


Big Gulp We eat crickets (and keep them down) Page 28

Sweet Carolina Super-chef Mario Batali grabs a cold beer and hot BBQ in Charlotte Page 26

AMERICAN AIRLINES - AMERICAN EAGLE

AMERICAN WAY

5, 2008

A full-page photograph of Emily Procter. She is wearing a long, white, short-sleeved dress with intricate lace and circular patterns. She is standing in a rustic, industrial-style setting with a window that has diamond-patterned metal grates. She is leaning her right leg on a wooden ledge and looking towards the camera with a slight smile. Her hair is styled in an updo.

Southern Comfort

Emily Procter is your typical girl next door (who just happens to be beautiful, talented, and successful)



Crunch Time

In Cambodia, creepy-crawly snacks are never far away.
By Dawn Reiss

I'M NOT A FEAR FACTOR KIND OF GAL

Sure, I've been dogsledding in Alaska, and diving and zip-lining in various parts of the world. But the thought of bungee jumping or skydiving terrifies me. Nor have I ever harbored a desire to be like the Travel Channel's Andrew Zimmern, the host of *Bizarre Foods*, who eats things like blood pudding and rotten shark. That's why I'm utterly shocked to find myself on the verge of eating a cricket.

It's my first trip to Asia, and I'm in the middle of Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh. On a whim, I decide to take a six-hour bus ride, by myself, up to Siem Reap, the nearest city to the famed temples of Angkor. At the equivalent of \$10, the price is right.

The Mekong Express bus is nearly full. Its two rows of small seats are divided by a single walkway. An underpowered air conditioner tries to keep the humidity at bay, and a small television plays music videos of women in saris who wave their arms as they dance.

The bus is filled mostly with Cambodians, though a few foreigners from Australia, Canada, and the United States are also onboard. My six-foot-one frame is smashed into the seat, my legs plastered in a permanent holding pattern. Next to me is a

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friendly Cambodian man in his 20s who is curious about the United States.

We leave Phnom Penh, with its dirt streets full of open-air markets, Buddhist monks, and Lexus SUVs, and begin to see the countryside. Small houses and palm-frond shacks sit near the impressively ornate stone entrances that lead to the ubiquitous pagodas. Tin-roofed brick factories are outnumbered only by flooded fields and rice farmers.

Three hours into the trip, our tour guide announces the bus is going to pull over for a 15-minute break at a small village. Stepping from the bus is like walking into a wall of heat. We're greeted by rows of small garage-style storefronts that are packed with stacks of Pringles, bottled water, and postcards. Children wander the streets, and nearby, a few men lean against their "motos," or motorbike taxis, quietly observing the sudden rush of visitors. Pushcart vendors display tropical fruits such as mangoes, papayas, and dragon fruit, and whole chickens cook on open-air rotisseries.

But most of the Cambodians are flocking to several stands where the options are deep-fried crickets and hairy black tarantula-like spiders that are bigger than my hand. I am curious but not brave. Not yet.

FLASH FORWARD TWO DAYS. I have visited the magnificent Angkor temple complex, which covers an area twice the size of Manhattan and is far more breathtaking than anything I have seen in Europe. It's just like being in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, if you discount the fact that I don't look like Angelina Jolie. Once again, I am on the bus, headed back to Phnom Penh. This time, I am sitting next to a 27-year-old college-educated woman named Nin, who comes from a well-off family in Phnom Penh.

She's very friendly, so I ask her, "Do you eat crickets?"

"Sure," she says. "They are delicious. Haven't you ever tried one?"

I shake my head no.

I had politely declined an offer from my previous seatmate, despite his insistence that crickets are a good source of protein and would help my lingering cough. Along with many of the others, he had purchased a plastic bag full of crickets and munched on them during the ride, much like Westerners snack on popcorn and peanuts. Crickets, as

well as spiders and other insects, became part of the Cambodian diet after the Khmer Rouge regime's policies in the 1970s caused a scarcity of food. They are still a staple today. But I'd already been feeling slightly queasy, and adding something creepy and crawly to my stomach would have been too much.

Now I am still apprehensive, but my curiosity is piqued. When the bus stops, Nin and

I get off, and she directs me to the cricket stand where she is going to make a purchase. The crickets and tarantulas are piled by the hundreds in large bowls, and customers scoop out the insects with soup cans.

"They are fresh and good here," Nin says. "More fresh than the ones you find in the city."

I turn slightly and see my former seatmate,

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ADVENTURES IN EATING

Not in the mood for cricket? Try one of these overseas delicacies instead.

Beetle Larvae

Location: Mexico

Price: \$1

Preparation: These three- to four-inch-long creatures look like worms and are usually fried and served in a corn tortilla with peppers and onions.

What it tastes like: "It has a very strong acidic, almost electric taste," says John Bianchi, a 44-year-old New Yorker who has eaten dozens of the little critters. "It's like getting your tongue stuck on an open light socket, but it's very tasty."

Cobra Blood

Location: Asia — in countries like China, Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Price: King cobra blood can cost more than \$100. Black-and-white cobra blood ranges from \$5 to \$10.

Preparation: Known as a powerful aphrodisiac, cobra's blood is served fresh. The cobra is beheaded, and the blood is poured into a small glass, sometimes along with the snake's still-beating heart. The blood is typically accompanied with a shot of distilled liqueur or rice wine.

What it tastes like: "It tastes like blood — like if you get a cut in your mouth — and cheap, crude liquor," says 25-year-old Ryan Carvalho, who works as a guide for Trek America. "You feel the cobra heart beating inside you as it goes down, and you get this warm sensation. Your whole body gets hot inside."

Durian

Location: Singapore

Price: \$2

Preparation: This fruit is the size of a large papaya. Its spiny, pinecone-like skin is cracked open, and the creamy banana-texture pulp inside can be eaten raw, put in ice cream, or cooked down to a drinkable liquid.

What it tastes like: "It smells like rotting meat and onions and tastes kind of like it smells," says Randy Evans, executive chef at Brennan's of Houston. "It is slightly sweet up front, but the aftertaste stays with you for hours, and it makes you belch. You can't have alcohol afterward because the gases durian produces in your stomach can be lethal when mixed."

who is traveling back on a different bus. He recognizes me, and soon, they are both encouraging me to try the delicacy. To them, it's like eating shrimp from the grill.

"Eat one," my former seatmate says, motioning to the pile of crispy fried crickets. "You'll like it."

"I can't," I say, as my stomach churns.

"Why?" he asks.

"I'm nervous about eating an insect," I say, imagining a chirping cricket jumping inside me.

Clearing his throat, my former seatmate says, "You're human, right? And I'm human, right? So if eating a cricket is good enough for Cambodians, it should be good enough for Americans."

Gulp. *Wow, guilt trip 101. He's better at that than my mother, I think.*

A crowd has now formed around me. Not wanting to look like the ridiculous, ugly American, I finally relent. Considering my options — cricket or tarantula — the former seems like a better choice.

A cricket that seems enormous, like the size of a small hot dog, is plucked from the pile.

"Too big," I say, "A smaller one, please."

With my choice selected, I am told to take off the legs (which have small razor-sharp edges that could cut my throat) and eat the head and body. Luckily, Nin doesn't like the head and offers to decapitate the insect and pull off the legs for me. She does the same with her own and then quickly swallows. I gingerly put the cricket — seemingly dead — in my mouth. It's crispy and then chewy. It dissolves into a messy ball of goo, and I try not to taste too much. I just swallow, as a crowd of Cambodians and other world travelers hoot and holler encouragement.

I smile squeamishly, trying to cover up the rising wave of nausea I'm suddenly experiencing. Nin looks over at me. "Are you okay?" she asks. I nod, trying to ignore the gritty, bitter aftertaste in my mouth as we walk back to the bus. A cricket does *not* taste like chicken. It just tastes ... gross.

As we ride back to Phnom Penh, Nin tells me she hopes to visit the United States someday — the land of Big Macs, stuffed-crust pizza, and pork rinds.

I just hope she has the stomach for it. **AW**

DAWN REISS is an award-winning journalist and a former St. Petersburg Times staff writer. Her work has been published in Travel + Leisure, Chicago magazine, and USA Today.

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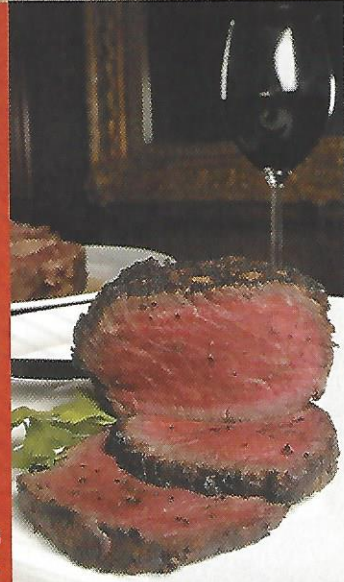
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