

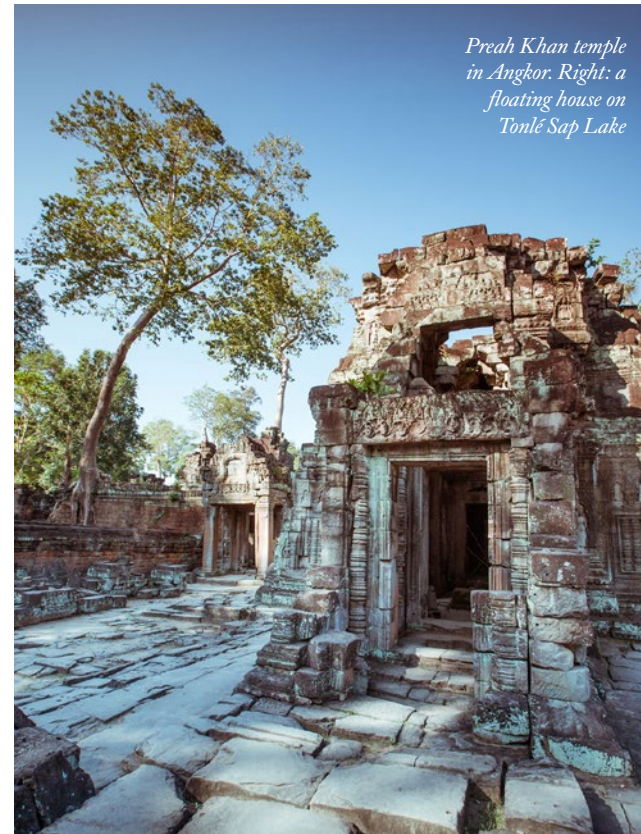


THE SUN ALSO RISES

Thanks to its unique heritage and unsurpassed natural beauty, Cambodia is moving on from a dark past to a happier, brighter future

By LUCY HALFHEAD

Monks at Angkor Wat in Cambodia



Preah Khan temple in Angkor. Right: a floating house on Tonlé Sap Lake



ESCAPE

Council on Tourism and Trade has named Cambodia the World's Best Tourism Destination for 2016.

A decade ago, Siem Reap was merely the base for explorations of the country's magical 12th-century temple complex. Now it offers travellers a thriving arts scene, excellent dining options and accommodation to match. Phum Baitang was the hotel Angelina Jolie and her brood called home for three months while she was in town directing the film adaptation of *First They Killed My Father*, the author Loung Ung's memoir about surviving the deadly Khmer Rouge regime. 'Phum Baitang's blend of Cambodian traditions and culture with a modern consciousness was exactly what appealed to us as a family,' Jolie told me.

Indeed, there is much to admire about the hotel, a lush oasis of lemon-grass and rice fields just a couple of miles outside the city. We indulged in delicious lunches of sparklingly fresh sushi or perfectly crisp, wafer-thin pizza by the infinity pool, after which we would cycle dreamily along the snaking walkways, past the resident water buffalo, to our accommodation, one of 45 thatched villas on stilts. These cool, clean nests are decked out with beautiful natural materials: solid wooden floors, egg-shaped stone bathtubs lined with Aesop products, and either a cushion-covered terrace or a private plunge pool. At night, we would follow the oil lamps through this tropical fairyland to the Cigar & Cocktail Lounge, to watch heart-stirring sunsets, with a gin and tonic, to a soundtrack of chirruping frogs.

However tempting it was to remain in the Phum Baitang cocoon, it would have been a mistake to miss the sensory delights of Siem Reap. Wandering through the maze of markets one evening we came across the beautifully dilapidated Kyung Yu Fun Fair that sets up daily at sundown. Locals flock like moths to the flickering neon lights, to ride on the faded dodgem cars or to try their luck at winning bottles of Fairy Liquid, warm Angkor beer and coat hangers by throwing darts at a wall of balloons. We stopped for dinner at Malis, the newly opened sister restaurant to the celebrity chef Luu Meng's famed establishment in Phnom Penh. Despite the pristine white interiors and polished presentation, the dishes are firmly rooted in Cambodian flavours. In the central courtyard, under a black velvet sky studded with stars, we feasted on bamboo shoots and smoked fish, and Kampot-crab fried

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We woke at 4.30am to watch the dawn at Ta Prohm, the temple famous for a surrounding army of trees whose spaghetti roots overwhelm the stone. Climbing the towering boulders in a wash of golden light, we were rewarded with solitude, and sweeping views towards the misty jungle below. These remnants of the extraordinarily creative Khmer empire, which sprawl across the Unesco-protected archaeological park, are rightfully Cambodia's top tourist destination, with the main temple-city, Angkor Wat, taking pride of place on the country's national flag. To quote the Frenchman Henri Mouhot, an explorer who encountered the Angkor temple ruins in 1860 and made them famous in Europe: 'At first view, one is filled with profound admiration, and cannot but ask what has become of this powerful race, so civilised, so enlightened, the authors of these gigantic works?'

Later, we ventured away from the main tourist hotspots guided by our very own Indiana Jones, the pioneering Australian archaeologist Dr Damian Evans, whose airborne laser-scanning technology has revealed multiple cities beneath the forest floor. (Access to his expertise came via Cambodia's leading authority on private, tailor-made tours, AboutAsia Travel, who hold all the keys to unlocking the secrets of this enigmatic country.) Unrestored and astonishingly beautiful, especially when the surrounding frangipani-trees are in bloom, these temples go some way to explain why the European

PHOTOGRAPHS: STOCKSY



The pool at Phum Baitang. Above left: a villa at the hotel

rice, then, bellies full, we made our way to the red and white striped big top of Phare, the Cambodian Circus. No clowns or dancing animals here; instead we were entranced by a sophisticated blend of theatre, dance, music and storytelling, staged by students of Phare Performing Social Enterprise's Battambang school, which provides free arts education to economically and socially challenged youth.

Before long, it was time to head south to Phnom Penh via a good domestic airline and assisted by the easygoing locals, who make travelling here simpler than you might think. Cambodia's magnificent capital, once an elegant garden city referred to as the Paris of the Far East, is now a dusty, rambunctious boomtown where high-rises are transforming the skyline and teenagers dressed like Korean pop stars zip by on motorbikes. Set at the confluence of the Mekong and Tonlé Sap Rivers, the landscape is one of vibrant markets and sizzling roadside barbecues, crumbling colonial villas, chic bars and restaurants.

We commandeered a tuk-tuk for a glimpse of the high life at the Royal Palace, a splendid sight with its manicured gardens, Buddhist and Hindu murals depicting tigers, warriors and princes, and floors of silver tiles. The Central Market, an easily recognisable yellow domed art deco building, is a treasure-trove of trinkets; or for a more rustic experience, try the Russian Market – sweltering, crowded and full of hidden surprises, where you can sample treats like steamed rice-flour dumplings oozing coconut cream, jujube fruit (red Chinese dates) stewed in smoky palm sugar and pumpkin-soy milkshakes.

In the heart of this bustling metropolis sits the Raffles Hotel Le Royal, a haven of Golden Age travel, where doormen welcome you in silk pantaloons that change colour each day (if they're orange, you know it's a Monday), modelled on those formerly worn by flunkies at the Royal Palace. Since 1929, guests such as Jacqueline Onassis and Catherine Deneuve have lounged on the green and white towels by the central courtyard pool, and walked the chequerboard corridors to bedrooms filled with rattan furniture and burnished brass lamps. We found respite from the heavy heat at the hotel's newly refurbished Elephant Bar, sampling potent martinis and freshly carved charcuterie under the waxy palm-trees on the terrace. Brunch is an equally lavish affair; the buffet is accompanied by endless champagne, and truffled eggs are cooked at your table by white-gloved waiters with gleaming silver trolleys.

The only way to justify such gluttony was to hop on our bikes for a morning's exploration with Grasshopper Adventures, also arranged by AboutAsia Travel. Making use of local ferries, we crossed the lazy

flow of the Mekong and found ourselves freewheeling along the peaceful back roads of the Silk Island, past giant humpbacked cows, trees heavy with pink lotus flowers and children offering high fives.

While there are many light moments to be found in Cambodia, any trip must also include a visit to the Killing Fields memorial at Choueng Ek on the capital's outskirts, where, between 1975 and 1979, Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge killed thousands. Coming face to face with the mass graves, bones and even remnants of clothing still visible, was indescribably chilling, but necessary to understand why, on the streets today, it is rare to see a middle-aged, let alone an old person. The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, originally built as a school but used by the regime as a prison, gives further insights into this terrible chapter in Cambodia's history, in which two million people, almost a quarter of the population, died.

Yet there is a palpable new energy and optimism among the young people, which we experienced firsthand at Romdeng, a training restaurant for disadvantaged Cambodian young people run by the charity Friends-International. Occupying a lovely teak mansion, its tables spill into a garden shaded by trees strung with lanterns. The menu offers delicious regional specialities such as shrimp topped with mint and chillies, and, for the more adventurous diner, plates of fried tarantulas, a Khmer delicacy. For a digestif with a bird's-eye view of the Tonlé Sap River, try the Foreign Correspondents' Club, in itself a piece of history where foreign journalists and aid workers used to congregate during the war.

Four hours from Phnom Penh by road, plus a speedboat ride from Sihanoukville, we reached our final destination – the two islets of Song Saa ('the sweethearts' in Khmer). In this paradigm of barefoot luxury, the husband-and-wife hoteliers Rory and Melita Hunter have built 27 villas, some in the jungle and some over water, as well as an Ila spa offering daily yoga and other tools to help you disconnect. By day, we'd sink our toes into pristine sandy beaches, or snorkel among seahorses in the azure waters; by night, we'd cross the sun-bleached footbridge to the Vista Bar to watch the sun dropping dramatically beyond the mountains of Koh Rong. This is a resort where you are offered the chance to explore the outstanding natural beauty of Cambodia, and reflect on the uniqueness of a country whose cultural and historical legacy has to be seen to be believed. □ *Phum Baitang (+855 63 961 111; www.phumbaitang.com), from about £310 a night for a Terrace Villa. Song Saa (+855 92 609 488; www.songsaa.com), from about £1,365 a night. Raffles Hotel Le Royal (+855 23 981 888; www.affles.com), from about £230 a room a night. AboutAsia Travel offers bespoke itineraries; for details, ring +855 63 760 190, or visit www.aboutasiatravel.com.*



The view from one of the islets of Song Saa



Clockwise from left: Crow's Beak Pagoda, outside Phnom Penh. An elephant at Angkor Wat. Monks at the Ta Prohm Temple. A rickshaw in Phnom Penh. The carved stone faces of Bayon Temple at Angkor Wat



Clockwise from left: a State Room at Raffles Hotel Le Royal. Frescoes in the Silver Pagoda at the Royal Palace. A footbridge between the islets of Song Saa

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