

UPDATE



# The DEPARTURES Guide to Cambodia

**Traveling through the Southeast Asian country reveals a nation developing an identity for itself beyond its well-trod temples. BY JESSICA FLINT**

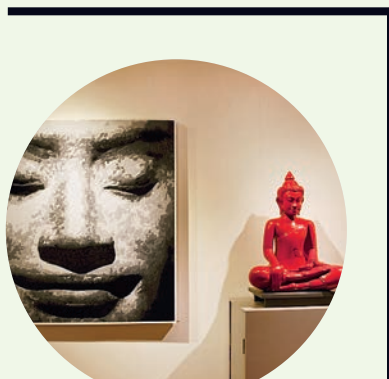
**C**hange is afoot in Cambodia, located between Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, and bordering the Gulf of Thailand. “It’s more of a rebirth than a birth,” says Lim Muy Theam, an artist and designer based in Siem Reap, the country’s cultural capital. Cambodia’s history was practically erased during the reign of the Khmer Rouge, from 1975 to 1979, which was responsible for the genocide of nearly 2 million Cambodian people and, along with it, the dismantling of the country’s heritage. Political unrest followed until 1998, when Prime Minister Hun Sen and

the Cambodian People’s Party came solely into power (they remain there today). Because 68 percent of the country’s population is under the age of 30, the older generation is trying desperately to instill a sense of tradition in the younger one, which is eager to move on from the past and catch up with the rest of Asia. This creates a palpable melting pot of emotions: hope mixed with heartbreak. DEPARTURES travels to the cities of Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, and Kep (pictured above), and to the island-resort Song Saa, and discovers that it’s this dichotomy that is paving the way for Cambodia’s future. **CONTINUED ►**

AARON JOEL SANTOS (MONKS); SAM JAM (TEMPLE DETAIL)

# Siem Reap

When Cambodia's political situation became more stable, in 1998, travelers started pouring into Siem Reap, in the northwest, due to its proximity to Angkor, a complex of magnificent ancient temples, the most famous of which is Angkor Wat. An area that in 1993 attracted 7,000 people annually now draws two million. As such, ramshackle Siem Reap morphed into a whistle-stop resort town. Now the city is so overstuffed that one has to wake up at 4:30 A.M. to get to Angkor before the hordes of selfie-stick-wielding tourists infest the place like ants on an anthill (though a good tour operator can get you off the grid. See "Our Man in Cambodia," page 82). However, scratching beneath the surface shows that in Siem Reap, tourism is actually what has allowed an emerging cultural revolution to take hold. Says photographer John McDermott, known for his black-and-white Angkor photos taken between 2000 and 2001, "The light is different, even if the stones are the same." While he's referring to shooting Angkor now versus when he first got to town, his statement somehow best encapsulates the city's atmosphere today.



## GALLERY WATCH

### OLD MODERN ART

"There is a gap between the temples and the Cambodian people of today," says artist and designer Lim Muy Theam, who sells his crafts at **Theam's House** (25 Veal Village, Khum Kokchack; [theams.house.com](http://theams.house.com)), his workshop and residence, which opened to the public as a gallery in 2011. "We want to show visitors another side of Cambodia—the artistic and cultural part, which is very forgotten."

Theam was born in Cambodia but relocated to France in 1980 as a child refugee. He returned to Siem Reap 15 years later and started thoughtfully reinventing lost Khmer craft. He now employs 55 artisans to help him create contemporary objects (pictured above) that nod to the past. For example, Theam's artisans use lacquer, a traditional Khmer medium, to decorate clay elephant sculptures in funky neon colors, and they turn silk, another customary Cambodian material, into scarves with stylish flair. Theam is also the former artistic director of **Artisans of Angkor** (*Chantiers-Ecoles, Stung Thmey St.*; [artisansdangkor.com](http://artisansdangkor.com)), which started in 1992 with a similar mission and now has 48 workshops, 800 artisans, and six shops around the country.

"From my Western point of view, people here do by their feelings," Theam says. "Energy is the source of our inspiration, and there is a common point of emotion. I started to understand this, and I feel this is the way our new culture can rise."

## SHOPPING THREE SPECIAL BOUTIQUES

Expats are behind some of Siem Reap's top stores. The couture house of **Eric Raisina** (75-81 Charles de Gaulle; [ericraisina.com](http://ericraisina.com)) shows off the work of the delightful Madagascar-born fashion designer, who is praised for using silk and raffia (a palm-tree-fiber textile from his homeland) to create stunning featherlight, soft frocks, shirts, scarves, and more. While Raisina is the country's main style establishment, the flagship is less than two years old. In the Old Market, above Laundry Bar, is **Christine's** (29 St. 9; [christines-store.com](http://christines-store.com)), a newer concept shop with fashionable purses and jewelry curated by Raisina's former assistant manager Christine Gleizes, a Parisian. And across the street from an Australian coffee shop, The Little Red Fox (order a flat white), is **Louise Loubatieres** (7 Hup Guan St.; [louiseloubatieres.com](http://louiseloubatieres.com)), a colorful home store named after its British owner. One-of-a-kind lacquered coconut-shell bowls (pictured) are one of its signature items.

## PHILANTHROPY

### A NIGHT AT THE CIRCUS

The biggest non-temple attraction in Siem Reap is the **Phare, the Cambodian Circus** (Lot A, Komay Rd.; [pharecambodiancircus.org](http://pharecambodiancircus.org)), a Cirque du Soleil-like event that has been running nightly since 2013. The performers are at-risk Cambodian youths who are transforming their lives through art. The show, set to energetic Cambodian music, mixes theater, dance, and circus acts (acrobatics, juggling, contortion) to tell modern and traditional Cambodian stories. The circus sells out, so book tickets in advance. Reserved seats are available, although not necessary.



## WHERE TO STAY

### AMAN: STILL GOT IT

The last big opening on the town's hotel scene was in 2013, when the modern **Park Hyatt Siem Reap** (rooms from \$230; *Sivutha Blvd.*; 855-63/211-234) replaced the old *Hôtel de la Paix* on a bustling downtown street. While it's a good new option, that doesn't change the fact that the secluded-feeling 24-suite **Amansara** (pictured; rooms from \$950; 262 Krom 8, Phum Beong Don Pa; 855-63/760-333; [amanresorts.com](http://amanresorts.com)), around since 2002, remains Siem Reap's hotel du jour, thanks in large part to its fabulous general manager, Sally Baughen. Aman junkies say it's one of the most authentic Amans. Request a pool suite. For years, the historic **Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor** (rooms from \$295; 1 Vithei Charles de Gaulle, Khum Svay Dang Kum; 855-63/963-888; [raffles.com](http://raffles.com)), which debuted in 1932, was the only hotel game in town. But we say stay at the Aman and save the Raffles for Phnom Penh.



## TEMPLE NEWS

### ANGKOR'S TECH INVASION

Damian Evans, a personable Australian archaeologist who works for École Française d'Extrême-Orient, a French institute that studies Asian societies, is pioneering using Lidar (aerial laser photography) to map Angkor's grounds in order to understand how people used the complex from the 9th to the 15th century. While Evans is not for hire per se, tour operators can sometimes persuade him to accompany travelers and their authorized Cambodian guides around the temples (see page 82 for more).



# Phnom Penh

**T**he challenges facing Cambodia become clear in Phnom Penh, the country's capital, a 45-minute plane ride southwest of Siem Reap. It was the second stop on our itinerary. The wealth and education gaps here are visibly wide: Range Rovers and BMWs crowd traffic-filled streets, while the poverty-stricken live in buildings that were left for ruin during the Khmer Rouge regime. Part of the problem is that change in Cambodia is being driven by the economic elite as opposed to the educated bourgeois (who were completely wiped out). Sedara Kim, an advisor to Cambodia's office of the Council of Ministers, says the country's revitalization depends upon quality youth education that balances knowledge and skill; building an effective government based on scientific research; and understanding how 30 years of war still impacts the older generation. Expats are important, Kim believes, because they bring new ideas and collaboration, which are the way of the future. And Kim is optimistic about the future: Despite its obstacles, Cambodia is coming back quicker than other postconflict countries, as evidenced by advancements in Phnom Penh.



## ART AND CULTURE NEIGHBORHOOD TO EXPLORE

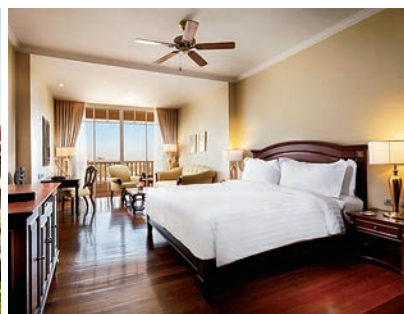
The **National Museum of Cambodia** (pictured; 227 Kbal Thnal, Preah Norodom Blvd.; [cambodiamuseum.info](http://cambodiamuseum.info)), which preserves the country's ancient stone, metal, wood, and ceramic treasures, is the centerpiece of a lively neighborhood near the river, filled with restaurants, art galleries, and boutiques. At the museum, two collection highlights to look out for are *Reclining Vishnu*, a bronze statue found buried at Angkor in 1936, and *Jayavaraman VII*, a sandstone sculpture of the last great king of Angkor. Bordering the museum is Street 178, a good shopping block, with stops such as **Garden of Desire** (33 St. 178; 855-12/319-116; [gardenofdesire-asia.com](http://gardenofdesire-asia.com)), for its silver and stone jewelry made by Siem Reap-born, Paris-educated designer Ly Pisith, and **Bodia Nature** (10 St. 178, [bodia-nature.com](http://bodia-nature.com)), a natural-beauty-product store with a spa across the street. The **Royal Palace** (Samdach Sothearos Blvd., bet. St. 240 and St. 184), where Cambodia's King Norodom Sihamoni lives, is also nearby. Visitors can stroll the grounds. The crown jewel is the Silver Pagoda, which houses a life-size Buddha decorated with 9,584 diamonds and has a floor made of 5,000 silver tiles.



WHERE TO STAY

## HOTELS: THE CLASSIC VS. THE NEWCOMER

The hotel to book in Phnom Penh is still undoubtedly **Raffles Hotel Le Royal** (pictured above, left; rooms from \$240; 92 Rukhak Vithei Daun Penh, Sangkat Wat Phnom; 855-23/981-888; [raffles.com](http://raffles.com)), which opened in 1929. It has lots of French Colonial character and lovely Khmer and Art Deco touches. There are 140 guest rooms and 35 suites (request a Landmark Suite, such as No. 314, in the historic part of the hotel). Two pretty pools and a green garden out back separate the old main building from a courtyard wing. The hotel is



deceptively large, with five restaurants and bars, including the iconic Elephant Bar. Service quirks add to the charm, making the hotel feel appropriately luxurious in the context of the city.

**Hotel Sofitel Phnom Penh Phokeethra** (pictured above, right; rooms from \$220; 26 Old August Site, Sothearos Blvd.; 855-23/999-200; [sofitel.com](http://sofitel.com)) debuted in 2011. It's certainly a suitable alternative to Raffles, though its corporate decor and riverside location, a little outside the city's center, give it a business-resort vibe.

## HISTORY LESSON

### THE KHMER ROUGE'S LEGACY

"If we have ignorance, Cambodian people can't find justice. If we can't find justice, these atrocities will repeat," says Chum Mey, one of only 12 known survivors of Tuol Sleng, or S-21, a Khmer Rouge prison that now houses the **Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum** (corner of St. 113 and St. 350). More than 12,000 people were either killed here or taken six miles outside the city to the **Choeung Ek Killing Fields** (Roluos Village, Sangkat Cheung Aek), where the Khmer Rouge executed nearly two million people. Mey, 84, speaks (through a translator) upon request to Tuol Sleng visitors about his incarceration and torture, and his belief, at the time, that he would die in jail. It is upsetting to listen to Mey's stories and hard to stomach touring the historical sites. But, as Mey points out, education is the key to preventing future mass-killing horrors—a poignant message in the era of ISIS, Boko Haram, and the Taliban.



## DINING TREND EXPAT FLAVOR

Global chefs have started infusing the city with tastes other than those of traditional Khmer cuisine (rice, curry, sauces). At **The Common Tiger** (20 St. 294; 023/212-917; [thecommontiger.com](http://thecommontiger.com)), South African chef Timothy Bruyns uses local market ingredients in his small rotating-weekly menu, though some dishes, such as the herb-crusted sea bass, make comebacks. His compatriot, chef Amy Baard, runs the kitchen at **The Chinese House** (45 Sisowath Quay; 855-93/708-791; [chinesehouse.asia](http://chinesehouse.asia)). She blends Western techniques with Asian ingredients (think seafood tortellini with coconut curry sauce and creamy *amok*). Two Venezuelans and a Uruguayan are behind **Samai Distillery** (pictured; 9b St. 830; 855-89/257-449; [samaidistillery.com](http://samaidistillery.com)), the city's first spirits maker. The distillery opens as a bar on Thursday nights, serving its namesake rum in mixed drinks.

# Kep

Once a popular Gulf of Thailand beach-vacation town for the colonial French elite and wealthy Khmer, Kep, like every place else in Cambodia, was destroyed by the Khmer Rouge and is now rebuilding itself. Today the town feels like a backpacker's haven that has just about turned over. It's a quieter and more authentic alternative to Cambodia's other popular seaside holiday destination, Sihanoukville, to the west, which has a casino-on-the-beach atmosphere.

Kep is billed as a two-hour drive south of Phnom Penh, but it really takes more like five (and that's with a driver navigating Cambodia's seemingly rule-free roads). The route passes through Cambodian countryside dotted with traditional stilt houses and grazing cows.

There isn't much to do in Kep except lounge around Knai Bang Chatt, the top hotel in the area; hike or bike in Kep National Park; go to the crab market; or watch the sun set over Vietnam, which is 12 miles away. There are also some nice day trips to take, such as to Rabbit Island or Kampot. But this is Kep's allure: It's a restful place after Siem Reap's early wake-up calls and Phnom Penh's pulsating energy.



DAY TRIP

## RABBIT ISLAND

**Koh Tonsay**, or Rabbit Island, is an underdeveloped otherworld about a half hour from the mainland by way of a local fishing boat. There are chaises for rent on the crescent-shaped beach, basic cafés, and rustic backpacker huts (pictured) that cost a couple of dollars per night to rent. Skip hiring a boat from Kep's pier and instead access Rabbit Island via a Knai Bang Chatt excursion, which provides a butler and a chef who prepare a massive beach-barbecue feast of fresh seafood.



WHERE TO STAY

## A BOHO BEACH HOTEL

A stylish 18-room property on the water, **Knai Bang Chatt** is housed in three villas (the Blue Villa is pictured) that were built between 1962 and 1965 by protégés of Vann Molyvann, Le Corbusier's famous Khmer student. (Two more villas were later added.) Here Art Deco architecture meets Indochinese and Japanese design accents, such as Cambodian stilt beds, Vietnamese antiques, and clay objects. General manager Joffrey Gris, a jolly, bald Frenchman, choreographs the action around the hotel, which includes an infinity pool, a private beach, and The Strand restaurant. The Sailing Club, next door, offers water activities like paddleboarding and kayaking. It also has a lively bar. *Rooms from \$275; Phum Thmey, Sangkat Prey Thom; 855-36/210-310; knaibangchatt.com.*



LOCAL CUISINE

## WHEN IN KEP, EAT CRABS WITH PEPPER

Kep is better known for its crab (sweet and cheap) than for its beaches (small and rocky). Along the town's main road, which hugs the shore, is the **Kep Crab Market** (pictured above, left). It doesn't have an address; it's just there. Any of the vendors on the sea-end sidewalk will pull crabs out of the water for



\$3 per pound (negotiable) and cook them for about 75 cents total. Next to the Crab Market is a row of restaurant shacks serving the day's catch. Any will do, though Kimly's is the best known.

Kep crab seems made for Kampot pepper, which comes from Kampot, an hour's drive from Kep. Kampot pepper is to Cambodia what Champagne is to France: Both have a protected geographical indication, a certification that

safeguards regional agricultural products.

### Sothy's Pepper Farm

(Pepper Rd., Kep; [mykam.potpepper.asia](http://mykam.potpepper.asia)), run by Sorn Sothy, is the one to visit in Kampot. It has three pepper fields from which the pepper is harvested (pictured), as well as a shop. While Kampot pepper is widely used in Khmer cooking, as Sothy tells travelers, pepper sauce—black pepper, lemon juice, and salt—is especially great with crab.

## TOUR OPERATOR

### OUR MAN IN CAMBODIA

DEPARTURES traveled in Cambodia for 11 days with London-based travel outfit **Brown + Hudson** ([brownandhudson.com](http://brownandhudson.com)), whose founding partner Philippe Brown ferrets out itineraries around the globe that are not typical or obvious. The company goes above and beyond to show clients unique and customized experiences. For example, Brown + Hudson orchestrated it so we didn't see another traveler on the grounds of Angkor Wat for sunrise, and organized an elaborate breakfast in a *tuk-tuk* for us and archaeologist Damian Evans at Angkor's Ta Nei, a research temple that was utterly deserted when we were dining. Logistically, the trip was seamless, from skipping customs at the airport to being booked on the Cambodia Angkor Air flight from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh in a row with an insane amount of legroom (okay, we'll give it away: row 27). But to experience nirvana at Angkor Wat? Talk to Brown + Hudson. **CONTINUED ▶**

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: BERNARDO SALCE; BROWN + HUDSON; CHRISTOPHER WISE; NICOLAS AXELROD/ROOM



# Song Saa



A two-bedroom jungle villa's pool and deck are on a hill above the resort's overwater villas.

**T**he speedboat is thumping against rough waves in the Gulf of Thailand, having pulled away from Cambodia's port of Sihanoukville 45 minutes and 20 miles ago. To the left is the mostly uninhabited Koh Rong island, with lush wild rainforest growing to the edge of the landmass's more than 16 virgin beaches. To the right is nothing but open sea, though an occasional wooden fishing boat putters by. Suddenly two mounds of jungle, like little green gumdrops, appear off Koh Rong's coast, and as the speedboat darts closer, thatched-roof villas, extending over the water like octopus tentacles, emerge into view.

I've arrived at Song Saa, Cambodia's first private island resort. It consists of two islands—Koh Ouen and Koh Bong—that are connected by a footbridge over a marine reserve. There are 27 villas (9 overwater, 11 in the jungle, and 7 with ocean views), each immaculately designed, each serviced by a ratio of

about six happy staffers to one villa. At Song Saa, guests can do as little or as much as they'd like. Activities include snorkeling, scuba diving, paddleboarding, kayaking, hiking, yoga, spa-ing, pool-ing, beach-ing, or simply luxuriating. Clocks are set an hour ahead of the mainland's to give the island more daylight.

A paper scroll, delivered to each villa daily, invites guests to dinner in different locations every night. The menus rotate, too. One evening supper might be at the Driftwood Bar for Thai cuisine; another night it could be a beach setting with Khmer food. Retiring after dinner, guests will find their villas lit up solely by 20 or so twinkling candles, and baths might already be drawn with, say, coconut milk and lavender.

It's no wonder Song Saa is usually visited as the relaxing end to a Cambodian journey. Although those who have traveled around the country first might find the resort to be a jarring contrast to the gloomy poverty elsewhere, it's only after experiencing Cambodia as a whole that one understands that Song Saa is

more than just a luxury resort. It's a metaphor for Cambodia's future. It's a symbol of hope.

Song Saa's founding goes like this: Rory Hunter and Melita Koulmandas Hunter, both attractive Aussies, met in 2003, in Auckland, New Zealand, where Rory was working in advertising at Saatchi & Saatchi and Melita had an organic-design business. On a whim, Rory accepted a job offer to run an agency in Phnom Penh. They moved there sight unseen for what they thought would be a year. That was 2005.

When the Hunters arrived in Cambodia, they witnessed a country dormant after decades of oppression. In Phnom Penh there were no traffic lights, paved roads, or cars. People got around only on cyclos, *tuk-tuks*, and bikes. But within six months or so, the country started waking up. Roads went down, traffic lights went up, and cars drove in. "We got caught up in the energy of a country wanting to rebuild itself," Rory says.

Locals in Phnom Penh didn't know islands existed 18 miles off Cambodia's southwest coast, in the Koh Rong archipelago, but the





An overwater villa's bedroom looks out at the Gulf of Thailand. The inspiration for the interior, conceived by Melita Hunter, came from the island's surroundings. Materials used to decorate the space include old fishing boats, local stone, and recycled timber.

Hunters had heard about them from a Khmer friend whose father-in-law was a fisherman. In 2006, the Hunters rented a fishing boat and spent two weeks adventuring around the undeveloped islands. The area was pristine. “Pure white-sand beaches, untouched rainforest,” Melita says. “The people had never seen a foreigner.”

On the last day, the Hunters stopped on Koh Ouen looking for lunch. The island was covered in rubbish, which was shockingly dissimilar to elsewhere in the archipelago (though not unlike the rest of Cambodia). A fishing family had been living and dumping garbage there for 20 years. Waste was everywhere, including in the offshore reefs. Pigs and chickens were running around. The family had cut down the rainforest. The island was dying.

The family said the area was becoming hard to fish since fishermen on about 50 local boats were throwing trash in the water. The father wanted to leave. He asked if the Hunters wanted to buy his island. “We said yes!” Melita recalls. The Hunters came back a week later with a brown paper bag filled with \$15,000.

**F**irst they started to pick up the trash. “In those early days we put a call out to the local villages to say we needed help,” Melita says. As the Hunters were cleaning up their property—which took two years of hauling 80 tons of garbage to the mainland—they realized that if they protected their reef, maybe the fish would return. So they worked

with the Cambodian government to establish the country’s first marine reserve, now a 12-acre no-fishing zone around Song Saa. Within about a year the fish—barracuda, teira batfish, slender silversides—started to come back.

Once the marine reserve was established, the Hunters handed its governance over to Prek Svay, the 645-person village across the bay from Song Saa, on Koh Rong. “We did that through lots of education, and getting the blessing from the locals,” Melita says. “The fishermen got the message. They stopped coming. It was a slow, gradual journey.”

The Hunters soon started to understand the difficulties that Prek Svay and the other three villages on Koh Rong were up against. They established the Song Saa Foundation to do conservation, education, and health-care work in the villages. That’s how the idea for the resort came about: as a way to sustain the foundation through optional guest donations. “This isn’t us trying to create a theme park where you can see a different world,” Rory says. “We want to make people’s lives better. The foundation is sustainable. And it’s not there because the hotel is there. It can continue if the hotel goes away.” The foundation has since worked on many projects driven by community need, like implementing a waste-management facility in Prek Svay. Today that village, once knee-deep in trash, is clean and beautiful.

Now it’s 2015, ten years after the Hunters began their journey in Cambodia, and three

years after the resort opened. I am accompanying three of the Song Saa Foundation team members on their monthly *Boat of Hope* excursion to deliver medical and school supplies around the Koh Rong archipelago. Philanthropy is one of the activities guests can choose to partake in.

Fifty-nine out of 64 elementary-school-aged children in blue-and-white uniforms show up for class today in one of Koh Rong’s four villages. But before the kids get to do the fun stuff—play with soccer balls we brought them, or color with crayons—we are going to teach them how to brush their teeth.

One thing to know is that my dad has had a long career in the American dental industry. So here I am, half a planet away from home, and of all things, I am showing these darling children how to use a toothbrush, an instrument most have never seen before. I spot one tiny boy who is foaming toothpaste at the mouth; he has the biggest, brightest, happiest smile.

It’s then and there, in this fishing village, a stone’s throw from one of the world’s most lavish resorts, that I realize that here, beauty goes beyond the richness of the temples. Beauty is in the water, sand, and sun. It’s in the art, culture, food, and shops. But, most of all, it’s in the warmth, creativity, and hope—especially the hope—of its people. And that is the real luxury of Song Saa. ♦

*Villas from \$1,440; Kaoh Rung, Krong Preah Sihanouk; 855-23/989-012; songsaa.com.*