

Eastern Cambodia



Eastern Cambodia is home to a diversity of landscapes and peoples, shattering the illusion that the country is all paddy fields and sugar palms. There are plenty of those in the lowland provinces, but in the northeast they yield to the forested mountains of Mondulakiri and Ratanakiri, both up-and-coming ecotourism areas. This is a vast region, stretching from the dragon's tail where the borders of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam meet, to near enough the dragon's mouth where the mighty Mekong continues its journey into the delta and on to the South China Sea. The river and its tributaries snake through the land, breathing life into the fields, blanketing the landscape in dazzling greens and providing a livelihood for millions of people.

If it is a walk on the wild side that fires your imagination, then the northeast is calling. The rolling hills and lush forests provide a home to many ethnic minority groups known as Khmer Leu (Upper Khmer) or *chunchiet* (ethnic minorities). With different dialects, lifestyles and looks, these people are a world away from their lowland Khmer neighbours. Peppering the area are thundering waterfalls, crater lakes and meandering rivers. Trekking, biking, kayaking and elephant rides are all activities beginning to take off in this remote corner of Cambodia, making it a must for adrenaline seekers.

The 'Wild East' atmosphere doesn't stop there. This is also home to rare wildlife such as tigers, leopards and elephants, although the chances of seeing some of these are about as likely as the kouprey – a wild ox and the country's national symbol – still living in the forests. The Mekong is home to dwindling numbers of the rare freshwater Irrawaddy dolphin, which can be viewed year-round near Kratie. Do the maths: it all adds up to an amazing experience.

HIGHLIGHTS

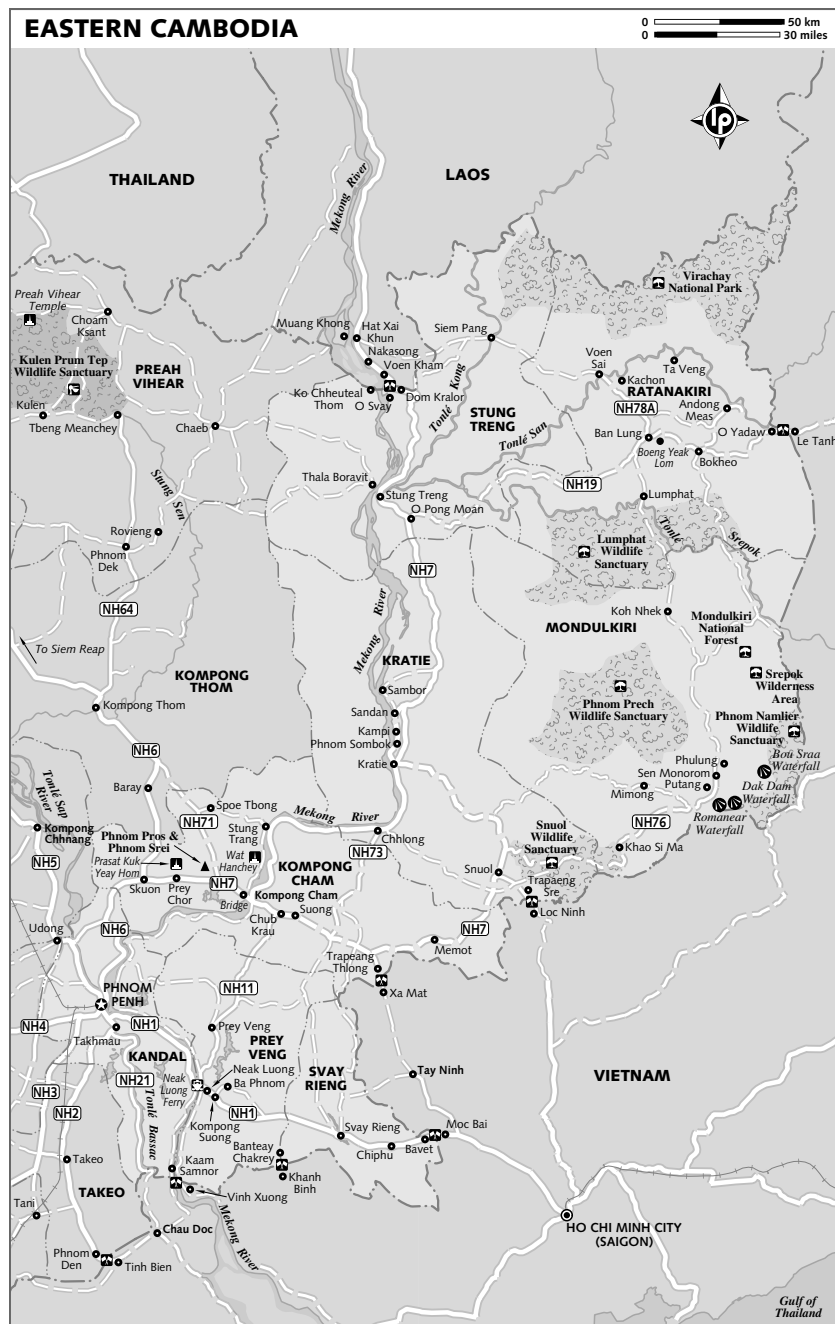
- Catch a glimpse of the rare freshwater Irrawaddy dolphin in the Mekong River near **Kratie** (p288)
- Experience a different Cambodia with a homestay in **Mondulakiri** (p298) and learn about the life of the hardy Pnong people
- Dive into the crystal-clear waters of the crater lake of **Boeng Yeak Lom** (p296) in Ratanakiri, the best natural swimming pool in the country, surrounded by lush forest
- Learn how to be a mahout for the day at the Elephant Valley Project in **Mondulakiri** (p302)
- Soak up the charms of **Kompong Cham** (p280), a bustling town on the Mekong and gateway to historic temples, lush countryside and friendly locals



■ ELEVATION: 5-1500M

■ POPULATION: 6 MILLION

■ AREA: 68,472 SQ KM



History

In the 1960s Vietnamese communist forces sought sanctuary in eastern Cambodia to escape the fire power and might of the US army, and much of the area was heavily under the influence of the Vietnamese. Prince Sihanouk became increasingly anti-American as the '60s progressed, and cut a deal to tacitly supply the Vietnamese communists with weapons from the Chinese, via the port of Sihanoukville. By the end of the decade, as the USA began its bombing raids and incursions, the Vietnamese communists had moved deep into the country. Following the overthrow of Sihanouk, Lon Nol demanded that all Vietnamese communist forces withdraw from Cambodia within one week, an ultimatum they could not possibly meet, and open war erupted. In just a few months, much of eastern Cambodia fell to the Vietnamese communists and their Khmer Rouge allies.

During much of the rule of the Khmer Rouge, the eastern zones were known to be more moderate than other parts of the country and it wasn't until 1977 that Pol Pot and the central government tried to impose their will on the east. Militarily, eastern Cambodia was independent and strong, and the crackdown provoked what amounted to a civil war between Khmer Rouge factions. This tussle lingered until December 1978, when the Vietnamese invasion forced the Khmer Rouge leadership to flee to the Thai border. The east became one of the safest areas of the country during much of the 1980s, as the Khmer Rouge kept well away from areas that were close to the Vietnamese border.

These days the region is experiencing an economic renaissance as the rubber industry bounces back and staple commodity prices soar.

Getting There & Away

Eastern Cambodia is home to several important international border crossings between Cambodia and its neighbours. The Mekong River border at Dom Kralor-Voen Kham shared with Laos to the north is an ever-more popular route for adventurous travellers. East of Phnom Penh are plenty of border crossings with Vietnam, including the old favourite Bavet-Moc Bai crossing on the road to Ho Chi Minh City, and the evocative Mekong River crossing at Kaam Samnor-Vinh Xuong. See p328 for more on border crossings in this region.

For those already in Cambodia, Phnom Penh is the usual gateway to the region, with a host of reliable roads fanning out to the major cities, plus irregular flights between the capital and the popular province of Ratanakiri.

As overland travel takes off in Cambodia, it is possible to reach almost any destination in the region in one day, unthinkable just a few years ago. A round trip from Phnom Penh to Ratanakiri by land can take just six days (if you set a fast pace). Monduliri is more straightforward and, with good connections, a round trip can be done in four days. But be aware that you still sometimes end up stranded in the wet season.

Getting Around

Eastern Cambodia is one of the more remote parts of the country and conditions vary widely between wet and dry seasons. Getting around the lowlands is easy enough, as many of the roads have been upgraded and buses, minibuses and taxis ply the routes. National Highway 1 (NH1) to Vietnam is in fine shape all the way to the border. NH7 has been rebuilt all the way to Stung Treng and the Lao border.

The northeast is a different matter, as the punishing rains of the wet season leave many of the roads in a sorry state. A good road can turn bad in a matter of months and journey times become hit and miss.

SVAY RIENG PROVINCE

ខេត្តស្វាយរៀង

This small province occupies a jut of land sticking into Vietnam, an area known as the parrot's beak. During the Vietnam War, American forces were convinced that this was where the Vietnamese communists' version of the Pentagon was situated. While there were undoubtedly a lot of Vietnamese communists hiding in Cambodia during much of the war, there was no such thing as a Pentagon. In 1969 the Americans began unauthorised bombing in this area and in 1970 joined forces with the South Vietnamese for a ground assault.

Svay Rieng is considered one of Cambodia's poorest provinces because of the poor quality of its land. Most of the population eke out a subsistence living based on farming and

fishing. There is really nothing to attract visitors here, which is why 99.99% zoom through it on their way to Vietnam.

SVAY RIENG

ស្វយរៀង

០០៤៤ / pop 21,000

Svay Rieng is a blink-and-you'll-miss-it provincial capital that many travellers whistle past when making the journey between Phnom Penh and Ho Chi Minh City. There is quite literally nothing to do here, but winding its way through town is Tonlé Wayko, a tributary of the Mekong.

Information

Aceda Bank (០១៤៥៥៤៥), a few blocks west of the Independence Monument, is the place to change travellers cheques. Internet access is intermittently available in telephone shops along the main drag.

Sleeping & Eating

Samaki Guesthouse (០០១១ ៨៨៨៤១២; St 113; r with/without bathroom US\$4/3) Clustered around a central junction is a group of guesthouses and this is the best of a mediocre bunch. The family are friendly enough, but cheaper rooms involve taking a chance with a share bathroom.

Tonlay Waikor Hotel (០១៤៥៧១៨; NH1; r US\$10; ☺) The only real hotel in town, the rooms are basic but comfortable and include cable TV. Security should be pretty good here, as it's owned by the National Police Chief.

Boeng Meas Restaurant (NH1; mains US\$1; ☺ 6.30am-9.30pm) Well located on stilts near the riverside, this wooden restaurant is consistently popular with Khmers passing through town. Service is sharp and the menu includes a healthy selection of Khmer favourites.

There are cheap food stalls around Psar Svay Rieng (Svay Rieng Market) for those wanting the local touch, as well as some snack stalls along the river at night that sell cold beer.

Getting There & Away

Share taxis for Svay Rieng leave from Phnom Penh's Chbah Ampeau taxi park in the south-east of the city. The cost is about 10,000r per person. Hua Lian operates buses direct from Phnom Penh to Svay Rieng (8000r, three hours, one departure a day).

Travelling to Svay Rieng from the Bavet border crossing with Vietnam may be more

difficult because taxi drivers prefer the more lucrative option of taking foreigners all the way to Phnom Penh. Stuff yourself into a taxi with other travellers and ask to be dropped off at Svay Rieng (US\$2). Taxis usually drop people off near Psar Svay Rieng.

PREY VENG PROVINCE

ខេត្តព្រៃវែង

Prey Veng is a small but heavily populated agricultural region nestled on the east bank of the Mekong. Rubber played a large part in Prey Veng's prewar economy, but most of the plantations are only just being redeveloped. There is little of significance to be seen in the province today, but it may have played a significant role in Cambodian history, as one of the earliest pre-Angkorian kingdoms was located in the area around Ba Phnom. It is a province that has experienced few visitors; the provincial capital is a sleepy place on NH11, a pretty road with light traffic linking NH1 and NH7.

PREY VENG

ព្រៃវែង

០០៤៣ / pop 55,000

Few travellers make it to Prey Veng, a sleepy backwater between Neak Luong and Kompong Cham. Not a lot happens here and most of the population is tucked up in bed by 9pm. But for those who want to escape their fellow tourists, it offers an alternative route between Phnom Penh and Kompong Cham.

There are a few decaying colonial structures around town, attesting to a once-important centre. During most of the year a vast lake marks the western edge of town, but from March to August this evaporates and the local farmers cultivate rice.

Information

Aceda Bank (០១៤៥៥៥) represents Western Union for those needing quick transfers, and can cash US dollar travellers cheques.

Sleeping & Eating

Angkor Thom Hotel (០១៣៩៣៩២៩; r US\$5-10; ☺) One of the taller buildings in low-rise Prey Veng, this is the smartest hotel in town, offering 27 spotless rooms. All include hot-water showers and cable TV.

Mittapheap Hotel (០០១២ ៩៩៧៧៥៧; r US\$3-10; ☺) Occupying a prime position on the central crossroads in town, this is the elder statesmen among Prey Veng's hotels. The friendly owners run a clean establishment and it's good value.

Mittapheap Restaurant (០០១១ ៩៣៩២១៣; mains 3000-4000r) Under the same ownership as the aforementioned Mittapheap Hotel, this restaurant has an ebullient manager who ensures speedy service. The menu is packed with inexpensive Khmer, Chinese and Vietnamese dishes.

Getting There & Away

Prey Veng is 90km east of Phnom Penh and 78km south of Kompong Cham. Share taxis link Phnom Penh with Prey Veng (10,000r, two hours); minibuses (7000r) depart when full. Prey Veng and Kompong Cham are also connected by minibus (5000r, 1½ hours) and share taxi (8000r).

NEAK LUONG

ន្ទកល្លៀង

០០៤៣ / pop 22,000

Neak Luong is the point at which travellers speeding between Phnom Penh and the Vietnamese border have to slow to a stop to cross the mighty Mekong River. The car ferry chugs back and forth giving kids ample time to try to sell you strange-looking insects and other unidentifiable food on sticks. Coming from Vietnam, it is an overwhelming welcome to Cambodia. The first bridge to span the Mekong's girth in Cambodia is in Kompong Cham. Construction on a second at Neak Luong has long been discussed but work is yet to begin.

The most straightforward way to get here is to take an air-con bus (4500r, hourly) from Psar Thmei in Phnom Penh and pay the foot-passenger toll (100r) to cross the Mekong on

the ferry. From Neak Luong, it is possible to continue east to Svay Rieng (64km), north to Prey Veng (30km) or south to Kaam Samnor (45km), gateway to Vietnam and the Mekong Delta. For more on the route between Phnom Penh and Chau Doc, see p328.

BA PHNOM

ប៉ាភ្នំ

Ba Phnom is one of the earliest religious and cultural sites in Cambodia, dating back to the 5th century AD and the time of the mysterious Funan. Some scholars consider it the birthplace of the Cambodian nation, in the same way that Phnom Kulen is revered as the first capital of Angkor. It remained an important place of pilgrimage for kings of the subsequent empires of Chenla and Angkor and continued to be a place of spiritual significance into the 19th century, but its past conceals a darker side: according to French records, human sacrifices were carried out here and were only finally stamped out in 1872.

Today there is little left to see considering the site's extensive history. At the eastern extremity of the small group of hills lie the kitsch ruins of an 11th-century temple known as **Preah Vihear Chann**. The temple was evidently destroyed by the ravages of time, but has been rebuilt by the local monastery using a few original blocks and a whole lot of cement, all set under a corrugated roof.

There is a modern **wat** at the base of the hill and a series of concrete steps lead up the slope to some small **pagodas** on the summit. It is only really worth the detour for those who have a keen interest in early Cambodian history; for the casual visitor there is unfortunately little to see.

To get to Ba Phnom from Phnom Penh, head east on NH1 and turn north at Kompong Suong, about 9km east of Neak Luong. Follow

THE BOMBING OF NEAK LUONG

Neak Luong is depicted in the opening sequences of *The Killing Fields* (1984), the definitive film about the civil war and genocide. In August 1973, American B-52s mistakenly razed the town to the ground in an attempt to halt a Khmer Rouge advance on Phnom Penh. The intensive bombardment killed 137 civilians and wounded 268. The US government tried to cover it up by keeping the media out, but Sydney Schanberg, played by Sam Waterstone in the film, managed to travel to the city by river and publicise the true scale of the tragedy. The US ambassador offered compensation of US\$100 per family and the navigator of the B-52 was fined US\$700, which pretty much summed up the American attitude to the price of Cambodian lives in this most miserable of sideshows.

this dirt road for 3km before turning right and bearing east along the base of the hill. After another 7km, turn left under a wat-style arch and head to the bottom of the hill. Those without wheels can engage the services of a *moto* in Neak Luong for about US\$5 round trip.

KOMPONG CHAM PROVINCE

ខេត្តកំពង់ចាម

Kompong Cham draws a growing number of visitors thanks to its role as a gateway to the northeast. Attractions include several pre-Angkorian and Angkorian temples, as well as some pleasant riverbank rides for cyclists or motorbikers. The provincial capital offers an accessible slice of the real Cambodia and the surrounding countryside is very pretty. Getting about has become a lot easier thanks to the excellent condition of NH7 all the way to Kratie. Beyond the main roads, travel is not too bad, as the large population has helped to prioritise secondary road improvements.

The most heavily populated province in Cambodia, Kompong Cham has also supplied a steady stream of Cambodia's current political heavyweights including Prime Minister Hun Sen and Senate Head Chea Sim. Most Kompong Cham residents enjoy quieter lives, living off the land or fishing along the Mekong River. Rubber was the major pre-war industry and there are huge plantations stretching eastwards from the Mekong. Some of Cambodia's finest silk is also produced in this province and most of the country's *kramas* (scarves) originate here.

KRAMA CHAMELEON

The colourful checked scarf known as the *krama* is almost universally worn by rural Khmers and is still pretty popular in the cities. The scarves are made from cotton or silk and the most famous silk *kramas* come from Kompong Cham and Takeo Provinces.

Kramas have a multitude of uses. They are primarily used to protect Cambodians from the sun, the dust and the wind, and it is for this reason many tourists end up investing in one during a visit. However, they are also slung around the waist as mini-sarongs, used as towels for drying the body, knotted at the neck as decorations, tied across the shoulders as baby carriers, placed upon chairs or beds as pillow covers, used to tow broken-down motorbikes and stuffed inside motorbike tyres in the advent of remote punctures – the list is endless.

Kramas are sold in markets throughout Cambodia and are an essential purchase for travellers using pick-up trucks or taking boat services. They have become very much a symbol of Cambodia and for many Khmers, wearing one is an affirmation of their identity.

KOMPONG CHAM

កំពង់ចាម

០៤២ / pop 46,000

Kompong Cham is a gateway to the real Cambodia, a land of picturesque villages, pretty wats and fishing communities. More a quiet town than a bustling city, it is a peaceful provincial capital spread along the banks of the Mekong. It was an important trading post during the French period, the legacy evident as you wander through the streets of chaste yet classic buildings.

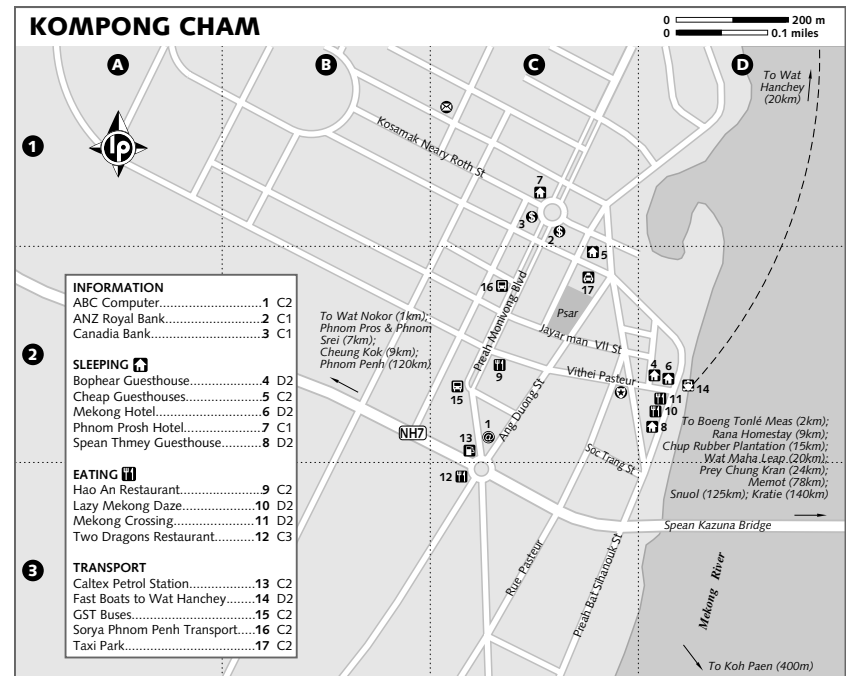
Long considered Cambodia's third city after Phnom Penh and Battambang, lately Kompong Cham has been somewhat left in the dust by the fast-growing tourist towns of Siem Reap and Sihanoukville. Kompong Cham remains an important travel hub and acts as the gateway to eastern and northeastern Cambodia. This role has grown thanks to the first bridge to span the Mekong's width in Cambodia, dramatically cutting journey times to popular destinations like Kratie and Mondulkiri.

Orientation

Kompong Cham may be one of Cambodia's larger cities, but that doesn't make it very big. Navigating on foot is straightforward. Arriving from Phnom Penh, all roads east end up at the Mekong, near many of the guesthouses and hotels. The market is a few blocks west of the river.

Information

Mr Vannat is an experienced local guide, and if you sip an evening drink overlooking the Mekong, he'll likely find you before long. He speaks English and French and his children are now continuing the family trade.



ABC Computer (11 Ang Duong St; per hr US\$1) Internet access.

ANZ Royal Bank (Preah Monivong Blvd) International banking in Kompong Cham (the times they are a changin'), plus a working ATM.

Canada Bank (Preah Monivong Blvd) Can handle cash and travellers cheques in various currencies, Visa and MasterCard cash advances and MoneyGram transfers.

Sights

WAT NOKOR

វត្តនគរ

The original fusion temple, **Wat Nokor** (entry US\$2) is a modern Theravada Buddhist pagoda squeezed into the walls of an 11th-century Mahayana Buddhist shrine of sandstone and laterite. It is a kitsch kind of place and many of the older building's archways have been incorporated into the new building as shrines for worship. On weekdays there are only a few monks in the complex and it is peaceful to wander among the many alcoves and their hidden shrines. There is also a large reclining Buddha.

To get here, head out of town on the road to Phnom Penh, and take the left fork at the

large roundabout about 1km from town. The temple is at the end of this pretty dirt road.

KOH PAEN

កោះប៉ែន

Koh Paen is a rural island in the Mekong River, connected to the southern reaches of Kompong Cham town by an elaborate bamboo bridge in the dry season or a local ferry in the wet season. The bamboo bridge is an attraction in itself, totally built by hand each year and looking like it is made of matchsticks from afar. There are plenty of local wats on the island and locals make a living fishing, as well as growing tobacco and sesame. During the dry season, several sandbars, the closest thing to a beach in this part of Cambodia, appear around the island. The best way to get about the island is by bicycle, which is possible to arrange through some of the budget guesthouses in town.

OLD FRENCH LIGHTHOUSE

ប៉ុម្រេងប៉ុម្រេង

Looming over the Mekong River opposite town is an old French lighthouse. For years it was an abandoned shell, but has recently been

renovated, including an incredibly steep metal staircase, more like a series of ladders. Don't attempt the climb if you are scared of heights, as it is a long way down. There are great views across the Mekong from the summit.

Sleeping

Many visitors prefer to stay on the riverfront, with a view over the Mekong. There are several guesthouses and a hotel here, but there is a lot of noise as soon as the sun comes up. One street off the market has a whole row of cheap guesthouses advertising rooms for 5000r, although most 'guests' seem to pay by the hour, so it could get noisy. Rooms are cells, but if money's too tight to mention, consider taking one for a night.

Bophea Guesthouse (☎012 796803; Vithei Pasteur; r US\$2-4) It's bare bones, but then what do you expect for this kind of budget? Cheaper rooms have a share bathroom, so it is worth splashing that extra cash for the bigger rooms with an ensuite.

Spean Thmey Guesthouse (☎012 831329; 95 Preah Bat Sihanouk St; s/tw US\$4/5) The name means 'new bridge', so it's hardly surprising to find this guesthouse has sweeping views over the Mekong bridge. The rooms are all fan-cooled with a private bathroom. The restaurant serves a reasonable range of food, including pizzas.

Mekong Hotel (☎941536; Preah Bat Sihanouk St; r US\$6-12; ☹) It's hard to beat this hotel, with a prime riverfront location and good value rooms, although they are beginning to age. All rooms include satellite TV, but 10 bucks will guarantee air-con and hot water. Ask for a Mekong view. The corridors are so vast, they are begging for a football tournament.

Phnom Prosh Hotel (☎941444; Kosamak Neary Roth St; r US\$6-12; ☹) A large hotel in the centre of town, this place is owned by a nephew of Samdech Hun Sen, Cambodia's prime minister, so security should be one less thing to worry about. The rooms include all the trimmings such as satellite TV, fridge and hot water.

Rana Homestay (☎012 686240; www.rana-cambodia.blogspot.com; one night US\$16, two nights or more US\$14 per night) Located in the countryside beyond Kompong Cham, this homestay offers an insight into life in rural Cambodia. The price includes all meals and tours of the local area. They only have capacity for five guests, so book ahead.

Eating

There are several good restaurants in town, including a couple of Western places, and a lot of cheaper hole-in-the-wall dives dotted around the market. There are stop-and-dip food stalls in the market and a number of *tukalok* (fruit shake) stalls near the police station.

Two Dragons Restaurant (Ang Duong St; mains 4000-10,000r) This family-run restaurant draws a steady crowd of Khmers thanks to its authentic food and a range of specials.

Lazy Mekong Daze (Preah Bat Sihanouk St; mains 4000-12,000r) A Western spot on the riverfront, this is – as the name suggests – a relaxing place to while away some time. The menu includes Khmer and Thai classics, plus a selection of home-comfort food. Plus beer – it's run by a Brit after all.

Mekong Crossing (☎012 427432; Preah Bat Sihanouk St; mains US\$2-4) Now on a prime corner on the riverfront, this old favourite serves an enticing mix of Khmer curries and Western favourites like big burgers and tasty sandwiches. By night, it doubles as a bar and draws a trickle of travellers in town.

Hao An Restaurant (☎941234; Preah Monivong Blvd; mains 4000-20,000r) The original Kompong Cham diner is still going strong and draws a legion of Khmers criss-crossing the country. The menu includes a mix of Khmer and Chinese favourites and service is slick, including beer girls who plug their brands at any time of day.

The advent of the bridge over the Mekong has brought a whole rash of restaurants on stilts to the other side of the river. Many are mini versions of those huge restaurants across the Chruoy Changvar Bridge in Phnom Penh. Some have live bands, others go for karaoke and all have a good range of Khmer favourites. Try the **Boeng Tonlé Meas** (NH7; US\$2-5), regarded by many locals as the best of the bunch.

In the early evening, locals gather on the waterfront outside the Mekong Hotel, where a number of stalls sell cheap drinks and cold beers.

Getting There & Away

Kompong Cham is 120km northeast of the capital and the road is in good shape. Phnom Penh Sorya Transport (Sorya; p110) and GST (p110) offer air-con buses between Kompong Cham and the capital (10,000r, two hours, hourly). Overcrowded minibuses also do the run (8000r), as do super-fast share taxis (12,000r).

INCY WINCY SPIDER

Locals in the small Cambodian town of Skuon (otherwise known affectionately as Spiderville) eat eight-legged furry friends for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Most tourists travelling between Siem Reap and Phnom Penh pass through Skuon without ever realising they have been there. This is hardly surprising, as it has nothing much to attract visitors, but it is the centre of one of Cambodia's more exotic culinary delights – the deep-fried spider.

Buses usually make a bathroom stop in Spiderville, so take a careful look at the eight-legged goodies the food sellers are offering. The creatures, decidedly dead, are piled high on platters, but don't get too complacent as there are usually live samples lurking nearby.

The spiders are hunted in holes in the hills to the north of Skuon and are quite an interesting dining experience. They are best treated like a crab and eaten by cracking the body open and pulling the legs off one by one, bringing the juiciest flesh out with them – a cathartic experience indeed for arachnophobes. They taste a bit like...mmm chicken. Alternatively, for a memorable photo, just bite the thing in half and hope for the best. Watch out for the abdomen, which seems to be filled with some pretty nasty-tasting brown sludge, which could be anything from eggs to excrement; spider truffles, perhaps?

No-one seems to know exactly how this micro-industry developed around Skuon, although some have suggested that the population may have developed a taste for these creatures during the years of Khmer Rouge rule, when food was in short supply.

NH7 to Kratie and Stung Treng is in great shape. Sorya has bus services from Phnom Penh to Memot and Kratie that pick up punters in Kompong Cham if space allows, as does Hua Lian. The buses to Kratie (17,000r, three hours) pass through around 10am.

There are no longer any passenger boat services running on the Mekong, but it may be possible to arrange passage on a cargo boat. However, given the speed at which they travel and the number of stops they make, this isn't the smoothest way to get about.

Motorbikers travelling north to Kratie should consider following the Mekong route for a slice of rural river life. See p287 for more details.

Getting Around

Most *moto* journeys around town are only 1000r or so; a little more at night. Bicycle or motorcycle rental can be arranged through negotiations with staff at your guesthouse or hotel.

AROUND KOMPONG CHAM Phnom Pros & Phnom Srei

ភ្នំប្រីស៍ភ្នំស្រី

'Man hill' and 'Woman Hill' are the subjects of local legends with many variations, one of which describes a child taken away at infancy only to return a powerful man who falls in love with his own mother. Disbelieving her protestations, he demanded her hand in marriage.

Desperate to avoid this disaster, the mother cunningly devised a deal; a competition between her team of women and his team of men to build the highest hill by dawn. If the women won, she would not give her hand. As they toiled into the night, the women built a fire with the flames reaching high into the sky. The men, mistaking this for sunrise, lay down their tools and the impending marriage was foiled. Locals love to relay this tale, each adding their own herbs and spices as the story unfolds.

A short distance from here lies **Cheung Kok** village, home to a local ecotourism initiative aimed at introducing visitors to rural life in Kompong Cham. Run by the NGO **Amica** (www.amica-cambodge.org, in French), villagers can teach visitors about harvesting rice, sugar palm and other crops. There is also a small shop in the village selling local handicraft products.

Phnom Srei has good views of the countryside during the wet season and a very stroke-able Nandin (sacred bull that was Shiva's mount) statue. Phnom Pros is a good place for a cold drink, among the inquisitive monkeys that populate the trees. The hills are about 7km out of town on the road to Phnom Penh and can be reached by *moto* for about US\$4 (round trip) depending on wait time.

Wat Maha Leap

វត្តដំ ឧបាលាភ

Wat Maha Leap is one of the most sacred temples in Cambodia, as it is one of the last

remaining wooden pagodas left in the country. More than a century old, it was only spared devastation by the Khmer Rouge because they converted it into a hospital. Many of the Khmers who were put to work in the surrounding fields perished here; 500 bodies were thrown into graves on site, now camouflaged by a tranquil garden.

The pagoda itself is beautiful. The wide columns supporting the structure are complete tree trunks, resplendent in gilded patterns and royal blue. The Khmer Rouge painted over the designs to match their austere philosophies, but the monks have since stripped it back to its original glory. Up above, the ceiling is adorned with colourful frescos depicting scenes of Buddha and his teachings.

It is necessary to remove your shoes to enter a temple, but this one is carpeted in thick pigeon poop. So unless you want a special souvenir, it is advisable to wear some old socks.

Wat Maha Leap is pretty difficult to find without a guide or some knowledge of Khmer, as there are lots of small turns along the way. It is about 20km from Kompong Cham on the other side of the Mekong River.

Prey Chung Kran Weaving Village

ភ្នំគូកប្រៃក្រាម

Kompong Cham is famous for its high-quality silk. The tiny village of Prey Chung Kran is set on the banks of the river and nearly every household has a weaving loom. Under the cool shade provided by their stilted homes, they work deftly to produce *kramas* of fashion and tradition. The most interesting thing to watch is the dyeing process as the typical diamond and dot tessellations are formed at this stage. Prey Chung Kran is about 4km from Wat Maha Leap.

Wat Hanchey

វត្តហាងជ័យ

Wat Hanchey is a hilltop pagoda that was an important centre of worship during the Chenla period, and today offers some of the best Mekong views in Cambodia. As well as a large, contemporary wat, there is a brick sanctuary dating from the 8th century and the foundations of several others. During the time of the Chenla empire, this may have been an important transit stop on journeys between the ancient cities of Thala Boravit (near Stung Treng to the north) and Angkor Borei (near Takeo to the south), and Sambor

Prei Kuk (near Kompong Thom to the west) and Banteay Prei Nokor (near Memot to the east).

The simplest way to get to Wat Hanchey is to charter an outboard from near the Mekong Hotel (p282) in Kompong Cham. Boats with a 15HP engine cost around 60,000r, while faster boats with a 40HP engine are 80,000r.

Local expats like to cycle up here in the dry season through the pretty riverbank villages. If you can get your hands on a decent bicycle, this could be a good way to pass a day.

Rubber Plantations

ធុការកៅស៊ូ

Kompong Cham was the heartland of the Cambodian rubber industry and rubber plantations still stretch across the province. Many of them are back in business and some of the largest plantations can be visited. Using an extended scraping instrument, they graze the trunks until the sap appears, dripping into the open coconut shells on the ground. In 1921, it was discovered that rich soils from Chup Hill were ideal for the cultivation of rubber and **Chup Rubber Plantation**, about 15km east of Kompong Cham, remains the most popular spot to visit.

MEMOT

ម៉េម៉ុត

០០៤២ / pop 35,000

Pronounced more like ‘may-moot’, this is a surprisingly large town set amid the rubber plantations of eastern Kompong Cham Province. Very few visitors stop here as there is little of interest unless you happen to work for Michelin, but plenty pass through on the way to Mondulhiri.

There is one small attraction in town for those with a keen interest in prehistory, namely the **Memot Centre of Archaeology** (NH7; admission free; ☎ 8-11am & 2-5pm). It houses a small exhibition on Iron Age circular earthwork villages, many of which have been discovered in the Memot region. It’s only really for the initiated, but breaks the long overland journey east if you have your own transport. The gate may look closed, but the guardians can usually let you in.

There is no real need to stay here, with the new and improved road connections, but those that get stuck should hit the **Reaksmy Angkor Chum Guesthouse** (០០១២ 317272; NH7; rUS\$4-10; ☎), a smart place with cheap, clean

fan rooms with TV, optional air-con and a central location.

The most reliable restaurant in town is the **Soy Try Restaurant** (០០១២ 708095; mains 3000-8000r), with an inexpensive range of Khmer standards.

Buses connect Memot with Kompong Cham (7000r, 1½ hours, several a day), but faster and more frequent are share taxis (10,000r). Heading on to Snuol, where you can connect to Mondulhiri, a seat in a share taxi should cost about 6000r.

KRATIE PROVINCE

ខេត្តក្រចេះ

A pretty province spanning the Mekong, much of Kratie’s population makes its living from the mother river’s waters. Beyond the river it’s a remote and wild land that sees few outsiders. Most visitors are drawn to the rare freshwater Irrawaddy dolphins found 15km north of the provincial capital. The town of Kratie is a little charmer and makes a good base from which to explore the surrounding countryside.

This was one of the first areas to fall to Khmer Rouge control in the civil war, although for several years it was in fact the Vietnamese communists who were running the show. It was also one of the first provincial capitals to fall to the liberating Vietnamese forces in the overthrow of the Khmer Rouge on 30 December 1978.

In the past, getting about was easier by boat than by road, as most roads in the province were pretty nasty. However, Kratie is now connected by NH7 to Kompong Cham and Phnom Penh to the south and Stung Treng and the Lao border to the north, making it a major cultural crossroads.

KRATIE

ក្រចេះ

០០៧២ / pop 79,000

Kratie is a thriving travel hub and the natural place to break the journey when travelling overland between Phnom Penh and Champasak in southern Laos. It is *the* place in the country to see the rare Irrawaddy dolphins, which live in the Mekong River in ever-diminishing numbers. A lively riverside town, Kratie (pronounced *kra-cheh*) has an expansive riverfront and some of the best Mekong sunsets in Cambodia. There is

a rich legacy of French-era architecture, as it was spared the war-time bombing that destroyed so many other provincial centres. It was one of the first towns to be ‘liberated’ by the Khmer Rouge (actually it was the North Vietnamese, but the Khmer Rouge later took the credit) in the summer of 1970.

Information

Telephone services are available at kiosks around the market, plus there are several internet shops in the vicinity of the market.

Aceda Bank (០០៧១៧០៧; ☎ 7.30am-4pm Mon-Fri) can change cash and travellers cheques (US dollars and euros) and has relocated to a swish new branch on Rue Preah Sihanouk.

There is a **tourist office** (☎ 8-11.30am & 2-5pm) by the river in the south of town, but don’t count on the (theoretical) opening hours!

For general information on getting around the province, the recommended budget guesthouses are pretty switched on with a wealth of information available.

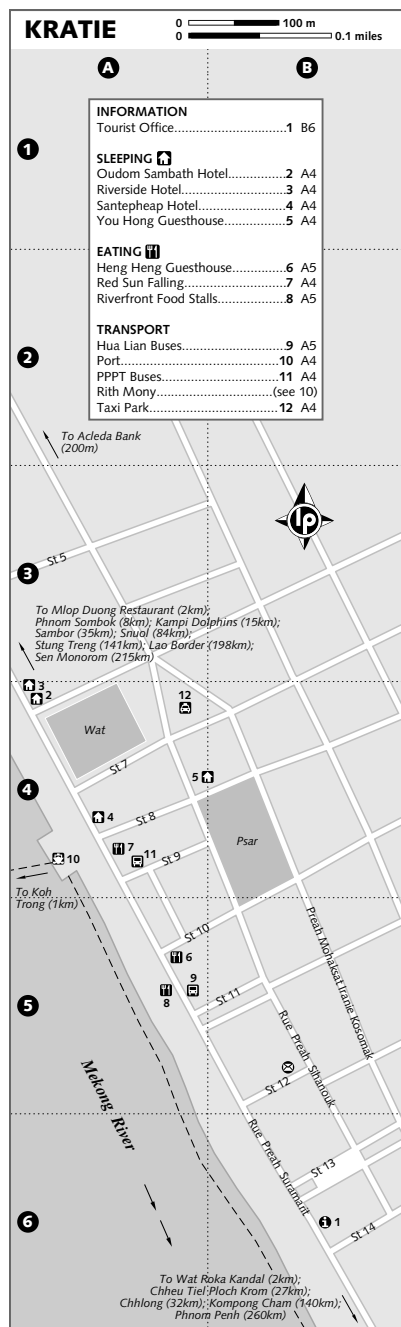
Sights & Activities

The main activity that draws visitors to Kratie is the chance to spot the elusive Irrawaddy river dolphin (p288).

Lying just across the water from Kratie is the island of **Koh Trong**, an almighty sandbar in the middle of the river. Cross here by boat with a bicycle in tow and enjoy a slice of rural island life. This could be the Don Khong of Cambodia in years to come and attractions include an **old stupa** and a small **floating village**, as well as the chance to encounter one of the rare **Mekong mud turtles** who inhabit the western shore. Catch the little ferry from the port (500r) or charter a local boat (US\$2) to get here.

Wat Roka Kandal (www.cambodian-craft.com; ☎ 8am-5pm) is a beautiful little temple dating from the early 19th century, one of the oldest in the region. The roof is in the classic Khmer style and the interior has been turned into a showroom for local wicker handicrafts. Baskets, bags, slippers and more are available at giveaway prices, all to help local women in the province. The temple is about 2km south of Kratie on the road to Chhlong.

It is also possible to arrange a visit to the handicraft village of **Chheu Tiel Ploch Krom** near Chhlong, an almost medieval-looking cluster of wooden houses on the banks of the Mekong.



Sleeping

The cheapest places to stay in Kratie are the guesthouses clustered around the market.

You Hong Guesthouse (☎012 957003; youhong_kratie@yahoo.com; 91 St 8; r US\$3-5; 📶) A great little guesthouse overlooking the bustling market, try and bag a room at the front with a view. Higher priced rooms include a TV and triples are just US\$5. Downstairs is a lively little restaurant and bar, plastered wall-to-wall with travel info. It also has a reliable internet connection (per hr US\$1).

Riverside Hotel (☎012 779255; Rue Preah Sumarit; r US\$5-12; 📶) A new riverfront property, the rooms here are enticing thanks to a real bath, hot water and cable TV. It was expanding during our visit, so looks set for bigger things.

Oudom Sambath Hotel (☎971502, fax 971503; 439 Rue Preah Sumarit; r US\$5-15; 📶) Another smart hotel on the riverfront, this hotel has large rooms with air-con, hot water and cable TV for those with the cash. There is a lively restaurant downstairs for those wanting an early breakfast.

Santepheap Hotel (☎971537; santepheaphotel@yahoo.com; Rue Preah Sumarit; r US\$5-20; 📶) The don of hotels in Kratie, this large place has large fan rooms at the back for just US\$5 with TV and bathroom. Air-con rooms come in various shapes and sizes, some with a plush wood trim and hot water. Popular with tour groups.

Wat Roka Kandal Bungalows (☎971729; Rue Preah Sumarit; r US\$8-15; 📶) And now for something completely different... Set on the banks of the Mekong, these wooden bungalows offer the perfect slice of river life. Hot water is a pleasant surprise and each has a balcony to soak up the sunset. The only drawback may be finding someone with a key.

There is also a high-end boutique hotel in Chhlong, 32km south of Kratie. See opposite for details.

Eating & Drinking

Cheap dining is available on the riverfront during the evening when food stalls set up shop overlooking the Mekong, and this area doubles up as a cheap spot for a sunset drink. By day, the *psar* (market) has the usual range of cheap food stalls hawking Cambodian, Chinese and Vietnamese dishes for next to nothing, including bargain breakfasts of *bobor* (rice porridge).

Mlop Duong Restaurant (NH7; mains US\$1-3) It's a bit out of the way for riverfront aficionados,

but if you have bolted down from the Lao border, this may be your first chance for a Khmer-style night out, complete with a local band and *rom vong*, the closest thing to line dancing in Cambodia.

Red Sun Falling (Rue Preah Sumarit; mains US\$1-4) One of the liveliest little spots in town, this place kicks off when the owner puts on his party hat to play. A relaxed ambience, subtle tunes and a small bookshop by day, the kitchen turns out a solid selection of Asian and Western meals, including moist homemade brownies. By night, it's a bar and draws the drinkers.

Several guesthouses and hotels also have good restaurants attached. One of the most popular local restaurants is attached to the **Heng Heng Guesthouse** (Rue Preah Sumarit; meals US\$1-3), with all the leading luminaries from the world of Cambodian and Chinese cooking.

Getting There & Away

NH7 puts Kratie 348km northeast of Phnom Penh and 141km south of Stung Treng. The road is surfaced all the way making the journeys straightforward. **SPPT** (☎092 181806) has buses to Phnom Penh (US\$5, five hours) at 7.15am and 9am; and one to Stung Treng (18,000r, two hours) at 1.30pm. **Hua Lian** (☎012 535387) has buses to Phnom Penh (US\$4, five hours) at 7.15/9/10.45am; the Lao border at Voen Kham (US\$10, four hours) at 1.30pm; Sen Monorom (US\$10, five hours) at 9am; and Banlung (US\$12, six hours) at 12.30pm. **Rith Mony** (☎012 991663) has buses to Phnom Penh (US\$5, five hours) at 7.30am and 9.30am; and one to Stung Treng (18,000r, two hours) at 1.30pm.

More frequent and faster are share taxis that cost about US\$4 per place to Kompong Cham and US\$7 to Phnom Penh. Most taxis take the dirt road south through Chhlong to Suong district to save money on petrol and that means just four hours to the capital.

For motorbikers, there is a more scenic dry-season route that follows the Mekong River. Take the river road north out of Kompong Cham as far as Stung Trang (pronounced Trong) district and cross the Mekong on a small ferry before continuing up the east bank of the Mekong through Chhlong to Kratie. This is a very beautiful ride through small rural villages and takes about four hours or so on a trail bike.

For the lowdown on getting from Kratie to Mondulkiri Province, check out p302.

Getting Around

A *moto* ride around Kratie town is the usual 1000r or so depending how far into the suburbs you venture. Most of the guesthouses and hotels can arrange motorbikes (with driver US\$6 to US\$10) and should also be able to set visitors up with a bicycle.

AROUND KRATIE

Phnom Sombok

ភ្នំសំបូក

Phnom Sombok is a small hill with an active wat, located on the road from Kratie to Kampi. The hill offers the best views across the Mekong on this stretch of the river and a visit here can easily be combined with a trip to see the dolphins for an extra dollar or so.

Sambor

សំបូរណី

Sambor was the site of a thriving pre-Angkorian city during the time of Sambor Prei Kuk and the Chenla empire. Not a stone remains in the modern town of Sambor, which is locally famous for having the largest **wat** in Cambodia, complete with 108 columns. Known locally as Wat Moi Roi (Wat Sorsor Moi Roi; 100 Columns Temple), it was constructed on the site of a 19th-century wooden temple, a few pillars of which are still located at the back of the compound. This temple is a minor place of pilgrimage for residents of Kratie Province. To get to Sambor, follow the Kampi road north to Sandan, before veering left along a reasonable 10km stretch of road – it's about 35km in total.

CHHLONG

ច្រើនឃុំ

Chhlong is a thriving riverside port with a wealth of beautiful old French buildings. French tourists sometimes make a diversion, but other visitors are few and far between. During the civil war, Chhlong somehow held out against the communists until 1975, probably a useful way for the Khmer Rouge to acquire arms from corrupt government forces.

Behind the market on the riverfront road are several grand old buildings from the 1920s, any of which would be prime real estate in Phnom Penh. Further north is the **house of a hundred pillars**, a huge old wooden Khmer residence that is one of the best preserved in the region.

DOLPHIN-WATCHING AROUND KRATIE

The freshwater Irrawaddy dolphin (*trey pisaut*) is an endangered species throughout Asia, with shrinking numbers inhabiting stretches of the Mekong in Cambodia and Laos, and isolated pockets in Bangladesh and Myanmar. The dark blue to grey cetaceans grow to 2.75m long and are recognisable by their bulging foreheads and small dorsal fins. They can live in fresh or salt water, although they are seldom seen in the sea. For more on this rare creature, see the **Mekong Dolphin Conservation Project** (MDCP; www.mekongdolphin.org).

Before the civil war, locals say, Cambodia was home to as many as 1000 dolphins. However, during the Pol Pot regime, many were hunted for their oils and their numbers have plummeted.

Locals and experts alike believe there may be as few as 75 Irrawaddy dolphins left in the Mekong between Kratie and the Lao border near Don Khone. It is possible to see them at Kampi, about 15km north of Kratie, on the road to Sambor. A *moto* for the 30km round trip should be around US\$4 depending on how long the driver has to wait.

There are local motorboats available to shuttle visitors out to the middle of the river to view the dolphins at close quarters. It costs US\$3/2.50/2 per person for one/two/three people in the dry season; US\$5/4/3 in the wet season, fixed price. Encourage the boat driver to use the engine as little as possible once near the dolphins, as the noise is sure to disturb them. It is also possible to see them at O Svay village (p290) in Stung Treng province, near the Dom Kralor border with Laos.

The old governor's residence has been given an ambitious renovation and is now **Le Relais de Chhlong** (☎012 501742; www.nicimex.com; r US\$80-100; 🍴 🚶), an atmospheric boutique hotel with just six rooms. Set on the riverfront, facilities include an inviting swimming pool and a private restaurant. Rooms have high ceilings and are thoughtfully decorated, although the prices are pretty steep for the provinces.

Chhlong is easy enough to access by motorbike or car from Kratie or can make a sensible stop on the long road journey from Phnom Penh.

SNUOL

ស្នួល
☎072 / pop 19,000

This was a sorry little town before the coming of the road. It still feels a little like it has fallen off the map, but the new road provides a quick way out. A lot of folk end up having at least one meal here, as it is common to have to change vehicles when journeying between Mondulakiri Province and towns on the Mekong. It is easy enough to get a feed around the *psar* (market) where there are several local restaurants.

Snuol is approximately 125km southwest of Mondulakiri Province and 135km east of Kompong Cham. It is only about 15km north of the Vietnamese border and this remote crossing is now open to foreigners (see p331). Several pick-ups take on the road to

Sen Monorom (inside/on the back US\$7/4, four hours). Buses and taxis connect Snuol with Kompong Cham (1½ hours) and Kratie (one hour).

STUNG TRENG PROVINCE

ខេត្តស្ទឹងត្រែង

Poor old Stung Treng is the neglected middle child, sandwiched between the luminary siblings of Ratanakiri Province and Champasak in southern Laos. While tourism is yet to take off, it is emerging as a major commercial crossroads for trade between Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. New roads have now plugged it into the rest of the country, but much of Stung Treng's traffic travels by water, as several major rivers traverse the province, including Tonlé Kong, Tonlé San, Tonlé Srepek and, of course, the Mekong.

Visitor attractions are limited for now, but as more travellers hit the overland route between Laos and Cambodia, it is possible that boat trips up the Mekong's tributaries, to places like Siem Pang, will be a different way to see some remote areas. Stung Treng is home to several minority groups and the western chunk of the massive Virachay National Park, accessible from Siem Pang – two factors that suggest there is definitely

some tourism potential as the province's infrastructure develops. It is also taking off as an alternative location to view the rare Irrawaddy dolphins in the village of O Svay, near the Lao border.

STUNG TRENG

ស្ទឹងត្រែង
☎074 / pop 24,500

While new roads have helped to put Stung Treng back on the map, they have also made it easier to pass through and many travellers are no longer overnighing here. It is located on the banks of Tonlé San, which flows into the mighty Mekong on the western outskirts of the city. Some locals call Tonlé San the 'Tonlé Kong' or 'Tonlé Sekong', as these two rivers merge 10km east of town. There is now a major new bridge across the San, which is a key link in the new road between Kratie and the Lao border.

Information

Aceda Bank (☎973684), near the *psar* (market), can change travellers cheques and arrange Western Union money transfers. Stung Treng might also be the last chance to get rid of any excess Lao kip.

For telephone services, try the mobile phone kiosks sprinkled around the market. Internet access is available in shops around the *psar* at US\$2 per hour.

Assuming you have a Lao visa in hand, there is no longer any need to arrange any paperwork to exit Cambodia into Laos. Anyone who tries to tell you otherwise is fishing for money.

There is a new **tourist office** (☎973967) located near the new bridge, not particularly convenient for the centre of town. Fellow travellers and local guesthouses are a more useful source of information.

Sights & Activities

THALA BORAVIT

ថ្នាំបូរាវិត

Thala Boravit was an important Chenla-period trading town on the river route connecting the ancient city of Champasak and the sacred temple of Wat Phu with the southern reaches of the Chenla empire, including the ancient cities of Sambor Prei Kuk (Isanapura) and Angkor Borei. For all its past glories, there is very little to see today. It is hardly worth the effort for the casual visitor, but temple

INFORMATION	
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SLEEPING 🛏	
Kong Ratana Sambath Guesthouse.....	2 A2
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EATING 🍴	
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TRANSPORT 🚗	
Boats to Kratie, Thala Boravit & Laos.....	7 A1
Rith Momy..... (see 4)	
Sorya Phnom Penh Transport.....	8 A2
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fiends may feel the urge to tick it off. Thala Boravit is on the west bank of the Mekong River and irregular boats cross from Stung Treng throughout the day. It should be easy enough to wait for locals to fill up the regular boats (1000r), rather than charter an outboard (US\$5 or so). It is from here that the jungle road to Kompong Thom or Tbeng Meanchey

MEKONG DISCOVERY TRAIL

Efforts are underway to open up the Mekong River for community-based tourism, particularly the wild and beautiful stretches in Stung Treng and Kratie Provinces. The **Mekong Discovery Trail** (www.mekongdiscoverytrail.com) is a new initiative to get visitors to spend more time visiting villages and learning about the local lifestyle in communities along the river between Voen Kham and Kratie. The project includes homestays in O Svay (below) and dolphin visits nearby, plus plans for homestays and pagoda-stays along the length of the trail. There are also plans for eco-friendly activities such as mountain biking on traditional islands like Koh Trong, opposite Kratie town, and kayaking pretty stretches of river renowned for their birdlife. The project is still in its infancy, but deserves support, as it intends to offer fishing communities an alternative income in order to protect the Irawaddy dolphin and other rare species on this stretch of river.

To stay up-to-date with the latest developments on the trail, including more homestays and kayaking options, check out the website.

starts via the village of Chaeb. See opposite for more details.

MEKONG BLUE

មេកុងប្លូ

A silk-weaving centre on the outskirts of Stung Treng, **Mekong Blue** (☎973977; www.mekongblue.com; ☎7.30-11.30am & 1.30-5pm Mon-Sat) is part of the Stung Treng Women's Development Centre. Mekong Blue specialises in exquisite silk products for sale and export. It is possible to see the dyers and weavers in action at this centre, most of whom come from vulnerable or impoverished backgrounds. There is a small showroom on site with a selection of silk on sale, plus a café. The centre is located about 4km east of the centre and moto drivers know the place.

O SVAY

ស៊ូវ៉ៃ

This small village near the border with Laos is emerging as an alternative place to view the rare freshwater dolphins of the Mekong. As politics muddies the waters on the Lao side of the border, with the Cambodian and Lao authorities arguing over who has the right to profit from the dolphins, O Svay is stepping forward. A friendly village that also offers the chance for a homestay with a local family, it is possible to view the dolphins for just US\$1 here. Boat rental is also available for about US\$5 per hour, although for now the boats have no covers so bring a hat or scarf. O Svay is now part of the Mekong Discovery Trail (above) and it is possible to arrange a homestay here. Contact the **Culture & Environment Preservation Association** (☎973858, 011 724250; www.cepa-cambodia.org) for details.

Sleeping

Riverside Guesthouse (☎012 439454; r US\$3-4; ☑) Overlooking the riverfront area, this is a popular crossroads for travellers heading north and south, thanks to the lively little restaurant (US\$1 to US\$3) downstairs and cheap rooms. Rooms are pretty basic, but so are the prices. This place is also a reliable source of travel information.

Le Tonlé Training Centre (☎973638; www.tourismforhelp.org; r US\$6) Located in a shady spot near the Tonlé Kong, this small guesthouse doubles as a training centre to give underprivileged locals a helping hand into the tourism industry. Rooms include mosquito net and fan, but involve a share bathroom. There is also an excellent restaurant.

Kong Ratana Sambath Guesthouse (☎012 964483; r US\$5-14; ☑) The name is a bit of a mouthful, but don't let that put you off, as the service is friendly and the welcome warm. Only the top-whack US\$14 rooms include hot water.

Ou Dynak Red Guesthouse (☎011 963676; r US\$7-25; ☑) One of the new breed of guesthouses in town, the rooms here are naturally cool even before the air-con kicks in. More expensive rooms are more spacious and include hot water.

Sok Sambath Hotel (☎973790; r US\$8-55; ☑) Long the smartest hotel in town, this place was on the move during our last visit to a new location overlooking the river. The old place had hot water, cable TV and air-con, so the new place should only improve things, although prices may rise.

Eating

Sorya Restaurant (☎011 908584; US\$1-3) Located near the market, this eatery offers a pick

and mix of Asian flavours from Cambodia, Thailand and China, plus a fair selection of beers to help wash the meal down.

Le Tonlé (☎973638; US\$2-4) Part of Le Tonlé Training Centre, this restaurant offers a selection of affordable Khmer and international food. All proceeds go to helping the training programme for underprivileged youngsters.

Mekong Blue (☎973977; US\$2-4) This relaxing café offers traditional Khmer flavours and is set in the countryside outside town. It is best to call ahead and make a booking for lunch and dinner, as they don't get that many drop-in diners.

Getting There & Away

NH7 south to Kratie (141km) is in great shape these days and the journey is a breeze. Sorya, Hua Lian and Rith Momy all operate buses to Phnom Penh (US\$9/9/10, eight hours, 470km) that pass through Kratie (US\$5), all leaving around 7am. Share taxis also make the run to Kratie (US\$4, two hours).

For the scoop on the road between Stung Treng and Ban Lung in Ratanakiri, see p294. There is a minibus service to Ban Lung (US\$8, three to four hours) which leaves around 7.30am daily and will pick up punters from their hotel.

For the inside story on the border crossing with Laos, see p328.

The adventurous can also charter small longtail rocket boats from Stung Treng to Kratie (US\$100 or so, three hours), but the river can be perilous with rocks and sandbars appearing everywhere. Do not be talked into taking one of these boats in the afternoon, as they have no lights and travelling at high speeds on the Mekong in the dark is dicing with death. Several locals die on this stretch each year and several tourists have lost everything when their boats have collided with immovable objects.

There is also a trail that leads across northern Cambodia from Stung Treng to either Tbeng Meanchey or Kompong Thom. It is unwise for the average traveller to take this route, but for adventure addicts who don't mind a very long and bumpy bike ride it is an option. First, cross the Mekong to Thala Boravit from where a jungle trail leads west to the large village of Chaeb. If trail conditions are bad you may need to overnight in Chaeb in the wat or with some locals. From Chaeb, there is an old logging

road west that joins with the main road from Kompong Thom to Tbeng Meanchey. A *moto* to or from Tbeng Meanchey should cost about US\$20, as the drivers need to cover the cost of their return. This route should not be attempted in the wet season.

RATANAKIRI PROVINCE

ខេត្តរតនគិរី

Up-and-coming Ratanakiri is making a name for itself as diverse region of outstanding natural beauty that provides a remote home for a mosaic of minority peoples. The Jarai, Tompoun, Brau and Kreung are the Khmer Leu (Upper Khmer) people with their own languages, traditions and customs. There is also a large Lao population throughout the province and multiple languages will be heard in villages such as Voen Sai.

Adrenaline activities are plentiful. Swim in clear volcanic lakes, shower under waterfalls, glimpse an elephant or trek in the vast Virachay National Park – it's all here. Tourism is set to take off, but that is if the lowland politicians and generals don't plunder the place first. Ratanakiri is the frontline in the battle for land, and the slash-and-burn minorities are losing out thanks to their tradition of collective ownership. The forest is disappearing at an alarming and accelerating rate, replaced by rubber plantations and cashew-nut farms. It is to be hoped someone wakes up and smells the coffee – there's plenty of that as well – before it's too late.

Gem mining is big business in Ratanakiri, hardly surprising given the name actually translates as 'hill of the precious stones'. There is good quality zircon mined in several parts of the province as well as other semi-precious stones. The prices are low compared with the West, but don't get suckered into a dream deal, as gem scams are as old as the hills themselves.

Ratanakiri Province played its part in the country's contemporary tragedy, by serving as a base for the Khmer Rouge leadership during much of the 1960s. Pol Pot and Ieng Sary fled here in 1963 and established headquarters in Ta Veng in the north of the province.

Roads in Ratanakiri are not as impressive as the sights: the dry season means chewing on dust; the wet season, sliding about in

mund... take your pick. The roads look like carrot soup during the wet season, so the ideal time to explore is December to February. Prepare to do battle with the dust of 'red earth Ratanakiri', which will leave you with a fake tan and orange hair.

Boats are a popular means of transport for scenic trips, but the province is too isolated to make river travel into Stung Treng a realistic option.

BAN LUNG

ក្រុងលុង

☎075 / pop 25,000

Affectionately known as 'dey krahorm' (red earth) after its rust coloured affliction, Ban Lung provides a popular base for a range of Ratanakiri romps. It may look like autumn all year round, but it's just that the leaves, like everything else, are cloaked in a blanket of dust. The town itself isn't the most inspiring, but with attractions such as Boeng Yeak Lom just a short hop away, there is little room for complaint. Many of the minorities from the surrounding villages come to Ban Lung to buy and sell at the market, making it one of the more lively centres in the province.

The town was originally known as Labansiek before the civil war, but the district name of Ban Lung has gradually slipped into use among locals.

Information

Aclea Bank (☎974220), near the *psar* (market), can change travellers cheques and offers Western Union money transfers. There is a local ATM here, which may be upgraded to credit cards.

There is a **post office** on the road to Bokheo that offers international phone services, but the mobile-phone kiosks around the market are cheaper. Internet access is available in town but rates are high, speed low. Try **Redland Internet Café** (per hr 10,000r) or **Cyber Sophat** (per hr US\$3).

There is a small provincial **tourist office** in the centre of town, but we have never seen it open in the last decade. Visitors will find their guesthouse or hotel to be of more use in the quest for knowledge. Check out www.yaklom.com for more ideas on what to do in Ratanakiri.

Activities

There are no real sights in town, but plenty beyond. For details on lakes, waterfalls, mi-

nority villages, national parks and gem mines beyond Ban Lung, see p296.

ELEPHANT RIDES

Most guesthouses and hotels can arrange short elephant rides from nearby villages to local waterfalls. One of the most popular rides is from the village of Kateung to the spectacular waterfall of Ka Tieng. The ride takes about one hour, passing through beautiful rubber plantations. The usual charge is US\$10 per person per hour. For longer elephant rides, Mondulkiri Province (p301) remains the more popular option.

TREKKING

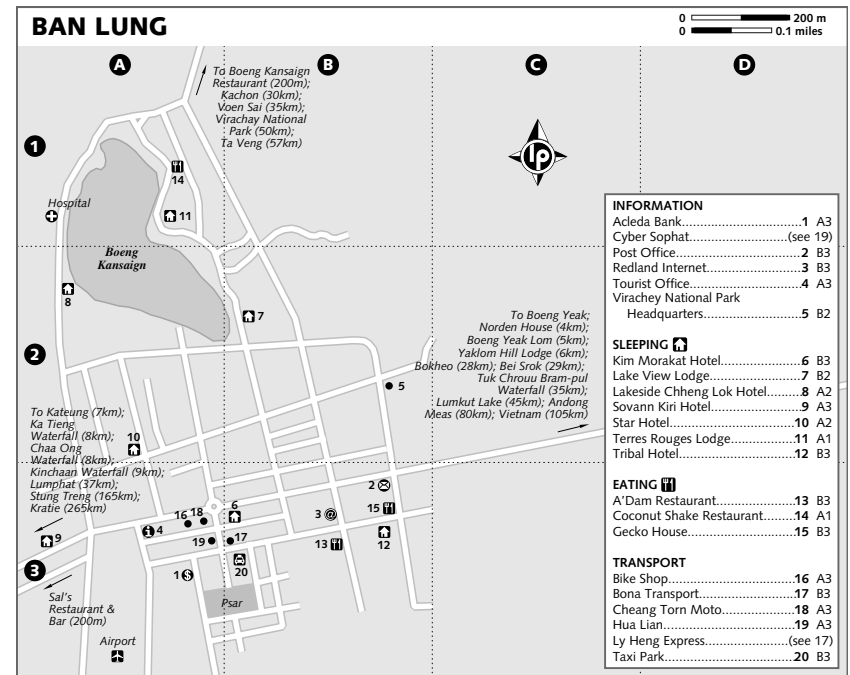
Trekking has really started to take off around Ratanakiri, but it is important to make clear arrangements with your guide to ensure you get what is expected out of a trip. There are lots of popular routes that take in minority villages and scenic spots around the province, including Kreung villages near the road to Ta Veng, and Jarai villages up in Andong Meas district, but with deforestation continuing apace you need to be sure of conditions along the way.

Many visitors opt for a trek into Virachay National Park, but be aware that some of these treks barely scrape the park itself, and spend much of the time in the park buffer zone. There are now multiday treks into the park, and these are a great way to explore one of the most wild and remote areas in Cambodia. See p297 for details. The cost depends on the route, but figure on US\$15 to US\$25 a day for a good guide and more for transport, food and lodging along the way. Budget travellers really need to link up with a group to make it affordable. The best places to arrange trekking are Terres Rouges (opposite) and Yaklom Hill Lodge (opposite). Recommended guesthouses can also help out with budget treks.

Sleeping

Ratanakiri is now firmly entrenched on the overland map of Cambodia and the choice of accommodation is growing by the year. Most places offer free pick-up from the airport if and when flights are operating.

Tribal Hotel (☎974074; tribalhotel@camintel.com; r US\$3-20; ☺) There is nothing particularly tribal about this huge place, but there is a healthy selection of rooms catering to all budgets. Pricier rooms include hot water,



cable TV and a fridge, while budget rooms are dotted around the huge garden and include singles with bathroom for US\$3. The garden includes a big restaurant (mains US\$1 to US\$3) with a good selection of Khmer and Asian cuisine.

Star Hotel (☎012 958322; r US\$5-10; ☺) Run by the irrepressible Mr Leng, this cotton-candy structure was originally built as a home and has large rooms complete with hot-water bathrooms. There is plenty of travel information here and the lively restaurant is a good place for a beer or a signature *phnom pleung* (hill of fire), a beef-and-vegetable DIY tabletop barbecue.

Lakeside Chheng Lok Hotel (☎390063; www.chhenglok.com/index.htm; chhenglok@yahoo.com; r US\$5-20; ☺) In a prime spot overlooking Boeng Kansaing, this is the best all-rounder in Ban Lung. Set in a lush garden, there is a choice of attractive garden bungalows or smart rooms. Hot water, cable TV, it's all here, and there is a local restaurant amid the flourishing plants.

Yaklom Hill Lodge (☎012 644240; www.yaklom.com; r incl breakfast US\$10-22) For an alternative

experience to the places in town, make for Ratanakiri's only ecolodge. Set amid lush forest about 6km east of town, the wooden bungalows are thoughtfully decorated with ethnic minority handicrafts. There is no power during the day, but the fan and lights work through the night. There is an atmospheric restaurant (mains US\$2 to US\$4) serving Thai and Khmer food.

Norden House (☎012 880327; www.nordenhouse.yaklom.com; r US\$25; ☺) This new bungalow resort is exceptional value and sits in a peaceful location on the road to Boeng Yeak Lom. Rooms are stylish and include cable TV and a DVD player, plus there's free internet access. There is also a restaurant with Swedish specialities, plus dirt bikes (per day US\$25) for hire.

Terres Rouges Lodge (☎974051; www.ratanakiri-lodge.com; r US\$32-75; ☺) Undoubtedly one of the most atmospheric places to stay in provincial Cambodia, this former governor's residence has an imperious setting on the shores of Boeng Kansaing. There is a range of rooms in the main house, all finished with creative Khmer and Chinese touches, but

only some have air-con. Set in the gorgeous garden are a series of exquisite bungalows, decorated with antique furnishings, sleigh beds and Balinese-style open-plan bathrooms. There is also a popular restaurant and bar, open to non-guests, which offers a teasing selection of Asian and European favourites (meals US\$2 to US\$5).

Other good options include:

Kim Morakat Hotel (☎974121; r US\$5-10; 🏠)

Right in the middle of town, this hotel is good value and popular with Khmers.

Lake View Lodge (☎092 785259; r US\$5-15; 🏠)

Located near the lake, this backpacker pad has eight rooms and good-value grub.

Sovann Kiri Hotel (☎974001; r US\$5-15; 🏠) A huge new hotel on the way into town, it is a riot of concrete but that ensures the rooms are smart and comfortable.

Eating & Drinking

As well as the aforementioned guesthouse and hotel restaurants, there is now an improving selection of restaurants around town. The cheapest food in town is found in and around Psar Ban Lung (Ban Lung Market) and this is also the area to find *tukalok* (fruit shakes) and desserts by night.

For the best coconut shake in the northeast, try the aptly named **Coconut Shake Restaurant** (☎012 416234; Boeng Kansaign; meals 4000-10,000r). Dare to try the friend frie or the friend toes (French toast?).

Gecko House (☎012 422228; mains US\$1-4) A charming little restaurant with inviting sofas and soft lighting, this is a great place by day or night. The menu features Thai tastes, Khmer classics and some Western dishes such as pizza, pasta and sandwiches. After dark it doubles as a lively bar.

Saf's Restaurant & Bar (☎012 284377; mains US\$1.50-5) This restaurant-bar, set in a traditional wooden house on the edge of town, is the place to come for comfort food from home, including Indian curries, spicy Mexican and great burgers. Service can be slow, but it's worth the wait.

Boeng Kansaign Restaurant (mains US\$1-4) Relax and unwind on the shores of the lake at this local restaurant. Khmer and Chinese dishes make up the menu and the breeze across the water is blissful on a hot day.

A'Dam Restaurant (mains US\$1-3) This local restaurant doubles up as a bar by night, thanks to one of the only pool tables in Ban Lung and a dart board... almost a British pub.

Getting There & Away

At the time of writing, all flights to Ratanakiri had been suspended for more than six months. They may start operating again, but bear in mind that schedules cannot be trusted and cancellations are common.

The road between Ban Lung and O Pong Moan (the junction 19km south of Stung Treng on NH7) is in reasonable shape and is currently undergoing renovation. Share taxi (25,000r, three hours) is the way to go as pick-ups (inside/on the back 25,000/15,000r, four hours) are slower and less comfortable. There is also a private minivan service to Stung Treng (US\$8), which offers pick-ups from your guest house or hotel. Direct taxis run between Ban Lung and Kratie (30,000, five hours). Wet-season journey times can be considerably longer.

One way or the other, it is now possible to make the overland journey to Phnom Penh in just one day and Hua Lian (US\$17.50) run a daily bus in either direction, departing at 6.15am. There are also private companies offering shared people carriers to Phnom Penh. Try **Bona Transport** (☎012 567161) or **Ly Heng Express** (☎012 724096), both costing US\$15 and leaving at 6.30am.

There is no real road linking Ratanakiri to Mondulkiri, contrary to what older maps may show. There is a road as far south as Lumphat, but after crossing the Tonlé Srepok by ferry, it descends into a series of sandy ox-cart tracks until Koh Nhek in northern Mondulkiri Province. A handful of hardcore bikers have been using this route over the past few years, but only attempt it if you have years of biking experience or are an extremely hardy soul with an iron backside. Anyone seriously considering this option should link up with a local who knows the route, as there are lots of opportunities to get lost. A range of motorbike spares, copious amounts of water and a compass should make for a smoother journey. An increasing number of travellers are also coming this way on the back of a *moto*, but it's punishing. The Cambodian military have rebuilt the road from Sen Monorom to Koh Nhek, which makes the journey possible in one day, assuming you don't get lost. It is almost impossible in the wet season.

Getting Around

Motorbikes, cars and 4WDs are available for hire from most guesthouses in town.

Motorbikes are usually US\$5 to US\$8 a day. Cars are available from US\$30 a day and 4WDs from about US\$50 a day, but prices rise rapidly the further you want to travel.

Cheang Torn Moto (☎012 960533) has some 250cc dirt bikes available for US\$10 per day, but maintenance is an issue. Norden House

(p292) has reliable ones, but at US\$25 a day. Local guides with motorbikes offer their services around the province and rates range from US\$8 to US\$15 depending on their experience, level of English and where you want to go.

For something cheaper and more environmentally friendly, consider a bicycle (US\$1

THE JUNGLE GIRL OF RATANAKIRI *Nick Ray*

In 1988, nine-year old Pnieng Rochum disappeared in a remote corner of Cambodia. In January 2007, she emerged from the jungle to be reunited with her family in O Yadaw village in Ratanakiri. When the story broke, the international press descended on this remote village and the story broke all over the world. I covered the story for the UK media and followed up with a visit to the family when researching this guidebook. This is her story.

For eighteen years, her mother Rochom Choy prayed for the safe return of her daughter. 'It was the happiest moment of my life,' she says. 'I looked into her eyes and knew this was my long lost daughter.' Her father, Lou Sal, a local policeman, was also certain it was his daughter. Filthy, naked and silent, instinct told him this was the little girl he had last seen during Cambodia's civil war. Back at the village, her mother bathed her. 'As I washed her, I saw a scar on her forearm,' she told me. 'I knew it was her because her sister accidentally cut her with a knife just before she disappeared.'

Early reports claimed she was with a wild man wielding a sword. 'She was alone. She came out of the jungle and I was afraid', says Cher Tam, the first person to set eyes on her for 18 years. 'She was naked and dirty and moving with a stoop,' continues the woodcutter from the nearby village of Ten. Pnieng Rochum and her young cousin vanished in 1988 when her mother had gone to collect some drinking water. The parents searched everywhere, wandering through the jungle and travelling from village to village. 'Some villagers saw some small footprints on the banks of a jungle stream near their rice fields,' says Rochom Chey. 'I thought we might find her but the jungle spirits did not want to let her go.' Ceremonies were held to pray to the spirits for her safe return. 'Money was no object to bring back my daughter,' says her father. 'I asked the spirits of the jungle to give back my daughter every night.'

When I first met Pnieng in January 2007, she sat and stared into space, traumatised and distant, almost autistic. She talked to herself at night, muttering noises that the family could not understand. 'She makes strange sounds like a small animal,' explained her mother. She was like a newborn baby, unable to take care of her most basic needs, spoon-fed, washed, and her every move watched.

Her parents were terrified she would return to the jungle, reclaimed by the powerful spirits in which they believe. Their fears were realised in the summer of 2007 when Pnieng vanished again for nine days. She was eventually found, a changed woman on her return. I met her again in November 2007 and she had put on weight, could barely contain her smile and sang songs. She also seemed to understand some language, particularly Vietnamese and Jarai, suggesting she may have spent some time across the border. Her parents believe she had made her peace with the spirits, or possibly said a final farewell to her jungle man companion.

The jungle girl story is baffling. There are more questions than answers. How does an eight-year old girl survive in the jungle for so many years? The Cambodian jungle is home to poisonous snakes, malaria and other dangers. It is an unforgiving place for anyone, particularly a young girl. Was she kidnapped by a jungle man and forced to forage with him, a Cambodian version of Tarzan and Jane? Did she stray across the border into Vietnam and end up forced into slavery for a time? What happened to her young cousin?

Even today, nobody knows. What is certain is that a little girl disappeared 18 years ago. The only person who knows the truth is Pnieng Rochum. For now she remains silent, but in time she may reveal her secret past.

Pnieng Rochum currently lives in O Yadaw village with her parents.

per day), available from some hotels and the bike shop on the main drag.

AROUND BAN LUNG

Try to link up with a responsible local guide when exploring Ratanakiri, as the minority people around the province are sensitive to outsiders just stomping in and out of their villages.

Boeng Yeak Lom

បឹងយ៉ាកយៀម

At the heart of the protected area of **Yeak Lom** (admission US\$1) is a beautiful blue crater-lake set amid the vivid greens of the towering jungle. The lake is believed to have been formed 700,000 years ago and some people swear it must have been formed by a meteor strike as the circle is so perfect. The indigenous minority people in the area have long considered Yeak Lom a sacred place and their legends talk of mysterious creatures that inhabit the waters of the lake. It is one of the most peaceful, beautiful locations Cambodia has to offer and the water is extremely clear. It is a great place to take a dip early in the morning or late in the afternoon, as there is a wooden pier on the water's edge, plus tubes for rent.

There is a small **visitors centre** (admission by donation) that has information on ethnic minorities in the province, local handicrafts for sale and suggested walks around the lake. The area is administered by the local Tompuon minority and proceeds from the entry fee go towards improving life in the nearby villages.

Boeng Yeak Lom is 5km east of Ban Lung. Turn right off the road to Bokheo at the statue of the minority family. *Motos* are available for around US\$2 return, but expect to pay more if the driver has to wait around. It takes almost an hour to get to on foot from Ban Lung.

Waterfalls

There are numerous waterfalls in the province, but many are difficult to reach in the wet season and lacking much water in the dry season. The three most commonly visited are **Chaa Ong**, **Ka Tieng** and **Kinchaan**, all attracting a 2000r admission fee, and these are signposted from the main road towards Stung Treng, about 5km west of town. The most spectacular of the three is Chaa Ong, as it is set in a jungle gorge and you can clamber behind the waterfall or venture underneath for a power shower. Ka Tieng is the most enjoyable, as it drops

over a rock shelf allowing you to clamber all the way behind. There are some vines on the far side that are strong enough to swing on for some Tarzan action.

Tuk Chrouu Bram-pul (0 Sin Laer Waterfall; admission 2000r) is a popular waterfall with seven gentle tiers, located about 35km southeast of Ban Lung, but the trail to get here is tough at any time and pretty much impossible in the wet season. Access to the waterfall involves a gentle walk through the forest. A visit here can be combined with a visit to the current hot spot for **gem mining** in Bei Srok, with gem mines littering the roadside. Locals dig a large pit in the ground and then tunnel horizontally in their search for amethyst and zircon. Take a local guide for this combination trip, but check in Ban Lung that the mines are still active.

Voen Sai

វ៉ែនសៃ

pop 3000

Located on the banks of the Tonlé San, Voen Sai is a cluster of Chinese, Lao and Kreung villages. Originally, the town was located on the north bank of the river and known as Virachay, but these days the main settlement is on the south bank. The north side of the river is the most interesting, with an **old Chinese settlement** that dates back more than 100 years and several **Lao and chunchiet villages** nearby. It is possible to cross the river on a small ferry (500r) and walk west for a couple of kilometres, passing through the Khmer village, a Lao community and a small *chunchiet* area, before finally emerging on a wealthy Chinese village complete with large wooden houses and inhabitants who still speak Chinese. Check out how neat and tidy it is compared with the surrounding communities.

Voen Sai is about 35km northwest of Ban Lung on an average-to-poor road. It is easy enough to get to under your own steam on a motorbike or vehicle.

Chunchiet Cemeteries

កន្លែងបញ្ចុះសពពួកជនជាតិ

The *chunchiet* of Ratanakiri bury their dead amidst the jungle, carving effigies of the deceased to stand guard over the graves. There are many cemeteries scattered throughout the forests of Ratanakiri. **Kachon** is a one-hour boat ride east of Voen Sai and has an impressive **Tompuon cemetery** (admission US\$1) in

the forest beyond the village. When a lengthy period of mourning is complete, villagers hold a big celebration and add two carved wooden likenesses of elephant tusks to the structures. Some of these tombs date back many years and have been abandoned to the jungle. Newer tombs of wealthy individuals have been cast in concrete and show some modern touches like shades and mobile phones. Sadly, some unscrupulous art collectors and amateur anthropologists from Europe have reportedly been buying up the old effigies from poor villagers, something tantamount to cultural rape. Remember that this is a sacred site for local Tompuon people – touch nothing and act respectfully. Many other Tompuon and Jarai villages have small cemeteries; ask villagers or guides for suggested sites.

Expect to pay around US\$15 for the boat trip from Voen Sai to Kachon, including a jaunt to the Chinese and Lao villages opposite Voen Sai. To get to the cemetery, walk through the health centre located at the riverbank and turn right. The cemetery is just a short distance from the village. It is also possible to get to Kachon by road – head south out of Voen Sai and turn left at the first major junction.

Lumkut Lake

បឹងលុកត

Lumkut is the new Boeng Yeak Loam, at least that is what some guides in Ban Lung would have you believe. Yes, it is a large crater lake and hemmed in by dense forest on all sides, but it is not as accessible as Yeak Loam and the old pier has already rotted into the water, making swimming a challenge. However, it's a beautiful spot and lies about 45km from Ban Lung to the south of Bokheo district.

Ta Veng

តាវ៉េង

Ta Veng is an insignificant village on the southern bank of Tonlé San, but acts as an alternative gateway to Virachay National Park. It was in the Ta Veng district that Pol Pot, Ieng Sary and other leaders of the Khmer Rouge established their guerrilla base in the 1960s. Locals say nothing remains of the remote base today although, in a dismal sign of decline, they point out that Ta Veng had electricity before the war.

Ta Veng is about 57km north of Ban Lung on a rollercoaster road through the mountains that affords some of the province's better views.

The road passes through several **minority villages**, where it is possible to break the journey. There are some very steep climbs in sections and for this reason it wouldn't be much fun in the rain. Travel by motorbike or charter a vehicle.

It is possible to arrange small boats in Ta Veng for river jaunts; US\$5 in the local area or US\$30 for the three-hour trip to Voen Sai.

Andong Meas

អង្គរដំបូង

pop 1500

Andong Meas district was growing in popularity thanks to a combination of minority villages, **Jarai cemeteries** and a short river trip, but there has been widespread deforestation in the last couple of years. There is a walkable trail from Andong Meas to a Jarai cemetery on the banks of the Tonlé San. From the cemetery it is possible to return to Andong Meas by river for about US\$10 by boat. Andong Meas lies about 80km northeast of Ban Lung on a reasonable road taking three hours. Transport prices are slightly higher due to the distance involved.

Virachay National Park

ឧទ្យានជាតិវិរៈជ័យ

Virachay National Park is one of the largest protected areas in Cambodia, stretching for 3325 sq km east to Vietnam, north to Laos and west to Stung Treng Province. The park has never been fully explored and is likely home to a number of larger mammals, including elephants, leopards and tigers. Optimists speculate that there may even be isolated rhinoceroses or kouprey (wild oxen), but this is unlikely. Rangers also suggest there are **waterfalls**, some as high as 100m, but these are many days' hike from the park boundary. So important is the park to the Mekong region that it was designated an Asean Heritage Park in 2003.

Virachay has the most organised ecotourism programme in Cambodia, focusing on small-scale culture, nature and adventure trekking. The programme aims to involve and benefit local communities. There is a small visitor and information centre at the **Virachay National Park Headquarters** (0974176; www.bpamp.org.kh) in Ban Lung, located at the Department of Environment. Visitors can book park excursions here, pay the necessary fees and find out the latest information. All visitors who wish to enter the park require an entry permit and must be accompanied by a park ranger and community guide.

TREKS IN VIRACHAY NATIONAL PARK

There are three main treks available in Virachay, from a gentle two-day trek to a week-long workout.

- **Kalang Chhouy Sacred Mountain Trek** (2 days/1 night; per person from US\$40) This short trek starts from near Koklak village and includes a night by the Chai Chanang Waterfall. On the second day, continue to Phnom Gong, a sacred mountain for the Brau people, and swim at the Tju Preah rapids.
- **O'Lapeung River Valley Trek** (4 days/3 nights; per person from US\$85) This trek starts from Ta Veng with a boat ride on the Tonlé San and O Tabok Rivers to the Brau village of Phum Yorn, where trekkers experience a homestay. The trek continues to the summit of Phnom Meive and into the O'Lapeung valley to a campsite. On the third day, the route passes along a section of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and it may be possible to see some war relics. After a second night in the Brau village, you return to Ta Veng by inflatable kayak.
- **Phnom Veal Thom Wilderness Trek** (8 days/7 nights; per person from US\$170) The longest trek into Virachay starts from Ta Veng with an overnight homestay in a Brau village. The trek goes deep into the heart of the Phnom Veal Thom grasslands, an area rich in wildlife such as sambar deer, gibbon, langur, wild pig, bear and hornbill. Trekkers return via a different route and pass through beautiful areas of evergreen forest. Due to the terrain, trekkers need to be relatively fit.

The park is actually more accessible from the Stung Treng side, although it's all relative really. Siem Pang acts as the western gateway to the park and it can be easier to spot wildlife in this section. Siem Pang is accessible by motorbike in the dry season, about a three-hour ride from Voen Sai. It is also connected to Stung Treng by longtail rocket boat (30,000r), but have a look at how rocky the Tonlé Kong is before you sign up.

Lumphat

លំផាត់
pop 2000

The former provincial capital of Lumphat, on the banks of the Tonlé Srepok, is something of a ghost town these days thanks to sustained US bombing raids in the early 1970s. This is also the last gasp of civilisation, if it can even be called that, for hardcore bikers heading south on the tough trails to Mondulkiri Province.

The Tonlé Srepok is believed to be the river depicted in the seminal anti-war film *Apocalypse Now*, in which Martin Sheen's Captain Benjamin Willard goes upriver into Cambodia in search of renegade Colonel Kurtz, played by Marlon Brando.

To get here from Ban Lung, take the road to Stung Treng for about 15km before heading south. The 35km journey takes around an hour and pick-ups do a few runs from Ban Lung for 5000r.

MONDULKIRI PROVINCE

ខេត្តមណ្ឌលគិរី

A world apart from lowland Cambodia, Mondulkiri is the original Wild East of the country. Climatically and culturally, it's also another world, which comes as a relief after the heat of the plains. Home to the hardy Pnong people and their noble elephants, it is possible to visit traditional villages and learn how to be a mahout. The landscape is a seductive mix of pine clumps, grassy hills and windswept valleys that fade beguilingly into forests of jade green and hidden waterfalls. Wild animals, such as bears and tigers, are more numerous here than elsewhere, although chances of seeing them are about as good as winning the lottery.

Mondulkiri means 'Meeting of the Hills', an apt sobriquet for a land of rolling hills. In the dry season it is a little like Wales with sunshine; in the wet season, like Tasmania with more rain. At an average elevation of 800m, it can get quite chilly at night, so carry something warm.

Mondulkiri is the most sparsely populated province in the country, with just two people per sq km. Almost half the inhabitants come from the Pnong minority group, with other minorities making up much of the rest of the population. There has been an influx of migrants in recent years, drawn to the abundant

land and benign climate. Fruit and vegetable plantations are popping up, but hunting remains the profession of choice for many minorities. Conservationists have grand plans for the province, creating wildlife sanctuaries and initiating sustainable tourism activities, but are facing off against speculators and industrialists queuing up for natural resources. BHP Billiton, one of the world's largest mining companies, is already digging around, literally.

Roads are pretty poor throughout the province, but the main highway to Phnom Penh is in pretty good shape most of the way, bringing journey times down to seven hours. The road to Koh Nhek is unrecognisable from the mess of bygone years. Improved access has fuelled an explosion of domestic tourists, so book ahead at weekends.

SEN MONOROM

សែនមនោរម្យ
[]073 / pop 7000

The provincial capital of Mondulkiri, Sen Monorom is little more than an overgrown village. A charming community set in the spot where the famous hills meet, the centre of town has two lakes, leading some dreamers to call it 'The Switzerland of Cambodia'. The area around Sen Monorom is peppered with minority villages and picturesque waterfalls, making it the ideal place to spend some time. Many of the Pnong people from nearby villages come to Sen Monorom to trade, and the distinctive baskets they carry on their backs makes them easy to distinguish from the immigrant lowlanders. Set at more than 800m, when the winds billow it's notably cooler than the rest of Cambodia, so bring some warm clothing.

Information

Hurrah, **Aceda Bank** has opened its doors on the main road from Phnom Penh and can change major currencies. Prices are slightly higher than in other parts of the country, as everything has to be shipped in from Phnom Penh or Vietnam.

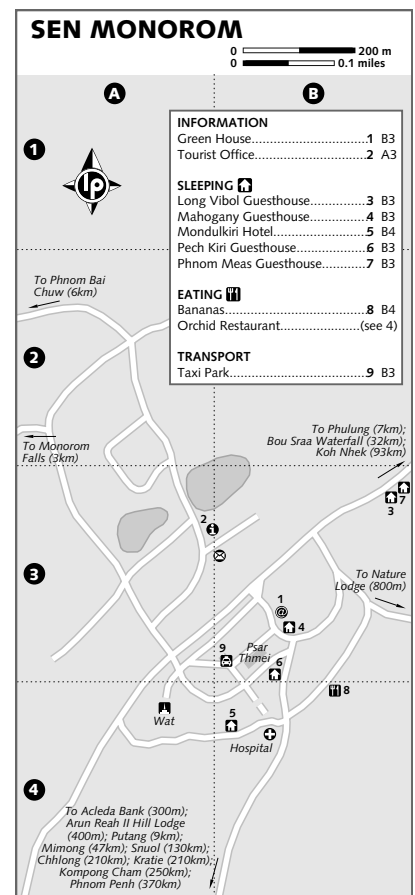
Green House (www.thegreen-house.blogspot.com; per hour US\$2) has the cheapest internet access in town and doubles as a lively little bar by night. Internet access is also available at the **Arun Reas II Hill Lodge** (per hr US\$4). Telephone calls can be made from mobile phones around the town.

There is a small **tourist office** in town and staff speak good English and French. They can arrange elephant treks and overnight stays in minority villages, as can the leading guesthouses in town, such as Long Vibol Guesthouse (p301).

Sights & Activities

Not much happens in Sen Monorom itself but there's plenty to see and do nearby.

Trips out to the Pnong villages dotted across the province can be arranged through guesthouses and hotels, including an overnight stay with the community. Each guesthouse has a preferred village to send travellers to, which is a great way to spread the wealth.



TREAD LIGHTLY IN THE HILLS

Tourism can bring many benefits to highland communities: cross-cultural understanding, improved infrastructure, cheaper market goods, employment opportunities and tourist dollars supporting handicraft industries. However, there are also the negatives: the overtaking of natural resources, increased litter and pollutants, dependency on tourist dollars, proliferation of drug use and prostitution and the erosion of local values and practices.

If you visit Cambodia's hill-tribe communities, make a positive contribution and ensure that the benefits of your stay outweigh the costs.

Interaction

- Be polite and respectful.
- Dress modestly.
- Minimise litter.
- Do not urinate or defecate near villagers' households; bury faeces.
- Do not take drugs – young children tend to imitate tourists' behaviour.
- Do not engage in sexual relationships with local people, including prostitutes.
- Try to learn something about the community's culture and language and teach something good about yours.

Gifts

- Do not give children sweets or money; it encourages begging and paves the way for prostitution for 'gifts' and money. Sweets also contribute to tooth decay.
- Do not give clothes – communities are self-sufficient.
- Don't give medicines – it erodes traditional healing practices and the medicine may not be correctly administered.
- Individual gifts create jealousy and create expectations. Instead make donations to the local school, medical centre or community fund.
- No matter how poor they are, villagers are extremely hospitable; however, feeding a guest can result in food shortages. If you accept an invitation to share a meal, be sure to bring a generous contribution.

Shopping

- Haggle politely and always pay the agreed (and fair) price for goods and services.
- Do not ask to buy a villager's personal household items or the jewellery or clothes they are wearing.
- Don't buy village treasures, such as altar pieces or totems.

Photographs

- Do not photograph without first asking permission – this includes children. Some hill tribes believe the camera will capture their spirit. Don't photograph altars.
- If you take a picture, do it quickly and avoid using a flash. If you promise to send copies, keep your word.

Travel

- Travel in small, less disruptive groups.
- Stay, eat and travel with local businesses.
- Try to book tours with responsible tourism outlets who employ hill-tribe people or contribute to community welfare.

Check out the observation deck of **Phnom Bai Chuw** (Raw Rice Mountain), 6km northwest of Sen Monorom, for a jaw-dropping view of the emerald forest. It looks as though you are seeing a vast sea of tree tops, hence the locals have named it **Samot Cheur** (Ocean of Trees).

ELEPHANT TREKS

The villages of Phulung, 7km northeast of Sen Monorom, and Putang, 9km southwest of town, are the most popular places to arrange an elephant trek. Most of the recommended guesthouses around town, as well as the tourist office, can arrange day treks for around US\$30 or so, including lunch and transport to and from the village. It can get pretty uncomfortable up on top of an elephant after a couple of hours; carry a pillow to ease the strain.

It is also possible to negotiate a longer trek with an overnight stay in a Pnong village, costing from US\$60 to US\$80 per person with an overnight homestay or camping out by a waterfall.

For the complete elephant experience, head out of town to the Elephant Valley Project (see p302).

Sleeping & Eating

Electricity has finally come to Sen Monorom, lighting up the lives of residents and visitors alike. Hot water is more important in this part of the country, as the temperature can drop dramatically at night. Places without hot-water showers can usually provide flasks of boiling water for bathing. There is no need for air-conditioning in this neck of the woods.

Pech Kiri Guesthouse (☎012 932102; r US\$3-10) Once upon a time, this was the only guesthouse in town and it is still going strong under the lively direction of Madame Deu. The place keeps expanding, with an oversized new wing underway, but there are still lots of bargain bungalows available.

Nature Lodge (☎230272; www.naturelodge.com; r US\$4-10) Everyone will want to get back to nature once they discover this place. Located on a windswept hilltop near town, this quirky eco-resort has basic bungalow accommodation with shared hot showers and an incredible Swiss family Robinson-style chalet with sunken beds and hidden rooms. The inviting restaurant is decorated with abandoned tree trunks and roots and has a good range of

traveller fare. There's also a bar and pool table for night owls.

Arun Reah II Hill Lodge (☎012 856667; arunreah_mondulkiri@yahoo.com.kh; r US\$5-10; ☑) We still haven't worked out where Arun Reah I is, but never mind as this is a fine place to stay. This wooden lodge boasts some fine views across the hills of Mondulkiri. The bungalows are good value, including hot water and cable TV. There is a cavernous restaurant (mains US\$1 to US\$3) for a local bite, plus free bicycles for those that fancy a little workout.

Long Vibol Guesthouse (☎012 944647; r US\$5-10) Vibol's is an attractive wooden resort set amid a lush garden. The rooms are clean and spacious and higher prices include hot water. Vibol is the elder statesman among the tour guides of Mondulkiri, making this a top spot for information and a reliable place to arrange trekking. The restaurant has a small selection of Cambodian favourites, with mains from US\$1 to US\$3.

Phnom Meas Guesthouse (☎012 929562; r US\$5-10) Next door to Vibol's, the 'Golden Hill' has a verdant garden dotted with bungalows and huts. Most rooms include hot water and all have cable TV. Check out the curious triangular huts near the entrance.

Mahogany Guesthouse (☎017 999042; www.mondulkiri.info; r US\$8-10) This small guesthouse in the middle of town has eight rooms, all with hot water, and they are steadily being upgraded. Better still is the excellent restaurant (mains US\$3 to \$7), serving some of the best pizzas and pastas in the province, plus an unexpected range of authentic Indian and Nepalese food. It's also a fine spot for international breakfasts, including quality coffees.

Mondulkiri Hotel (☎390139; r US\$15-30; ☑) It looks out of place in this pristine land of rolling hills, but the hulking concrete exterior conceals the most comfortable rooms in town. All are equipped with air-con, smart bathrooms, cable TV and fridge. There are also some bungalows and Pnong-style dwellings in the extensive gardens.

Aside from the guesthouse restaurants recommended above, there is also the inviting **Orchid Restaurant** (mains US\$1-3) on the main drag, with some flavoursome Khmer and Chinese dishes on the menu. **Bananas** (☎092 412680; mains US\$2-5) is a new restaurant-bar serving up Western favourites like shepherd's pie and Flemish stew, with a dose of expat insight on life in Cambodia. By night, beers and spirits flow.

THE ELEPHANT VALLEY PROJECT

For an original elephant experience, visit the **Elephant Valley Project** (☎017 613833; jackhighwood@yahoo.co.uk). Part of the **Elephants Livelihood Initiative Environment** (www.elie-cambodia.org), visitors can learn the art of the mahout for a day. The trip starts with a tour of the project before learning about the body language of elephants. Students are then given the chance to try a series of short elephant rides to build their confidence. After lunch, wannabee mahouts get the chance to experience a longer elephant ride to a nearby waterfall. After a dip in the water, it's possible to help wash down the elephants. The experience costs US\$50 per person per day up to a maximum of four people, although this number may rise as more elephants are brought into the project. The price includes transport but not lunch. All proceeds are ploughed back into the project to help provide veterinary care for the working elephants of Mondulkiri. There are plans to build bungalows at the site, which may offer up the option of longer immersion courses with the elephants. Project coordinator Jack Highwood has also trained up some former hunters as trekking guides and these guys have inside knowledge of the birdlife and wildlife of the region.

Getting There & Away

The airstrip at Sen Monorom has been sold off and there are plans to develop a new airport at Putang. For now, visitors who want to get to this unique region have to come overland, and this is pretty straightforward thanks to a major dirt highway which is slowly being upgraded to bitumen.

There are two ways to get to Mondulkiri, both of which include the same section of old logging road from Snuol to Sen Monorom, and a third, harsh trail north to Ratanakiri – see p294 for more details on this hardcore route. The stretch from Snuol to Sen Monorom passes through some wild jungle after Khao Si Ma district and is one of the most dramatic and beautiful roads in Cambodia.

There is usually one bus daily between Phnom Penh and Sen Monorom (US\$10, ten hours, 7.15am) in the dry season. However, locals say it is safer to take a car or pick-up due to steep hills and unexpected rains. There are also pick-ups heading from Phnom Penh to Sen Monorom (inside/on the back US\$12/6, eight hours), leaving from Psar Thmei soon after 6am, but it's best to head to the market the day before you want to travel to arrange a seat with a driver, as places are limited.

Coming from Kompong Cham, there are few direct services to Sen Monorom, so it is usually necessary to first go to Snuol (12,000r by taxi, 1½ hours). From Snuol, there are pick-ups to Sen Monorom (inside/on the back 20,000/15,000r, three hours).

From Kratie there are direct pick-ups heading to Sen Monorom (inside/on the

back 30,000/20,000r, five hours) early in the morning. Anyone leaving later will probably need to change vehicles in Snuol.

Getting from Mondulkiri Province to any of these destinations is generally easier, as most locals are going beyond Snuol and so no change is required, plus guesthouses can arrange for the pick-ups to collect.

Experienced bikers will find it a pretty straightforward run these days, on surfaced roads all the way to Snuol and then decent enough dirt roads through to Sen Monorom. If it doesn't sound challenging enough compared with the old days, don't worry: once you get to Mondulkiri there are still plenty of tough trails to be found.

Getting Around

Motorbikes cost from US\$5 to US\$10 to rent around town. Ask your guesthouse or hotel or negotiate with a *moto* driver. There are no 250cc dirt bikes available for rent here, so hire one in Phnom Penh (p111) if you want more muscle. Pick-up trucks and 4WDs can be chartered for the day. It costs about US\$40 or so around Sen Monorom in the dry season, and more again in the wet season.

AROUND SEN MONOROM Monorom Falls

ទឹកជ្រោះមនោរម្យ

This small waterfall is the closest thing to a public swimming pool for Sen Monorom. It has an attractive location in the forest, about 3km northwest of town. *Motos* can take people out here for about US\$2 or so for the round trip. If walking, head straight on beyond

Sihanouk's abandoned villa and when the trail eventually forks, take the left-hand side.

Bou Sraa Waterfall

ទឹកជ្រោះស្រា

Plunging into the dense Cambodian jungle below, this is one of the country's most impressive falls. Famous throughout the country, this double-drop waterfall has an upper tier of some 10m and a spectacular lower tier with a thundering 25m drop. To get to the bottom of the upper falls, take a left turn just before the river that feeds the falls. To get to the bottom of the lower falls, cross the river and follow a path to a precipitous staircase that continues to the bottom; it takes about 15 minutes to get down.

Bou Sraa is an easy 35km journey east of Sen Monorom, thanks to a new toll road to get out here, taking just 45 minutes. Prices are 3000r for a small motorbike, 5000r for a large motorbike and 15,000r for a car or 4WD. Hire a *moto* driver for the day or charter a car in a group. Basic snacks and drinks are available at the falls, but pack a picnic if you want something more sophisticated.

Other Waterfalls

Other popular waterfalls in Mondulkiri include **Romanear Waterfall**, 18km southeast of Sen Monorom, and **Dak Dam Waterfall**, 25km east of Sen Monorom. Both are very difficult to find without assistance, so it's best to take a

moto driver or local guide. Romanear is a low, wide waterfall with some convenient swimming holes. There is also a second Romanear Waterfall, known rather originally as **Romanear II**, which is near the main road between Sen Monorom and Snuol. Dak Dam is similar to the Monorom Falls, albeit with a greater volume of water. The waterfall is several kilometres beyond the Pnong village of Dak Dam and locals are able to lead the way if you can make yourself understood.

MIMONG

មីម៉ុង

Welcome to the Wild East, where the gold rush lives on. Mimong district is famous for its **gold mines** and this has drawn speculators from as far away as Vietnam and China on the trail of wealth. The population of this overgrown village may actually be equal to that of Sen Monorom. Miners descend into the pits on ancient mine carts that are connected to dodgy-looking winches, sometimes going to a depth of 100m or more. It's not for the faint-hearted and several miners die in accidents each year.

The main problem is getting here, as the road is so bad that it takes about four hours to cover the 47km from Sen Monorom. The road improves slightly on the other side of Mimong and it is possible to carry on to link up with NH7 to Kratie to the west (taking another four hours). There is a major set of falls in the

MONDULKIRI PROTECTED FOREST: THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE IN CAMBODIA

Before the civil war, the vast grasslands of northern Mondulkiri were home to huge herds of gaur, banteng and wild buffalo. Visitors lucky enough to witness their annual migrations compared the experience to the Serengeti and the annual wildebeest migrations. Sadly, the long civil war took its toll and like Uganda and other African countries, thousands of animals were killed for bush meat.

A project is currently underway to return this area to its former glory. An initiative from the **World Wide Fund for Nature** (WWF; www.wwf.org/cambodia), the Srepok Wilderness area is at the heart of the Mondulkiri Protected Forest, one of the largest protected areas in Cambodia that provides a home to tigers, leopards, bears, langurs, wild cow and rare birdlife. Plans are currently underway to develop ecotourism activities here during 2009, which will include homestays, elephant trekking, mountain biking, kayaking and bird watching. Villagers and rangers are currently undergoing training to prepare for visitors and part of the project will showcase minority cultures and lifestyles. There are also eventual plans for a high-end ecotourism in the heart of the protected area. However, all this is some way off, so check in with the WWF website or the **Phnom Penh office** (☎023-218034) to find out the latest. Once it is up and running, access is possible via Sen Monorom and Koh Nhek, but it takes two days from Phnom Penh. If flights to Ratanakiri resume, then it will be faster to fly to Ban Lung and travel by road and trail from there.

Mimong area called **Tan Lung Waterfall**, but this is also a nightmare to reach.

KOH NHEK

កោះនេក

pop 6000

The final frontier as far as Mondulkiri goes, this remote village in the far north of the province is a strategic place on the challenging overland route between Sen Monorom and Ratanakiri Province. Friendly locals are willing to put up foreigners for 10,000r and can

prepare some basic food for a small charge. There are also basic supplies in the village, including coldish beer – well-earned once you get here.

The road from Sen Monorom to Koh Nhek is in good shape and takes just a couple of hours to cover the 93km. After Koh Nhek, the road simply vanishes into a spider's web of ox-cart trails after Koh Nhek and it really requires a local to show the way to Ban Lung in Ratanakiri. For more on this route, see p294.