



The approach is unchanging: 'You want young girl, little girl?'

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'It's like a sweet shop: if this girl's not right, get another'. In a shocking undercover report from Cambodia, Daniel Foggo reveals how British paedophiles are buying girls as young as six in the brothels of Svay Pak, a dirt-track street near Phnom Penh. Westerners are constantly propositioned by pimps hawking for business. The approach is unchanging: 'You want young girl, little girl?' Daniel Foggo

It is a hot afternoon in the dirty little street, so hot that even the puddles left by a monsoon a few hours earlier have already evaporated. In the shade beneath the awning of a bar, men lounge on plastic chairs, sipping beer and talking. Their features and white skins mark them out as foreigners among the bustling brown bodies.

This is Svay Pak, a single dirt-track street 12 kilometres outside Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital. Its sole distinguishing feature is that it is lined with brothels full of underage girls.

Westerners with a penchant for having sex with children are drawn to Svay Pak, where the girls - or "players" - are as young as six and their services cost only pounds 3.

It is a place where paedophiles from all over the world go to indulge themselves. After satiating themselves, they sit back and have a Tiger beer, a Coke, or a plate of spaghetti at one of the bars on the other side of the street.

Among the American, Canadian, Australian and Japanese accents, there are voices with more familiar cadences: British paedophiles are well represented in the ranks of those who use the shanty whorehouses.

After a police crackdown on child prostitution in Thailand during the last two years, Cambodia has become a favoured destination for paedophiles, and websites now give directions to Svay Pak. Although under the 1997 Sex Offenders Act, Britons can be prosecuted in this country for sex crimes committed abroad only a handful of people have been charged. Last year, Mark Towner, from Kent, was convicted at Maidstone Crown Court of abusing children when his wife found images on his computer, taken during a trip to Cambodia, of him having sex with young girls. He was jailed for eight years.

Using covert video cameras, tape recorders and stills photography, the photographer Julian Simmonds, the reporter Graham Hall and I are watching Svay Pak and those who go there.

What we discover, during more than a week of surveillance, is deeply disturbing. On our first visit there on a Friday night the street is bustling. Westerners are constantly propositioned by young Cambodian pimps hawking for business. The approach is unchanging: "You want young girl, little girl?" they ask. If no reply is forthcoming, they try a different tack: "You want young boy?" Always the emphasis is on young. Why else, they reason, would a Westerner be here? If a man wants an older girl then there are plenty on offer in the brothels and bars of Phnom Penh.

The 18 brothels in Svay Pak occupy the left side of the 100-yard street. Each is built into a low-rise, flat-roofed rendered building constructed of cheap breeze-blocks and of indeterminate design. Here and there is an incongruous hint of colonial pastiche, such as first-floor balustrades straight out of the Victorian era.

On the ground floors are metal sliding shutters. Usually these are open, allowing punters to view the girls. Most appear to be between nine and 14 years old.

We sit at one of the open-fronted bars opposite. There is an Irishman, holding his head and weeping. His skin is covered in scabs. He does not want to talk. "No, I'm not all right, look at me, just look at me," he says. Then he wanders off into one of the brothels.

Sitting at another bar we talk to Michael, a Canadian, and Bruce, an American. Bruce points at two pre-pubescent girls wearing pyjama-like clothes printed with paisley patterns and they both talk freely about "which girls do what".

Most of the girls are Vietnamese, they say, sold into temporary slavery by parents desperate to bail themselves out of debt. Others are drawn from three local villages. By the time they are seven - but certainly no later than their 13th birthday - their virginity is sold for hundreds of dollars. Thereafter the price diminishes steadily, eventually dropping to pounds 3.

Later, Michael and Bruce take two young girls - the younger one is between nine and eleven, the elder no more than a year or two ahead of her - behind the brothels to the private shanty homes beyond. This, we are told, is where the "really young" children are offered.

First, Michael and Bruce pay the madame, known as a "mamasan", a few dollars. Then, about an hour and a quarter later, they emerge for a smoke and a beer, followed by the girls. They detail what they have done, which is unprintable. They are unconcerned, they say, by the possibility of retribution from the police, explaining that the chances of being arrested in Svay Pak are minimal.

Although the age of consent in Cambodia is 15, the police are in the pockets of the brothel owners. Only if a bribe is missed, or an example needs to be made of someone, is a foreigner likely to be arrested. Just weeks before our visit, however, a Briton called Derek Baston, from Staffordshire, had allegedly been caught with a naked 12-year-old girl, and is in prison awaiting trial. His arrest seemed to spark a flurry of police activity, but most Svay Pak regulars judged the action a token gesture linked to the visit of the United Nations High Commissioner Mary Robinson in late August. No one seriously expected the crackdown to last long.

Three days later we meet Danny, from Australia, and his German friend who has also indulged with the young girls used by Michael and Bruce. "Mine wasn't as young as his," says Danny, who once lived near Prestwich, Manchester. "She was 13," says his friend. "My daughter's that age," says Danny, matter-of-factly. We accept an invitation from the mamasan to go into the

alley behind one of the brothels and view the two girls bought by Michael and Bruce several days earlier.

"How old?" we ask her as she brings them in. Close up they are both quite clearly no older than 12. "Fifteen," she says, repeating the mantra all the brothel keepers adhere to when they are asked a girl's age. For legal reasons all the girls are "15" despite the fact that many, like these two, are barely four feet tall. We decline the offer, saying we are looking on behalf of a friend and give the girls a dollar each for their trouble. The next day we meet Paul Skelhorn. Paul is a 62-year-old former demolition expert from Liverpool. He describes himself as "a player". When he is in Cambodia he lives with a local woman in an apartment in Phnom Penh but he likes to "play away" by picking up girls and taking them to the Capitol Guest House, a low-rent hovel where rooms cost pounds 2.50 a night and nobody asks questions.

Paul tells us he has been to Svay Pak and had sex with a 14-year-old girl. Afterwards he shared her with a friend in a cubicle next to him. Later he becomes nervous at our questions and tries to say she was 16, but he is damned by his own words. "I'm not against anything," he says. "I'm not against fellows who go with young ones. I'm against fellows who go with children. The idea of a child is not someone who is 15. The police and judges and politicians are doing it, all going in the brothels with 14, 15, 16-year-olds so it's all right.

"Those Japanese are regular players. They probably do it with the young ones, I don't know if they go with the kiddies but they are not doing anyone any harm. "With 13 and 14-year-olds, by the time she gets to Svay Pak she's probably had sex a 100 times, maybe 500 times for all I know. You didn't turn her, you didn't make her do that. You're taking advantage of the situation and the opportunity and it's not your fault." Paul tries to convince us that Cambodian and Vietnamese girls simply reach sexual maturity faster. "Fifteen, 16 is like 20 [in Britain] and 14 is getting round to that."

Later that day we meet Carl, a teacher from Leicester, at Svay Pak. He is about 40 with a tanned face and swept-back blond hair and is now teaching English at a private school in Taiwan. He has been frequenting Svay Pak for three years, but right now he is wary. The crackdown which has descended upon the area in the last few weeks will blow over, he says, but in the meantime, it is best to keep a low profile.

"A month ago it was Babylon," he says. "Whatever you wanted was here. It still is, but you have to be very careful. A lot of guys here are waiting for things to settle down. You just go in and if this girl isn't good enough for you, you just go and get another one. It is still a sweet shop but the brakes are on now. A month ago it was really rampant, it was wide open. This place is unique. Thailand used to be good but it's too civilised now. Some people like that but I like it wild. I like the chaos." A few days earlier, two Australians, Bart Lauwaert, 36, and Clint Betteridge, 35, were arrested in northern Cambodia for allegedly having sex with girls as young as 12. Carl says he knows them and that their arrest was brought about because of a personal vendetta with a Cambodian.

"One is actually from Belgium," he says. "They had a dispute with a neighbour over a water pump, which is foolish. Then, lo and behold, two weeks ago they are arrested. "You have to be very careful but I think you can buy your way out of it fairly easily if you are caught. I've heard it can cost \$400. You don't make a fuss and it's between you and them in a small room." Carl points to a group of about 10 very young girls huddled inside an open-sided barrow across the street. "All of those girls under that roof are players, even the tiny one," he says. "They are all

Vietnamese. They are seen as expendable people. A lot of these girls live here, their mothers and even their dads are here. They mature faster here and it's their mental attitude too. These Vietnamese girls are very worldly. They are very provocative." He then went into details - which are unprintable - of the services the girls provide. How much do the girls cost, we ask? "For the first time it might be US\$500 (pounds 320)." Then the price decreases rapidly "until it finally hits the front line at \$5", he says. "They lose their virginity at 13, maybe 12, it depends. She could be seven she could be 15, it depends who's paying good money."

Carl has a personal recommendation. "The one with the umbrella in the grey and white. She is pretty open. She is 13. She is more experienced than some of them. I've played with her." He also admits having "played" with the two girls abused by Michael and Bruce. Two days later, I am party to an even more sickening and terrible revelation. It comes from a Scotsman in his thirties with close-cropped hair, who refuses to give his name, and concerns the horrifying fate of the girls after they have been used for sex. His friends, an American from Nevada named Chris, who says he is in the pornography business, and a German known as Frankie who sports dyed blond hair scraped back in a stunted ponytail, listen avidly.

The trio's discussion makes my head reel. Their conversation encompasses topics such as the countries which offer the safest haven for indulgers of child sex and the probable fate awaiting their friend Ray, an ice-cream vendor from Vermont who is now facing his second conviction for paedophilia. "Ray was stupid. He was always going to get caught. I don't like stupid people around me," says Chris.

Chris has been frequenting the brothels of the Far East since 1971, he says. Whatever the topic under discussion, he has been there, done that.

One of his friends points out a young girl of about 11 skipping past their vantage point. "She's a lousy lay," he says.

Echoing a sentiment voiced by Carl earlier, he laments the "lack of chaos" in present-day Cambodia. "I'd like to be a warlord and get some AK47s and start shooting," he says. "You need chaos to operate".

He is referring to what he perceives as an inverse relationship between a country's political instability and the likelihood of those who indulge in child sex being caught by the authorities. Cambodia, it seems, is potentially becoming unviable for them.

The depraved conversation continues as the sky clouds over, preparing for the next deluge. Next to them a villager holds her baby, an angelic-looking little girl of perhaps nine months.

The child stares with huge unknowing eyes at the men who wait to corrupt her.

But they don't notice her. Yet.