

Condé Nast Traveler

WIN!
A \$25,000
DREAM
TRIP
Page 14

TRUTH IN TRAVEL

AUGUST 2008

NINTH ANNUAL

PERFECT TRIPS EVERY TIME!

128

TOP TRAVEL PLANNERS—
AND WHAT THEY CAN
DO FOR YOU

ITALY

SECRETS OF THE
AMALFI COAST

CHARLESTON'S
SOUTHERN CHARMS

25 GREAT
TRAIN TRIPS

IN EUROPE &
NORTH AMERICA

PULLOUT EXTRA

CHOOSE THE RIGHT CRUISE

47 SHIPS FOR ALL TYPES
*Families, Couples, Foodies, Sybarites,
Adventurers, and More*



A Conversation WITH Scott Neeson

- **Claim to Fame:** Once a Hollywood executive who oversaw the marketing of *Titanic* and *X-Men*, he gave it all up to help Cambodian kids.
- **Founder:** *Cambodian Children's Fund*, providing education to child garbage pickers at the Phnom Penh Steung Meanchey dump.
- **Winner:** 2007 Harvard School of Public Health/Quincy Jones "Q" Prize for his work on children's issues.
- **Launched:** Vocational programs teaching cosmetology, computer skills, bread making, and graphic design.
- **Goal:** To create an agricultural training college in Cambodia.

CNT: How did you first get involved in Cambodia?

Neeson: I began to sponsor a family whose daughter was begging in restaurants. I rented them an apartment and gave them a television, a motorbike, clothes. But I discovered that it all got sold off. The parents pulled the children out of school and were gambling with the money.

CNT: So the way you were trying to help was naive.

Neeson: Yes. Then I saw kids picking through garbage at the Steung Meanchey dump, and I realized that you couldn't help unless you had control over feeding them, their health, making sure they stayed in class.

CNT: What advice do you have for travelers who confront beggars?

Neeson: It's impossible to resist giving money sometimes. But remember, kids don't keep it: The money goes to the people running the racket. And you're reinforcing a life of begging, which keeps kids out of school. It's best to give to a well-run charity.

CNT: How has the increase in food prices affected Cambodia?

Neeson: Prices have gone up some 300 percent over the past year. Cambodia is the poorest country in the region. People barely managed to scrape by last year.

CNT: What can be done?

Neeson: We need more resources through the World Food Program. We need more attention.

CNT: In your view, how does tourism help people on the lowest rungs?

Neeson: It's income that can't be taken away from people by corruption. A forestry contract is a single transaction that can easily go into the wrong pockets. But tourism money goes to thousands of people, including the guy driving the *tuk-tuk*. That said, if hotels aren't taking care of the environment, travelers should speak up.

CNT: Isn't tourism to Angkor Wat threatening the monuments and overwhelming the town?

Neeson: The government really needs to expand tourism beyond Siem Reap. There are lovely beaches in the south and a totally untouched rain forest in the northeast, with wild elephants and Asian tigers. There's a beautiful French colonial town called Kratie, where you can see Irrawaddy dolphins.

CNT: What place do you love most in Cambodia?

Neeson: Anywhere outside the cities. I have a motorbike, and I take dirt roads that always end in villages, where the people are welcoming and curious. In my work, I experience the worst side of the society. Getting to see the balance in the rural areas is essential.

CNT: Why did you decide to give up Hollywood?

Neeson: I had a very indulgent L.A. lifestyle—the sports cars, the boat. I had the attitude that there's nothing you can do to change the world, it's a black hole of desperation.

CNT: Does that cynicism serve as an excuse for some people?

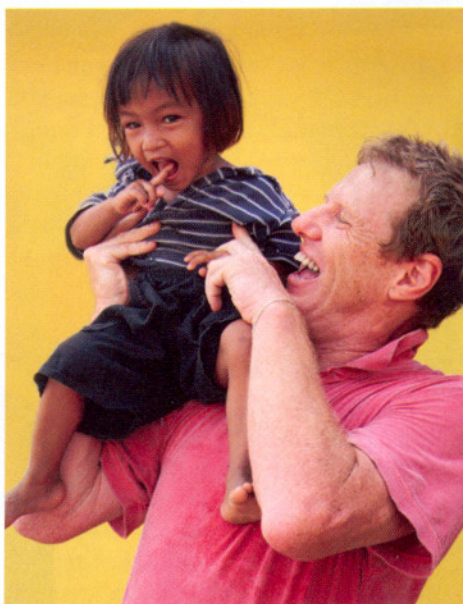
Neeson: It does. You see this kind of intense suffering on TV, and it's just so alien. It's not until you get there that you realize you

can help. Money goes such a long way in Cambodia.

CNT: How will the Cambodian Children's Fund beneficiaries contribute to change?

Neeson: We're not just getting them out of a bad place. I'm hoping that each CCF child will change a community.

Interview by Patricia Storace



"Tourism money is income that can't be taken away from people by corruption"

TRAVEL LOG

- **Last Trip:** To Thailand's Golden Triangle, where I saw amazing Thai compassion toward an ever-increasing number of Burmese refugees.
- **Next Trip:** To the United States, to raise money.
- **Favorite Trip:** Bali, in 1980, my first time overseas. Ubud was paradise. The fishermen on the beaches at Nusa Dua were surprised to see a Westerner. They took me to view the foundation for the first of dozens of five-star hotels.
- **Takeaway:** Travel broadens the mind and cures intolerance.