

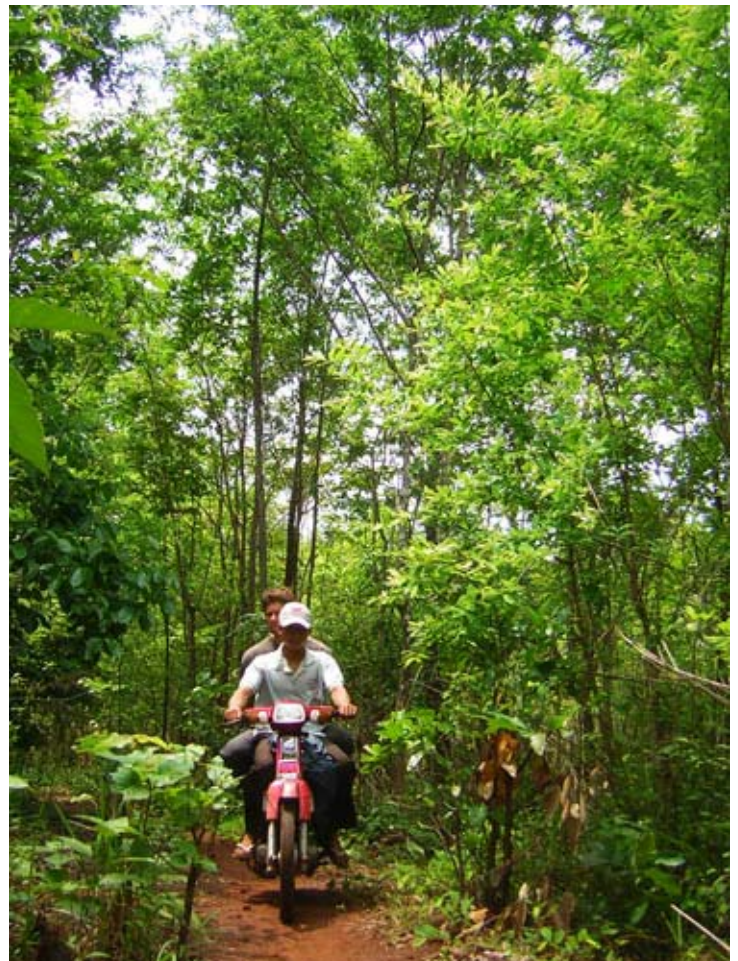
Twilight of a Gold Rush: Wild ride in the wild east.

One of the reasons I made the 5 hour detour east of the main road connecting the Lao border with Phnom Penh to the eastern Cambodian province of Mondolkiri and its regional capitol Sen Monorom, was to visit the gold mining town of Menmong. The other reason, at 800 meters the area was cooler than the blistering banks of the Mekong from which I had come, and I was looking forward to an evening without sweat. Visiting Menmong seemed like a doable task, the town lying a mere 50 km from Sen Monorom. I was traveling with a Dutch guy named Thaijs who I had met in southern Laos. Our initial plan was to rent motorbikes to get to the town. However, our inquiries were met with laughter and the discouraging words, “You not go to Menmong, road very bad.” Deciding to heed the local advice, we visited a nearby waterfall and some tribal villages for the day and decided to explore other options to get to Menmong the next morning.

Early the next morning we inquired at the market, the official unofficial place to arrange transport, if that makes any sense. It soon became clear that the only way to get there was on the back of a motorbike with an experienced Cambodian driver. I should have known we’d be in for an adventure when we were quoted the outrageously high take it or leave it price of \$30 a person to make the round trip. At this point we were determined to see the gold mining town, so we took it. By luck or by fortune it turned out we had hired two very good moto drivers. Perhaps it was due to my good-luck strings that I was still wearing on my wrist from Pee Mai Lao. Whatever the case, I couldn’t help but be terrified and at the same time amazed, making



The road started out good enough, and yes even more remarkable after you see what I was riding on. (picture from Thaijs)



Riding along one of the good stretches of road. (picture from Thaijs)

our way deeper into the jungle as I clung to the back of his Korean made 100 cc bike never designed for roads like this. Every time I thought the road couldn't get any worse and remain rideable it did. First it degenerated down to a bumpy dirt track wide enough for one motor bike. Next, there were the rocks, lots of them, and finally in the worst sections the "road," better described as a path, had degenerated into a series of rocks with the mud pits. Some how the driver picked his way through dabbling his flip-flop clad feet



Overview of Menmong.



Rock containing gold ore.



Boy with slew in the background..

to keep balance. Granted we were not going that fast much of the time and it took about 3 and half hours to cover the 50 km from Sen Monorom to the gold mine at Menmong.



Grinding down rock



Digging up the old ore.

The gold mine at Menmong had the feel and look of a mining town straight out of the old west on the tail end of its boom. Although boom feel was gone not because the gold had run out, there was still plenty of wealth beneath the rickety wooden structures and slues that the Cambodians had constructed. Rather, if you asked my Cambodian driver, he would say because it was stolen from the Cambodian people by the Chinese mining company that now owns the rights to everything beneath the ground. What had once been a gold fever free-for-all with locals and immigrants alike digging to seek there fortune had turned into a 1 player game a few years ago when a couple well connected Cambodians were able to sell the mining



Family portrait



Jeep that made a one way trip to Menmong



Welcome mats used to trap the gold in the slews

rights literally right out from under the people who lived there. The local people are now forbidden to dig and relegated to regrinding the previously mined material to extract a small amount of gold and a meager living. They work slues and grinders scattered across the hole riddled, garbage strewn vicinity of the old mine, now silently mined from beneath by the Chinese behind their gated compound which keeps out the prying eyes of cameras and journalist. When outsiders are kept out it always makes one wonder what they are hiding, or what they are embarrassed to let the world see. Perhaps the less than humane conditions of the Cambodian labor force, but I can only guess as we were not permitted to go near the Chinese mine.

Of course at Menmong we were only half way through our journey and with the onset of the monsoon approaching an afternoon shower managed to change a bad road into a worse one. Now the relatively smooth sections before the rain turned into ice-like slicks of mud after the shower. Remarkably the first 10 km slog through mud only set us back 45 minutes and we made it back to Menmong without a single fal (to my astonishment)l in a little over 4 hours. When I heard the price for the ride was \$30 I thought it was outrageous, given typical rates range between \$7 and \$10 a day, it turned out it was, and I gave the driver \$35 for his superhuman efforts.



In this gold obsessed town there are plenty of gold teeth around.



And then it got muddy. . . (picture from Thaijs)



Mining area Menmong