

The Torture at Tuol Sleng

Shocking and disturbing, Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum offers a portrait of anguish and suffering to help the world prevent new regimes from emerging. Giselle Whiteaker speaks to one of the four remaining survivors.

Photos by Nick Ross.



PHOTO BY GISELLE WHITEAKER

Walking through the gates of Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, I find it easy to recognise the layout as a former school. The buildings ring two central grassed courtyards, with several magnolia trees in full bloom, bringing to mind laughing school children at play. This image is quick to change.

Outside the first building are the graves of fourteen victims whose bodies were discovered at the prison on Jan 9, 1979. These were the last prisoners to be executed by the prison personnel before they fled. The simple white boxes are an innocuous start to a confronting education on the atrocities committed at Security Office 21 (S-21).

S-21 was created on Pol Pot's orders in April, 1975. The museum pamphlet describes it as "...designed for detention, interrogation, inhuman torture and killing after confession." This does not convey the true horror of the facility. Prisoner records give an official figure of 10,519 detainees, excluding children. Unofficial figures range

from 14,000 to 20,000. Only seven survived. Prisoners were detained for two to three months, routinely tortured, then executed or sent to Choeung Ek killing fields.

Rules of Incarceration

The buildings have been preserved largely as they were found. The first building was converted from classrooms into a set of 6x4 rooms with glass panelled windows for soundproofing. Each room contains a rusting iron bed frame, shackles and an iron box. The walls and floors are stained. Hanging in each room is a black and white photograph showing the mutilated occupant of the room on discovery. These are the souls resting in the graves outside. Somewhat bizarrely, a number of today's visitors pose by these photographs for their own shots.

Outside this building is a translated sign with the rules of incarceration, allegedly detailed to the prisoners on arrival. These include: "You must answer accordingly to my questions. Do not turn them away," and

"While getting lashes or electrification you must not cry at all."

Inside the next building are hundreds of prisoner photographs. The majority look young and afraid. Some are children. Most photographs were separated from their accompanying documentation, leaving many people unidentified.

With a heavy heart I move to the other side of the compound. There are no visitors here yet. The façade of the first building is covered in a net of barbed wire. Stepping inside the wire I notice painted numbers on the wall, representing cells. These rooms are divided into eight two-metre units made of brick. A pang of sorrow passes through me. It's as if the intense suffering has permeated the walls and is radiating outwards, engulfing anyone who comes close.

As other visitors trickle over, each falls silent close to the building. No one is taking photographs here. I take a few deep breaths and push myself mentally through the doorway.