

NORWICH/CAMBODIA

Giving new hope to a community

Pictures: SUBMITTED

The journey from five-star hotels to poverty can be measured in minutes in Siem Reap, the jewel in Cambodia's cultural crown.

Reflecting the great Khmer civilisation between the ninth and 14th centuries, the stunning temples in the area include Angkor Wat, acknowledged as one of the great wonders of the world. But this small country in south-east Asia has fallen a long way from its glory days. Under the brutal regime of the Khmer Rouge in 1975-1979, an estimated two million people were murdered in Pol Pot's "killing fields" while starvation was endemic among those who survived.

While a few are now achieving prosperity and most are at least making progress, there are many who are terribly poor and in some cases starving.

Cambodia has no meaningful welfare system and has to rely on Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) to fill the vacuum as best they can.

One of these is the New Hope Community Centre which is supported by the UK-registered charity, Globalteer.

Through volunteers it is able to help with skills, pairs of hands and financial support - using the donations volunteers pay and contributions via the website - to sponsor individuals and families.

In autumn 2007, one of those was our son Robin, 36, from Norwich, who decided he needed a new challenge.

He chose to go to Cambodia initially for eight weeks but was sufficiently moved by the need he found to accept an offer to go back in January 2008 as a member of the small team looking after administration and planning.

As tourists, Tony and Linda Shorthose enjoyed the sights of Cambodia but it was only when they made a return visit to see their son Robin, who is helping a charity, that they discovered the real country. Here TONY SHORTHOSE, founder



of Norwich-based marketing company Shorthose Russell, writes about their experience.

Though Globalteer supports four other projects in the area, Robin has a particular interest in New Hope (the name was his suggestion) based in the village of Mondul 3 on the outskirts of Siem Reap.

It was founded by local man and ex-buddhist monk Kemsour Sot, the 27-year-old son of a village chief who had enjoyed a good education and moved to Mondul 3 to build a life with his wife and two young sons.

He soon recognised the community



A HELPING HAND: Robin Shorthose who is working for the New Hope Community Centre in Cambodia.

desperately needed help and financed the original grass hut base and work himself until Robin introduced Globalteer to the project and they agreed to support it.

Robin said: "The village is a highly impoverished community. Most of the people are remnants of army families, children with only one parent or being raised by a grandmother. Many of the fathers were killed serving in the army or died of illness and disease.

"Up to 400 girls live in the village as karaoke entertainers and prostitutes. These girls come to Siem Reap from rural areas to find jobs to support their families. Having no education or skills they quickly fall victim to the sex trade. Prevalent health problems in the village are chronic malnutrition, HIV, hepatitis, typhoid, tuberculosis and dengue fever.

"The nearest primary school is more than 5km away. Most families are too poor to provide the uniforms, resources and transport for their children to attend. So for many residents the education New Hope provides is all that is available to them.

"There are now more than 320 students being taught in English and the local Khmer language. In addition, vocational skills in sewing, traditional carving, computers, beauty treatment and cooking help older children and adults find employment.

"There is no free medical care for adults so in the most extreme cases the poor simply die if they have no help. We have employed a resident doctor to see the sick and needy. He dispenses free medicines and arranges for those needing hospital care to be transported into Siem Reap where New Hope meets their costs.

"For reasons I can't understand, Cambodia's poverty is invisible in the UK. We rightly help those in Africa and India where we are familiar with the problems but no

country has a more tragic recent history and places like Mondul 3 are in desperate need. There is a rice list of more than 100 undernourished families who once a month collect a bag of rice and local seasonings. Only those with absolutely nothing qualify but there are still more than we can afford to help. The families that get sponsored come off the list enabling new ones to be added. Only £25 monthly will feed a family, help with housing and provide medical care."

Robin is quick to point out that his role is behind the scenes with the great day-to-day operational pressures being borne by 50-year-old Australian Kerry Huntly who arrived as a Globalteer volunteer in January 2008 with the intention to stay for three months.

Over a year later the centre has taken over her life. She lives on site surrounded by the seven children she has taken into guardianship in the new shelter opened last summer.

Kemsour's dream is to make New Hope self-sustainable and less reliant on donations as demand will always exceed available funds in the foreseeable future.

Sponsorship today can lead to extraordinary, lasting changes in the lives of children and their communities.

■ To find out more or to help New Hope support the people of Mondul 3 see www.newhopeCambodia.com or if you are interested in volunteering go to www.globalteer.co.uk

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TOURIST ATTRACTION: One of the temples in Siem Reap, Cambodia.