

PHNOM PENH

Heidi Fuller-love explores Cambodia's capital, from flamboyant architectural gems and iconic colonial haunts to chaotic street markets and creative creepy-crawly cuisine

Why go? Still a stiff trot away from Asia's more mainstream tourist trails, Cambodia's capital – located at the confluence of the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers – is today only just recovering from wounds inflicted by the Khmer Rouge regime over 30 years ago. A raw, rather provincial conurbation with a bewilderingly authentic blend of tatty colonial architecture, kamikaze tuk-tuks and chaotic street markets, the city – once known as Paris of the East – has been enjoying a heady rebirth, with new shops selling trendy recycled design items, more sophisticated restaurants and unusual bars.

What to do? As the sun rises, head for the Olympic Stadium to join thousands of people doing aerobics. After your exertions, order a breakfast of *bai sach chrouk* rice dotted with slivers of grilled pork and scallions from one of the stands outside, then flag down a tuk-tuk and get to the Royal Palace (phnompenh.gov.kh). The Khmer masterpiece, home to the country's kings since 1866, features splendid exhibits such as an emerald buddha hewn out of Baccarat crystal. See Khmer art and textiles at the recently updated National Museum (tourismcambodia.com), then learn about the country's dark past at Tuol Sleng, or 'S-21', Genocide Museum (tuolsleng.com), a school-turned Pol Pot's most notorious prison. While grim, the Killing Fields at Choeung Ek, 17km south of the city centre, are also an essential visit for anyone looking to understand the lasting effects of the Khmer Rouge regime. For a lighter side to the city, take a stroll along Sisowath Quay, a lively, three kilometre-long promenade, where you can watch row boats floating down-stream and stop off at one of the bars and cafés for a sunset cocktail.

Where to stay A tad touristy but still iconic, FCC Phnom Penh (Foreign Correspondents' Club) was home to news reporters in the aftermath of the Pol Pot regime. It has colonial-style rooms overlooking the Mekong river and a bar with trademark whirling ceiling fans and Al Rockoff black-and-white war photos (00 855 23 99 22 84, fcccambodia.com). Take a dip in the pool at luxury

hotel The Plantation (00 855 23 21 51 51 theplantation.asia) in a converted government building near the Royal Palace. Its restaurant serves Khmer specialities such as luscious coconut fish amok. A skip away from the trendy boutiques of Street 240, The Pavilion Hotel (00 855 23 22 22 80, thepavilion.asia) is a 1920s villa built in Khmer and French styles, boasting a pool, spacious rooms with four-poster beds and some with private plunge pools.

Where to eat and drink Influenced by Chinese and French cuisines, Khmer food's flavours depend on distinctive ingredients, including a wide range of creepy crawlies. For the city's best bowl of *nom banh chok* noodles topped with pungent *prahok* fish paste, carve a way through tuk tuk- and cycle-encumbered streets to the Russian Market (Street 163 and Street 444). If you prefer seafood snacks, including crunchy grilled crab dusted with aromatic *kampot* pepper, wend your way to the bustling riverfront night market Psar Reatrey (Street 108 and Sisowath Quay). In the tangle of alleys surrounding a 19th-century post office, Van's Restaurant (00 855 23 72 20 67, vans-restaurant.com), which was Gérard Depardieu's hangout in the film *City of Ghosts*, deals in Khmer fusion cuisine – try the richly melting cognac, chocolate and vegetable Mekong lobster hotpot. Bugs have been on the menu in Cambodia for centuries, but if you don't fancy the street-food option, sample a gourmet version at Romdeng (00 855 92 21 95 65, tree-alliance.org). A stylish eatery run by former street children and renowned for its local cuisine, stand-out dishes include the (surprisingly bacon-like) fried spider served in a spicy lime dipping sauce, and chewy strips of sun-dried snake served with crunchy green mango salad.

Time running out? Hop in a pedal-powered rickshaw for a three-hour Khmer Architecture Tour of the city (ka-tours.org).

Trip tip Visit traditional communities, eat local specialities and explore the lush countryside on a 25km Islands of the Mekong bicycle tour with Grasshopper Adventures (grasshopperadventures.com).

Travel information

Currency is the riel (£1 = 6,400 KHR). Phnom Penh is seven hours ahead of GMT and is a 16 hour journey from London.

Getting there

Thai Airways (thaiairways.com) flies from London Heathrow to Phnom Penh, with a change in Bangkok.

British Airways (ba.com) also operates a route from London Heathrow to Phnom Penh, with a change at Bangkok.

Resources

Tourism of Cambodia (tourismcambodia.com) offers useful information on Phnom Penh, as does the **Ministry of Tourism of Cambodia** (tourismcambodia.org)

Further reading

Phnom Penh: A Cultural and Literary History by Milton Osborne (Signal Books, £12) is a great reference.

AVERAGE DAILY TEMPERATURES AND RAINFALL

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Min °C	21	22	23	24	24	24	24	24	24	24	23	21
Max °C	31	32	33	35	33	32	32	32	31	30	30	30
mm	0	0	1	2	5	5	5	5	7	8	4	1

Clockwise from right: a roadside food vendor; the Olympic Market; a cross-town delivery; creepy crawlies for sale; children in a nearby village; The Plantation; one of the hotel's luxury rooms; alongside the Mekong River; the Royal Palace; a creamy curry; spring rolls