

[HOME](#) > [TRAVEL](#)

I grew up living hand to mouth in Cambodia. I secretly enrolled in the circus when I was 13, and it became my lifeline out of poverty.

Tara FT Sering Sep 17, 2023, 7:14 PM GMT+7

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Jump to

Main content
Search
Account

performing in "White Gold" (left) and "Ponleu Samnang" performance by Phare

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- **The Southeast Asian country is known for its majestic Angkor temples as well as for its dark recent history.**
- **Viban enrolled in the circus when he was 13. It has become a lifeline out of poverty and a passport to the world.**

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This as-told-to story is based on a conversation with 31-year-old circus artist Kong Viban, a performer at Phare, the Cambodian Circus. The show performs regularly in Siem Reap and will be on tour in New York in December.

I never thought that I'd become a professional circus artist. But juggling and performing gravity-defying acts for Phare, the Cambodian Circus, has not only brought me joy and fulfillment, it has also helped me make a living. It has become my passport to the world.

It's been an unlikely journey. I was born in 1993 in Battambang, in the northwest of Cambodia. I was the second of four kids. My parents, siblings, and I lived with our grandparents, all of us in a small house on one plot of land.

Jump to

Main content
Search
Account

family lived a hand-to-mouth existence. My grandparents were
er sold fish in the market, and my father hawked ice cream around
had survived the Khmer Rouge but never talked about it. It's likely

[◀](#) **HOME PAGE**

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Whatever my parents made for the day was only enough for that day.

I attended state school when I was eight. When classes were out, my friends and I would go around town collecting trash to make some money. We picked up empty glass bottles, used shampoo bottles, scraps of corrugated iron roofing, basically anything that could be sold for recycling. After we'd split the day's take, I'd end up with about 300 riel, or 7 cents by today's exchange. Back then, 500 riel could get you a serving of bai sach chrouk, or pork and rice, and 200 riel, could get you a bowl of hot porridge.

Some days after school I would help look after the cows. I didn't have a dream back then; all I cared about was my family's survival from day to day. The future wasn't something I really thought of.

I joined the circus as a teenager.

Jump to

Main content
Search
Account

[◀](#) [HOMEPAGE](#)

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31-year-old circus artist Kong Viban's mother moved him to the art school at 13. Phare Circus

When I was 13, my mom moved my older brother and me from the state school to Phare Ponleu Selpak, an arts school that had also begun to offer general subjects. The school opened in Battambang in 1994, but traces its roots back to the 1980s at a refugee camp on the Thai border after the Khmer Rouge regime had devastated Cambodia. In the camp, a French humanitarian, Veronique Decrop, taught children art as a form of therapy.

It was close to our home, it was free, and I could choose what art form to study. A friend of mine was enrolled in the circus arts program, and I really enjoyed jumping from a high point onto a soft mattress, so without telling my mom I enrolled as well.

Jump to

Main content
Search
Account

[◀](#) [HOMEPAGE](#)

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first, but then I loved the audience's reaction to my stunts.

I especially loved the look on my mom's face when she saw me perform for the first time. She didn't even know I was taking circus classes, so naturally, she was in shock. I performed twice a month and for every performance I was paid \$3 to \$5, which I gave to my mom.

That time of my life was a real turning point.

Before then, I thought I'd end up fixing cell phones for a living. But after about a year of performing, I started to think that it was something I could do for a really long time. I started to think that one day, I could become a pro.

Circus school was pretty intense. We trained about three hours a day and depending on the day, we studied different things: theater and acting, acrobatics, dance, juggling and other clown skills. But it was also a lot of fun. In 2012, a bunch of us — including my brother — got sent to Berlin for three months where we performed a total of 40 shows. It was my first time out of Cambodia.

My brother and I put our earnings together to build a house of our own right beside my grandparents' place. It was modest, but it was ours. That had always been my dream for my mom.

More great things started happening for me around that time. When Phare, the Cambodian Circus, was established in 2013 and debuted in a big top in Siem Reap — which most tourists know as the landing point to the Angkor temple complex — I would travel from Battambang to Siem Reap regularly to perform. I was still a student at the

Jump to

Main content

Search

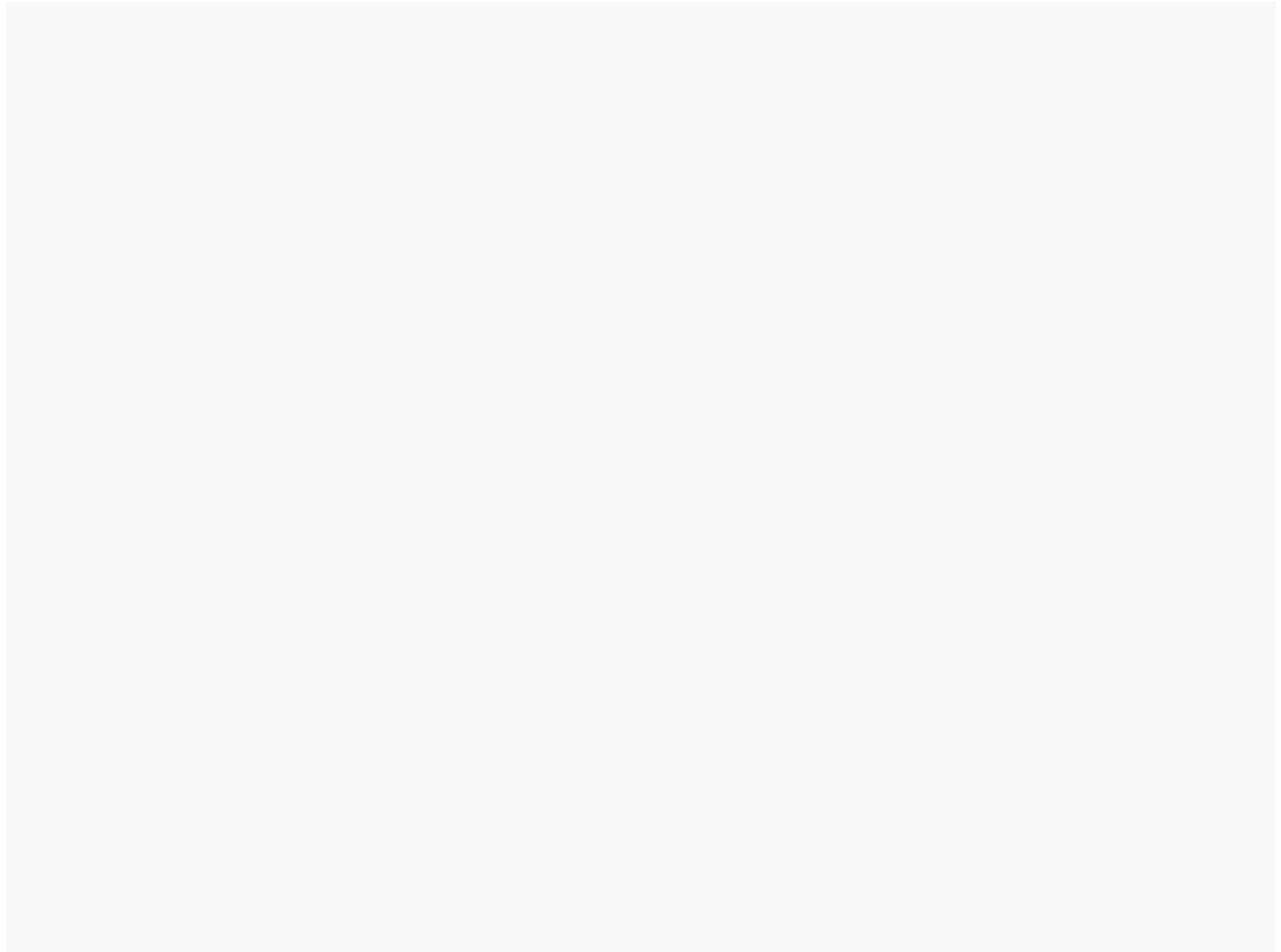
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I was also able to contribute to the household income with what I got from my performances. I had also fallen in love with a fellow circus artist. Last year, after 11 years together, we finally got married.

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Seeing the world has been one of the biggest rewards of this life.



Kong Viban will perform "White Gold" in New York in December. Oyen Rodriguez

Having the opportunity to discover new things, see new places, and take pictures has been incredible. Before joining the circus, I never thought I'd get to see the Eiffel Tower, but as part of the show, I went to France several times from 2015 to 2019. Seeing the Eiffel was one of my favorite memories of Paris. Being away in a foreign place has also made me closer to my troupe, who are now my best friends. There's something about telling a story through a circus performance, that creates very deep

Jump to

Main content

Search

Account

and telling stories about Cambodia and our way of life, past and

[◀ HOMEPAGE](#)

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and I feel honored to share it with the world. I finally became a professional circus artist in 2018. I'm 31 years old and want to keep performing and entertaining audiences for as long as possible.

In Germany, we performed "The Adventure," about a young Cambodian boy who flees his home and ends up in Phnom Penh, getting into all kinds of scrapes and meeting interesting characters, good and bad. In France, we performed "Chills," a comedy about our cultural beliefs around the supernatural. It's two ghosts that haunt school kids.

This year, we're off to New York to perform our show, "White Gold," about the importance of rice in Cambodian culture. In Cambodia, we have cultivated rice for thousands of years and eat it with almost every meal. It nourishes us as individuals and a community. But the commercialization of it has a dark side that the show also tackles.

I'm looking forward to visiting the US for the first time. I've only ever seen the Statue of Liberty in fantasy films like "X-Men," and now I'm going to be seeing it in real life. Never in my wildest fantasies did I think I would, but thanks to the life acrobatic, the dreams I never thought I had are coming true.

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Main content
Search
Account

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