

CRAVING CAMBODIA

With ancient roots and eastern hospitality, the Khmer Kingdom is waiting to be rediscovered

Words and photographs by **Nick Corbett**

The southeast of Asia holds many gems: the crystal waters of Ko Phi Phi, the glimmering white sands of Ko Samui. But one of the continent's hidden secrets lies in a kingdom that once spanned larger than all of the glittering parts of the coasts and islands and forests put together. This is the Kingdom of Khmer, now known as Cambodia. With a rich history of ancient gold, prosperity and peace, the country was later pillaged by colonial invaders and ravaged by Pol Pot's tragic genocide in the 1970s. The otherwise strong economy faltered and Cambodia shrank to the small part of southeast Asia we see today.

The country's wealth now lies in its history, way of life and accommodating culture, all of which can be experienced for less than what a trip to somewhere European will set you back. We caught a British Airways connection to Jo'burg before heading east to Hong Kong on Cathay Pacific's Premium Economy Class. From there, GQ ascended into the ancient and ever hospitable Khmer Kingdom.

STAY Shinta Mani

When you walk through the doors of this uber-luxurious boutique hotel, you're welcomed to 'your second home' with champagne and a cold towel - attention to hospitality detail that saw Shinta Mani voted the third best hotel in the world on Trip Advisor. The hotel boasts two luxury pools, custom-designed rooms, outstanding service and stream-side tables that are suspended from the ceiling in the five-star dining room. • **Oum Khun Street, Siem Reap. shintamani.com**

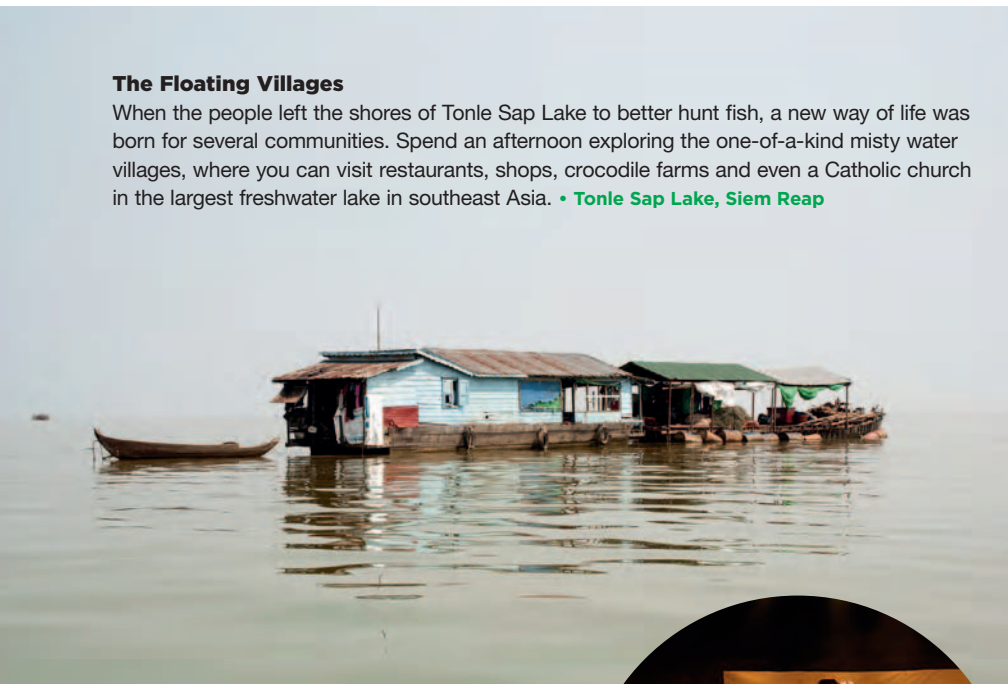
Siem Reap

DO Temple exploring

Siem Reap is world famous for its temple complexes, built between the eighth and sixteenth centuries. From the sheer majesty of Angkor Wat to the quiet jungle temples of Ta Prohm (where you may remember Angelina Jolie firing bullets at temple guardians in *Tomb Raider*), take time to explore the ancient past of the region. With over 900 temple complexes to go raiding in, it may take you longer than a day.

The Floating Villages

When the people left the shores of Tonle Sap Lake to better hunt fish, a new way of life was born for several communities. Spend an afternoon exploring the one-of-a-kind misty water villages, where you can visit restaurants, shops, crocodile farms and even a Catholic church in the largest freshwater lake in southeast Asia. • [Tonle Sap Lake, Siem Reap](#)



Phare Circus

Take fire juggling, death-defying drops, hip-hop dancing and girls who can fire a bow and arrow with their feet, throw in humorous and intelligent narratives, and you have one of Siem Reap's most exciting nights out. And socially conscious, too, as it gives youth from rural areas a chance to provide for their families and build a career network.

• [Comaille Road, Siem Reap.](#)
[pharecambodiancircus.org](#)



EAT

The Blue Pumpkin

Located on the edge of the Angkor Wat temple complex, this modern eatery is the perfect lunch spot for when you're done with early-morning temple exploring. Lavish the fresh dragon fruit and salad selection, dig into the signature yellow curry, and finish off with The Blue Pumpkin's famous homemade ice cream.

• [Angkor Wat. tbpumpkin.com](#)

Apsara Theatre

Get comfy on the floor on traditional low tables (don't worry – there's a dugout for your legs) while you enjoy a fresh selection of soups, seafood and Siem Reap's speciality, Khmer Amok – a spiced coconut fish bake. After dinner, treat yourself to a traditional Apsara dance ceremony, which tells the stories of ancient Hinduism.

• [Angkor Village Hotel, Street 7, Krong, Siem Reap](#)

Marum

Don't be afraid of the giant paper dragon puppet that greets you at the door. Soft red lighting gives ambience to a fresh menu of vegetable and seafood dishes, most noticeably the extensive tapas and sweet eastern desserts. A Friends International shop is found alongside, where you can pick up homemade up-cycled souvenirs, the profits of which go to shelters and orphanages supported by the group.

• [8A/B Phum Slokram, Siem Reap.](#)
[tree-alliance.org](#)



Pub Street

Looking for an excuse to kick back after a long day of exploring? The narrow streets in the Old Market area, lined with countless night bazaars and eateries, lead onto Pub Street, where you can find an assortment of Euro bars, clubs and pubs abuzz with other thirsty travellers. • [Street 8 Krong, Siem Reap](#)



Tour like a local

If you want the chance to uncover the secrets of Cambodia, grab a guide from Wendy Wu Tours. Private drivers in air-conditioned cars will keep you comfortable, and the knowledgeable guides use their expertise to help you dive deep into the culture of the Khmer. For special rates and packages, check out: [wendywutours.co.za.](#)
011-394-1660



How to get there

Flying daily from Jo'burg to Hong Kong, Cathay Pacific is the gateway to many Eastern destinations, including:

China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, The Maldives, Myanmar, The Philippines, Singapore, South Korea Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand and Vietnam



DO

The Royal Palace

Explore the King's Compound and visit the Silver Pagoda, a temple coated in more than 5 000 silver plates. It's home to the most expensive curated collection of royal jewels, including a solid-gold Buddha adorned with over 2 000 diamonds – one of the most valuable artefacts in the world. Guides from Wendy Wu Tours offer ample information about the rich history of the Royal Palace.

• **Samdach Sothearos Boulevard, Phnom Penh**



The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum and Killing Fields

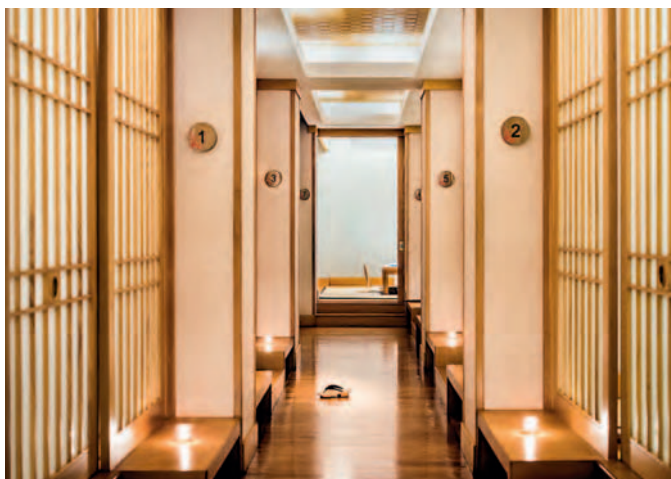
Preserving the history of Pol Pot's socialist genocide, which killed nearly 1.7 million people in the 1970s, the UNESCO World Heritage Site immortalises one of the greatest human tragedies. Enter with an open heart and mind.

• **Street 113, Boeng Keng Kang, Phnom Penh.**
tuolsleng.com

The National Museum

To return and exhibit thousands of stolen and pillaged artefacts, the museum was set up with funding from France. Inside, you'll find a lost world of ancient cultures, mapping the religions and conquests of the great Khmer Kings.

• **Preah Ang Eng, Phnom Penh.**
cambodiamuseum.info



STAY Sofitel Phnom Penh Phokeethra

When the French took occupation of Cambodia in the 19th century, they left a substantial mark on the country. An impressive and towering hotel, the Sofitel exudes this old-world luxury with strong colonial influences. Taking a stroll to the enormous crystal-blue pool, relaxing at the almost ridiculously luxurious spa and gym complex and even reclining in the master suites that make up your bedroom are all experiences in themselves.

• **26 Old August Site, Sothearos Boulevard, Phnom Penh.** sofitel.com



Chart your journey to the east



For the upmarket backpacker:

Book your seat on Cathay Pacific's Premium Economy class and skip the queue when boarding. Enjoy hot towels, wider seats, spacious legroom and 5kg increased baggage allowance for you souvenirs. Improved pillows, blankets and digital entertainment make for an impressively comfortable flight.



For the businessman:

Fly on Cathay Pacific's new Business Class for unmatched comfort and hospitality. A five-course dinner and a good night's sleep in lie-flat pods will make you feel like you're the only one in the cabin.

cathaypacific.com/za

EAT

Romdeng Restaurant

A flagship restaurant of the philanthropic Friends International, Romdeng is located near the city centre and gives young Cambodians training in the hospitality industry a chance to hone their skills. With the villa-style eatery boasting architectural influences from both southeast Asian and French roots, try the selection of fresh fish, noticeably the Kampong Sam style prawn curry, served with French bread. If you're feeling adventurous, and you should be, start with the crispy tarantulas with lime and black pepper sauce and wash it down with the signature honey-flavoured Khmer rice wine.

• **Oknha Ket Rd, Phnom Penh.**
romdeng-restaurant.org



Kanika Boat Cruise

Drink in the views of Phnom Penh as you sail down the Mekong River. Whether you're in the mood for a sunset cruise with tapas or the longer dinner cruise option, make use of the full bar and French-Khmer fusion menu before enjoying a trip back through time that smacks of the 1940s as you pass hotel boats of old (as well as one or two Japanese and Korean karaoke cruises).

• **Sangkat Chaktomuk, Phnom Penh**

Himawari Microbrewery

The last place you'd expect to find a local craft beer is in the middle of southeast Asia, but this small brewery has one or two pints up its sleeve. Hidden near the bank of the Mekong at the far end of the Himawari Luxury Apartments hotel, the brewery offers a selection of IPAs, oat and stout lagers which are made on site. Pair it with a river-side sunset before you hit Phnom Penh's vast night markets.

• **Himawari Luxury Hotel Apartments, Sangkat Chaktomuk**