

Norwegian 'hit machine' hits temple town

Claire Byrne

Forget Angelina Jolie. Siem Reap had a new celebrity visitor last week in Norwegian star Hanne Sørvaag. Visiting her old friend, and local expat, Katrine Solhaug, she came to the Kingdom to help out with Katrine's charitable efforts, in a week which saw her dangle off the back of a garbage truck in a cheerleader costume, paint stars and moons on a primary school wall and perform not one, but two concerts in town.

Known as "The Hit Machine" at home, Hanne is as famed for her ability to thrash out chart-toppers for other stars, as well as her own solo and collaborative endeavours.

The stunning blonde was the first woman ever to have two songs in one Eurovision Song Contest. Counting Simon Cowell among her fans, she penned the hit *My Destiny* for 2006 *American Idol* finalist Katherine McPhee, and has most recently collaborated with Barbados R&B star Shontelle.

After a summer of performing and promoting her latest album *Cover Me* (in which she covers the hits she scrawled for others), and having recently formed

trio-group Dollhouse Special, she came to Cambodia for a well-earned break. Or so she may have thought.

"It's so funny," she chuckles, reflecting on her short visit, "People have been writing on my Facebook, 'I thought you were going to relax? Are you working there now?'"

Hanne has been helping to raise awareness of the work at Babel Guesthouse both here and at home in Norway, having appeared in no less than seven newspapers in her homeland this week.

She's known in Norway, so she's been able to raise awareness

"It's been a lot of extra help having her here this week," gushes pal Katrine. "She's known in Norway, so she's been able to raise awareness, which is the most important thing. People have been following her blog. We've had an article in our home town, which is a rich oil city, about her time in Cambodia, with a picture of her hanging from the garbage truck in her Go Green cheerleader outfit. Hopefully that might bring in

some donations."

During her trip, Hanne also performed, accompanied by Babel's other resident songstress, student supervisor Hilde Marie Kvalosoter. Along with a Friday-night performance at a packed Warehouse Bar, which saw the audience holler for an encore, the pair also performed a more intimate gig at Babel.

Despite having played all over the world, Hanne said she wasn't quite sure what to expect. "It was amazing. You go to different countries and some people don't really listen when someone plays because that's not in their culture. And both places had people from many countries and that's typically when it becomes noisy, so it was really nice to have them listen and show their appreciation."

The star returns to Norway to begin a hectic three months working the country's version of hit TV talent show *The Voice*.

Despite her brief stint in town and packed do-gooding schedule, she did manage to fit in some sights, explaining how she got in as many temples as she could on her last day and fell asleep at the Butterfly Centre.

But the most lasting memory for the star from her time in Temple Town won't be the rubbish she collected, the temples she visited or the songs she sang.

It will be the people she's met, and the mark they've left with her.

"I think they're brave," she says. "Their challenges are many, but they look courageous and happy. I'll go home and be grateful." **2D**



Hanne Sørvaag, Katrine Solhaug and Hilda Marie strike a pose. CLAIRE BYRNES

Babel guesthouse branches into NGO work

Claire Byrne

BABEL, already a popular Siem Reap guesthouse, has now turned into a school, slash NGO, slash celeb hangout, all thanks to one of its pro-active owners, Katrine Solhaug.

Katrine has been working in Siem Reap since 2007. She saw how the ethical travel movement was growing here and thought it was an initiative the tourism sector in Norway needed to know about, so she set up Globalstudies. "I have a cooperation with a university in Norway. Students and teachers come here for one semester, they stay here and take in how we run Babel responsibly. We have a classroom here too, so they do their study and they also do excursions to understand how it works."

A group of 15 students from the Norwegian School of Hotel and Business Management at the University of Stavanger are the first in the new initiative.

Katrine hopes the project will expand to other programs. "Eventually we'll have more students. We'll move the classroom elsewhere and maybe include another guesthouse. The students are studying tourism, or hotel and business management, but it would be great to include journalism and photography students too."

The students are also helping Katrine realise her own ambitions for the Babel staff, improving their education and work experience.

Part of this includes a staff outing. "We're taking all the staff to Battambang, while the students look after the guesthouse for a night. The idea is that they get the full traveler experience, and see what it's like to stay somewhere."

Last week, the staff and students at Babel were working on something else close to Katrine's heart: creating a clean and safe school for the 900 students at Sambour Primary. Over three days, the group cleaned out, de-roached, and repainted the school.

To add an extra boost of fundraising and awareness, Katrine's long time friend, famed Norwegian singer-songwriter Hanne Sorwaag was in town to lend a hand and muck in.

On the final day Kristine and Hanne, along with students and staff from Babel, collected rubbish around their neighbourhood to raise funds.

To fund the Educational Program, Katrine and her father John Daniel, who is also in town to help out, have set up a fund in Norway, solhaugfond.org, using donations from their friends and family. **2D**

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