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EXCLUSIVE FIRST REVIEW

## RISE AND SHRINE

Crowds zoom in and out to see the temples of Angkor, Cambodia's busiest attraction, but few people hang around for long. Now there's finally a smart retreat with real staying power. Michelle Jana Chan hails its arrival

## WHERE TO STAY



**W**HEN I VISITED CAMBODIA 20 years ago, Siem Reap was a potholed backwater town teetering on the edge.

There had been decades of fighting – internally with the Khmer Rouge, then with Vietnam – as well as political plots and coups. Millions had died. The living were weary. I was a young reporter for *Newsweek* magazine and Cambodia offered up a story with a bit of grit. Pol Pot was still hiding out in the jungle and some members of the Khmer Rouge were active. The UN was trying to mediate elections and keep the peace. There seemed to be more of their white four-wheel-drives than local tuk-tuks.

In spite of the instability, there was already a trickle of tourists. Siem Reap is the gateway to Angkor, hundreds of Khmer temples dating from the ninth to 15th centuries, which had recently been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Signs instructed visitors to stick to

the path. It was a serious warning: they hadn't yet cleared the area of landmines planted over the years by various sides.

Yet Siem Reap was a perfect pause on an Indochinese tour, a slice of old Asia where everybody woke at dawn to go to the market, loitered throughout the day, and turned in early because there was little else to do. After sunset, the town was enveloped in darkness. I recall the hum of the few generators and a lone light bulb dangling above a hawker stall where I'd eat a bowl of *nom banh chok* noodles. When I returned to my backpacker guesthouse, I'd be splashing through puddles in the pitch black.

Since then, the town has boomed and is past recognition, except for the potholes. But I still adore Siem Reap: the lovely locals who know of darker days; the crazy traffic; kitsch souvenirs; little hidden bars, and cheeky shops that can upload an iPad with a thousand songs for a few dollars. It's fun and noisy, but,

of course, all that busyness can get to you, so it's good to have a secret retreat.

Phum Baitang sits in eight acres of lush vegetation just outside town, a collection of stilted huts built with thatch, rattan and clay tiles, which closely resemble the homes of rice farmers. The gardens are designed to look like paddy fields but are planted with aromatic lemongrass instead of rice, which only looks attractive for a few months of the year. The fields are studded with the tall, slender sugar palms that are so distinctive of the Angkor landscape. There is talk of buying a water buffalo to plod around the hotel grounds.

I might be in the heart of Cambodia's hinterland if it wasn't for the fact that I can lounge on a day-bed beside a private plunge pool and pad about on my terrace in the shade of a frangipani tree while sipping a fresh-lime soda.

Phum Baitang (it translates as green village) is the second hotel from French



## SIEM REAP IS ALL ABOUT THE CRAZY TRAFFIC, LITTLE HIDDEN BARS AND KITSCH SOUVENIRS, AND THE LOVELY LOCALS WHO KNOW OF DARKER DAYS

fashion entrepreneur Roger Zannier, who holds the licences for Kenzo Kids and Junior Gaultier, among other labels. He is a strong supporter of Cambodia and finances two orphanages in Phnom Penh. His son, Arnaud, who's in charge of the company's new hotel division, says they want to build properties with a strong local feel that echoes their immediate environment.


Phum Baitang has 45 rooms, which are simple but supremely tasteful, as you might expect from a French family in designer children's wear. Each one is dressed in cool cottons and linen with elegant, handmade wooden furniture, rough stone sinks and bathtubs, antique carved headboards, a few pottery jars and lantern-style lighting.

There are two restaurants – one beside a sensational 50-metre infinity pool – and

two bars, one in the original 100-year-old farmhouse, which looks like a scene from a Somerset Maugham novel, with rattan wing chairs, pie-crust tables and oriental carpets. On the menu are Khmer curries and fish *amok* with lemongrass, turmeric and galangal, as well as Thai *tom yam* soup and fresh Vietnamese spring rolls (Cambodia's neighbours have hands-down better food). The wine list includes Roger Zannier's own vintages from his estates in the South of France and Portugal's Douro Valley.

The staggeringly beautiful spa is a tribute to Angkor's temples, carved by stonemasons and run by a delightfully camp Filipino named Mariano Jr. Organic coconut milk and local moringa oil – 'the most expensive oil in the world,' he says – are used in the treatments. It is all a perfect antidote to the hustle of Siem Reap,

and a respite from the two million visitors who come to Angkor each year.

The challenge will be to maintain the calm. When Zannier started building, the site was well outside town. Now it is among new villas and down the road from a Nick Faldo-designed golf course. 'We'll probably end up in the middle of Siem Reap,' sighs Arnaud. Perhaps, but for some time yet it will be a place of repose, seemingly set apart yet quintessentially Khmer. 

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