

FAST TRACK

BROOK MCCARTHY, 24
TOUR GROUP LEADER,
INTREPID TRAVEL



Photo: Wade Laube

CV Waitress > public relations > yoga instructor > office administrative work > casual teacher > tour group leader

Where have you led tour groups?

I just spent the past 21 months leading tours. I did Cambodia predominantly but I also did Vietnam and a bit of Laos. The Cambodia trips would usually begin in Bangkok and end in Ho Chi Minh City or the other way around. The shortest tour I did was five or six days; the longest was three weeks.

In those countries, what's your favourite destination?

Phnom Penh definitely sticks out as my favourite. There's always something happening, there's always action. There's between 1.5 and 2 million people, which is the right size - big but not too big. In Phnom Penh, they're also very good at parties. On one tour, we had the King's birthday, independence day, the Chinese Moon Festival, the Water Festival and the Festival of the Dead - and they all happened within about 10 days of each other.

What's a favourite destination that not many people know about?

Battambang (Cambodia) would be up there. It's quite close to Thailand, only about eight hours on the road from Bangkok. It's a fantastic little side trip if you're going to Thailand or Cambodia. Or if you go south to the city of Kep, it is going through a huge resurgence at the moment. The southern part of the country is very, very natural, lots of bush.

Have language barriers ever been a problem?

I have an advantage because I speak Vietnamese and Cambodian. But there were times where I'd be in Cambodia for two weeks and then have to switch to Vietnam, and was still speaking Cambodian. But a lot of times it is funny, like when I was asking for a "cold beer" and it came out as a "beer with lime" because the words for "cold" and "lime" are very similar. Or when, to a beggar in a market, I was trying to say "no money" and I kept asking him "how much money?"

What type of training did you do?

There was a week of training, which was really broad-based - company policy, some health information, some training on how to deal with people in a group setting. Once we got over to whatever country we were leading in, we had a first trip with another leader. So you're in a back-seat role watching that other leader and how they interact with the group ... I went earlier by myself [and] spent 2½ months travelling around South-East Asia. But it's not unusual to go to a country you've never been to before and do a training trip.

What pressures come with leading a travel group?

It gets a little frustrating at times because they think it's a great job and the easiest job in the world. What they don't see is behind the scenes, where there's a lot of preparation. The group expects you to be there when they come down for breakfast and then be the last man standing at the bar. It's very draining and tiring. That's why most people don't do it for too long at a time. It's not something you do for the money.

Jeff Fleischer