



Cambodia's homemade trains, made by hand of wood and bamboo and known locally as “norrys,” shuttle passengers across the countryside on the remnants of a defunct rail system.

JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Creaky Trains Made of Bamboo Still Rule the Rails in Cambodia

They Carry People, Logs, Booze, Coconuts;
Like a Ride on a ‘Bat,’ Says One Mom

By **JESSE PESTA** | *The Wall Street Journal*

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BATTAMBANG, Cambodia—Lim Sareub needed a ride home recently, so she did the usual thing. She went to an abandoned train station, sat down on a Dr. Seuss-like contraption just inches above the tracks, then rocketed down the rails on a train made of bamboo.

The wiggly old tracks stretched into the distance like two wet noodles. The bamboo train—just a platform the size of a bed, really—gained speed and

began shuddering.

Weeds lining the tracks whipped at passengers' thighs. Someone on board casually started swinging a machete off the side, hacking at the underbrush. A chicken flapped out of the way.

Cambodia's bamboo trains aren't that great, says Ms. Lim, a 53-year-old rice farmer. "When we hit the gap in the track, it gives me a little headache."

A few miles down the line, the driver braked by pressing a block of wood against the steel wheels with his foot. Ms. Lim hopped off. Cost for a ride like this: about 50 cents.



Lim Sareub

In Cambodia, real trains are almost as rare as bamboo trains anywhere else. The impoverished country has a network of tracks left over from French colonial days, but there are hardly any actual trains running anymore. Only one line is in service. The railway never recovered from the horrors of Khmer Rouge murder and war decades ago.

For years, the transportation gap had been filled partly by the homemade trains, known as "norrys," built of bamboo, wood and sometimes old tank parts. Today, the norrys have all but disappeared. Around the northern town of Battambang, a few cater to thrill-seeking tourists, although during one visit last year there weren't many tourists, just Ms. Lim catching a ride home.



A norry being operated by Doak Khemra moves down the tracks at the village of Stung Touch.

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One of the men hanging around Ms. Lim’s village destination that day was 73-year-old Pat Oun. He claims he built one of the very first norrys, back in the 1980s.

At that time, he says, norrys didn’t have engines, as they did later. Instead, drivers stood up and used long sticks of bamboo to “pole” the vehicle down the track, sort of like a Venetian gondolier. To demonstrate, Mr. Pat grabs a pole, steps onto a norry and slowly starts poling along the tracks. “I did this for 20, 30 kilometers in the past,” Mr. Pat boasts.

As he demonstrates, one of the wheels snags on a twig lying across the track, nearly throwing him overboard. Some kids nearby giggle.

Cambodia is trying to bring back real trains, according to Ly Borin of the Transportation Ministry. “When the railroad starts working, there will not be

norry anymore,” Mr. Ly says. Still, that could take awhile because, he says, Cambodia has run out of money to fix the tracks.

Meantime deep in the countryside, several hours’ bumpy drive from Battambang, there is a place where tourists don’t intrude and norrys still provide cheap, local train service along a route covering 30 or more miles a day. Here, in a village called Stung Touch, a woman sits in a shack selling baguettes and bottles of Wrestler brand wine. “I haven’t seen a regular train along here for two years,” she says. But the norrys pull in every day.



Six-year-old Ya Kori, center, just before her first norry ride. Her mother told her it would be like riding “a bat.” *JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Across the street, El Maysom is waiting to catch a norry with her 6-year-old daughter, who has never ridden one before. They are off to a wedding, a trip that will take several hours by bamboo train.

Ms. El says when she first mentioned the norry to her daughter, she asked what it was. Ms. El told her, “It’s like a bat.”

Her daughter, Ya Kori, hugs her mom’s leg shyly when asked if she is excited about riding a bat. Eventually she squeaks out a one-word answer: “Happy!”

At 9:33 a.m. a norry arrives carrying about 10 people and roughly an equal number of small logs. The driver, Neum Chhean, helps unload the logs at a tiny sawmill behind the baguette shack. “I deliver anything,” he says. He had started out at 7 a.m.

About an hour later, another norry pulls in. More people and more logs. “Five passengers this morning,” says the driver, Doak Khemra.

One arriving passenger is wearing a bullwhip on his pants à la Indiana Jones. He works at a lumber mill nearby, he says, where he drives a buffalo cart to haul logs. In this respect, then, bamboo trains are in competition with buffalo carts.

Now the wait for customers begins. The two drivers help each other lift their respective norrys off the tracks and turn them around to face back the way they came. Mr. Doak’s is lined up in front, meaning his will be the first to depart.

Soon, this will be an issue.

The midday sun is hot at Stung Touch. Hours pass, customers gather, and tensions rise. Mr. Neum’s norry is filling up a lot faster than Mr. Doak’s.

A customer walks up, and Mr. Doak offers to carry his goods—but the customer declines, saying he prefers Mr. Neum’s services. Mr. Doak isn’t happy about that.

The two drivers start bickering, and Mr. Doak makes a threat: “I’m going across the street to take a nap,” he says. A nap would delay everyone, because his norry is lined up first to depart.

Passengers start grumbling. “It’s hot, we should leave,” one person says to Mr. Neum.

“Don’t ask me,” Mr. Neum says, shrugging.

Finally, just before 2 p.m., the two men resolve their differences and fire up their engines.



A norry operated by Neum Chhean, left rear in the black shirt, prepares to depart with a full load from the village of Stung Touch. JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Mr. Doak pulls out first with a light load including a crate of glue, a sack of baguettes and a half-dozen or so passengers sitting cross-legged amid the cargo. Among them is 6-year-old Ya Kori, taking her first ride on the train her mother had likened to a bat.

Mr. Neum’s norry creaks away a few minutes later, heaped high with passengers and cargo. On board for the trip: 14 adults, five children, six bunches of bananas, two boxes of Mary brand soft drinks, 14 dozen eggs, some Earth brand ginseng wine, a sack of

lollipops, a sack of coconuts, a sack of beef, a case of DeeDoo orange drink, a cake, a baby walker and one case of 12 flashlights that strap to your head for hunting frogs at night.

—Sun Narin contributed to this article.