

# LAND OF TEMPLES AND SMILES

I ARRIVED IN CAMBODIA EXPECTING TO SEE A COUNTRY DEFINED BY WAR. INSTEAD, I FOUND A NATION OF SMILES AND THE MOST MAGNIFICENT RUINS I'VE EVER SEEN

By Nick Dall



KNOW  
**THIS**

**GETTING THERE**

Cambodia is wedged between Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. There are no direct flights from South Africa, but there are daily flights to Phnom Penh and Siem Reap from most Asian hubs.

**WEATHER**

Cambodia is hot and humid for most of the year. The wet season is from June to October.

**CURRENCY**

The local currency is the riel but US dollars are widely accepted.

**GETTING AROUND**

Tuk-tuks (motorbikes with canopied trailers for passengers) and taxis are generally cheap, reliable and driven by honest folks. In Phnom Penh, you need to be a bit more careful.

**BE RESPECTFUL**

The Angkor temples are extremely important religious buildings, so behave appropriately and don't show too much skin.



*This page and above*  
The jungle has reclaimed many of the temples at Angkor Wat, a World Heritage Site built around waterways

**Y**ou may think you're not into museums, ruins and history. But this will change when you visit the Angkor temples of Cambodia. They mix grand scale, sublime intricacy and jungle, and meld them into a truly unforgettable whole.

Tourists fly in and out of Siem Reap – the endearing city that is the access point to the temples of Angkor – but those who explore the rest of the country are rewarded. Cambodia has a cosmopolitan capital city, Phnom Penh, with an alluring riverside location, beaches and islands in the south, and a fascinating albeit gruesome history. But the people's smiles and stories will touch even the stoniest of hearts.

Angkor Wat is one of Cambodia's biggest money-spinners and Siem Reap has rapidly evolved to cater for the more than two million tourists who visit annually. You'll find everything from backpacker party pads to five-star golf resorts and sumptuous colonial spas, but it still manages to retain a pleasant, friendly air. There are restaurants to cater for every palate, including some with cutting-edge 'Khmer fusion' cuisine – but before you get fancy, be sure to order a bowl of *amok*, Cambodia's signature fish curry.

One of the highlights of my trip was a tour of Kampong Phluk floating village, close to

**THE TEMPLES OF ANGKOR**

➤ The Angkor Archaeological Park encompasses more than 400 km<sup>2</sup> and includes dozens of temples built by the Khmer Empire between the ninth and 15th centuries. One-, three- and seven-day passes are available, but one day is never enough. Get your own car (or tuk-tuk if you're on a tight budget) with a driver. Many of them are fully qualified tourist guides.

➤ Angkor Wat is the largest religious building in the world. The lotus-bud turrets are its defining image, however, don't overlook the intricate bas-relief engravings that depict a variety of Hindu epics, including *The Churning of the Ocean of Milk*.

➤ If enormous scale is what you're after, then Angkor Thom, the last Khmer capital, is your guy. Just next door is the Bayon, an otherworldly temple featuring hundreds of carved faces staring outwards in a myriad directions.

➤ If you've seen the movie *Tomb Raider*, then you have already spent a couple of hours exploring enigmatic Ta Prohm, which was the location for this Hollywood blockbuster. Unlike the other temples, Ta Prohm is engaged in a constant, and extremely evocative, battle with the jungle's roots, creepers and trees.

➤ Banteay Srei is one of the smaller temples. It's a bit off the beaten track, but its exceptionally intricate carvings make it many people's favourite.

## DESTINATION



### REMEMBER, REMEMBER...

From 1975 to 1979, Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge soldiers were responsible for the death of at least 1.7 million Cambodians – a bone-chilling 21% of the population. Chances are, every taxi driver, waiter or masseuse you meet lost a family member to the Khmer Rouge.

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in downtown Phnom Penh is housed in what used to be Security Prison 21. Of the 17 000 people imprisoned and tortured here, only 12 survived. Majority of these prisoners were taken to the killing fields of Choeng Ek, eight kilometres out of town, to be disposed of. There is a chilling memorial here that can be heard on audio tour.



**Clockwise from top**  
*Explore the waterways on a boat tour; many villages are built on stilts in the water; enjoy delicious, spicy street food; Buddhist monks view the ruins at Angkor Wat*



Siem Reap. The visit involves a 45-minute drive (each way) and an interesting boat trip that takes you right into the heart of a village built on stilts. Most tours in Siem Reap will try to take you to another floating village called Chong Kneas, which is closer and cheaper to get to, but this is a tourist trap you should avoid.

Phnom Penh is the exotic Asia you dreamt of. Situated on the banks of the mighty Mekong River, it is a place of towering spires where orange-robed monks roam, of Parisian cafes and pungent street-side noodle stalls.

Sihanoukville's beaches may not be quite as picture-perfect as those in Thailand or Vietnam, but it makes up for this with its laid-back vibe and distinct lack of tourist pressure. If you've got a bit more time, spend a couple of nights on one of the many offshore islands. Koh Rong is great for partying, while Koh Rong Samloem is more chilled out.

Of course, the temples are probably what you came for, and you won't be disappointed (see *'The Temples of Angkor'*). There's so much to see, learn and appreciate in this resilient country. 📍