

Destination Cambodia

FAST FACTS

Population:
About 15 million

Life expectancy: 58 years

Infant mortality:
95 per 1000 births

GDP: US\$8.3 billion (2007)

Adult literacy rate: 73.6%

Number of tourists per
year: 2 million and rising

Number of monks in
Cambodia: 60,000

Annual freshwater fish
catch: 290,000–430,000
tonnes per year

Bombs dropped on Cam-
bodia: 539,000 tonnes

Number of psychiatrists
in Cambodia: 20

There's a magic about Cambodia that casts a spell on many who visit this charming yet confounding kingdom. Ascend to the realm of the gods at the mother of all temples, Angkor Wat, a spectacular fusion of symbolism, symmetry and spirituality. Descend into the hell of Tuol Sleg and come face to face with the Khmer Rouge and its killing machine. Welcome to the conundrum that is Cambodia: a country with a history both inspiring and depressing, an intoxicating place where the future is waiting to be shaped.

The years of fear and loathing are finally over and Angkor is once more the symbol of the nation, drawing pilgrims from across the globe. Peace has come to this beautiful yet blighted land after three decades of war, and the Cambodian people have opened their arms to the world. Tourism has well and truly taken off, yet a journey here remains an adventure as much as a holiday.

Contemporary Cambodia is the successor state to the mighty Khmer empire, which, during the Angkor period, ruled much of what is now Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The remains of this empire can be seen at the fabled temples of Angkor, monuments unrivalled in scale and grandeur in Southeast Asia. The traveller's first glimpse of Angkor Wat, the ultimate expression of Khmer genius, is simply staggering and is matched by only a few select spots on earth, such as Machu Picchu or Petra.

Just as Angkor is more than its wat, so too is Cambodia more than its temples. The chaotic yet charismatic capital of Phnom Penh is a hub of political intrigue, economic rivalry and intellectual debate. All too often overlooked by hit-and-run tourists ticking off Angkor on a regional tour, the revitalised city is finally earning plaudits in its own right thanks to a gorgeous riverside location, a cultural renaissance, and a dining and drinking scene to rival the best in the region.

Siem Reap and Phnom Penh may be the heavyweights, but to some extent they are a bubble, a world away from the Cambodia of the countryside. This is the place to experience the rhythm of rural life and timeless landscapes of dazzling rice paddies and swaying sugar palms. Spend some time in the *srok* (provinces), as Cambodians call them, enjoying a *dar leng* (walkabout) to discover the true flavour of the country.

The south coast is fringed by tropical islands, with barely a beach hut in sight. The next Ko Samui or Gili Trawangan awaits discovery and, for now, visitors can play Robinson Crusoe. Inland from the coast lie the Cardamom Mountains, part of a vast tropical wilderness that provides a home to elusive wildlife and is the gateway to emerging ecotourism adventures. The mighty Mekong River cuts through the country and is home to some of the region's last remaining freshwater dolphins; cyclists or dirt bikers can follow the river's length as it meanders through traditional communities. The northeast is a world unto itself, its wild and mountainous landscapes a home for Cambodia's ethnic minorities and an abundance of natural attractions, including thundering waterfalls and pristine crater lakes.

Despite this beautiful backdrop, life is no picnic for the average Cambodian. It remains one of the poorest countries in Asia and it's a tough existence for much of the population, as they battle it out against the whims of nature and, sometimes, of their politicians. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP; www.undp.org), Cambodia

remains poorer than Mongolia and El Salvador, just scraping in ahead of Mauritania, while Transparency International (www.transparency.org), the anticorruption watchdog, rates the country a lowly 151 out of the 163 countries ranked. Income remains desperately low for many Khmers, with annual salaries in the hundreds of dollars, not thousands, and public servants such as teachers unable to eke out a living on their meagre wages.

Cambodia's pristine environment may be a big draw, but much of it is currently under threat. Ancient forests are being razed to make way for plantations, rivers are being sized up for major hydroelectric power plants and the south coast is being explored by leading oil companies. All this helps add up to an ever-stronger economy, which is growing at an incredible 10% a year, but it's unlikely to encourage the ecotourism that is just starting to develop.

Cambodia is like the teen starlet who has just been discovered by an adoring public: everyone wants something from her but not everyone wants what is best for her. The government, long shunned by international big business, is keen to benefit from all these newfound opportunities. Contracts are being signed off like autographs and there are concerns for the long-term interests of the country.

Tourism has brought many benefits to Cambodia: it provides opportunity and employment for a new generation of Khmers, has helped to spark a rebirth of the traditional arts, and has given the country a renewed sense of pride and optimism as it recovers from the dark decades of war and genocide. However, not all tourism has been good for the country and there is the dark side of sex tourism, human exploitation and a casino culture. Cambodia is in a great position to benefit from the mistakes of other countries in the region and follow a sustainable road to tourism development. However, it may be that the government is more focused on the short-term gain that megabucks investments can provide. Can Cambodia be all things to all visitors? So far, so good, but a new era is about to begin and the beaches are the next battleground.

There are two faces to Cambodia: one shiny and happy, the other dark and complex. For every illegal eviction of city dwellers or land grab by a general, there will be a new NGO school offering better education, or a new clean-water initiative to improve the lives of the average villager. Such is the yin and yang of Cambodia, a country that inspires and confounds. Like an onion, the more layers you unravel, the more it makes you want to cry, but these are spontaneous tears, sometimes of sorrow, sometimes of joy.

Despite having the eighth wonder of the world in its backyard, Cambodia's greatest treasure is its people. The Khmers have been to hell and back, struggling through years of bloodshed, poverty and political instability. Thanks to an unbreakable spirit and infectious optimism, they have prevailed with their smiles intact; no visitor comes away from Cambodia without a measure of admiration and affection for the inhabitants of this enigmatic kingdom.

Cambodia: beaches as beautiful as Thailand but without the tourist tide; wilds as remote as Laos but even less explored; cuisine as subtle as Vietnam but yet to be discovered; and temples that leave Burma and Indonesia in the shade. This is the heart of Southeast Asia, with everything the region has to offer packed into one bite-sized country. If you were only planning to spend a week in Cambodia, it's time to think again.

Cambodia is still a predominantly rural society and as much as 80% of the population still lives in the countryside, working in agriculture and fishing.

Getting Started

A journey to Cambodia offers a window on the soul of Southeast Asia. The magnificent temples of Angkor are unrivalled, and beyond the rich legacy of the ancient Khmer empire lie the buzzing capital of Phnom Penh, hundreds of kilometres of unspoilt tropical beaches, the mighty Mekong River, a vibrant culture and some of the friendliest people in the region. It's not the most sophisticated destination in the world (though for many this makes it all the more charming), so be sure to pack some patience and humour. Cambodia is full of surprises, and is a place for adventure as much as a vacation.

See Climate Charts (p308) for more information.

WHEN TO GO

Cambodia can be visited at any time of year. The ideal months are December and January, when humidity levels are relatively low, there is little rainfall and a cooling breeze whips across the land, but this is also peak season when the majority of visitors descend on the country.

From early February temperatures keep rising until the killer month, April, when the mercury often exceeds 40°C. Some time in May or June, the southwestern monsoon brings rain and high humidity, cooking up a sweat for all but the hardest of visitors. The wet season, which lasts until October, isn't such a bad time to visit, as the rain tends to come in short, sharp downpours. Angkor is surrounded by lush foliage and the moats are full of water at this time of year. If you are planning to visit isolated areas, however, the wet season makes for tough travel.

Some visitors like to coordinate their trip with one of the annual festivals, such as Bon Om Tuk or Khmer New Year (see p19).

COSTS & MONEY

The cost of travelling in Cambodia covers the whole spectrum, from almost free to outrageously expensive, depending on taste and comfort. Penny-pinchers can survive on as little as US\$10 per day, while budget travellers with an eye on enjoyment can live it up on US\$25 a day. Midrange travellers can turn on the style with US\$75 to US\$100 a day, staying in smart places, dining well and travelling in comfort. At the top end, flash US\$200 a day or more to live a life of luxury.

Accommodation starts from as little as US\$2 to US\$5 in popular destinations. Spending US\$10 to US\$20 will add to the amenities, such as air conditioning, satellite TV, fridge and hot water. Stepping up to US\$50, you enter

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Bring as little as possible. Cambodia has everything you find at home and it's usually available at lower prices. All the soaps and smellies are plentiful, and clothing, shoes and backpacks are available at a fraction of the price in the West. Tampons are available in all major towns and cities, but not in more remote areas.

A Swiss Army knife or equivalent comes in handy, but you don't need 27 separate functions, just one blade and an opener. A torch (flashlight) and compass are also useful.

Other handy items: earplugs to block the ever-present noise, a universal plug adaptor, a rain cover for your backpack and insect repellent to keep the bugs at bay. Finally, the secret of successful packing: plastic bags – not only do they keep things separate and clean, but also dry. That means a lot at the end of a long, wet day.

THE PRICE OF INFLATION

After several years of stability, inflation in Cambodia is once again on the rise. The figure for 2007 was around 10%, but already in the first quarter of 2008 it was above the 20% mark. Rice has trebled in price and cooking gas has doubled. Petrol prices continue to soar and this is having a knock-on effect on electricity costs. The long and short of it is that as we go to press, some costs may be higher than quoted in this book. It may be prudent to round up moto and remorque fares by 25% or more. Hotels and restaurants are also starting to raise prices to cover rising electricity bills and food overheads. Cambodia is still cheaper than home, but it is no longer the bargain it once was.

the world of three-star standards and charming boutique resorts. Forking out US\$100 or more brings a five-star fling. Don't be afraid to negotiate for a discount if it is low season or traffic is down.

While Cambodian cuisine may not be as well known as that of its neighbours Thailand and Vietnam, it can certainly compete with the best of them. Snack on the street or chow down in the market, with meals starting at just 1000r or so, or indulge in a banquet for a couple of bucks. Khmer restaurants are a step up in comfort, and a local meal will cost US\$1 to US\$2. Next are the sophisticated Khmer, Asian and international restaurants. Meals start from about US\$3 at the cheaper places, rising to more like US\$10 at the smarter ones, and US\$50 or more is possible if you go wild with the wine list.

Domestic flights link Phnom Penh to Siem Reap. Fast boats link several popular destinations in Cambodia and the journey can be more scenic than by road. There is now a healthy selection of bus companies connecting towns and cities throughout Cambodia and prices are rock bottom. On the rougher roads, share taxis and pick-ups take the strain. Train travel is no longer possible, as passenger services have been suspended, but that could be seen as a blessing in disguise given that trains crawl along at an average speed of 20km/h. For ultimate flexibility, rent a car or 4WD and travel with a guide.

Visitors to Angkor (which is surely everybody coming to Cambodia) will have to factor in the cost of entrance fees, which are US\$20 for one day, US\$40 for three days and US\$60 for one week. An additional expense is transport to get to, from and around the ruins; from US\$2 for a bicycle, US\$6 to US\$8 for a *moto* (small motorcycle with driver), US\$10 to US\$15 for a *remorque* (trailer pulled by a bicycle or motorcycle) and US\$25 to US\$35 for a car.

Small budget, big budget, it doesn't really matter; Cambodia is the place to be. Soak it up in the style that suits.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and experience the magic of independent travel. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on both the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

Cambodia has been to hell and back and there are many ways that you can put a little back into the country. Staying a bit longer, travelling further and spreading the wealth around is obvious advice, but even for those on a short stay, it is possible to engage with locals in markets and spend money in restaurants and outlets that assist disadvantaged Cambodians. See the boxed text, p67, in the Food & Drink chapter, as well as the Eating

HOW MUCH?

Hotel room with air-con
US\$10-20

Restaurant meal US\$3-10

Internet access per
minute US\$0.40-1.50

Cambodia Daily
newspaper 1200r

Krama (checked scarf)
3000r

TOP 10



ANCIENT TEMPLES

Cambodia is the temple capital of Asia. The kingdom is littered with the lavish legacy of the god-kings. Choose from majestic mountain-top temples, forbidding and forgotten jungle fortresses, incredible carved riverbeds and pre-Angkorian brick cities.

- 1 Angkor Wat (p154), the mother of all temples
- 2 Banteay Chhmear (p255), the forgotten fortress of the northwest
- 3 Banteay Srei (p175), the jewel in the crown of Angkorian art
- 4 Bayon (p161), with its 216 enigmatic faces
- 5 Beng Mealea (p178), Angkor-sized but swallowed by jungle
- 6 Kbal Spean (p176), the River of a Thousand Lingas
- 7 Koh Ker (p264), a usurper capital of huge proportions
- 8 Prasat Preah Vihear (p268), king of the mountain temples
- 9 Sambor Prei Kuk (p272), the first temple city in the region.
- 10 Ta Prohm (p166), left as explorers first saw it – nature run riot

TRAGEDIES IN WORDS

In stark contrast to the glories of the Angkor empire is the dark void into which Cambodia plunged in the 1970s. A brutal civil war raged for five years, delivering the Khmer Rouge to power. This regime turned the clocks to Year Zero in what was to become one of the world's most radical and bloody revolutions. Read your way into these tumultuous events to understand how it all happened.

- 1 *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* by William Shawcross (1979)
- 2 *Brother Enemy* by Nayan Chanda (1985)
- 3 *History of Cambodia* by David Chandler (1994)
- 4 *Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness* by Milton Osbourne (1994)
- 5 *The Pol Pot Regime* by Ben Kiernan (1996)
- 6 *Voices from S-21* by David Chandler (1999)
- 7 *First They Killed My Father* by Luong Ung (2001)
- 8 *The Gate* by Francois Bizot (2003)
- 9 *Pol Pot: The History of a Nightmare* by Phillip Short (2004)
- 10 *The Lost Executioner* by Nic Dunlop (2005)

ADVENTURES

If you are looking for adventure in Asia, then you have come to the right place. The roads may be rough, but the stories will be smooth and stay with you forever. One thing is for sure, an adventure is never far away in Cambodia.

- 1 Make the overland pilgrimage to Prasat Preah Vihear (p268)
- 2 Beachcomb on the beautiful island of Koh Kong (p188)
- 3 Learn to ride like a mahout at the Elephant Valley Project (p302) in the remote north-east
- 4 Paddle a dugout through the flooded forest of Kompong Phhluk (p139)
- 5 Go underground at Kampot's cave pagodas (p218)
- 6 Ride the bamboo train in Battambang (p247)
- 7 Camp out in the jungle at the temple of Preah Khan (p262)
- 8 Catch a fast boat from Siem Reap to Battambang (p245)
- 9 Pan for gold in the Wild East town of Mimong (p303)
- 10 Trek across the remote Cardamoms from Thmar Bang to Aural (p189)

and Shopping sections in the Phnom Penh and Siem Reap chapters for more ideas.

The following websites have more information on sustainable tourism and tips on responsible travel:

Cambodia Community-Based Ecotourism Network (www.ccben.org) The official website promoting community-based ecotourism in Cambodia. Browse here for more on projects and initiatives across the country.

ChildSafe (www.childsafe-cambodia.org) Learn about the ChildSafe campaign, which aims to stop child-sex tourism and raise awareness of the problem.

Heritage Watch (www.heritagewatch.org) The home of the heritage-friendly tourism campaign to raise interest in remote heritage sites and their protection.

Responsible Travel (www.responsible-travel.org) A no-nonsense website with common-sense advice on how to travel with a conscience.

Stay Another Day (www.stay-another-day.org) A great website dedicated to tempting tourists into staying another day in Cambodia, packed with ideas on day trips, project visits and alternative things to see and do.

TRAVEL LITERATURE

The classic Cambodian read is Norman Lewis' *A Dragon Apparent: Travels in Cambodia, Laos & Vietnam* (1951), an account of his 1950 foray into an Indochina that would soon disappear. In the course of his travels, Lewis circumnavigated Tonlé Sap Lake, with a pause at Angkor. The book has been reissued as part of *The Norman Lewis Omnibus* (1995).

Written by writers who know and love their countries, *To Asia with Love: A Connoisseur's Guide to Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam* (2004), an anthology edited by Kim Fay, is a delightful introduction to Cambodia and the Mekong region for those looking for some inspiration and adventure. A new *To Cambodia with Love* is on the cards and should be out some time during the lifetime of this book.

Travels in Siam, Cambodia, Laos and Annam (1864) by Henri Mouhot has been reprinted in English by White Lotus and gives the inside story of the man credited with 'rediscovering' Angkor.

Jon Swain's *River of Time* (1995) takes the reader back to an old Indochina, partly lost to the madness of war, and includes first-hand accounts of the French embassy stand-off in the first days of the Khmer Rouge takeover.

Tim Page's *Derailed in Uncle Ho's Victory Garden* (1995) covers this legendary photographer's quest for the truth behind the disappearance of photojournalist Sean Flynn (son of Errol) in Cambodia in 1970, and his mission to secure a monument to fallen correspondents on all sides of the Indochina conflict.

An excellent account of life on the Mother River is *The River's Tale: A Year on the Mekong* (2001) by Edward Gargan. A war-protester-turned-foreign-correspondent, Gargan sees for himself how Cambodia and its neighbours have brought themselves back from the brink.

The Indochina Chronicles (2005) by Phil Karber is a lively travelogue taking in adventures and misadventures in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

Amit Gilboa's *Off the Rails in Phnom Penh – Guns, Girls and Ganja* (1998) deals with such murky subjects as prostitution and drugs. It feels like he got too close to his subject at times and it's not really a side of Cambodia of which Khmers are proud.

The ultimate spoof guidebook, *Phaic Tân: Sunstroke on a Shoestrings* (2004) is a pastiche of Southeast Asian countries that pokes fun at all of us. No-one is spared, not the locals, not the travellers – not even hallowed guidebook authors.

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INTERNET RESOURCES

Andy Brouwer's Cambodia Tales (www.andybrouwer.co.uk) Gateway to all things Cambodian, this site includes comprehensive links to other sites and regular travel articles from veteran Cambodia adventurers. Includes a daily blog from his new home in Cambodia.

Angkor Wat Portal (www.angkor.com) When it comes to links, this site has them, spreading its cyber-tentacles into all sorts of interesting areas.

Biking Southeast Asia with Mr Pumpy (www.mrpumpy.net) The definitive but dated website for cyclists passing through Cambodia is written with candour and humour by Mr Pumpy's best friend Felix Hude.

Expat Advisory (www.expats-advisory.com) News and events site aimed at expats in Asia, with up-to-date information on happenings in Phnom Penh.

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Information on travelling to and within Cambodia, the Thorn Tree Travel Forum and up-to-date travel news.

Ministry of Tourism (www.mot.gov.kh) The official Cambodian tourism website is a touch dated but there are some useful links for hotels, restaurants and travel agents.

Oriental Tales (www.orientaltales.com) Short stories, articles and inspiring photos of travel throughout Southeast Asia.

Tales of Asia (www.talesofasia.com) This popular website has up-to-the-minute information on overland travel in Cambodia, including webmaster Gordon Sharpless' personal obsession, the Bangkok–Siem Reap run.

Things Asian (www.thingsasian.com) Bubbling with information on the culture of the Mekong region, this site has everything including architecture, literature and fashion.

Events Calendar

Why not plan your trip to coincide with one of Cambodia's major festivals? Holidays and festivals take place according to the lunar calendar, so dates vary from year to year. Check the internet (www.mot.gov.kh) for this year's exact dates.

JANUARY–APRIL

**CHAUL CHNAM CHEN
(CHINESE NEW YEAR)** late Jan–mid-Feb
The Chinese inhabitants of Cambodia celebrate their New Year somewhere between late January and mid-February – for the Vietnamese, this is Tet. As many of Phnom Penh's businesses are run by Chinese, commerce grinds to a halt around this time and there are dragon dances all over town.

**CHAUL CHNAM KHMER
(KHMER NEW YEAR)** mid-Apr
This is a three-day celebration of the Khmer New Year, and is like Christmas, New Year and birthdays all rolled into one. Cambodians make offerings at wats, clean out their homes and exchange gifts. It is a lively time to visit the country as the Khmers go wild with water and talcum powder, leaving a lot of bemused tourists looking like plaster-cast figures. Large crowds congregate at Wat Phnom in the capital, but females should watch out for the over-eager attention of young gangs of males. Throngs of Khmers flock to Angkor, and it's absolute madness at most temples, so avoid the celebration if you want a quiet, reflective Angkor experience.

MAY–AUGUST

**CHAT PRAH NENGKAL
(ROYAL PLOUGHING CEREMONY)** early May
Led by the royal family, the Royal Ploughing Ceremony is a ritual agricultural festival held

to mark the traditional beginning of the rice-growing season. It takes place in front of the National Museum, near the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, and the royal oxen are said to have a nose for whether it will be a good harvest or a bad one.

**VISAKHA PUJA
(BUDDHA DAY)** May/Jun
Celebrating Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* (passing away), activities are centred on wats. The festival falls on the eighth day of the fourth moon and is best observed at Angkor Wat, where you can see candlelit processions of monks.

SEPTEMBER–DECEMBER

**P'CHUM BEN
(FESTIVAL OF THE DEAD)** Sep/Oct
This festival is a kind of All Souls' Day, when respects are paid to the dead through offerings made at wats. This includes paper money as well as food and drink, all passed through the medium of the monks.

**BON OM TUK
(WATER FESTIVAL)** Oct/Nov
Celebrating the epic victory of Jayavarman VII over the Chams who occupied Angkor in 1177, this festival also marks the natural phenomenon of the reversal of the current of the Tonlé Sap River. It is one of the most important festivals in the Khmer calendar and is a wonderful, if hectic, time to be in Phnom Penh or Siem Reap. Boat races are held on the Tonlé Sap and Siem Reap Rivers, with each boat colourfully decorated and holding 40 rowers. As many as two million people flood the capital for the fun and frolics, so be sure to book ahead for accommodation.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

CAMBODIA SNAPSHOT

Two Weeks

Whether you start in Siem Reap and travel south, or head north to Angkor, this is the ultimate journey, via temples, beaches and the capital.

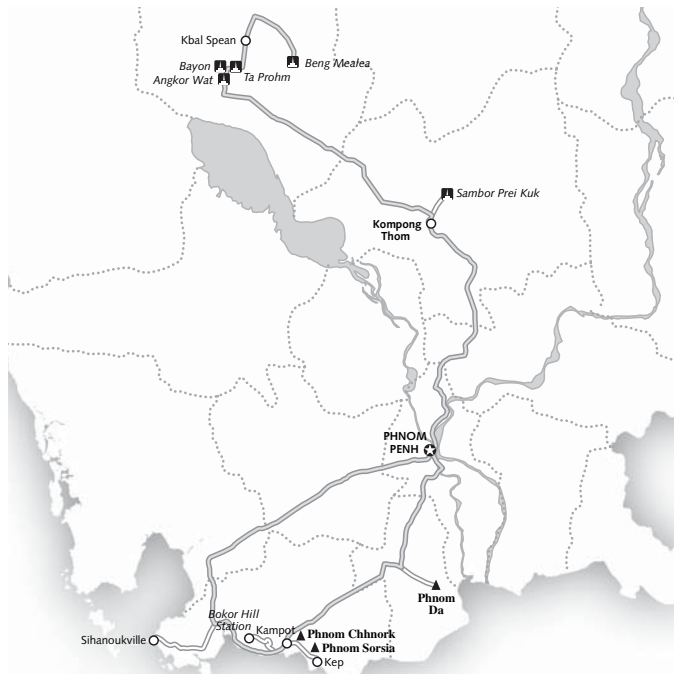
Hit **Phnom Penh** (p72) for sights such as the impressive **National Museum** (p84), with its excellent Angkorian sculpture collection, and the stunning **Silver Pagoda** (p83). There is superb shopping at the **Psar Tuol Tom Pong** (p109), and a **night shift** (p106) that never sleeps.

Take a fast boat to **Phnom Da** (p230), then go south to the colonial-era town of **Kampot** (p215). From here, visit **Bokor Hill Station** (p221), the seaside town of **Kep** (p224) and the cave pagodas at **Phnom Chhnork** and **Phnom Sorsia** (p218).

Go west to **Sihanoukville** (p193), Cambodia's beach capital, to sample the seafood, dive the nearby waters or just soak up the sun. Backtrack via Phnom Penh to **Kompong Thom** (p270) to get a foretaste of what's to come by visiting the pre-Angkorian brick temples of **Sambor Prei Kuk** (p272).

Finish the trip at Angkor, a mind-blowing experience with which few sights compare. See **Angkor Wat** (p154), perfection in stone; **Bayon** (p161), weirdness in stone; and **Ta Prohm** (p166), nature triumphing over stone – before venturing further afield to **Kbal Spean** (p176) or the jungle-clad **Beng Mealea** (p178).

This trip can take two weeks at a steady pace or three weeks at a slow pace. Public transport serves most of this route. Rent a motorbike for side trips to Kep and Sambor Prei Kuk, and try out a *remorque-moto* (trailer pulled by a motorcycle) at Angkor. More money, less time? Rent a car and set the pace.



THE BIG ONE

One Month

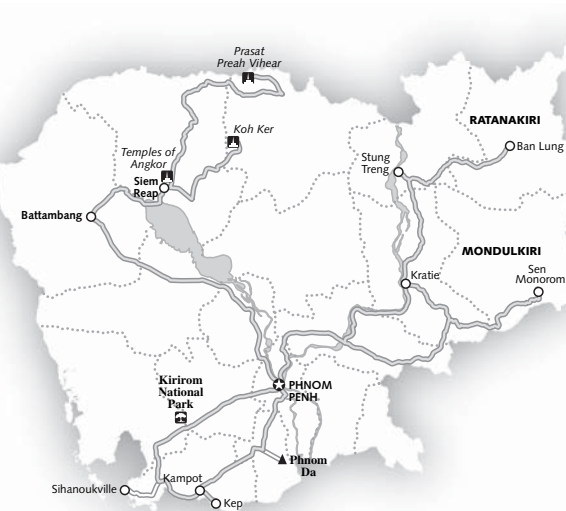
Cambodia is a small country and even though the roads are often bad and travel slow, most of the big hitters can be visited in a month.

Setting out from **Phnom Penh** (p72), take in the beauty of the northeast, following the Run to the Hills itinerary (p23). Choose between **Ratanakiri Province** (p291) and **Mondulki Province** (p298) to ensure maximum time elsewhere. The gentle hills of Mondulki are better for budget travellers as traversing overland is easy, while Ratanakiri makes sense for those planning an overland journey between Cambodia and Laos. Tough choice...can't decide? Flip a coin, if you can find one in this coinless country.

Head to the south coast, taking the route outlined in Cambodia Snapshot (opposite). Take your time and consider a few nights in comeback **Kep** (p224) or one of the nearby islands, and a boat trip from **Sihanoukville** (p193) to explore the up-and-coming islands off the coast. On your way back to the capital, check out **Kirirom National Park** (p116), home to pine trees, black bears and some spectacular views of the Cardamom Mountains.

Then it's time to turn northwest and head to charming **Battambang** (p240), one of Cambodia's best preserved colonial-era towns and a base from which to discover rural life and ride the bamboo train. Leave in style by fast boat to **Siem Reap** (p118), passing through stunning scenery along the snaking Sangker River, and turn your attention to the **temples of Angkor** (p140).

Visit all the greatest hits in and around Angkor, but use the extra time to venture further to the rival capital of **Koh Ker** (p264), which is cloaked in thick jungle, or **Prasat Preah Vihear** (p268), where it is all about location, location, location – a mountain temple perched precariously atop a cliff-face on the Thai border.



Overlanders can run this route in reverse, setting out from Siem Reap and exiting Cambodia by river into Vietnam or Laos. Entering from Laos, divert east to Ratanakiri before heading south. Getting about is generally easy, as there are buses on the big roads, taxis on the small roads and buzzing boats on the rivers.

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

THE LOST TEMPLES OF THE NORTHWEST

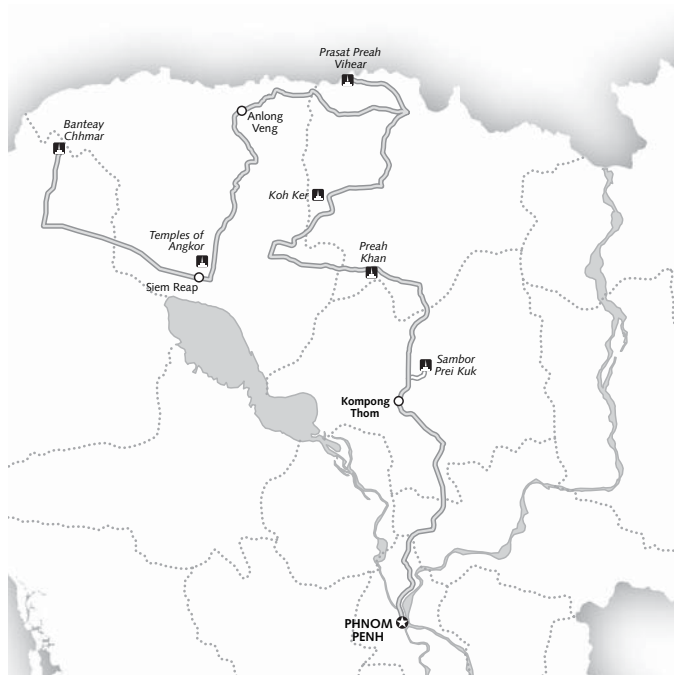
The magnificent temples of Angkor are renowned for their splendour, but these represent no more than the capital of what was an unrivalled empire spanning Southeast Asia. In the steaming jungles of Cambodia, forgotten to the world for centuries, lie several stunning religious monuments that make the perfect excuse to extend your adventure.

The beauty of this tough trip on rough roads is that it is the alternative way to link Cambodia's vibrant capital, Phnom Penh, with Siem Reap, gateway to Angkor. Starting in **Phnom Penh** (p72), head north through **Kompong Thom** (p270) and on to the pre-Angkorian capital of **Sambor Prei Kuk** (p272), Asia's first temple city. Bid farewell to civilisation from here and make the tough journey northwest to the vast jungle temple of **Preah Khan** (p262), one of the largest structures from the Angkorian era.

Continue on to **Koh Ker** (p264), a usurper capital from the 10th century, with a wealth of monuments spread throughout the forest.

Last of the temples is **Prasat Preah Vihear** (p268). The height of Angkorian architectural audacity, its foundation stones stretch to the edge of a precipitous cliff. Breathe in the views as they are simply enormous. From here, it is a long run to **Siem Reap** (p118) via the former Khmer Rouge stronghold of **Anlong Veng** (p258), where you can visit Pol Pot's cremation site. In Siem Reap, finish with the compulsory **temples of Angkor** (p140) or continue to the beautiful **Banteay Chhmar** (p255) if you still have the energy reserves.

This is a tough trip with little in the way of public transport. It takes at least a week and should not be attempted in the wet season. Seasoned motorbike riders can do it on a dirt bike. For less pain, a 4WD is the way to go. The trip is possible using a combination of pick-up truck and *moto* (small motorcycle with driver), but you'll need massage therapy afterwards.



RUN TO THE HILLS

Northeast Cambodia is a world unto itself, a landscape of rolling hills and secret waterfalls, and home to a patchwork of ethnic minorities, many of whom still use elephants to get around. It's not only the sights and sounds that are different up here, the temperature is notably cooler, as both Mondulakiri and Ratanakiri Provinces lie at almost 1000m.

Leaving the capital **Phnom Penh** (p72), pass through the bustling Mekong town of **Kompong Cham** (p280) before heading east to **Sen Monorom** (p299), the charming capital of Mondulakiri Province. Spend a few days here to bathe at **Bou Sraa Waterfall** (p303), one of Cambodia's biggest waterfalls; learn to ride an **elephant** (p302) and explore Pnong villages before heading back to the Mekong at **Kratie** (p285). This attractive little town is the base for an encounter with one of the rarest mammals on earth, the elusive Irrawaddy river dolphin, which lives in ever-dwindling numbers upstream from here.

Push north up the Mekong to **Stung Treng** (p289). To the east lies **Ban Lung** (p292), provincial capital of Ratanakiri Province and base for an adventure to remember. From here plunge into Cambodia's most beautiful natural swimming pool at **Boeng Yeak Lom** (p296), ride an elephant through the rubber plantations to the stunning waterfall of **Ka Tieng** (p296) or visit the medieval **gem mines** (p296) where much of Cambodia's zircon comes from.

Adventurers and motorbikers can link Mondulakiri and Ratanakiri Provinces directly via the village of **Koh Nhek** (p304). Sen Monorom to Koh Nhek is a breeze, but the roads all but disappear from there and a *moto* driver as a guide is almost essential.



On main roads, this trip is easy to manage using share taxis or pick-ups, but until the roads are finished it's a frightening prospect in the wet season. Motorbikers can link Mondulakiri and Ratanakiri Provinces on one of Cambodia's more devilish roads – not for amateurs. Finishing up in Ratanakiri, overlanders can carry on into Laos.

TAILORED TRIP

UNTAMED CARDAMOMS & UNEXPLORED COAST

Visitors can get a sense of the diverse ecosystems of the Cardamom Mountains – from the rainforested highlands down to the mangrove-fringed shoreline and pristine beaches – along the **Koh Kong Conservation Corridor** (p186), in Cambodia's far southwestern corner. Based in the one-time smugglers' port of **Krong Koh Kong** (p182), travel by *moto* or boat to the **Tatai River** (p187), where you can stay in ecologically sustainable accommodation. Drive inland to the **Thma Bang ranger station** (p189), in

the Central Cardamoms Protected Forest, to explore the Areng River habitats of the endangered dragonfish (Asian arowana) and Siamese crocodile (p190). Krong Koh Kong is also a good base for an excursion by open skiff through the pristine mangrove forests of **Peam Krasaop Wildlife Sanctuary** (p187) and on to **Koh Kong Island** (p188), whose western side has seven unspoiled beaches, some with lagoons. The northwest coast of **Botum Sakor National Park** (p190) is just across the channel from the island, but the superb beaches further south are easier to get to from **Koh Sdach** (p191), a stop on the **Sihanoukville–Krong Koh Kong ferry** (p185) that's not far from some excellent snorkelling grounds. To visit the park's mangrove-lined east coast – including **Ta Op stream** (p190) and

its monkeys – hire a boat in **Andoung Tuek** (p191), where you can also take an early morning ride upriver to the village of **Chi Phat** (p191). Once notorious for its poachers, it is now the site of a pioneering community-based ecotourism project.



On The Road



NICK RAY Coordinating Author

This photo was taken at Prasat Preah Vihear (p268), the king of the mountain temples, and has to be one of my favourite views in Cambodia – the extensive plains of lowland Cambodia melting into the infinite horizon. It's possible to approach the temple via a motorway from the Thai side of the border, but much more of a challenge is a motorcycle adventure from the Cambodian side. This was where the Khmer Rouge made their last stand, so you still need to be careful of land mines, but equally dangerous are the ferocious winds that whip across the ridge. Make sure those tent pegs are firmly secured!



DANIEL ROBINSON On Battambang's 'bamboo train' (see p247), you click and clack through the countryside on warped rails – until two cars meet on the single track. The car with more passengers (or carrying a motorbike like the one behind me in this photo) is given priority; the other car has to be disassembled to allow it through.

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