

# OUR REVIEW OF 2025

The year at the Smiling Gecko campus



Dear friends of Smiling Gecko,

Today, we would like to take a look back at the past year with you. It has been a year of many changes. Not only here at the Smiling Gecko Campus, but also, more fundamentally, in Cambodia.

At the beginning of the year, who could have predicted the events that would hit Cambodia's economy as severely as the pandemic of the early 2020s? Weapons were fired along the Thai-Cambodian border displacing up to 1.2 million people. They lost their jobs, and with them their livelihoods, in a country where social security is largely nonexistent. The full economic impact of this conflict is not clear, but it is certain to be significant.

There have been plenty of positive developments too and we have worked hard to make them happen. That is why we are especially excited to share them with you in this review. None of this would be possible without your support. We are truly proud and thankful to have such a loyal fan base. Thank you!

Best regards from Cambodia and Switzerland,

Hannes Schmid

*Founder of Smiling Gecko*

*Co-Founder of Smiling Gecko Cambodia*

Ngon Sokleap

*Co-founder of Smiling Gecko Cambodia*

Alain Biner

*CEO of Smiling Gecko*





On 26 July, tens of thousands crossed the Ban Laem border checkpoint under war conditions to return to Cambodia.



# FINALLY, THE SCHOOL BUILDING IS PARTIALLY OPENED

Anyone who has built as much as we have over the past ten years naturally develops a certain routine, even when the unexpected occurs. Yet the construction of our new school building has proven, and continues to be, a true test of endurance.

First, the ground was so soft after what seemed like endless rainfall that civil engineering work could not begin for months. To provide sufficient stability for the construction, we then had to drive a total of 218 reinforced concrete beams, each eight metres long, into the ground – despite the limited availability of heavy equipment in Cambodia. The architects subsequently revised the brick arrangement for the exterior walls and extended the roof overhangs by 150 centimetres on both the inside and outside, as the originally planned construction method was not sufficiently waterproof to withstand the increasingly frequent strong winds of the rainy season. These challenges are clear consequences of climate change, which we are likely to experience more often and for longer periods in the near future.

*Well received: the inner courtyard.*



We are therefore delighted that we were able to open the first phase of the new school building in time for the start of the new school year in August. The first six classrooms are complete, among other things. There are also offices for teachers, sanitary facilities, and a school canteen with a capacity of up to 250.



*Learning is fun here.*



*Always busy: the school canteen.*

Further classrooms and all specialist rooms, such as the science laboratory, the new computer laboratory and the library extension, are still under construction. The same applies to the auditorium, art and pottery studios, various storage rooms, and a smaller kitchen where meals will be prepared for the children and teachers.

Another construction project is the extensive greening of the area around the school building. Over the next few years, more than 60 large trees, 250 medium-sized trees and 1,000 shrubs will be planted here. This will also protect the building from the weather. As you can imagine, this is a significant financial undertaking.

# A GRAND PERFORMANCE AT THE NATIONAL STADIUM

In July, our school choir had the great honour of performing at the Cambodian Football League finals at Phnom Penh's National Stadium.

Accompanied by the two Cambodian musicians and enthusiastic Smiling Gecko fans Kesorrr and Roxy, our young artists aged 11 to 17 gave their all to delight the audience with their singing talent.



*Our kids with Kesorrr and Roxy.*





For our children, performances like this provide a welcome change from their daily lives, which are full of hardship. At the same time, they provide important motivation to continue working hard at school. Perhaps one day they will escape poverty and earn enough money to afford a ticket to a football match themselves.



*The national stadium can hold 50,000 spectators.*

The most important thing for us as an organisation about events like this is the publicity. It is the best publicity for us when a small school from the provinces is given preference over established private schools from the capital. And it is even better when the Deputy Prime Minister, Hun Many, is among the dignitaries present. He was very impressed by our choir and congratulated our children personally. What an honour!







# LIGHT AND SHADOW AT FARMHOUSE RESORT

Over the past twelve months, an impressive array of companies and organisations has visited the Farmhouse Resort and campus for corporate social responsibility (CSR) events and activities, including Etihad Airways, Honda, Menarini Asia Pacific, V-ZUG, GIZ, and UNIDO.

They are all more than welcome here. We greatly appreciate every CSR programme that engages with us, and these partnerships also help to improve the resort's occupancy, which has been less than satisfactory. Notably, the resort has won several awards again this year.



*Etihad Airways constructing a greenhouse on campus.*



*Mariya Un Noun in her element with V-Zug employees.*

Cambodian tourism continues to be in a fragile recovery phase, to put it mildly. Even the Cambodian government, which is otherwise very optimistic in its communications, has reported a decline in international arrivals of over 5% for the first eight months of 2025. It can also be assumed that the actual number of travellers is well below the official figures. European individual travellers, who traditionally make up a significant proportion of our guests, are currently travelling to Cambodia less frequently.

Reasons for this include border conflicts, a weaker global economy, and a shift in demand towards destinations that have been heavily promoted, such as Vietnam and Thailand. A clear indicator of weak overall demand is the decline in visitor numbers to Angkor Archaeological Park, which recorded significantly fewer visitors in 2024 and the first few months of 2025 than before the pandemic. As Angkor Wat is the main attraction for many travellers to Cambodia, this decline clearly reflects waning international interest.



*The Honda delegation brought 56 water pumps with them on their visit.*

Despite the less-than-encouraging short-term outlook, the Farmhouse remains our largest and most important training facility. For this reason alone, we will continue to do everything we can to appeal to as many target groups as possible worldwide. One focus will be on creating more individually tailored offers for the business guests mentioned earlier. In addition, in 2026, we will launch a programme for people who want to work on our campus for a few days or weeks, but who also want the comforts of a hotel. We will provide more information on this in the first newsletter of the new year.



# OUR OWN LABEL FOR CAMPUS PRODUCTS

A real first in this review is the newly created label for products grown or produced on the Smiling Gecko Campus. Whether fruit and vegetables from our fields, fish from our own aquaculture, fresh and preserved foods from our production kitchen, or handcrafted items from the carpentry and sewing workshops, in the future they will all carry a uniform logo.

Under the motto 'Smiling Goods' and our iconic gecko logo, we will position Smiling Gecko in Cambodia not only as an organisation dedicated to education and training, but also as a brand known for high-quality, organically produced food and selected artisanal products.

We are aware that the path to market will not be easy. Domestic demand remains limited. Additionally, competition for affluent customers is heavily concentrated in the capital, while elsewhere there is a lack of distribution structures and logistics channels. Nevertheless, we are cautiously optimistic that we will find our place with 'Smiling Goods'. We have already enjoyed some small successes, such as securing contracts with the Rosewood Hotel and the shipping company Aqua Expeditions.



# SMILING GECKO IS NOW ALSO IN SINGAPORE

In addition to expanding our product range, we have also been focusing on developing our organisation. One key step in this direction is the establishment of a national branch in the United Kingdom, though these efforts are still at an early stage.

Much greater progress has been made in Singapore, where we successfully founded Smiling Gecko Singapore earlier this year. Following Switzerland, Germany, the USA and, of course, Cambodia, this is our fifth branch. Our Singapore entity is already officially registered as a non-profit-organisation, and applying for charity status now. Hopefully the latter is only a matter of time. The local team is already highly active, even without this status. Hardly a week goes by without a campaign in this small yet economically powerful country to promote our project in Cambodia. The activities serve a dual purpose: to position the Farmhouse Resort as a holiday destination; and to unlock new fundraising opportunities, both of which continue to be essential.



*Our team in Singapore.*

In the meantime we welcomed two new board members and said goodbye to one in Switzerland. Dr Thomas Meier left in September, and we would like to thank him for his many years of service. 'Take care, Tom!'

We are delighted to welcome Andreas Staubli, former CEO of PwC Switzerland, and entrepreneur Peter Bachmann, as new members of the board. We have enjoyed a close partnership with both for many years, and are confident that they will support our small team with advice and assistance in our daily challenges. A warm welcome to you both!

# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As always, a review would not be complete without an outlook, and 2025 is no exception. One of the highlights of next year will certainly be the grand opening of the new school building in spring, once it has been completed.

Another key focus will be finding suitable solutions for Year 9 pupils who, for academic or personal reasons, do not wish to move on to the upper school next summer. Most of these young people will begin vocational training on our campus after completing secondary school, while we are currently seeking training placements in Phnom Penh for the others.

*The opening is planned for early May.*







We are currently in discussions with potential partners, including the Don Bosco Technical School, which offers a wide range of programmes and training opportunities in electrical and mechanical engineering, welding, automotive technology, computer science, and electronics. As we do not wish to release these young people entirely from our care, we are initially planning a daily bus shuttle so that they can return to their families near the campus after work. In addition, we intend to establish a “safe house” in Phnom Penh, where trainees can live in a secure environment during the week and receive support and supervision from social workers.

For now, we must still speak of these plans in the conditional tense, for one simple reason: the required funding is not yet available.

*Soon to become a reality: vocational training for our schoolchildren.*



## WE APPRECIATE YOUR SUPPORT.

To turn as many of our plans as possible into reality over the next twelve months, we need your support. Every contribution makes a real difference, even a single pound can mean the difference between a project being feasible or remaining out of reach. We are deeply grateful to everyone that helps make our work possible. Thank you!



Smiling Gecko donation account

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