

From one culture shock to another

Written by Emmanuelle Dethomas
Tuesday, 03 January 2012 12:02



www.scottawoodward.com Sala Bai Hotel and Restaurant School trains 100 students, mainly youths from impoverished villages, to work in the hospitality industry. Since its founding in 2002, it has trained more than 800 young people, 70 per cent of them young women. All have found jobs, with a salary range between US\$200 and \$300 on average within a few years of graduating.

Youths from villages who find work in luxury hotels undergo a series of “culture shocks” that may be more profound than those experienced by foreign guests. Their journey from thatched huts to five-star hotels is made possible by gradual immersion, writes Emmanuelle Dethomas of Sala Bai Hotel and Restaurant School.

Deth Nimol was 18 years old before she first stepped foot in the “big city” of Siem Reap in January last year, even though she grew up less than an hour away, in Angkor Thom district’s Samrong village.

“I was really frightened the first day I arrived at Sala Bai! Then, when I met foreigners I felt so nervous that I could not speak the few words of English I knew. They dried up in my mouth,” she recalls.

She was one of the 100 of 584 candidates selected, and began on September 5th in Sala Bai’s restaurant department. The weather was beautiful that day, the temperature in the high twenties, but all the students were shivering with cold. All were wearing sweaters or sweat-shirts, clutching their arms, looking at their feet: the anxiety and fear they felt in their new environment was palatable.

Most were from remote villages in 12 different provinces. To reach their homes, it takes hours of riding on dirt roads that splinter into small paths between rice paddies. They were cut off from electricity and unexposed to the city life. For most, high schools were so far away and so expensive they were out of reach. Their one room huts lacked electricity and running water. The

From one culture shock to another

Written by Emmanuelle Dethomas
Tuesday, 03 January 2012 12:02

traditional stilts are as high as they can afford, some not higher than half a metre.

All the students are from poor families who live on less than US\$300 a year, one criteria for selection. It is no wonder that these young Cambodians feel a culture shock on their first day at Sala Baï School.

On average they have been out of school for five years. Getting back into the habit of reading and writing becomes a challenge. Meeting so many new people – other students of their age, Cambodian teachers and foreign staff – is also a source of anxiety.

Then they are introduced to equipment they had no idea they would one day use: lights that can be switched on, fans, air-conditioning in the training hotel rooms, warm water and taps. Lights, water, air-conditioning: they also need to learn to remember to turn them off.

Next, they begin to venture outside our training school. Before being equipped with bicycles, they are taken in small groups around Siem Reap to check out what the just learnt rules of road safety really mean.

Once they are dressed with their regular uniform, they are taken to four- and five-star hotels where they will eventually go as trainees: first for their compulsory internships during their one-year training, and in the end as employees. Within the first week of school, the culture shock waves keep piling up.

“I am very excited to have a lot of new friends coming from different places of Cambodia”, says Thoeun. Most students resent being far from their homes, even those who are orphaned. About 40 per cent of the current class are motherless, fatherless or parentless, but they still miss their home village.

Their accommodations – one dormitory for young men, another for young women – quickly become a second home, while their schoolmates and teachers become a second family that alleviates homesickness and provides the necessary support to face the fear of the unknown. Our staff have to be aware of the journey these youths have made to encourage them to become confident enough to enter an industry that requires a high level of self-assurance. The first 50 go two months into their training. They are selected according to their level of English. Two more later the other 50 follow them.

Our latest class, the tenth, is luckier than the first because they can meet graduates from previous classes who can be their mentors in the different departments: front office, restaurant service, kitchen or housekeeping. The students then realise that our extended family is much larger than they thought, and includes staff in their new hotels who can give all sorts of advice to help cope with the shock of being in a five-star venue filled with foreign customers. Make-up, lipstick and cosmetics become no secret for the young women. Young men opt for new hairstyles and start lowering the waist of their pants, just like trendy youths of their generation do the world over.

These changes demonstrate a natural adjustment and adaptation, a process that can be

From one culture shock to another

Written by Emmanuelle Dethomas
Tuesday, 03 January 2012 12:02

surprisingly fast. These tokens give them the feeling of belonging to a new world and the confidence to at last be able to speak to customers, smile and dare look them straight in the eyes.

“I was born at Sala Bai”, said a student from our fourth year, now a “chef de rang” in a restaurant in Phnom Penh. “I learnt that future existed,” explained a graduate from our third year, now a sales manager at a five-star hotel in Siem Reap. The one-year training transformed their lives and provided a vivid example for this year’s class as they begin to see the opportunities that await on the other side of the culture shocks they are absorbing. The journey from isolated village to a five-star hotel welcoming guests from around the globe becomes normal.