



Cambodia

Chock-full of surprises and wonders, this country in southeast Asia is a refreshingly cheap destination

WHY GO?

There is a curious allure about a country of contradictions that can delight on the one hand and dismay on the other. The scale and splendour of the deserted 1000-year-old temples of Angkor can't fail to impress while the horrors of the Pol Pot's legacy at Tuol Sleng Prison in Phnom Penh can only provoke a sense of despair at humanity's ugly side.

Beyond the cities, an improved transport infrastructure means that unspoiled regions of Cambodia are more accessible than ever before. Secluded palm-fringed beaches and offshore islands embellish the tropical coastline, and the rainforests conceal a great variety of wildlife, yet to be properly recorded, which can be heard if not always seen. The Khmer (Cambodian) capacity to eat anything that moves warrants a healthy coyness from the local fauna.

One of Cambodia's charms is its pastoral culture. Thousands of rice paddies cover swathes of the country in an emerald patchwork.

GETTING THERE

- There are no direct flights to Cambodia from the UK. You will have to fly to Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore and take a short flight from any of these destinations to Cambodia using a local airline.
- Passports must be valid for six months.

You are required to have a 30-day tourist visa \$20 (£13). Payment is made in dollars, and the visas can be bought on arrival at Phnom Penh and Siem Reap airports, or at the Cambodian Embassy in London (Tel 020 8451 7850, www.cambodianembassy.org.uk).

Airlines flying to southeast Asia

AirAsia (www.airasia.com)
 Bangkok Airways (www.bangkokair.com)
 British Airways (www.britishairways.com)
 Jetstar Asia (www.jetstar.com)
 Kampuchea Airlines (www.orient-thai.com)
 Malaysia Airlines (www.malaysiaairlines.com)
 Qantas Airways (www.qantas.com.au/uk)
 Siem Reap Airways (www.siemreapairways.com)
 Singapore Airlines (www.singaporeair.com)
 Thai AirAsia (www.airasia.com)
 Thai Airways (www.thaiair.com)
 Silk Air (www.silkair.com)
 Singapore Airlines (www.singaporeair.com)
 Virgin Atlantic (www.virgin-atlantic.com)

Airlines from the UK to southeast Asia

You can fly to the following destinations before getting a short connection to Cambodia:

- To Bangkok**
 London Heathrow: British Airways, Qantas Airways, Thai Airways, Eva Airlines.
 Manchester: British Airways, Cathay Pacific, Qatar Airways.
- To Kuala Lumpur**
 London Heathrow: Malaysia Airlines, London Stansted: AirAsia.
- To Singapore**
 London Heathrow: British Airways, Qantas Airways, Singapore Airlines, Virgin Atlantic.
 Manchester: Singapore Airlines, Virgin Atlantic.

Airlines to Cambodia from southeast Asia

These airlines include:

- Bangkok to Phnom Penh**
 Bangkok Airways, Kampuchea Airlines, Siem Reap Airways, Thai Airways, Thai AirAsia.

- Bangkok to Siem Reap**

Bangkok Airways.

- Kuala Lumpur to Phnom Penh**

AirAsia, Malaysia Airlines.

- Kuala Lumpur to Siem Reap**

AirAsia, Malaysia Airlines.

- Singapore to Phnom Penh**

Jetstar Asia, Silk Air, Singapore Airlines.

- Singapore to Siem Reap**

Jetstar Asia, Silk Air, Singapore Airlines.

TOUR OPERATORS

Tailor-made tour options to Cambodia include:

- Abercrombie and Kent**

☎ 0845 6182 200
www.abercrombiekent.co.uk

- Cox and Kings**

☎ 020 7873 5000
www.coxandkings.co.uk

- Kuoni**

☎ 01306 747 002
www.kuoni.co.uk

- Magic of the Orient Ltd**

☎ 0800 840 0850
www.tripsworldwide.co.uk

- Page and Moy Holidays**

☎ 0800 567 7400
www.pageandmoy.com

- Premier Holidays**

☎ 08444 937 531
www.tripsworldwide.co.uk

- Sunset Faraway Holidays**

☎ 020 8774 7100
www.sunset.co.uk

- The Ultimate Travel Company**

☎ 020 7386 4646
www.theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk

- Thomas Cook Signature**

☎ 0844 871 0663
<http://thomascooksignature.inbro.net/main>

- Trail Finders**

☎ 0845 054 6060
www.trailfinders.com

GETTING AROUND

Travelling around the country is time consuming. From each compass point, most major roads seem lead to Phnom Penh, so that it's necessary to return to the city from a far-flung region to reach another corner of the country.

Unless you have a Cambodian driving licence, driving is prohibited. This leaves three choices for the independent visitor – the bus, the taxi, or the shared taxi (minibus). At the time of writing there were no passenger trains in Cambodia.

INTERCITY FARES AND JOURNEY TIMES

Journey times and fares vary according to the mode of transport, season and agent. For example, from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap (314 km) a bus costs between \$5-\$10 (six hours), a shared taxi is \$6-\$12 (between five and six hours) and a private taxi is \$60-\$80 (four hours). Domestic flights are only possible between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, one-way journeys start at around \$80 (one hour).

WHAT TO SEE AND DO

VISITING PHNOM PENH

Phnom Penh is predominantly low-rise, with an intimate provincial feel, where life revolves around the streets. The tourist centre of the city is a half-mile wide section that runs parallel to the river for a mile from Phnom Wat to the Royal Palace.

■ The National Museum

This museum exhibits an impressive collection of Khmer sculptures.

Open 7am-5pm

Admission \$3 (£2)

■ The Royal Palace and Silver Pagoda

The palace is the official royal residence. The Silver Pagoda, famed for its floor of 5329 silver floor tiles, is open to the public. An impressive emerald Buddha and a golden Buddha (Maitreya) encrusted with 2086 diamonds.

Open 7-11am and 2-5.30pm

Admission £4 (\$6.50)

■ Tuol Sleng Prison Museum

However uncomfortable it might be, a visit to the museum is highly recommended for an insight into Cambodia's recent terrifying history.

Open 7am-5.30pm

Admission £1 (\$2)

Guide 1-3 people £4 (\$6)

■ The Killing Fields of Choeng Ek

A glass-sided tower, piled high with skulls is the focal point of the site, divided by a series of excavated mass graves and victim's bones.

Open 7am-5.30pm

Admission £1 (\$2)

TRAVELLING AROUND THE TOWNS AND SIGHTS

■ Tuk-tuks (scooter-driven carriages) and moto (scooter) taxis

A short single journey of 1-2 kms should cost no more than \$2 in a tuk-tuk and \$1 on a moto. For longer journeys, negotiate the fare. Hiring a tuk-tuk for a day's sightseeing will cost between \$10-\$20, depending on destination and number of passengers. Always agree on a fare before travelling. Many of the drivers don't own their vehicles, so that a tip of a dollar or so is always welcome.

Recommended English-speaking tuk-tuk drivers/guides

■ Battambang

Mr Phi Lay Ob

☎ 00855 12 68 22 30

philayroyal2003@yahoo.com

■ Siem Reap/Angkor

Mr Thy

☎ 00855 12 572 412

john_angkor@yahoo.com

■ Markets

The Russian Market (Psar Tuol Tom Pong) sells traditional carvings and sculptures. The Art Deco food market (Psar Thmei) sells tropical fruit dainties, along with fried field delicacies such as frogs, cockroaches, crickets, spiders, snakes and waterfowl.

WHERE TO GO ALONG THE COAST

■ Kampot

Kampot is a pleasant French colonial town, a few kilometres from the coast on the Tuek Chhu River and 150 km from Phnom Penh.

■ Phnom Chhnork

The area is dotted with limestone caves, many of which can be explored, and this temple grotto is well worth a visit. Inside, the cave stalactites envelop this 7th-century temple (which is dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva) in strange, gothic-looking formations.

Open 8am-6pm

Admission £1 (\$2)

■ Kep

Just 25 km to the south east of Kampot is the old seaside town of Kep, where you can find some reasonable beaches. The town was once a fashionable resort until the Khmer Rouge razed much of it to the ground.

■ Sihanoukville and its beaches

To the west of Kampot by 105 km, the port town of Sihanoukville is at the southern edge of a great peninsular has some glorious beaches. Serendipity Beach, adjoined to Occheuteal Beach, is one of the busiest and prettiest. Quiet



Otros Beach, which is at the southern edge of Occheuteal, offers an endless stretch of sand.

■ Natural Cambodia

Between Sihanoukville and Koh Kong town, the coastal gateway into Thailand, are a number of unspoiled islands, coral reefs and coastal and forest wildlife reserves that are becoming major draw for visitors who want to experience Cambodia's natural environment.

■ Rainbow Lodge

www.rainbowlodgecambodia.com

One of country's first private eco-lodges is tucked away in the jungle of the Conservation Corridor, 20 km east of Koh Kong on the Tatai River.

PLANNING A TRIP TO ANGKOR

■ Battambang

The small French colonial town of Battambang has some fascinating sights. Two days will cover the highlights and, as with Angkor, the best way of seeing them is to hire a tuk-tuk, a scooter-driven carriage, with an English speaking guide-come-driver.

■ Battambang Museum

The dusty museum exhibits a number of beautifully carved 10th-12th century lintels and statues from Angkor and Battambang province.

Open 8am-5pm

Admission 50p (\$1)

■ Banan Wat

This 11th-century temple is 23 km from Battambang. Banan Wat is reached by a steep stone staircase of 358 steps. The temple towers with their original carved lintels are intact and a number of headless statues litter the site.

Open 8am-6pm

Admission £1 (\$2)

■ Chan Thai Choeng Vineyard

On the way back to town, call in on Cambodia's only vineyard to taste the uniquely flavoured red wine and brandy (forget French vintages and keep an open mind).

Open 8am-6pm

Admission/tasting free

■ Phnom Sampov and the Killing Caves

The views across the countryside from the limestone outcrop of Phnom Sampov are superb. The cave wats, half way up the hill, are Buddhist temples that were perversely used by the Khmer Rouge as mass graves. Statues of Buddha, overseen by monks and nuns, are sited next to displays of the victims' skulls.

Open 8am-6pm

Admission £1 (\$2)

■ The Bamboo Train

These ingenious open-decked contraptions rattle their way along an old railway track from

Battambang into the countryside. Local people use it to take goods to and from the town. Fare (depends on distance and negotiated price) £5-£9 (\$8-\$15).

■ A river trip

Boats run between Battambang to Siem Reap and takes from around five hours (downstream from Battambang). Expect to spend more time travelling upstream and during the dry season. Fare £15 (\$25).

■ Siem Reap

Full of bars, good restaurants and hotels, Siem

Reap is a neat little tourist town that makes a comfortable base for excursions to Angkor.

■ Chong Kneas floating village

Take a river trip out to the neighbouring floating village. Fare £6 (\$10)

■ Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary

Leave before sunrise to watch the flocks. Best months for birdwatching are November-March. Osmose (www.osmosetonlesap.net) run guided tours. Tours includes breakfast, lunch, one bottle of water and tour of Prek Toal floating village (book 48 hours in advance).

Tour 5.30am-6pm

Price (depending on the number of people on a tour) one person £165 (\$270), two people £91 (\$150) per person, three people £67 (\$110) pp etc

Recommended temple sights of Angkor (three-day visit)

Our five recommended sights can be seen comfortably in three days. Go in the morning and late afternoon to avoid the midday heat.

Open sunrise-sunset

Admission 3-day pass £24 (\$40)

■ Angkor Wat

Built in the 12th century, Angkor Wat is reputedly the largest intact religious complex in the world. The three-storey principle temple, dedicated to Shiva, is thought to be King Suryavarman II's funeral temple.

■ Angkor Thom

Translated as 'Big City', 12th century Angkor Thom was an immense fortified city that covered 10 sq km. Built by Angkor's most powerful king Jayavarman VII, the complex has groups of temples and fantastically sculpted balustrades and walls. The most impressive of the temples is the Bayon temple: 216 huge serene faces of the Bodhisattva make up each of the 54 towers.

■ Ta Prohm

Used for the film set of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, Ta Prohm is one of the most photographed of the temple ruins. Giant roots from towering Strangler Fig trees wrap around the 12th-century walls and gateways in a tight embrace.

■ Phnom Bakheng

This steep hilltop temple was once the centre of a city that predates Angkor Thom by two centuries. Visitors flock to the tiered edifice for the superb views and sunsets.

■ Banteay Srey

It's a trek to reach this 10th-century temple (32 km from Siem Reap), but it's worth the effort because this petite, pink sandstone temple is adorned with exquisite carvings depicting Shiva. The drive up to the temple is an enjoyable tour through the countryside and you can stop off at Pradok village for refreshments or souvenirs and visit the Landmine Museum for Khmer Rouge history.

■ Cambodia Landmine Museum

Open 7am-6pm

Admission £1 (\$1)

GOOD PLACES TO EAT

Typical Khmer food is similar to Thai cuisine, except that it's much milder, and coconut milk figures strongly. Chilli is used, but black pepper is still the preferred condiment to pep up dishes. The Khmer speciality dish is *amok* – fish steamed in coconut milk with turmeric and other spices, served in banana leaves.

BATTAMBANG

■ La Villa

☎ 00855 5373 0151

www.lavilla-battambang.com

Dine in the smart and airy atrium restaurant, or sit out on the garden terrace under the trees. Two courses of chicken *sate*, and fish *amok*, with a glass of wine comes to \$13.50.

■ White Rose

House 102 (opposite the Chinese School)

☎ 00855 12253 152

Popular with the locals, this joint is always jumping. The dining room is spacious and functional, but it's the street-side terrace that attracts most of the diners. The Chinese/Khmer menu is huge and dishes are tasty and cheap (each main dish costs \$2.50-\$3)

KAMPOT

■ Rikitikitavi

☎ 00855 1223 502

www.rikikititavi-kampot.com

The first-floor restaurant and bar terrace that overlooks the

river is fast becoming an established spot to enjoy a beer and well-prepared fare of local dishes, service can be a tad slow but it's worth the wait. Main dishes come in at around \$6.

SIEM REAP

■ Angkor Palm

www.angkorpalm.com

☎ 00855 (0) 6376 1436

Close to the Old market, the swish colonial-style restaurant has an interior of walls strewn with colourful silks, which extends to a pleasant street-facing terrace. Beef *lok lak* (stir-fried beef with a lime and pepper dipping sauce) costs \$6, and a fresh fruit shake is \$2.50.

■ Amok

The Passage Old Market

☎ 00855 6396 5407

www.angkorw.com

A large colourful place with palms sprouting out from urns scattered about the place and two street-facing terraces. There is a good range of Khmer dishes. Banana flower salad and Khmer-curry costs \$9.

■ BBQ

The Passage Old Market

☎ 00855 63966 052

www.angkorw.com

A fun way of sampling unusual dainties in a smart dining room, or on the street-side terrace, is to cook your own. Small dome-shaped barbecues sit on the table and you idle

away a pleasant hour or so grilling a variety of your chosen meats (snake, crocodile, ostrich, chicken, beef etc). Our choice of meats with rice and vegetables came to \$10.

SIHANOUKVILLE

■ Happa

☎ 00855 3493 4380

Under a wide reed roof this welcoming, rustic eatery serves up a range of excellent seafood dishes. A plate of tiny squid followed by fish of the day served with rice and vegetables is around \$10.

PHNOM PENH

■ Frizz Restaurant

☎ 00855 23220 953

www.frizz-restaurant.com

Basic, tasty dishes here are a mix of Khmer and European. The house specialities of Guinness pie with chips and peas (\$6) and apple pie (\$2) sit strangely alongside spicy red or green curry (\$4) and sticky rice and mango (\$2) on the menu. Imported wine is priced at \$12 a bottle.

■ Malis

☎ 00855 2322 1022

Choose to dine in one of the smartly furnished dining rooms or on the popular courtyard terrace. Sophisticated dishes are excellent and reasonably priced. Green papaya and shrimp salad (\$7.50), river fish (*sand goby*) with mango (\$12), and steamed rice (\$5), an jasmine mousse (\$3).

GOOD PLACES TO STAY

Prices listed here are for the cheapest double room for two people per night B&B, including breakfast and taxes, in October 2009.

BATTAMBANG

■ La Villa Hotel

☎ 00855 85373 0151

www.lavilla-battambang.com

A striking yellow villa from the French colonial period is positioned on the east bank of the Sangkae River. This captivating boutique hotel retains many Art Deco features such as the propeller ceiling fan. From the stylish high-ceilinged restaurant (see 'Good places to eat') a shady garden terrace fronts the small pool in a walled garden. Rooms are adorned with modern and traditional furnishings.

Price £36 (\$60)

Rooms 7

Facilities pool

Disabled access 3 ground-floor rooms

KAMPOT

■ Rikitikitavi Hotel

☎ 00855 1223 502

www.rikikitavi-kampot.com

From the leafy front garden a broad staircase leads up to a splendid, and popular, open-sided bar and restaurant terrace that overlooks the riverfront (see 'Good places to eat'). Silk hangings adorn the walls of pleasingly arranged bedrooms that have rattan-clad ceilings. Furnishings are a combination of modern and local styles.

Price £21 (\$35)

Rooms 5

Disabled access ground-floor rooms

■ Bokor Mountain Lodge

☎ 00855 3393 2314

www.bokorlodge.com

Step out of the front door and you are on the riverfront in this fine old French-colonial house. In the spacious, river-facing restaurant on the first floor, the solid wood furniture affords it an attractive rustic feel. Large bedrooms are simply furnished with wicker tables and chairs.

Price £18 (\$30)

Rooms 6

Disabled access not suitable for people with mobility problems

Koh Kong (Phum Doung Bridge at Tatai)

■ Rainbow Lodge

☎ 00855 9974 4321

www.rainbowlodgescambodia.com

In the rainforest of the Cardamom mountain foothills, the seven bungalows in this attractive place are arranged in a staggered chevron that meets at the thatched bar/restaurant hub. Each

bungalow is simply and comfortably furnished and has a large balcony. Wide concrete walkways are raised over a metre above the forest floor (walkways do not have side railings or handrails).

Price £36 (\$60) includes all meals (not drinks)

Rooms 7

Facilities kayaking, motorboat trips, trekking, camping trips (charge per trip)

Disabled access not suitable for people with mobility problems

PHNOM PENH

■ The Pavilion Hotel

☎ 00855 2322 2280

www.thepavilion.asia

An elegant 1920s French colonial villa within an easy walk of the Royal Palace. The pool is set within a luxuriant garden, with breakfast and simple meals served on the pleasant shady pool-side terrace. Most bedrooms are spacious and have small private gardens or balconies. Four rooms come with a private plunge pool, one room has a Jacuzzi. No children, minimum age 16.

Price £24 (\$40) 1 Nov-20 December

Rooms 20

Facilities pool

Disabled access ground-floor rooms

■ Raffles Le Royal Hotel

☎ 00855 2398 1888

www.phnompenh.affles.com

Established in 1927, Phnom Penh's imposing French colonial grande dame is in the heart of the city. Two swimming pools, surrounded by a wide terrace and headed by a café, are the lush garden's centrepiece and frescos adorn the walls of the writer's bar. The restaurant is a genteel high-ceilinged affair and the large breakfast room has a wide exterior terrace overlooking the front garden. Bedrooms come with balconies (the Art Deco 'Landmark rooms' do not have balconies).

Price £97 (\$160)

Rooms 171

Facilities 2 pools

Disabled access lifts, ground-floor rooms

SIEM REAP

■ Angkor Village Resort

☎ 0855 6396 3561

www.angkorvillage.com

Three km out of town on the road to Angkor, a delightful pagoda accommodates a swish restaurant and bar and leads to a magnificent garden. Tucked beneath the leafy canopy, 20 villas border an extensive pool that meanders its way around the garden.

Price £54 (\$89)

Rooms 80

Disabled access ground-floor rooms (not suitable for wheelchairs)



■ The River Garden Hotel

☎ 00855 6396 3400

www.thevergarden.info

Set in a delightful garden, this little star is four km out of town on the road to Angkor. Centred by a small freeform pool with a restaurant terrace within a shady garden, the rooms are beautifully composed with a blend of Khmer and modern furniture and fittings. Many come with a balcony or terrace.

Price £24 (\$40)

Rooms 17

Facilities swimming pool

Disabled access ground-floor rooms, 2 wheelchair-adapted rooms

SIHANOUKVILLE

The Reef Hotel

☎ 00855 (0) 12 315 338

A pleasant open-sided bar and restaurant that faces the street leads to a courtyard with pool. The guest house is 200 yards uphill of Serendipity Beach. Two small accommodation blocks are sited on either side of the pool terrace. Spruce bedrooms have queen-size beds and are simply kitted out with rattan furniture.

Price £15 (\$25)

Rooms 16

Disabled access ground-floor rooms (not suitable for wheelchairs)

USEFUL INFORMATION

The US dollar is Cambodia's de facto currency and the most useful for tourists.

Currency £1 = 6.73 Cambodian Riels, \$1 = 4.11

RECOMMENDED GUIDEBOOK AND MAP

■ **Lonely Planet Cambodia**, £12.99 (ISBN 978-1-74104-317-4)

■ **Gecko Maps Cambodia**, £12.95 (ISBN 978-3-906593-31-9)



For the full magazine report on Cambodia, see p40 of the September 2009 issue of Which? Holiday