

# Detour in Cambodia: The Charms of Siem Reap



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The magazine, dedicated to lifestyle, travel and understated luxury suggests the first step towards all possible trips with its reports.

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Siem Reap seems to have doubled in the last twenty years. | ©Getty Images

**Cambodia snorts. This country with a soft face but a rough history seems to want to project itself into the future. Everywhere, new places appear. Dream hotels, trendy bars and restaurants, trendy shops... The young generation wants to take advantage of the tremendous leap forward that is boosting Asia.**

## **An enlarged city**

Take Siem Reap, the main tourist city, from where all excursions to Angkor depart. The city has increased dramatically in the space of a decade. Under the impulse of the Asian clientele, now majority when it was non-existent 20 years ago (the share of Chinese only has increased by 30% in 2016 alone), Siem Reap seems to have doubled in size and its streets are now rustling with a new life. Young people from around the world are busy infusing impressive energy into their streets. We meet them at the Embassy restaurant, the most chic restaurant in the city, opened by the French Serge Billot.



Located on the first floor of a pretty house on Kings Road, in the heart of the city, this restaurant features two fake twins, say the Kim Sans. Both searched the archives and took lessons from a king's cook, to resurrect Cambodian gastronomy. Now, the best-starred chefs are scrambling to discover their unique oriental flavors. The story goes that for the job competition, one of the Kim Sans came from his village by bike, carried by his brother.

A few steps away, in the Kandal district, the Hup Guan Street brings together small signs of a new kind illustrated by Sirivan, a trendy outlet launched by a French-Cambodian couple. Next to the casual ready-to-wear designed by Sirivan Chak Dumas - an ex-student of the Atelier Chardon Savard in Paris - Loïc, his companion created Biniky Chic Nomad, a mini concept store focused on deco and high tech that pleased expatriates.

### **Luxury imposes itself**

Eric Raisina, inaugurates for its part a place of a different scale. Fashion designer star in Cambodia, this Malagasy trained at the École Duperré and at the Institut Français de la Mode had a career that has led him especially to work for Yves Saint Laurent and for the Centre de la Soie In 2004, he launched his own brand, by betting on models carved in shimmering silks, adorned with stitched petals, or woven in yarn drops. His original creations have hit the ground and he has opened his fourth, particularly sumptuous, point of sale in Siem Reap.



Cambodians also undertake ambitious projects. Soann Kann, a former employee of Sofitel, has thus become 38 years old as one of the key figures of Siem Reap. This young man has yet started as a small market seller. He rules for a month the largest independent spa in Cambodia. The brand new Sokkhak Spa Riverside occupies no less than 1000 square meters, on Pokombo Avenue, an ultra-high street address facing the river. Paved with black and white cement tiles, the spa plays on natural

materials and rare wooden furniture, original lighting, and Khmer sculptures. Bright orange banquettes and contemporary homemade paintings bring the ensemble together.

Passionate about massage, Soann Kann has personally invested in the training of his team, to develop a Khmer massage protocol with firm and precise pressure on shiatsu points and joints. "We use fresh products, such as avocado masks, pumpkin masks, or coconut and sesame oils, made with the production of local farmers," says Cambodian.



Besides the spa, he has also opened a restaurant, the Chanrey Tree probably fed by the same farmers. This one is always full. Here again, he has personally managed to create a refined menu and a trendy decor, with portraits of retro singers at the entrance. His boundless energy has finally led him to the hotel business. Located in a quieter area, on the outskirts of the city, the Sokkhak Boutique Resort is a pretty, 12-room, all-comfort hotel with a sharp decor, built around a slate-covered pool and lined with vegetation. In the lobby, a majestic staircase surrounded by a rounded brown wall seems to curl around a gently illuminated sculpture. Pewter and wooden sculptures and paintings enliven the restaurant, with windows framed by purple velvet curtains. The rooms also offer a subtle blend of contemporary touches and beautiful pieces of solid wood, like the huge carved rounded wooden headboards and granite bathrooms. The institution also offers an excellent table and mini spa, which is a must after a day trip to Angkor.

### **A story to discover**

Better to aim for a calm niche to enjoy serenely the magic of these mythical ruins, trapped in the roots. In view of the noisy influx of Chinese groups, it is urgent to visit these fabulous remains. We imagine them immutable, but even they have changed. Beside the famous temples of Grand Bayon or Ta Phrom, we now discover the temple of Baphuon. The shapeless stone heap of yesteryear turned into a majestic temple dominating the jungle, under the impulse of the late conservative architect Pascal Royère. The twenty years of work of this remarkable man, who died at 48, are greeted by a

discreet stele. To appreciate Angkor, despite the crowd, it is better now to move to the sites of the periphery (200 monuments and 568 archaeological sites) which still retain all their charm.

The visitor in search of authenticity will prefer to reach Battambang, the next step, by boat rather than by road. From Soksan, it is possible to embark to the floating village of the island of Prek Toal. Particularly lively, this hamlet of 2200 fishing families has maintained a real social life. We cross in boats the children in uniform, rowing to their school. The men fish or raise crocodiles and the women work in the small cooperative of the NGO Osmose, to braid pretty objects in straws.



Some extra hours of driving or navigation are required to reach Battambang. This quiet village, well known for its cultural and artistic life, has preserved in its heart a neighborhood of colonial houses, close to the market. The show of his circus school is a must: scenes and acrobatics are the pretext to comment on the local life with humor. But the charm of the city is found more in the immediate surroundings. Rickshaws will obligatorily offer you the visit of the local craftsmen. We discover the way of making rice alcohol, in a house with seductive fragrances, or the manufacture of these fine pasta that surrounds the spring rolls. In a modest shack, a few people are busy making no less than 2000 cakes a day, dried in vines, along the road.

### **Temple and oasis of peace**

Close to Battambang, the Ek Phnom temple has an interesting surprise. Located on the shores of a lake, next to a giant Buddha, this discreet temple contains interesting sculptures that deserve a restoration. For now, buried under the flowers and plants, it keeps an old magic.

In Battambang, the best oasis to relax is Maisons Wat Kor. Recently inaugurated, this beautiful set of Khmer houses allows you to taste an enchanted parenthesis in a suburb of the city. For those who

discover it today, these beautiful homes grouped around a small pond full of water lilies look like a traditional Khmer hamlet, which would have gone through years and revolutions. In reality, it is the fruit of a titanic work recently undertaken by a couple of Cambodians, eager to better discover his country. They moved tons of earth to reshape the landscape, created a pond, planted a lush garden and made and build these beautiful traditional houses, like a majestic old house that can be visited a few steps away.

The three large wooden houses house two to four rooms each with majestic volumes (up to 6m under ceiling) and neat details. Large traditional wooden beds and headboards, antique furniture, shimmering parties. Large windows bring light and outside, we can enjoy the sun on the benches adorned with cozy colorful cushions. It is also possible to lie in front of the natural stone swimming pool or to take refuge in the massage room, above the pond. The fairy Socheat, masseuse of her state, dispenses skillful care.

In the evening the red bamboo lanterns light up around the pond and the places take a little festive air. We find ourselves facing the pond, on the wooden seats of recovery, decked with big cushions, creating a chill atmosphere. The meals are taken in a nice room paved with cement tiles, open on nature. For ten euros, it is possible to enjoy a delicious home-made menu. Maisons Wat Kor also offers more festive moments: aperitif in the middle of the rice fields or private dinner in the middle of the pond.



"If you live in my house, you're part of my family," says the Cambodian proverb, "that Sophia Huth, the hotel manager, seems to have made her own. The staff at Maisons Wat Kor is very caring for guests and a thousand details make everyone feel at home. It was obviously the opinion of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt who booked the entire hotel to stay with their family for ten days. Magical moments, whose staff keeps a marveled and tender memory. The stars accepted a souvenir photo and covered the neighborhood children with gifts. Buoyed by its success, the establishment should soon grow and improve again.

The driver is waiting, it is time to join Kep, a pretty seaside town, very popular with the people of Phnom Penh. This small seaside resort has always been favored by the Cambodian elite, for better or for worse. The Khmer dignitaries, who had requisitioned the beautiful houses, were chased away by shelling leaving behind a strange landscape of urban ruins. The Cambodians imagine them cursed, they prefer to sell them - at a golden price, do not dream - especially when they are signed Vann Molyvann, the star architect of the sixties.



### **Less is more**

A Belgian philanthropist, Jef Moons, decided in 2006 on three of these houses and made them the cornerstone of the most beautiful seaside hotel, the Knai Bang Chatt. Together with the French architect Françoise Lavielle, they worked on the fine-quality restoration of houses and the construction of exquisitely refined villas around a green stone pool, embedded in vegetation and wood. "Less is more" being their motto, here does not go beyond any frills or even any painting. Some very select antique furniture and a perfect balance of proportions are enough to give a feeling of harmony. These are the materials that speak: walls painted with natural pigments, cement tiles and waxed concretes skilfully aged, colors inspired by the sea, clouds, and earth. The "Do not disturb" signal is a simple pebble. Water bodies at the entrance of the rooms and details of orientation point to the Feng Shui spirit of the place and at dawn, a yoga teacher awaits you on the roof terrace. The brave ones have the opportunity to do a detox or yoga cure.

In the restaurant, the finest dishes are served at the Strand Restaurant on a rough wooden table cut into an 18-meter-long trunk, facing the sea. Further, at the Sailing club, we dine on the pontoon, licked by the waves. "It's luxury, barefoot," summarizes Jef Moons who is preparing an enlargement

of his kingdom, with the creation of a large organic vegetable garden and a sustainable development pilot project on the island of Ko Karang, opposite the hotel. He also hopes, with new suites, to help a school to self-finance.

The Knai Bang Chatt has obtained the highly rated Green Growth 2050 label. For this he opted for non-chemical cleaning products and for the adoption of organic food in his restaurant and water sterilized in glass bottles. Behind the scenes, the staff (93 people for only 18 rooms) benefits from attentive treatment. Some are also concerned by the Hand in Hand association created by Jeff Moons to help neighboring villagers. So goes this country, boosted on all sides by projects between liberalism and philanthropy.

### **Preserving the local culture**

We find this ecological approach in some plantations of pepper, the great local specialty. In the farm of Champei, created in 2011, lush plantations seem to have been there forever. Here pepper and mango trees are worked according to organic standards. The visit of the plantation allows to discover how the different varieties of pepper are made, since only their different treatments explain the differences of color.

Other initiatives in the region are to be welcomed, such as this small factory of recycled bags created by Iwa, the brand of Melissa Matteucci. To avoid seeing the countryside damaged by rubbish, she offers a bonus to those who bring her used bags and she runs a small workshop of elegant bags.

And then there are those who do not want to do anything. Just admire the sea and rest in the shade. For them the city of Kep has planned large awnings, facing the sea, under which are suspended hundreds of hammock swaying with the wind... Another version of "less is more".

Stay and flights:

Terres de Charme, unique travel collection offers this 14-day / 11-night course (double base):

from 3.375 € including taxes / pers, flights included, with:

- 4 nights in Siem Reap + 2 nights in Battambang + 2 nights in Phnom Penh + 3 nights in Kep in the mentioned hotels, with breakfasts
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- Eco-flights Paris / Siem Reap // Phnom Penh / Paris via Hong Kong on the Cathay Pacific.

The international company of Hong Kong offers 11 weekly flights via Hong Kong at prices ranging from 599 euros (eco) to 1105 (Eco premium) and 2535 euros (Business). The VIP lounges of Hong Kong are worth a visit since their renovation in 2016. The Pier, First Class is now among the best salons in the world and The Pier, Business Class, all in white marble and black-coated, has become the company's largest lounge with its various culinary bars. The company has also started to create a special perfume and special beers altitude, and a soundtrack "Sounds of traveling".

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