

Cambodia's Bamboo Trains



Cambodia has a fine network of railway tracks. These tracks were put in place many years ago, when France occupied Cambodia. These days, there are very few normal trains running on these tracks. But Cambodians travel on these tracks using a local invention - bamboo trains.

The Cambodian railway system never recovered from war and the Khmer Rouge tragedy that happened decades ago. There is only one proper train in service. The rest of Cambodia's railway transportation industry is made up of "norrys," which are homemade train cars.

Norrys are made of bamboo, wood, and occasionally parts of old military tanks. They aren't luxury transportation in any way shape or form, but they're cheap to ride. A typical norrry ride costs about 50 cents.

The first norrry was built in the 1980s by a 73 year old man named Pat Oun. Back in his day as a norrry driver, the earliest norrrys didn't have engines. Drivers stood in them and used long bamboo poles to push them down the track. It was very strenuous work.

"In the past, each day I worked, I pushed my norrry for up to 20 miles (that's almost 30 kilometers)," Oun said, as he smoothly demonstrated the norrry pushing motion.

Norrys aren't as common as they once were, but for a while they were Cambodia's only means of transportation. There are still a few norrrys covering the routes between the small cities and towns in northern Cambodia. Cambodians here rarely uses them anymore. These norrrys are mostly for thrill-seeking tourists who are eager to find an exciting new adventure. A norrry ride is definitely unique and exciting!

However, deep in the countryside, several hours away from the cities, Norrrys still provide a cheap and reliable service for the locals. The bamboo trains cover a 30-mile route (just about 50 kilometers) every day, helping villagers get around from village to village.

Norrys carry goods as well as passengers. Norrry driver Neum Chhean makes several trips a day, carrying people as well as large logs.

"I'll deliver anything," Chhean said confidently.

As you can expect, there are many different norrry drivers. They must compete with each other for the locals' business. Chhean's main competitor is another norrry driver named Doak Khemra. They have known each other for years and help each other out when they can. They have become pals. But that doesn't stop the two drivers from arguing when they lose customers to each other.