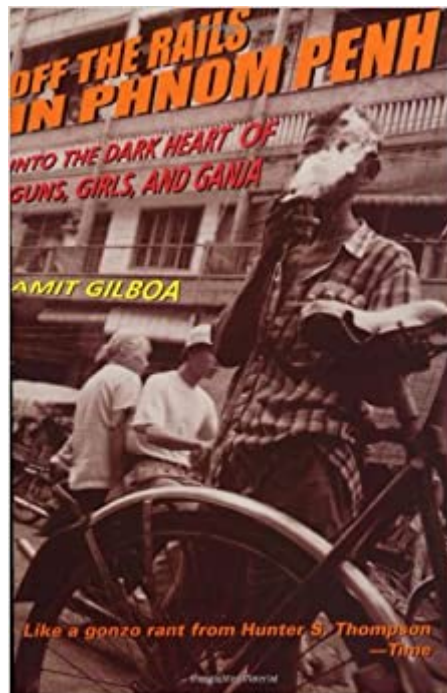




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# Off The Rails In Phnom Penh: Into The Dark Heart Of Guns, Girls, And Ganja



## Synopsis

Phnom Penh is a city of beauty and degradation, tranquillity and violence, and tradition and transformation; a city of temples and brothels, music and gunfire, and festivals and coups. But for many, it is simply an anarchic celebration of insanity and indulgence. Whether it is the \$2 wooden shack brothels, the marijuana-pizza restaurants, the AK-47 fireworks displays, or the intricate brutality of Cambodian politics, Phnom Penh never ceases to amaze and amuse. For an individual coming from a modern Western society, it is a place where the immoral becomes acceptable and the insane becomes normal. Amid this chaos lives an extraordinary group of foreign residents. Some are adventurers whose passion for life is given free rein in this unrestrained madhouse. Others are misfits who, unable to make it anywhere else, wallow in the decadent and inviting environment. This unparalleled first-hand account provides a fascinating, shocking, disturbing and often hilarious picture of contemporary Phnom Penh and the bizarre collection of expats who make it their home. As they search for love in the brothels or adventure on the firing range, Phnom Penh Journey follows them into the dark heart of guns, girls and ganja.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"There is a beast in all of us, but in Cambodia that beast is let out into the open," says Amit Gilboa of the country he calls a "fiction writer's dream". The Bangkok-based Gilboa's debut book, *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh*, is not a work of fiction, however, even though it reads like one. It is a racy, disturbing, fantastic, and sometimes funny account of the exploits of a motley group of expatriates in

1990's Phnom Penh, who spend their days visiting \$2 brothels, eating ganja-topped pizzas, snorting heroin and shooting rockets at firing ranges. -- South China Morning Post, April 4, 1999. By Kavitha Rao

As a literary genre the travel narrative is often genteel to the point of yawn-inducing boredom. Maybe that's why first-time author Amit Gilboa's recent book, *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh*, is causing such a stir in Southeast Asia. Just one glance at the subtitle--"Into the Dark Heart of Guns, Girls, and Ganja"--tells you his hellish holiday in Cambodia will unfold more like a gonzo rant from Hunter S. Thompson than an erudite essay by Paul Theroux. Gilboa spins a fascinating if somewhat fractured tale about a beautiful country whose people have been ravaged by decades of turmoil. With its mix of random jottings, bizarre character sketches and diary entries, Gilboa's account plunges readers into the center of the Khmer storm. -- Time Magazine, February 1, 1999. By Jeffrey Ressler

The book is phenomenal. On a scale of the amount of muck raked it must come very high in the annals of reportage... The book...is by turns attractive, repulsive and frightening but never boring. I found it hard to put down, and will never forget it. -- The Nation, Bangkok, August 30, 1998. By Simon Johnstone

The debut work of young writer Amit Gilboa is a helter-skelter low-life travelogue through that neighboring madhouse named Phnom Penh. A book easy for old hands to dismiss as immature or nave, it's invigorating, exciting, packed full of fun and infectious youthful exuberance. -- Bangkok Metro Magazine, September 1998. By Ian Crawshaw

Amit Gilboa was born in Israel, grew up in America, and currently lives in Bangkok. Over the past 10 years, he has studied in China, entrepreneured in Viet Nam, worked and researched in Cambodia, and written in Thailand, as well as working as a consultant in Washington, DC. Gilboa is fluent in Chinese, Khmer and Hebrew, and proficient in Thai and Vietnamese. While in Cambodia, Gilboa developed customer service training for Royal Air Cambodge, began a call-back partnership, and sold airline tickets, as well as teaching English and learning Khmer. In addition to his recent book about Cambodia, Gilboa has published numerous articles in North American magazines and newspapers. Gilboa is a 1991 graduate of Wesleyan University.

beautifully written - a wonderful titillating book about an exotic country - also extensive history on the Pol Pot era

interesting, proctivce

A good read very informative particularly the first part about Cambodies history.

A Review of OFF THE RAILS IN PHNOM PENH I bought this book from a handicapped woman while drinking a beer at the Kandal bistro on the riverfront in Phnom Penh. This book describes Amit Gilboa's experiences of Phnom Penh as it was in 1996 to 1998. Even for that time, he presents a skewed view of Phnom Penh, as he intended to. Hence the title. He describes the lowlife expatriates who were there to take advantage of the inexpensive, often-underage whores, and drugs. Reading this book would scare off the majority of prospective tourists, except those seeking those sorts of thrills. Fortunately, though still a messed up country rife with corruption, Cambodia is no longer much like Gilboa describes. There are no people shooting guns off into the air that haphazardly kill people as the bullets drop back to earth. I suppose underage prostitution still exists, but if so it's well underground, and most hotels tell their patron to report any suspicion of this crime. While I was there the story in international news was of the rich guy who was arrested for severely beating a TV personality. This is the sort of thing the wealthy can ordinarily get away with in Cambodia, but in this case the woman was high-profile and from a rich family herself. Even Hun Sen, the ex-Khmer Rouge Prime Minister, said he went too far. Whether that was how he really felt about it is doubtful, but at least it means he's concerned about international opinion and Cambodia's image. Within the past couple of years garment-factory workers, who are paid \$100/month, which is not a livable wage, went on strike. The strike was put down violently, and some of the strikers were murdered. So Cambodia is still like America in the 1930's in that respect. Given the economic conditions in Cambodia, prostitution is inevitable, perhaps even necessary. It takes a skewed view of reality to insist that a woman who sells her body for \$100/night -- the current rate -- is abusing her body worse than working over forty hours a week in a sweat shop for the same money. At a sidewalk restaurant in Battambang I spoke to an English teacher from Sweden who had, he told me, just finished smoking a joint right there in the open. According to another resident I spoke to, there are still places that sell marijuana-laden pizza, but this isn't openly advertised to the casual tourist. Since Gilboa lived with low-lives, he got to know them as people. His descriptions of their views of what they're able to get away with in the "wild-west" atmosphere of Phnom Penh are often humorous, in a really disgusting sort of way. In their home countries, they would be nothing; in Phnom Penh they are able to teach English with no training, skills, interest, or talent in teaching, and live like depraved royalty. Cambodia needs a lively tourist industry. I'm sure many people interested in seeing Angkor Wat or enjoying Cambodia's beaches, are still leery of going there, and reading this book would scare them away. However, this book presents a thin slice-of-life from a time now,

thankfully, gone. Tourists in Cambodia, even those looking for drugs and prostitutes, are quite safe in Cambodia. Though the Cambodians have every good reason to hate America, they are warm, hospitable people who do not hate individual Americans.

Amit Gilboa's *OFF THE RAILS* starts out giving a vivid sense of a fascinating city, but soon the pounding one note he strikes, the note of westerners as bottom feeders out for rotten good times, begins to weary. Any visitor in Phnom Penh meets and sees some of the people Gilboa knows--they are there and Gilboa provides something of a record of their existence. But Phnom Penh offers so much more than his talk of the depressing "Majestic" Hotel crowd. Yeah, in a one-line disclaimer in the preface he admits that such people aren't the whole picture, but good journalism must not ignore the greater context after a such a limp disclaimer. Sure, show us the Majestic crowd but at least show them rubbing shoulders with the other expats in the city who work in real education, in building commerce, in landmine operations, in goverment exchanges, in journalism, in physical therapy. Gilboa presents a sensationalist vision--no big problem about that; but it is incredibly narrow.

As someone who loves the world's subculture I first bought this in a Bangkok bookstore prior to flying into Siem Reap on my first visit to Cambodia in 2001. After visiting twice since I bought it again from one of the many dodgy book sellers expecting its clingfilm wrapping to seal a book of blank pages, fortunately not, as I can honestly say that the book shows a Cambodia that I am sure still exists but has drawn further into the shadows as Western influence seeps across the country like a water for a leaking pipe. A memoir the now seems more of an alternative historical account than anything else and while disturbing, shows life in the developing world still as one of survival .

I was pleasantly surprised to find that much of *Off the Rails* in Phnom Penh was interesting and engaging. This is not to say that the reader does not have to wade through long passages in which Bilboa experiences or feigns astonishment that drug abusers with poor work ethics and social skills might possibly have sex with underaged prostitutes and engage in other antisocial activities. This would have been fine except that Bilboa feels the need to quote these people and regale the reader with their repetitive exploits. Had he not, and instead summarized this content, this could have been an excellent book; as it stands, portions of the book are excellent and thought-provoking, but sandwiched between rather repetitive and offensive content that is neither gripping nor shocking, but merely tedious and annoying, Bilboa has a good point to make about how the bizarre lifestyles of some of his expatriate friends mirror the absurdity of life in Cambodia in the 1990s. This would be

a more striking point if his friends' behavior weren't, in fact, typical of a certain segment of travelers and expats who seem to think that if they are not in their own country, and they have money or power, anything goes. That's not bohemianism or authenticity, it's just colonialism, and it's no less objectionable for being enacted by individuals than by governments.

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