

Tuck in to a tarantula

There isn't a lot of meat on a spider's breast but, as Rhymer Rigby in Cambodia is happy to report, there are plenty of legs to go around

(Filed: 23/09/2003)

I was enjoying my first spider outside Phnom Pen market when I heard a highly agitated voice behind me: "Oh my Gaahd, what are yooooo eating?" Turning, I saw an American tourist staring at me with an understandable mixture of revulsion and fascination. Trying to sound casual, I replied: "Spider - would you like a leg?"

She stood for a couple of moments, mouth gaping soundlessly before grabbing her husband, who was busily working a flashy video camera: "Dan! Dan! The boy is eating a spider!" Working on a variant of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle - nothing exists until you video it - Dan swung his costly optics round and I obligingly stuffed the thing in my mouth while she continued to goggle. Once Dan had captured the moment for posterity they left, she still more than a little horrified.

Although my spider wasn't quite as delicious as the Americans' reactions, it was pleasant enough for something that looked like a Hallowe'en prop. My epicuriosity was piqued so I asked the spider seller about her trade. She spoke no English but a nearby taxi-bike driver did and, through him, she explained that she was a mere metropolitan outpost of arachnid cuisine; if I were serious about my spiders - or a-ping as they're known locally - I needed to head to the town of Skuon, some 55 miles north of Phnom Pen.

Riding up National Highway 6 you quickly realise what a deceptive place Phnom Pen is. The capital is vibrant, has decent bars and restaurants, and is awash with aid money and big-spending foreign workers. Everywhere else in Cambodia (the fabulous temples of Angkor excepted) is dirt poor. So, disappointingly, the home of arachno-cuisine is a dusty little place whose muddy central square serves mainly as a rest stop for long-distance buses and trucks. Feeling deflated, I sat down in the only real restaurant in town and ordered a coffee. Then, slowly, the spider women began to appear.

It is a curious aspect of Cambodian restaurant culture that in all but the swankiest places, it's perfectly normal for hawkers to come into a restaurant and sell you all manner of things - including other food. Even more curious is that the restaurant owners don't seem to mind. From a distance, the spider women looked as if they were carrying large plates piled high with fried seaweed or squid-ink pasta. Close up, however, there was no mistaking it: these platters were groaning with crispy tarantulas.

I walked over to one woman and a prosperous-looking Cambodian, Kong Socheat, a local project manager for an American aid agency, who began chatting to me. He said that he always stopped when he was passing through Skuon, "to buy a couple of spiders for my children. They love eating them. And so do I."

Over a spider, Kong explained that the people of Skuon had long used the local tarantulas in traditional medicine; they were thought to be good for the heart, throat and lungs. The practice of using them as a foodstuff started in the years of terror under the Khmer Rouge. Across Cambodia starvation was rife and people ate anything they could get their hands on, including insects. When Pol Pot's murderous regime came to an end, most Cambodians were happy to stop eating bugs, but the Skuonese decided that they'd developed rather a taste for the local tarantulas.

Since then Skuon's fame as a centre for extreme cuisine has spread - and the town's position on one of Cambodia's main highways means that web business is booming. Cham, one of the spider women, explained: "At first it was just locals but now people from Phnom Pen come just for spiders. We even get a few Europeans - usually they think it's disgusting but then they try one and find it's delicious."

Spider vendors, she adds, usually sell "100 to 200 spiders a day for 300 riels and we buy them for 150 riels". So a seller makes between 15,000 and 30,000 riels a day - or £2.50 to £5.

Spider wages are earned not just by the women who sell the creatures but also the men who dig them up. Says Mr Raveun, a spider hunter: "There are two ways to get the spider out of its burrow. Usually we just dig them out, but it is also possible to push a stick down the hole and wait until the spider attacks. Then you pull it out."

A good hunter, he continues, can catch several hundred spiders a day. While the sums involved may not sound much, Cambodia is one of the world's poorest nations and the average income is about 50p a day. Thus, in a pleasing piece of arachnological wordplay, these furry invertebrates form the backbone of the local economy. Or at least the fast-food sector.

So what does spider taste like? Well, you might expect it to be crispy on the outside and goey in the middle and that's not a bad start. The legs are pleasantly crunchy and have little flesh in them. Then you get to the head and body which have a delicate white meat inside, rather like a cross between chicken and cod. These bits are quite moreish and the only downside is that, after munching a few, you can develop little spider fur balls in your throat.

But then there's the spider's large, globular abdomen. This is the only really disturbing part of the animal: it's full of a dark brown paste that includes everything from eggs to the heart and spider excrement. One local man enthusiastically claimed these were a delicacy and was energetically popping spider rears into his mouth like grapes. But even some of the sellers blanched at this display of arachno-machismo.

As for me, after an exploratory taste of what may or may not be the foie gras of the spider world, I knew that eating tarantula rump is what separates the spidermen from the boys.

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