I can say, it's that the vast majority of people here are a bunch of scammers and thieves. As far as they're concerned, you're just a flashing dollar sign. Try picking up a girl without money and see the response you get. I guarantee she'll be gone in a second with the oldest, ugliest, bastard with money. Once you understand that everything pans out fine."

The old jumping spider was nice, but new to South East Asia and basking in antiquated ideals. As the hours passed inside the confines of our sweaty van he revealed he was working on a novel about a middle-aged teacher who starts afresh in a Buddhist monastery.

"Nah! Forget that big time!" said the wolf spider, swiping at the jumping spider's aspirations as if they were pesky flies. "You've gotta come up with something original, man. Something about aliens or sci-fi. Turn on the TV and you'll see all that X-files shit everybody's lapping up. Forget writing some artsy-fartsy romantic shit about some old fool who finds himself. You've gotta write something that sells rather than smells."

Figure 2. *Wolf Spider*



Image created by author using Canva AI generation tools, 2025

I can't remember when I first heard about Skuon—the small, dusty bus stop of a town between Phnom Penh and Kampong Cham. It could have been from a guidebook. But now that I think of it, I remember an old grey-haired guy in my apartment block telling me about a pit stop his bus made on the way to Phnom Penh.

“You’ve got to be joking?” I queried, stopping him midstream as he reminisced about his golden days in Cambodia.

“No! No joke! Women were walking about with plates of deep-fried spiders carefully balanced on their heads. Then the locals got off the bus and started munching away at the spider’s legs and stomachs but there was no way I was going to eat a spider. I just sat on the bus and watched from the window. Then everybody got back inside and we drove another two hours south to Phnom Penh.”

Become the spider, I thought, pumping him for as much information as I could concerning the whereabouts of the town. *Conquer your fears and ingest the beast; learn its secrets and you might be able to understand those dreams that have plagued you since childhood*. I hated spiders—was sickened whenever I encountered them—yet something told me I had to go to Skuon. I told the story to a friend—mentioning a few of my creepy spider dreams—and was asked my date of birth and astrological sign.

“Twenty-ninth of May, nineteen seventy-four, Gemini,” I replied. Sceptical and bored of encounters with those who believed they were capable of predicting my personality.

“Ok,” she replied, writing it down on a napkin. “Where and what time were you born?”

I picked up the telephone and called my mother.

“Hey mum,” I said, eyes fixed on the cute girl in front of me. “What time was I born?”

“What time? What do you want to know that for?” she asked, stirring something gluggy in a metallic pot; the nasty sound of wood against aluminium.

“No reason...I’m just sitting here with a friend who’s interested in astrology.”

“You know that’s all a bunch of nonsense Syd.”

“Yeah, what time Mum?”

“Kevin, can you remember what time Syd was born?”

I could barely make out what Dad was saying in the distance. Mum confirmed it was the afternoon, around four p.m. I hung up the phone and gave the information to my friend. Two days later she came back with six pages printed from the internet. I was a Scorpio alright; not a goose, gull, horse, hound, hummingbird, parrot, pheasant, salmon, snake, snipe, sow, lion, mouse, otter, owl, peacock, rabbit, starling, fish, turtle, swan. I was part of the spider family; roaming the streets of Cambodia with spiderlings crawling across my skin.

Figure 3. Spiderlings crawling across my skin



Image created by author using Canva AI generation tools, 2025

The average person swallows eight spiders a year in their sleep, a strange statistic that keeps appearing; only sometimes it's nine, other times it's three, some say twelve, and I've heard it as high as fifty. How is it possible? Why do spiders crawl into our mouths? Surely, it's not on purpose. Surely arachnids do not seek to enter our bodies. People breathe when they sleep and like other small creatures, spiders, don't like breath and are likely to abscond if a large animal is breathing upon them. Then again, what about when a spider's egg sac hatches and hundreds of microscopic spiderlings sail through the air, ballooning on the currents in an attempt to escape their cannibalistic mothers? You're exhausted with your mouth hanging wide open, and in sail a dozen microscopic spiderlings. You close your mouth and are none the wiser. But the spider has become you, and you have become it: eight legs, fangs, and an abdomen of bulletproof silk.

Figure 4. *The spider becomes you, you become it*



Image created by author using Canva AI generation tools, 2025

The bus wasn't a bus. It was a minibus filled with Khmers, live animals, and vegetables moving towards the market in Skuon. The amount of booze I'd consumed the night before and the horror images that crept into my skull was enough to bring on a blackout. I remember being pressed between the driver and an old lady with wrinkly hands, and every time I came to, she was nudging me in the side with her elbow. The heat was extreme and the insides of my legs stuck to my shorts as rivers of sweat ran from my temples down my back. After a couple of hours of persistent horn blasts and intermittent elbowing, the minivan stopped and the driver ordered me out.

Touch down! The highway was alive and pulsating. I looked about the market but couldn't find what I was looking for. Walking across the road, I bought a can of Tiger Beer with a straw stuck in it. A young woman stood a few feet away with a plate of fried spiders balanced on top of her head.

"You want spider Mr.?"

"How much?" I replied, salivating with anticipation.

"How many you like?" I sell five spider good price."

"Sounds good."

"I sell five spider one thousand five hundred riel."

"Ok, but where do you get them? Show me where you catch them" I said, looking over the woman's shoulder in search of something more.

The woman took one look at my glassy staring eyes, knew exactly what I was after, and lead me across the street to a grandmother sitting on a stool with a hessian sack in her hands.

"A-ping! A-ping!" shouted the old woman, jumping to her feet with betel nut juice dripping from her lips.

I stood close to her and she opened the sack, let out a cackle, and fired forth a blood-red jet. Spiders were clinging to the hessian sack. Some were sleeping. Some were crawling towards her hand. She took out a spider put it on my shirt. The grandmother revealed a knowing smile, a caring smile, a smile of affection that addressed me as if to say *it's ok you can relax*.

Looking down at my shirt, watching a placid arachnid move towards my neck, I felt a sense of relief as I stroked its thorax and abdomen. I'd read this particular species belonged to the trap-door family and people pushed sticks into their holes and waited for them to attack. The stationary creature on my shirt sleeve seemed completely harmless however.

The young woman who had led me to the spider mamasan wanted me to buy the five dead spiders we'd previously agreed on. I put money in her hand and she carefully placed five greasy candidates in a green plastic bag.

"Can you take me to where the spiders live?" I asked, looking down at the spider on my shirt sleeve, which was completely motionless, as if sleeping.

"What?" she asked.

"Where do the spiders live?" I said pointing over her shoulder, past the town, off into the palm trees and fields.

"Ok. But first you give old woman money."

"Hey?"

"You buy live friend, yes?"

"Ok, how much?"

"You buy two live spider one thousand riel."

I knew I was being had for a few extra riels but it was a small price to pay to find out where my friends were hiding and what was going on in the fields. The grandmother reached down and pulled out another spider, carefully took my sleeping companion from my shirt and placed them together in a paper bag. The young woman signalled to a motorbike driver and said a few words in Khmer. Jumping on the back of his motto I saw his eyes shift for a second in the rear-view mirror as we sped towards the mountains.

Twenty minutes later we arrived at a large restaurant with a dirt parking lot and I was ushered inside. A young man in his early twenties with a shock of wiry jet-black hair and a purple greyish mole on the side of his ear came up and slowly shook my hand.

"You come for spider?" he asked, uncomfortable and shy.

"Yes, but I want to see where the spiders live. Can you show me?"

"Sure. You work for newspaper or magazine?"

"No, I just came to see the spiders. Do you get a lot of tourists?"

"No, not so many now. In past many buses come from Angkor but now only Khmer from Phnom Penh."

"Do you catch the spiders?"

"Yes, if I have free time and not work. But now I very busy and no time."

"How far away are they?"

"About five kilometres, but walking very much to find hole. I take you soon but now must work."

He shook my hand, did an uncomfortable bow, said “nice to meet you,” then disappeared behind a door that led to the kitchen area of the restaurant. Sitting on a plastic chair—hair plastered across my forehead, damp with sweat—I took out the green plastic bag of deep-fried spiders, pulled out a candidate and began singing a familiar tune.

*“Itsy Bitsy Spider climbed up the water spout.
Down came the rain and washed poor Itsy out.
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain.
And Itsy-Bitsy Spider went up the spout again.”*

It had been a while since I’d sung the nursery rhyme in kindergarten, but somehow, I remembered the words. I held the spider close and studied the tips of its fangs.

“You’re not so bad!” I said breaking off one of its legs and placing it in my mouth. “It’s time for us to change our arrangement. It’s time for you to become the victim and me the villain. I shall suck on your abdomen and crack open your thorax, chew your legs and steal prima materia.”

The legs came off like flavoursome twigs and began gathering on the roof of my mouth. Holding the last limb—as if the creature was an eight-legged popsicle—I began to access the abdomen and sucked its sticky brown goo.

I closed my eyes. I knew that I had won, become the spider, and beat the beast that had haunted me since childhood. However, as I sat at the stone table gathering its legs inside my mouth, I felt strangely disconnected from my ancient ancestors. So what if I was an ascendant in Scorpio with Mars in the tenth house at the time of my birth. So what if I was six foot four, thirty years old, and scared out of my skin every time I saw an arachnid. To hell with spiders! To hell with my pathetic fears! I swigged my can of Elephant and swallowed the legs, sparked up a menthol, and began gnawing on a slightly larger candidate. Three spiders and a few beers later my man still hadn’t shown. I keep staring at the wooden door, expecting him to emerge.

Bored, I went outside and laid down in the shade. An hour later I woke with a dry throat as the sun rippled through the trees. *Where the hell is he?* I thought, jumping to my feet and dusting off my clothes. I went into the restaurant but nobody could speak English. I tried to go into the kitchen and was stopped by an old lady in a chef’s hat with a meat-cleaver in her hand.

What the hell is this? I thought, scratching my scraggly beard and wiping sweat from my forehead on my old grey shirt. *Have I stumbled upon the gatekeeper? Was I about to discover the final piece of this puzzle, only to be sidelined at the last hurdle by a covert agent with a meat cleaver in her hand?*

I went out to the road as the sun beat down. I walked for a kilometre to another restaurant and ordered a bottle of their strongest beer.

You know what? I thought as I wiped sweat-beads from my forehead and flicked them from my fingertips onto the dusty hot gravel. *Forget this! Forget this pathetic little mission I've sent myself on. To hell with those spiders and their stupid little tunnels, to hell with this ridiculous idea of becoming the spider, and to hell with writing some cool surrealistic avant-garde sci-fi piece about an ascendant in Scorpio who travels to a strange town and becomes Lord of the Flies. Fuck this! This place is a stink hole! A dirty backwater one horse town on the outskirts of Phnom Penh and there's nothing more keeping me here.*

A bus came down the road that was heading to a town an hour away. I got on it and slept for the entire journey, waking up at the bus station and remembering I had two live spiders in my bag.

I closed the door, walked over to the window and put my bag on the floor. The window had bars but I could see the temple across the street and a patch of blue sky. It was an honest view; no fancy lakes or mountains, just a simple temple with its adjoining monastery, and a busy market halfway down the street. I fired up a menthol, got down on my hands and knees and began to work the zipper on my bag.

What if my spider buddies have become aggressive and pounce on my hand? I thought, bugged-eyed, breathing out nervous plumes.

What if they bite me and then I get cold and nosedive in the bathroom?

I looked at the paper bag and it was motionless. I shook and watched my brown friends tumble onto the floor. One of them did a funky trot as it rolled out of the bag, then casually waved a bristly leg in the air. I could see its fangs. For a moment its tight brown chelicerae covered in fine hairs reminded me of something terrifying yet serene. I took off my clothes and pulled the curtain shut, sidestepped my guests—sitting motionless in front of the bed—then walked into the bathroom and let the water run hard.

What am I going to do? I thought, holding the showerhead, letting the water flow through my fears. *I would rather they weren't here but at the same time they're not going to bite me, matter of fact we're all good friends.*

I looked up at the ceiling, noticed a water stain mushrooming out like an atomic cloud, and then when I was well and truly scrubbed pink-clean, I stepped out of the shower and noticed one of the spiders was clinging to the curtain's skirt.

"What are you doing!" I yelled. "You're not a bird eating spider! You're a trap door! Know your place!"

I looked down at the other spider and it was motionless, only now it was resting against one of the bed legs. I towelled myself down and rolled up a number, sat by the crack in the curtain and studied the street. An old monk was sitting in a chair, relishing the sweat afternoon breeze. I took a drag on my joint and disappeared out the door.

Figure 5. *I stepped out the door*



Image created by author using Canva AI generation tools, 2025

Spider Maintenance 101

Spider House: First select a wide-mouthed jar. Then tightly pull a piece of stocking over it lips and secure it with elastic bands. Make sure to provide a couple of inches of soil at the bottom of the jar and a piece of bark for ground nesting species, or a stick for web-building species to anchor their webs.

Water: Don't forget a cap of water for ground nesting spiders and make sure you add rocks so smaller spiders can swim to safety and do not drown. For web-building spiders, gently mist the spider's web once a week and it will be able to obtain all the extra moisture it needs.

Food: Be careful with food. Insects that are too big and beyond a spider's capabilities are likely to destroy a spider's web and traumatise both creatures involved. Also, be sure to choose insects that are not too frisky and smaller than the arachnid, such as flies and bees.

Dead Food: Under no circumstances should you give a spider dead food. Spiders do not accept dead insects and frankly I don't blame them. Would you want to eat a wax mummified turkey from a supermarket freezer or would you rather wrestle a pheasant in a field and wring its brightly plumed neck? The answer is obvious: *Do not give spiders dead food.*

Making a spider house: A spider's house will need cleaning now and then. Use forceps to retrieve the exoskeletons of dead insects and paper towels to clean spider droppings from the glass. Do not be alarmed if a ground-nesting spider suddenly rolls on its back and becomes lifeless; it is merely shedding its skin.

Spider handling: When handling spiders, it is best to first chill them in a refrigerator to make them more lifeless and docile then once again use forceps to lift them from their jars. Be careful not to drop a spider. A fallen spider usually sustains an exploded abdomen or broken legs and dies soon after.

Taking care of young spiders: When an egg sac appears do not panic or be alarmed. It is now your responsibility to remove spiders from each other if the situation arises. Be on guard for cannibalistic mothers and jealous aunties and uncles. A good spider rearer will receive wisdom at the appropriate time. A good parent will shift their young ones from harm's way and let the beasts go on with their lives.

The internet was slow and a couple of stinky poodles scampered about the shop, barking and copulating while the owner casually cleaned her ears with cotton buds that she tossed onto the floor. Checking emails had become a chore. When I first came to South East Asia, I was a good boy and dutifully checked my emails every couple of days—replying with all manner of witty observations about life in the orient—but after a couple of years I got bored and was lucky if I set foot in an internet shop every couple of weeks.

Mum was angry at first, but after a while she got used to it. Internet shops gave me the creeps. I approached them with the same formula I approached supermarkets and department stores: *get in quick and get out fast*. I sat down in my swivel chair and punched away at the keys, typed in my password and saw a message from mum.

Dear Syd, sorry I haven't written in a while. It was nice talking on the phone with you the other day, even if it was only for a brief while. Anyway, back to the reason why I'm writing, I fear your father and I made a mistake about the time of your birth and just thought you might want to know. Much to my surprise your grandma remembers both yours and your brother's birth times very clearly. She was over here the other day making one of her gorgeous pies and we had a good time talking about when you and your brother were boys.

According to granny it was actually Barry who was born in the afternoon and you somewhere between two or three a.m. I remember it quite clearly now because I was in labour with you much longer than Barry and nearly had to have my stomach cut open because you were such a big boy.

Nine pounds eight ounces you were! You used to crawl about the house with ice-cream buckets on your head and yell and scream if your father or I didn't hold onto your hand when you were about to go to sleep.

I miss you darling. Take care and don't forget to send me a postcard now and then.

"Shit's sake!" I shouted, disturbing the shop owner as she twisted another cotton bud in her ear.

This means I'm not an ascendant in Scorpio. This means I'm not cunning, shrewd, and turbulent with a tendency to disappear into the shadows and secretly plan things. This means my destiny will not have many critical decisions and moments of bravery. This means I could very well have no real connection with the arachnid family.

I left the internet shop, walked to the market, and ordered a beer.

He came up from behind and slapped me on the back.

"Hey scumbag, you find your spiders yet?"

I turned around and the wolf spider was leaning over me with his scraggly beard split sideways, licking on a beer. His skin was greasy in the fluorescent light and his eyes ping-ponged from face to face before he finally sat down.

"Yeah, I did. They're crawling about my room."

"What are you talking about?"

"Bought a couple of live ones and released them in my room."

"What ya do that for?"

"Dunno, guess I was just absorbed in the moment."

"Absorbed in the moment? Grab a clue! If one of those things crawls up and sinks its fangs into the side of your face you won't be so absorbed in the moment. I guarantee!"

"You may have a point there."

"Like I said before: head out of ass, hand on bum."

"Sounds great!" I replied sarcastically.

"Yeah, could be. This is the land of milk and honey. This is about one of the only places left where you can live out your fantasies."

"What do you think I went chasing spiders for?"

"You're joking right? You mean to tell me your biggest fantasy is chasing spiders?"

"Yep."

"You're in trouble then!"

"Why?"

"Well, life isn't about spiders. It's about rootin' and fighting. It's about winning and losing and not giving a Jean-Claude Van-Damn."

"Uh-huh."

"Yeah, the other night I was down at ..."

"Listen mate, I really don't want to hear your sad stories anymore ok!"

"Whoa, what twisted your melon all of a sudden? I was just having a bit of fun."

"Well, there comes a point when it's not acceptable."

"Acceptable? Acceptability? You...the golden spider boy! Racing about munching on dead spiders! Setting live ones loose in your room! You tell *me* what's acceptable?"

"Whatever! Just don't bother telling me your stories anymore ok!"

"Jez, you're a moody bastard today."

"Nah, I'm just sick of guys like you who think they can take advantage of people who don't have any choice doing what they do."

"What did you say?"

"You heard me!" I said jumping to *my* feet with my beer in *my* hand.

For a moment we were entranced; eyes locked together like primordial beasts dangling from the edge of the world. The wolf spider's left nostril went up and I countered it with a wrinkling of my brow.

What's he waiting for? I thought. *What are we waiting for?*

He looked me up and down, gave a smile, turned, and began walking back through the crowd. I picked up my stripy blue and green hat and a piece of dead skin fell to the floor. I slowly walked down the road and arrived at the temple before nightfall.

A Note from the Author

In the Kingdom of Cambodia there are numerous dark tourism sites that are frequented by YouTube content creators seeking to cash in on the horror Cambodians have experienced as a result of the 1975-1979 genocide. Now anyone can be a virtual dark tourist, with content creators competing against each other for the most sensationalised forms of macabre entertainment. Before Youtube started in 2005, a classic dark tourist account of Cambodia, *Off the rails in Phnom Penh: into the dark heart of guns, girls, and ganja*, written by Amit Gilboa, appeared in 1998 in airport bookstores around South East Asia. At the age of twenty-four, and new to backpacking across Asia, Gilboa's stories of Cambodia's dark tourism sites, such as a firing range where people could aim a rocket launcher at a cow in a paddock, both disgusted and intrigued me.

Cambodia in the year 2000 was still very much the Wild West that Gilboa described in his controversial novel; a ravaged frontier in which depraved expats broke all the rules, roaming lawlessly from karaoke dive, to firing range, to Buddhist temple. Traveling across the Thai border to Cambodia for the first time, I will never forget seeing a grandmother with a wooden leg, who stood on a hilltop in an area full of landmines as our moto raced by. As she turned to look back at me for a brief moment, I was filled with adrenaline when she held out her hand, beckoning for me to give her some money. The photographer in me wished I had been able to return and take a photo of her, but my memory has forever tattooed the old woman with a wooden leg in my mind. Born in a country that has never experienced the extent of poverty and suffering that Cambodians have had to endure, as an Australian on the dark tourism trail, it is easy to forget the lingering scars of the victims of the Khmer Rouge genocide. As you shuffle up to the ticket window and buy t-shirts and souvenirs from the gift shop for friends back home in *The Lucky Country*, it's easy to gloss over the true horror of the events that have taken place within a dark tourism zone.

My first trip to Cambodia turned out to be memorable and saw me returning several times over the next decade. One night when our moto was forced off the road in Phnom Penh and an attempted robbery took place, a nauseating wave of fear instantly quelled any foolish ideas I entertained about visiting that firing range Gilboa described in *Off the rails in Phnom Penh*. The scared little boy breathing heavy under a pink mosquito net back in *The Cloud 9 Guesthouse* after the incident was suddenly aware that he was in well over his head. After the attempted robbery, I stopped glorifying *Off the rails* and its enticing hedonistic fairy tale adventures, deciding to be more careful to keep my wits about me.

Dith Pran, a survivor of the Pol Pot regime whose experiences inspired the movie *The Killing Fields* (1984), states in *Children of Cambodia's Killing Fields: Memoirs by Survivors* (1997):

It is important for me that the new generation of Cambodians and Cambodian Americans become active and tell the world what happened to them and their families under the Khmer Rouge. I want them never to forget the faces of their relatives and friends who were killed during that time. The dead are crying out for justice. Their voices must be heard. (p. x)

As YouTube lures millions into its clickbait webs, in which anybody can give their spin on dark tourist zones, the voices of the dead are often unheard by the restless viewer who spies a more engaging video thumbnail. Gone are the days of silence and deep respect found within a well-researched documentary that consults survivors like Dith Pran. In the current monetised YouTube landscape, it's all about the likes, the shares, and the entertainment factor, rather than ethics and respect for the dead. As algorithms and the power of AI knit together hyperlink threads that seek to constantly hit you with a cloud of dopamine spores, it's easy to forever feast on a banquet of dark tourism, yet remain empty and numb. Entering into doom scroll territory, our intentions and ethics become murky at best: eyes dancing from one video thumbnail to the next, unable to sincerely absorb the horror of genocide and its aftermath.

My travelogue *An Ascendant in Scorpio* engages with dark tourism in the Kingdom of Cambodia in the form of a surreal narrative that examines the seedy terrain of backpackers through the eyes of a delusional protagonist, who believes that he and those around him are half-human, half-spider-like creatures. Taking inspiration from literature, including Hunter S. Thompson's famous reptile zoo in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A savage journey to the heart of the American Dream* (1971), Franz Kafka's hideous bug in *Metamorphosis* (1915), and morbid themes reflected in William T. Vollmann's *Butterfly Stories* (1993), anthropomorphism is used as a narrative device to tell the tale of a man who wrestles with a disturbed psyche that shifts between darkness and shadows. In the academic sphere, Barbara Creed, focusing specifically on the human-animal in the imaginary of the tropics, has traced the link between zoos, surrealism, and science (2016); and the tropical melancholic in film (2011).

My aim with *An Ascendant in Scorpio* is not to present a true account of events that occurred during my time in Cambodia, but rather to present a narrative that explores a constellation of ideas that revolve around dark tourism; entwining magical realism with the everyday debaucheries of a swarm of hideous foreigners who have descended upon Cambodia, sucking the marrow from its shell-shocked citizens.

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Note: The images in this narrative were created by the author using Canva's AI image generation tools. All prompts were authored by the writer, and the images are used for illustrative and conceptual purposes.

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