

Cambodia

by MARK HOTHAM
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thirty years on



On 7th January 1979 the Vietnamese Army rolled into Phnom Penh, freeing the country from the barbaric rule of the Khmer Rouge. They found a country that had been dragged back to the Stone Age. The subsequent road to recovery has been long and hard but Cambodia is finally emerging into a fascinating tourist destination. As the country marks this sombre anniversary we look at the major role tourism has played in its rehabilitation.

To be in Phnom Penh during the Water Festival is to witness this quiet backwater of a country transform into a riot of sound, colour and smell, as hundreds of thousands of Cambodians pour into the capital for three days of fun and festivities. The festival is held each year to mark the turning of the waters in the great Tonle Sap River and is the biggest event in the Cambodian calendar.

Yet thirty years ago these teeming, vibrant streets were deserted, purged of their inhabitants. Cars lay abandoned in the street, obsolete bank notes from the looted banks fluttered in the air, unwanted since the abolition of all currency in the new regime, the doors to homes left open in the rush to evacuate the fallen city. It was 1975 and the Khmer Rouge had begun their four year rule of murder and insanity by clearing the capital city of its

inhabitants. Many were never to return. It was not until January 7th 1979 when Vietnamese Army tanks rolled into the city and pushed the Khmer Rouge out, that the end of so many years of suffering was in sight.

Thirty years later the effects of these events still reverberate through Cambodia. To the casual observer it would seem axiomatic that the Cambodians would be eternally grateful to the Vietnamese for ridding them of the Khmer Rouge. However, things are a little more complicated, and events to commemorate the anniversary this year were met, as always, with a muted response from Cambodians. The fact that the Vietnamese stayed on for ten years and are accused by some of still pulling the strings from Hanoi, has a lot to do with this apparent lack of appreciation.

Yet Cambodia is moving on and the significance of tourism and the

benefits it brings to countries like Cambodia can not be underestimated. An ever growing proportion of Cambodia's young population now works in the tourism industry. The increasing number of visitors to the country has also had a significant effect on traditional craft industries, such as silk weaving and rattan work. They have been able to develop in a way that includes social enterprises and adheres to fair-trade principles, all of which would not exist without tourism. In addition, Khmer ballet has seen a resurgence in interest, along with traditional Khmer music, both of which were all but destroyed during the Pol Pot years.

Inevitably, the vast majority of visitors head straight to Siem Reap to visit the amazing Angkor period temples. The range of hotels now on offer in Siem Reap has grown to cater for this surge in numbers. You will find everything from charming, smaller, ►►



Angkor Wat at Sunset, Siem Reap



The National Museum, Phnom Penh



Boatman, dolphin spotting in Kratie



Tuol Sleng, Phnom Penh



Hotel De La Paix, Siem Reap



Painted girls, Phnom Penh



Contemplative monk, Angkor Wat, Siam Reap



Cambodian countryside



Apsara show, Angkor Village Resort and Hotel, Siem Reap



Bou Sra waterfalls, Mondulkiri



Catholic Church building, Phnom Penh



Ta Prohm temple being reclaimed by the jungle, Siem Reap



Chan Chaya Pavilion, Royal Palace, Phnom Penh

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▶ traditional boutique hotels such as the Hanuman Alaya; to the uber-modern, design-led Hotel de la Paix which helps to train locals in the tourism industry; to the standard bearer La Residence D'Angkor, an Orient Express property which comes with all the style and grace you would expect from them. This means that after a hard day's temple exploration you can be sure to return to an oasis of peace, relaxation and comfort.

But get away from the temples around Siem Reap and there is a lot more to see and do. And now you will be able to find some superb little boutique properties in remote locations ready to take you in and offer you a wonderful, characterful place to stay. In Chhlong for example, a small riverside town in the east of Cambodia, from where visitors can head out to nearby Kratie to spot the rare Irrawaddy dolphin, you can now stay in the lovely Relais De Chhlong. A former French colonial villa, it has now been restored to its original condition and has six rooms for guests and the additional benefit of a swimming pool in which to relax and cool off at the end of the day.

It is in Phnom Penh that the past sits alongside the present so markedly though. In the centre of the city you have the moving and poignant Khmer Rouge memorial at Tuol Sleng, the former school turned into a detention and torture camp by the Khmer Rouge. A few minutes away by cyclo sits the impressive Raffles Le Royal Hotel. Formerly a French Gendarmerie, it was then converted to a hotel before becoming one of the last refuges for civilians during

the Khmer Rouge invasion of Phnom Penh. It has since been restored to its former glory as the best hotel in the city. Although Cambodia has some fine examples of French colonial architecture it is also home to some classic pieces of art deco and post modern architecture which can be discovered on a fascinating walking tour of the capital. Many are the work of renowned Cambodian architect, Vann Molyvann, a disciple of Le Corbusier. Perhaps his most famous piece is the Independence Monument.

Another positive aspect of the growth in tourism has been the increasing array of wonderful restaurants on offer, particularly in Phnom Penh. You can now dine at any number of excellent Khmer restaurants, offering modern Khmer cuisine at international standards, or even Russian, Mexican, Italian or Indian restaurants.

Along the riverfront you will find numerous cafes and bars, and no trip to Phnom Penh is complete without a sundowner at the famous Foreign Correspondents' Club.

Although still far from the future that the Cambodian people deserve, this is a country on the right track in many ways. It is to be hoped that a responsible approach to the continued growth of its tourism industry will play a significant role, not only in making this beautiful country a wonderful destination for visitors, but to make it a better place for its citizens.

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FACT file

A typical 11 day itinerary to Cambodia, taking in the temples in Siem Reap, the capital Phnom Penh and a side trip to Chhlong and Kratie to see the Irrawaddy dolphins, staying in three star character hotels and using economy flights, would cost from **£2,100 per person**. For more information, please contact our Cambodia specialists on **01993 838 160**.



www.audleytravel.com/cambodia

The view from Phnom Penh

Kulikar Sotho, Managing Director of Audley's partners in Cambodia, was born in 1973 in Phnom Penh. Kulikar's early years were overshadowed by the horrors of the Khmer Rouge. It was a tragic period for her family that saw her father imprisoned and killed for the 'crime' of being an Air France pilot. She subsequently grew up in Phnom Penh during the 1980s and still lives in the Cambodian capital. She looks back on Cambodia then and now:



“*At school (in the 1980s), I had to study Russian as a foreign language, either that or Vietnamese and a lot of Cambodians weren't happy with the Vietnamese at that time as they were occupying our country. English was banned as this was the height of the Cold War.*

By 1979, Cambodia was on its knees, the population traumatised and starving. I remember well, as one of my earliest memories, eating raw chillies from bushes growing near the Mekong River bank. Look at the country today and it has come a long way. Bicycles have been replaced by motorbikes, motorbikes by cars and the new generation has access to computers and the Internet. Even as late as 1990, we had no photocopiers in Cambodia, as they were seen as seditious or dangerous by the communist authorities. One of my first jobs was to work as a human photocopier, copying pages and pages of documents by the light of a candle.

Stability is very important for Cambodia and the Khmer people. We spent too many years suffering through wars, genocide, famine and occupation, so what we crave more than anything else is a sense of stability. I am not exactly a fan of the current government, but one thing they have delivered is stability to most of the country. There are no more Khmer Rouge guerrillas, no more controlled areas. Today, Cambodia is one again and it is possible to travel anywhere in the country.

Tourism has helped bring this improved security to the countryside. It has also helped to improve the self-esteem of our country, helped us to feel valued, cherished by our visitors. The Cambodian people are very proud of our past glories, and it gives us great satisfaction to see visitors so overwhelmed by the temples of Angkor. It is a confirmation of our rich culture, an affirmation of our identity and something of which we can be very proud as a nation.

Tourism has had a big impact on the country, introducing the Cambodian people to another world, a world of opportunity and freedom. This has changed our own attitudes and expectations towards our government and our country, and can only improve our situation in the long run. I wish more Cambodians had the opportunity to travel to broaden their minds. But in its own way, this is what tourism does for Cambodia; it brings these other ideas, other cultures, and other people to Cambodia, which is helping to broaden minds.”