

Find an unspoilt corner of Asia in Cambodia



Sunrise over Angkor Wat

Forget fire-safety instructions, my favourite hotel in the world had a sign hanging on the door telling me to check explosives in at reception. The hotel was in Siem Reap in Cambodia. I loved it because it was so far removed from anywhere I'd stayed before. In the six years since, accommodation in Cambodia has become far less rough and ready, with several luxury boutique hotels now available (see below). But the country, with its beautiful countryside and strong sense of identity, still feels unspoiled compared to some of its south-east Asian neighbours.

The capital city, Phnom Penh, has plenty of sights to keep you entertained for two or three days. Start with a walk up Wat Phnom; at 88ft, it is the city's only hill and it offers a great view of the capital. Then visit the Royal Palace to see the famous Silver Pagoda, which gets its name from the 5,000 silver tiles that carpet the floor. You can then go on to pick up some silver of your own at the city's markets. Here you can buy quality silver goods for a fraction of their Western prices – the Russian market is particularly good for bargain hunters.

Cambodia is, of course, also well known for its grim past. Under the brutal regime of Pol Pot in the 1970s, more than a million Cambodians died or were killed by the Khmer Rouge. It's upsetting, but it's worth taking time to visit the Killing Fields and Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum to learn more about what the Cambodian people have been through.

After spending a few days in Phnom Penh, visit Siem Reap in northern Cambodia. This is the gateway to Angkor, a Unesco World Heritage site, made up of hundreds of temples built between the 9th and 14th century by the Khmer civilisation. Amazing technological advances, including complex irrigation schemes, enabled Angkor to become the world's largest pre-industrial settlement.

The best way to start a visit to Angkor is at dawn. Get up early and enter the site while it's still dark to see the temples gradually revealed by the rising sun. The open square in the centre of Angkor Wat (the biggest temple) is the best place from which to see the sun rise.

Up until 1908, when the French launched a restoration project, the temples had been all but lost to the jungle. Now most have been brought back into the open. As well as Angkor Wat, make sure you see the stone faces of Bayon and the delicate carvings of Banteay Srei. Then turn your attention to Ta Prohm. This temple hasn't been restored, and only a minimal amount of jungle clearance has been done – just enough so you don't need a machete to get to it. The result is an eerie world where trees and buildings seem to blend into each other.

After all that sightseeing, you'll probably have an appetite. As in the rest of southeast Asia, cheap, good curries are easy to find in Cambodia – just head to the busiest restaurant. But if you want something more upmarket, try the Meric restaurant at Hotel de la Paix in Siem Reap, or Metro in Phnom Penh.

Cambodia: getting there and staying there

Phnom Penh

The Scandinavia Hotel; double rooms cost from \$40 per night:

www.hotel-scandinavia-cambodia.com;

00 855 92 791 449.

Siem Reap

Hotel de la Paix; double rooms cost from £160 per night:

www.hoteldelapaixangkor.com;

00 855 63 966 000.

Flights

As yet there aren't any direct flights to Cambodia from Britain, but you can fly via Bangkok with several airlines. **Thai Airways** offers the most regular service, with daily flights between Phnom Penh and Bangkok. See: www.thaiair.com;

0870-606 0911.