

Food bizarre

On a culinary odyssey by scooter from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap, Heidi Fuller-Love samples everything from termite egg soup to crunchy insects, braised tarantula and savoury chopped frog. Photography by Vinh Dao





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As the sun sets over Angkor Wat, the temple complex built for King Suryavarman II in the 12th century, I nose my cream-coloured Vespa out into a horn-tooting, bell-dinging line of tuk-tuks, bikes and cars. In my pink crash helmet and Gucci bike goggles, I feel a bit like a displaced cast member from an *Austin Powers* movie. Still, my mission is a serious one: I'm planning to travel the 315km from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh in three days, stopping off en route to sample some of the weirdest and most wonderful foods the kingdom has to offer.

Before leaving Siem Reap, however, I head for Le Tigre de Papier cooking school to get a handle on the main elements of Khmer cuisine. Putting my foot in my mouth before I've even taken my first bite of anything exotic, I mention the influence of Thai food on Cambodia's culinary offerings.

Heng, who runs the cookery course, scowls darkly. "Let's get one thing straight: WE influenced THEIR food. Khmer food came first and the Thais copied from us."

Despite Heng's understandably one-sided viewpoint, the influence of other cultures on Khmer cuisine can't

Above, from left: Siem Reap's night market; Le Tigre de Papier cooking school students enjoy a lesson in food selection

be ignored. Cambodian food has its own, very distinctive flavours – thanks in part to the presence of preserved lemons in dishes like *ngam nguv* (chicken soup) and the use of a shudder-inducing range of creepy crawlies in other "delicacies" – but it also owes a debt to countries as far-flung as China, India and France. It was Chinese traders who introduced noodles here, India clearly inspired the Cambodian practice of using coconut milk and turmeric in curries and desserts, and the French were undoubtedly behind the bizarre Khmer tradition of having a baguette smothered with liver pâté for breakfast.

With the morning's discord behind us, Heng takes me to the food stands surrounding Siem Reap's night market. The heavenly aromas of spice and barbecued meat fill the air as we fight through a dense throng and bag two of the few remaining empty seats in front of a long line of roadside food carts. "When you first come to Cambodia, people tell you never to eat street food," Heng says. "But if you want to eat the best of Khmer cuisine, you should never eat anywhere else."

Elbow to elbow with fellow diners >>

พระอาทิตย์ตกลงเบื้องหลังนครวัดแล้ว ฉันขี่รถเวสไปไปตามถนนที่พลุกพล่าน จากเมืองเสียมราฐมุ่งหน้าสู่พนมเปญ เพื่อจุดหมายเดียวคือการแวะชิมอาหารรสเลิศตามรายการ

คุณแข่งจากโรงเรียนสอนทำอาหารพาฉันไปชิมอาหารในตลาดกลางคืนในเมืองเสียมราฐ ก่อนจะบอกว่า เมื่อมาชิมพูซา ใครๆก็จะบอกให้คุณเลี่ยงอาหารข้างถนน แต่ถ้าหากอยากชิมอาหารกัมพูชารสชาติที่ดีที่สุดในกัมพูชา ก็ต้องกินจากร้านริมถนนนี้แหละ



Above, from left: Barbecued frog legs along Cambodia's street; deep fried scorpions

at rickety plastic tables, we eat *cháo lòng*, a flavourful rice broth dotted with cubes of congealed blood and served with tubular chunks of tripe.

Emboldened by my first encounter with Khmer offal, the next morning I breakfast on *plea sach ko* – a version of *laab* (diced meat) made with beef tripe, toasted rice and cilantro. Sweet with a hint of spice, it's delicious and gives me the courage to head out on my Vespa amid the convoy of tuk-tuks, trucks and mopeds leaving Siem Reap.

It's June, the wet season, so I'm not surprised when rain starts lashing down. I'm taken aback, however, when the tarmac road disappears and I find myself motoring along a muddy, pot-holed track. By the time I reach Chong Khneas, a floating village on the Tonlé Sap, I look like a hippo who has just emerged from a leisurely mud bath.

Luckily, the rain stops and I strip to a T-shirt and shorts as hot steam rises from South-East Asia's largest freshwater lake. Hopping on a boat, I take the two-hour trip to Kompong Phluk, the lake's largest settlement,

where I visit the *prahok* shed to see suspended fish dripping with the fermented juice used to make Cambodia's ubiquitous fish sauce. Its "aroma" takes some getting used to.

Next, I head for a bamboo food hut on stilts and order frog amok, a variation on Cambodia's savoury signature dish, fish amok. Steamed in a banana leaf basket along with *prahok*, turmeric and coconut milk, the chopped frog is tender and tastes like chicken. That night, I seek out a homestay in the little town of Damdek and sleep under the eaves, with my host family snoring on the mattress

next to me and pigs snorting in their pen below.

A couple of hours overland from Damdek is the tiny town of Skun, home to what is said to be Cambodia's largest concentration of tarantulas. On a visit to the fascinating breeding ground and edible insect exhibition at Skun spider sanctuary, I learn that arachnids are considered a gastronomic delicacy in Cambodia. "Along with lizards, scorpions and rats, they were introduced onto the menu during the foodless >>>

ฉันนั่งรับประทานข้าวต้มใส่เลือดเป็นก้อนๆกับ
กระเพาะเรียกว่า ข้าวลอม ก่อนจะสั่ง พะเล ลัด โก
ที่ดล่าย ะลอบแต่ทำจากกระเพาะวัว ข้าวต้มและ
ผักชี รสหวานๆเค็มๆผสมกับเครื่องเทศ
รสชาติดี ช่วยให้ฉันมีกำลังใจขี่รถเวสป้า
ออกไปเผชิญถนนลูเมืองเสียมราฐอีกครั้ง

ไม่กี่ชั่วโมงจากเมืองต้อมเต็กสู่เมืองสะกุนที่มี
ชื่อเสียงว่าเป็นแหล่งรวมแมงมุมยักษ์ทาร์ันทูรา
หลังจากแวะชมงานจัดแสดงแมลงในเมือง ก็ได้
รู้ว่าแมลงต่างๆนับเป็นของกินขึ้นชื่อและหายาก
ในกัมพูชา ทั้งแมงป่อง หนูและพวกกิ้งก่า ต่าง
กลายเป็นอาหารในช่วงอาหารขาดแคลนในสมัย
เขมรแดงปกครองกัมพูชา จากนั้นก็กลายเป็นที่
นิยมชมชอบจนทำให้สัตว์เหล่านั้นถูกล่า และเกิด
ความกลัวว่าจะกลายเป็นสัตว์สูญพันธุ์ในที่สุด



Khmer Rouge regime, but now they have become so popular that there are fears they could be hunted to extinction,” sanctuary employee Sopheap tells me.

Back in Skun town, the market stands are piled high with fried crickets, grilled locusts and braised *a-pings*, as the beleaguered arachnids are known locally. All around me, school kids and grannies buy the spiders. They are black and hairy and as big as a hand – and at 50 US cents each, they don’t come cheap. “We fry them to destroy the poison, then dip them in garlic and salt,” I learn from a vendor.

Summoning every last bit of courage, I graze the food stands for crickets (bland and crunchy) and locusts (meaty but with legs that tend to stick in the teeth) before going all out on a bag of tarantulas. Shutting my eyes, I dip my hand in the bag, pull off a leg and nibble. Surprisingly, once the initial revulsion wears off, the taste is not that bad. The texture of *a-ping* is rough and crispy like pork, but inside it’s tender and fatty with a flavour not unlike cod. “The head is the best bit,” says a granny with half a spider in her hand and the other half in her mouth. Deciding to take her word for it, I offer her the rest of my bag. She accepts gratefully and makes short work of the three hairy spiders inside.

Above, from left: Crispy tarantula for sale; a delicious pot of termite egg soup being served

A lazy putter along the N7 takes me to Kampong Cham, a bustling town stretched along the Mekong. I spend the night in a rundown guesthouse and sample termite egg soup, popping each tiny egg between my teeth like grapes to enjoy the salty, slightly, sour taste.

From Kampong Cham, it’s a three-hour trip to Phnom Penh. After parking my Vespa, I take a table at Romdeng (74 Street 174, T: +855(0)92 219565), a restaurant that’s run by former street kids and is renowned for its local cuisine. After an entrée of fried spider with a spicy lime dipping sauce, I tuck into the green mango and wild snake salad. Pungent and chewy, the dried snake is superb and I congratulate myself on finding the perfect place to wrap up my journey into the culinary heart of the “Kingdom of Wonder”. *

BEST RESTAURANT FOR WEIRD FOOD IN SIEM REAP

Meric, Hotel de la Paix,
T: +855 (0)63 966000

The menu at this chic hotel restaurant near the night market includes grilled frog, snake salad and other culinary oddities

ในที่สุดฉันก็มาถึงท่าจอดเรือ เมืองที่ดูวุ่นวาย ตั้งอยู่
เรียงฝั่งแม่น้ำโขง ฉันค้างที่เมืองนี้หนึ่งคืนและ
รับประทานแกงไขปลวก จากนั้นก็มุ่งหน้าสู่ร้าน
อาหารริมตลิ่งแล้วลองลิ้มชิมรสแมงมุมทอด
จิ้มซอสมะนาวเผ็ด สลัดงูกับมะม่วงรสจัด