

RAISING THE BAR

Phnom Penh might not be renowned for having the world's most chichi breweries or beer gardens, but change is brewing. Gemma Price hops over to Cambodia to witness a new breed of boozier



Kingdom beer in a glass and bottled; CEO Peter Brongers enjoys his brew



AMBODIA'S SLEEPY CAPITAL HAS

always been a place to sit back, relax and watch the world pass by, but a recent proliferation of upscale beer gardens is changing all that, giving travellers and diehard barflies an irresistible excuse to get out more. Chic alfresco hangouts that offer great BBQ and international food, accompanied by a pick of the local brews, are replacing well-worn plastic chairs and raucous karaoke.

Adding to this is Phnom Penh's newest boutique producer, Kingdom Breweries. Sitting on the banks of the Tonlé Sap, Kingdom Breweries is gearing up to give the twin stalwarts of Anchor and Angkor a run for their riel, using premium German malt and top-quality water to produce the brand's flagship pilsner. "Fancy one?" Kingdom CEO Peter Brongers asks me, proffering an ice-cold bottle of the first batch from his office mini-fridge. "The locals

think it's a little bitter, but I think it's perfect."

I have to agree. Crisp, light and refreshing, the taste is distinctly European, but Kingdom's branding is unmistakably Khmer. A mystical protective naga serpent coils around every bottle neck, and four of the country's endangered fauna – the clouded leopard, impressed tortoise, pangolin and rarely-seen kouprey (forest ox) –

Cambodia's national animal – have been adopted as brand ambassadors.

In keeping with the growing culture of beer gardens in Phnom Penh, Kingdom already has an elegant Indochine-style bar and deck patio. Here I'm introduced to Rolf Lanziger, the proprietor of Dan's Meats who's widely considered the best butcher in town. His table is littered with proof that the bottle in his hand is far from his first. "I love it," he admits, raising a toast.

Kingdom may have impressed expats, but



German brew master Peter Hauptenthal knows he still needs to capture Khmer tastes while staying faithful to his proud fermenting and filtering heritage. "We're now working towards the final recipe and think we're almost there. Unfortunately, making a good beer takes time and we can't speed up the process," he reveals.

Local consumption of beer is estimated to be as low as seven litres per person annually, but Brongers believes that means there's money to be made. He plans to expand



54 Langeach Sros (top centre); Man Han Lou beers

Kingdom's output from 150,000 bottles to around one million per month, with a vision to raise the standard of Phnom Penh's already buzzing beer scene. Alongside Kingdom's upscale bar, he's also importing an old Island River double-decker bus from the UK, which he'll transform to an open-top mobile bar, complete with wooden veneer bar, tables and swivelling velvet-topped stools.

For US\$10 a ticket, punters will get a tour of the facilities, a couple of beers and a Kingdom T-shirt as a

memento. "When it starts running in February, it'll be the only party bus in Cambodia," Peter Brongers boasts. Good timing, as it turns out: the opening coincides with the start of the dry season and by the time of Khmer New Year (*Chaul Chnam Thmey*) two months later, the *alfresco* beer drinking season will be well and truly under way.

While Kingdom may be the newest brand on the beer block, the small city already has two microbreweries with beer gardens that have been rising in popularity. Man Han Lou's brews are extremely palatable, and patrons seem perfectly accepting of them in spite of one of the beers sporting an unusual acid green colour.

Every night waistcoated staff swarm the brewhouse-themed restaurant, delivering pints pulled from plastic keg-effect containers while an imposing array of metal tanks against the back wall store the goods. Man Han Lou's beers are sold in four multi-hued varieties: Gold, Red, Green and Black stout.

Munich beer garden, on the other hand, is a self-proclaimed purveyor of "authentic German brew". Gold and stout are the only varieties on offer, but the garden setting makes the experience worthwhile. Its striped awning, high-ceilinged gazebo, verdant greenery and potted plant hedgerow makes Munich quite the beer-and-barbecue oasis.

Besides these two, beer gardens have sprung up all over the city, serving quick, delicious dishes accompanied by local and international brews. "Try 'Good Dreams' (*Soben Laoh*), it has the best steak in town!" advises one resident. Sovanna, around the corner from Java gallery, also draws in a crowd, while 54 Langeach Sros is filled with beer guzzlers. So the next time you're in Phnom Penh, make sure beer is part of the experience.

www.kingdombreweries.com

Munich Beer Garden, tel (+855) (0)23 638 2226

Man Han Lou, tel (+855) (0)23 721 966

54 Langeach Sros, tel (+855) (0)17 455 454

Sovanna, #2, Street 21