

Northwestern Cambodia



Offering a blend of highway accessibility and outback adventure, Northwestern Cambodia covers a broad swath of the country, running all the way around Tonlé Sap Lake, extending from Kompong Chhnang west to the Thai frontier and north to the Dangrek Mountains (Chhor Phnom Dangkre), which mark Cambodia's northern border with Thailand. (In this book, Siem Reap and the Temples of Angkor have their own chapters.)

Of the region's municipalities, Battambang – Cambodia's second-largest city – attracts the most visitors thanks to an alluring blend of classic colonial architecture and excellent day trip options. Other towns serve as gateways to some of the country's most captivating corners – Kompong Thom is a good base for a visit to the temples of Sambor Prei Kuk, Pursat makes a fine jumping-off point for the wilds of the northern Cardamoms, and Anlong Veng is a short *moto* ride from a string of eerie Khmer Rouge sites.

The remote jungles conceal some of Cambodia's most inspired temples, forgotten to all but the intrepid for decades. Preah Khan and Prasat Preah Vihear are sublime spots but are only for those with a serious thirst for adventure. Koh Ker is more accessible than ever thanks to a new road and Banteay Chhmar now has a pioneering community-based homestay project.

The Northwest is where you'll find some of Cambodia's most important wilderness areas, most well off the beaten track. The Cardamom Mountains in the southwest are home to pristine jungle and rare wildlife, while the forests and marshes of Preah Vihear Province provide ideal habitat for endangered birds such as the giant ibis, Cambodia's national bird.



Getting There & Away

Northwestern Cambodia has an ever-increasing number of international border crossings with Thailand:

- Poipet–Aranya Prathet (p329), on the recently upgraded NH5 48km west of Sisophon and 153km west of Siem Reap. This is Cambodia's most popular land crossing with Thailand.
- Psar Pruhm–Ban Pakard (p331), 22km west of Pailin and 102km southwest of Battambang via a churned-up dirt road.
- Choam–Choam Srawngam (p331), 16km north of Anlong Veng and 134km north of Siem Reap.
- O Smach–Chong Jom (p330), a punishing 40km northeast of Samraong and 120km north of Kralanh (on NH6).

Within Cambodia, the obvious gateways to the region are Siem Reap (p118) and Phnom Penh (p72). A memorable boat service links Siem Reap with Battambang. It should be possible to disembark from one of the Siem Reap–Phnom Penh fast boats at Kompong Chhnang.

Getting Around

The sights in this chapter can be visited on a giant loop around Tonlé Sap Lake.

SOUTH OF THE TONLÉ SAP

You can visit the towns along NH5 (including Kompong Chhnang, Kompong Luong, Pursat and Battambang) en route between Phnom Penh and either the Poipet–Aranya Prathet border crossing to Thailand, or – if you loop around via Sisophon – Siem Reap. Heavily potholed dirt roads lead from Pursat southeast into the Cardamom Mountains and from Battambang southwest to Pailin (NH57) and the Psar Pruhm–Ban Pakard crossing to Thailand.

NORTH OF THE TONLÉ SAP

NH6 links Phnom Penh with Kompong Thom, Siem Reap and Sisophon. Roads leading north from NH6 include the following:

- NH64 from Kompong Thom to Tbeng Meanchey, at press time in a ruinous state.
- A decent toll road from Dam Dek via Beng Mealea and Koh Ker to Tbeng

HIGHLIGHTS

- Soak up colonial-era charm in the riverside town of **Battambang** (p240), surrounded by lush countryside and hilltop temples
- Explore Southeast Asia's first temple city, the impressive pre-Angkorian ruins of **Sambor Prei Kuk** (p272)
- Journey to the 10th-century capital of **Koh Ker** (p264), its massive temples forgotten in the forests for a thousand years
- Make an adventurous overland pilgrimage to the majestic mountaintop temple of **Prasat Preah Vihear** (p268)
- Sail out to the colourful **floating villages** at Kompong Luong (p239) and Kompong Chhnang (p234)



■ ELEVATION: 5-1500M ■ POPULATION: 3.5 MILLION ■ AREA: 71,157 SQ KM

Meanchey. North of there, towards Prasat Preah Vihear, the roads are catastrophic and are often impassable in the wet season.

- The recently upgraded NH67 from Siem Reap to Anlong Veng and the Choam-Choam Srawngam border crossing to Thailand.
- NH68 from Kralanh to Samraong. From there the road to the O Smach-Chong Jom border crossing to Thailand is in a terrible state.
- NH69 from Sisophon via Banteay Chhmar to Samraong.

Doing a loop north of Angkor along Cambodia's northern border with Thailand – from Sisophon (on NH6) to Banteay Chhmar, Samraong, Anlong Veng, Sa Em (near Prasat Preah Vihear), Tbeng Meanchey and Kompong Thom (on NH6) – is challenging in the dry season and virtually impossible in the wet, when the trip could be dubbed 'the Churning of the Ocean of Mud'.

Commercial and passenger traffic to and from each of these towns is oriented southward, towards NH6, rather than east or west, the result being that there's little vehicular traffic – and no public transport – from Banteay Chhmar northeast to Samraong, from there east to Anlong Veng, and from there east to Sa Em. In general, your only option for these segments – if the road is motorable – is to hire a *moto* or a taxi, pricey because the driver will probably have to head back empty. *Motos* have an easier time of it than cars (generally, amazingly hardy Toyota Camrys) or 4WDs, which have to find two parallel grooves rather than just one. For the hardy traveller, though, this route, past minefields and through areas so remote they're being homesteaded only now, is one of Cambodia's most challenging outback journeys.

KOMPONG CHHNANG PROVINCE

ខេត្តកំពង់ឆ្នាំង

Kompong Chhnang is a relatively wealthy province thanks to its proximity to the capital and its fishing and agricultural in-

dustries, which are supported by abundant water resources.

KOMPONG CHHNANG

កំពង់ឆ្នាំង

☎026 / pop 42,000

Kompong Chhnang (Clay Pot Port), on the Tonlé Sap River, is a tale of two cities: the leafy centre, its focal point a grassy park, and the bustling dockside. Nearby sights include two floating villages and a hamlet famous for its distinctive pottery.

By land, the town is a straightforward stop on the way from Phnom Penh to Battambang, or an easy day trip from the capital, perhaps combined with a visit to Udong (p113). You can also get to Kompong Chhnang by water; usually it's possible to get off the Phnom Penh–Siem Reap fast boat here.

Orientation

The city centre's civic focal point is a grassy park stretching from Independence Monument to the Cambodia-Vietnam Friendship Monument. Just north of the park is the bus and taxi station and a commercial district anchored by Psar Leu (Central Market). Kompong Chhnang has a second commercial strip about 3km northeast of the centre, around Psar Krom (Lower Market) and the waterfront.

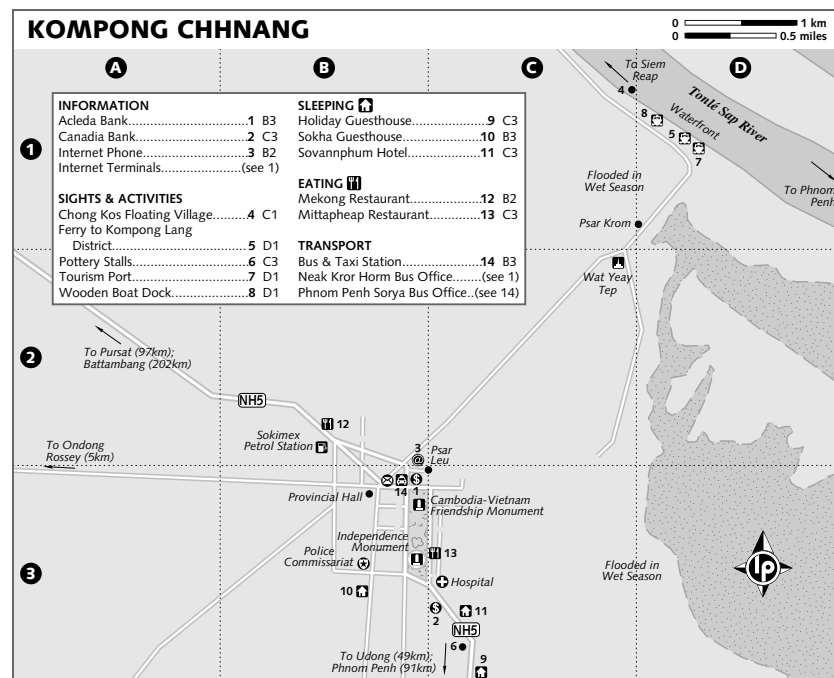
Information

Aclea Bank (☎988748; NH5) Changes travellers cheques and should have an ATM by the time you read this.
Canadia Bank (NH5) Expected to get an ATM in 2008.
Internet Phone (per hr US\$2; ☎ 6am–8pm) Fifty metres north of the western end of Psar Leu.
Internet Terminals (per hr 10,000r; ☎ 7am–8pm) Two mobile-phone shops are situated across the street from the bus and taxi station, 30m north of Aclea Bank.

Sights & Activities

A short sail from Kompong Chhnang's **waterfront** takes you to two colourful floating villages, **Phoum Kandal** to the east and **Chong Kos** to the northwest. Much less commercial than Kompong Luong (p239), they have all the amenities of a mainland village – houses, machine tool shops, veggie vendors, a mosque, a petrol station – except that almost everything floats. Many of the people are ethnic Vietnamese.

From the Tourism Port, you can charter a **big wooden boat** with space for eight (US\$8) for



a one-hour excursion. A cheaper, quieter and more ecological option, available about 300m to the west, is to get around like the floating villagers do: on a **narrow wooden boat** rowed standing up (US\$1 for a 20-minute trip).

For a cheap river cruise, you can hop on a **ferry** (2000r, 45 minutes, hourly to 4pm) to Kompong Lang District, about 6km away. The vessels, which have space for several dozen people, dock 100m west of the Tourism Port.

Across the Tonlé Sap River are several rather dilapidated brick-built **temples** dating from the Chenla period, including **Prasat Srei**.

The quiet village of **Ondong Rossey**, where the area's famous red pottery is made under every house, is a delightful 7km ride west of town through serene rice fields dotted with sugar palms, most with bamboo ladders running up the trunk. The unpainted pots, decorated with etched or appliqué designs, are either made with a foot-spun wheel (for small pieces) or banded into shape with a heavy wooden spatula (for large ones). Artisans are happy to show you how they do it.

The golden-hued mud piled up in the yards is quarried at nearby **Phnom Krang Dai Meas** and

pounded into fine clay before being shaped and fired; only at the last stage does it acquire a pinkish hue. Pieces (from 1000r), including piggy banks, can be purchased at the **Pottery Development Center**. In Kompong Chhnang, several **stalls** selling Ondong Rossey pottery can be found on NH5 towards Phnom Penh from the centre.

A visit to Ondong Rossey can be combined with **Phnom Santuk**, a rocky hillock behind Wat Santuk, a few kilometres southwest of Kompong Chhnang. The boulder-strewn summit affords fine views of the countryside, including the Tonlé Sap, 20km to the north.

By bicycle or *moto*, combining Ondong Rossey and Phnom Santuk makes for a truly magical circuit, especially early in the morning or late in the afternoon. There are no road signs, so it's a good idea to go with a local.

Sleeping

There are several cheap guesthouses on NH5 within 1km of the Cambodia-Vietnam Friendship Monument, towards both Battambang and Phnom Penh.

Holiday Guesthouse (☎988802; NH5; r US\$3-10; 🏠) Run by a friendly teacher and his family, this basic place has 10 slightly claustrophobic rooms.

Sokha Guesthouse (☎988622; r US\$5-10; 🏠) A favourite of NGO workers, this 30-room hostelry, set in a shady garden, offers the most charming accommodation in town. Hot water costs US\$2 extra.

Sovannphum Hotel (☎989333; sovannphumkhotel@yahoo.com.kh; NH5; r US\$10-15; 🏠) Opened in late 2006, this is a proper tourist-class hotel. The 30 good-sized rooms have 4m ceilings and modern bathrooms.

Eating

There are plenty of food stalls at the two markets and, in the evening, at the western end of Psar Leu.

Mekong Restaurant (☎012 374154; NH5; mains 5000-13,000r; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The small menu includes the basic Cambodian hit parade and a good interpretation of French beefsteak.

Mittapheap Restaurant (☎012 949297; NH5; mains 6000-20,000r; 🍴 5am-8pm) Popular with Khmers travelling between Phnom Penh and Battambang, this airy eatery serves good-sized portions of mainly Khmer dishes.

Getting There & Around

The ferries linking Phnom Penh with Siem Reap pass right by Kompong Chhnang. If you'd like to get off here, inform the boat company in advance and they should be able to arrange for a local launch to pull up alongside the ferry and whisk you ashore.

From the bus and taxi station, **Phnom Penh Sorya** (☎012 631545) has services to Phnom Penh (7500r, 91km, five or more a day to 3.30pm), Pursat (8000r, 97km, six a day till 4pm), Battambang (20,000r, 202km, two or 2½ hours, five a day till 2.30pm) and Poipet (30,000r, two a day in the morning).

Sam Phoas Mobile Phone Shop, across the street from the bus and taxi station, sells west-bound tickets issued by **Neak Kror Horn** (☎012 900190). Departures to Battambang (17,000r), Sisophon (20,000r) and Poipet (24,000r) are hourly from about 8.15am to 3.30pm.

You can also get to Phnom Penh by share taxi (8000r or 9000r, 1¼ hours, departures till early evening) or minibus (8000r). A pick-up to Pursat is 5000r.

Moto drivers charge 1000r for short hops around town. Hiring a *moto* for a day trip

to Ondong Rossey and Phnom Santuk costs US\$6.

Sokha Guesthouse rents out bicycles (US\$1 a day) and motorbikes (US\$5 a day).

PURSAT PROVINCE

ខេត្តពោធិ៍សាត់

Pursat, Cambodia's fourth-largest province, stretches from the remote forests of Phnom Samkos, on the Thai border, eastwards to the fishing villages and marshes of Tonlé Sap Lake. It encompasses the northern parts of the Cardamom Mountains, a huge forest area of global ecological importance that's becoming accessible from the relaxed town of Pursat.

PURSAT

ពោធិ៍សាត់

☎052 / pop 57,000

This mellow town, known for its marble carvers and oranges, makes an ideal base for a bamboo train excursion, visits to several waterfalls, a day trip to the floating village of Kompong Luong (p239) or an expedition into the wilds of the Central Cardamoms Protected Forest (p238).

Orientation

Pursat's main commercial street, St 3, is two blocks west of St 1, which runs along the riverfront. Both streets are perpendicular to the NH5.

Information

Internet cafés are concentrated along the southern stretch of St 1. Money can be changed at any of the gold shops near the market or at Lim Hoern Grocery.

Aclea Bank (☎951434; NH5) Changes travellers cheques and may get an ATM in 2008.

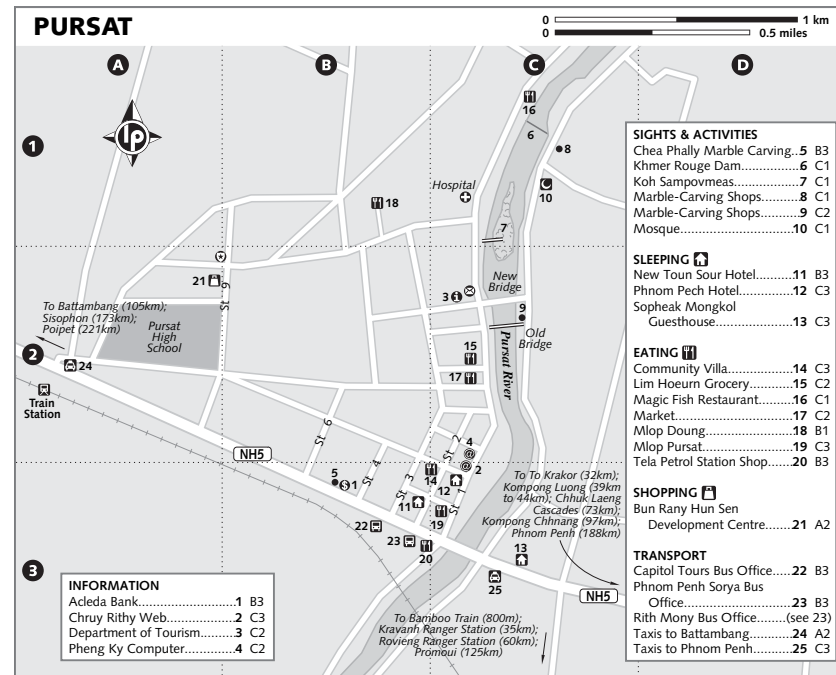
Chruy Rithy Web (St 1; per hr 3000; 📞 6am-10pm) Internet access.

Department of Tourism (☎012 838854; 📞 7-11am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Has maps and photos of province highlights on the walls and a few handouts.

Pheng Ky Computer (St 1; per hr 2000r; 📞 6am-8pm or 9pm) Internet access.

Sights & Activities

A pleasant few hours can be spent strolling north along St 1 and then south along the east bank of the river.



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Koh Sampovmeas, the town's answer to Singapore's Sentosa (though there's no cable car just yet), is an island park with manicured lawns, benches and Khmer-style pavilions. From the northern tip you can see a yellow, onion-domed **mosque** – topped with a star and crescent – eastward across the river.

A long block north, you can complete a vertiginous walk across the crumbling Khmer Rouge-era cement **dam**, part of a grandiose project intended to make it possible to grow rice in the dry season (the scheme never worked). On the rural east bank, walk south along the river road and you'll come upon a number of small **marble-carving shops**, where artisans make – and sell – everything from tiny tchotchkes to huge smiling Buddhas (also on sale in shops along NH5, including **Chea Phally Marble Carving**). You may also see groups of women making *naom bancho* (thick rice noodles) that they sell fresh in the market.

Pursat's own **bamboo trains** (p247) – much less tourist-oriented than their Battambang cousins – stop at the train crossing 800m south of NH5 along the road to Kravanh.

A three- or four-hour private excursion costs US\$10, or you can hop on with the locals; departures are most frequent in the morning. For the best scenery, head towards Phnom Penh. One option is to get off at the village of **Chheu Tom** and catch a *moto* to **Chhuk Laeng Cascades** (Chroek Laeng Waterfall; one hour), situated 73km south-east of Pursat and 41km south of Krakor (on NH5 near Kompong Luong).

Sleeping

Sopheap Mongkol Guesthouse (☎012 483538; NH5; r with 1/2 beds US\$3/5) A real cheapie but the 19 rooms, though TV-equipped, are barely larger than a bed and bathrooms lack sinks. Friendly, though, and a hub of activity, with pool and ping-pong tables in the courtyard.

New Toun Sour Hotel (Hotel Than Sour Thmey, Hotel Thmey Thansour; ☎951506; St 2; r US\$6-12; 🏠) Its lobby chock full of carved wooden do-dads, this welcoming hotel has 43 large, pleasant rooms and a restaurant in the yard. Popular with the NGO crowd.

Phnom Pech Hotel (☎951515; St 1; r US\$6-13; 24) A modern, central hotel with spacious, clean rooms. Don't expect an effusive welcome.

Eating

The **market** (St 1), which burned to the ground in April 2007 but is being rebuilt, has both daytime eateries and a night market, as well as the usual fruit and veggie stalls.

For self-caterers, **Lim Hoeurn Grocery** (☎6am-8pm) stocks wine, soft cheese and Western snack food. The **Tela Petrol Station shop** (NH5; ☎6am-8.30pm) sells ice cream, wine, cookies and sometimes even yoghurt.

Mlop Pursat (☎012 928586; St 1; ☎6-11am) Serves, in its shady garden, the best breakfast soup (2000r) in town.

Magic Fish Restaurant (☎951537; St 1; mains 3000-15,000r; ☎9am-9pm) Affording fine river views from the balcony, this place – just north of the dam – serves tasty Khmer dishes and has the best roasted salt peanuts in town.

Community Villa (☎951483; mains 4500-10,000r; ☎ to early evening) Run by a Cambodian NGO that gives job skills to at-risk young people, this place just off St 2 serves Khmer dishes, including ginger fish; Western meals, including salads; and the best pancakes and *tukalok* drinks in town. Most Cambodian restaurants have geckos that eat insects; this one has fearless frogs, so watch where you step at night.

Mlop Doung (☎951760; mains 5000-10,000r; ☎ approx noon-midnight) Said by some to serve Pursat's best cuisine, this garden restaurant – decked out in coloured fairy lights – serves Khmer specialities such as *dtray bong kachait* (fish with vegetables cooked at your table) in open-air thatched pavilions.

Shopping

The gift shop at the Community Villa restaurant sells silk items, *krama* and bags made by local women.

Bun Rany Hun Sen Development Centre (☎951606; St 9; ☎7-11am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri & Sat morning) Teaches cloth weaving, mat weaving, sewing, marble carving and other practical skills to young people and markets the items they make. Travellers are welcome to visit classes.

Getting There & Around

Lots of buses run by lots of companies pass through Pursat. Destinations include Phnom Penh (16,000r, three hours,

188km), Kompong Chhnang (8000r, 97km), Battambang (10,000r, 1½ hours, 105km) and Poipet (20,000r, 221km). The Sopheap Mongkol Guesthouse sells tickets for Phnom Penh Sorya and Ponleu Angkor buses and serves as a bus stop (both companies also have their own offices on NH5).

Share taxis to Phnom Penh (15,000r) can be found on NH5 just east of the bridge, while those to Battambang (10,000r) stop in front of the old train station. A private taxi to Phnom Penh should cost US\$25 or US\$30.

Pursat's big local transport news for 2007: the town now has two *tuk tuks*! These hang out along NH5 in the day and along the river in the evening.

NORTHERN CARDAMOM MOUNTAINS

As the Central Cardamoms Protected Forest (CCPF) and adjacent wildlife sanctuaries slowly open up to ecotourism, Pursat is emerging as the Cardamoms' northern gateway.

For details on the southern reaches of the Cardamom Mountains, which stretch all the way to the Gulf of Thailand, see p186.

Roads in the area are heavily rutted and some bridges have holes big enough for a car tire to fall through. To find a taxi to Kravanh, Rovieng or Promoui, ask around in Pursat or enquire at a hotel or guesthouse.

Central Cardamoms Protected Forest

For information on the CCPF and road access to its southern sections, see p189.

The CCPF, which is not contiguous with the Southern Cardamoms Protected Forest (p189), is flanked by two at-risk areas: **Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary** to the west (opposite); and **Phnom Aural Wildlife Sanctuary** (2538 sq km) to the east, where Cambodia's highest peak, Phnom Aural (1764m), and the country's only hot springs are found. Sadly, the latter is rapidly being destroyed from the south and the east by corruption-spurred land speculation and rampant illegal logging.

The CCPF's enforcement ranger teams get technical and financial support from **Conservation International** (CI; www.conservation.org). To coordinate a visit, arrange a guide and perhaps stay at a ranger station (eg Kravanh, Rovieng or O Som), contact CI's **Ouk Kimsan** (☎012 256777; ccp.kimsan@everyday.com.kh).

Areas in and near the CCPF are still being de-mined, so stay on roads and well-trodden trails.

KRAVANH RANGER STATION

The Forest Administration rangers (in tan uniforms) and armed military policemen (in dark-green uniforms) based at this CCPF ranger station, about an hour south of Pursat, play an unending game of cat and mouse with loggers, poachers and encroachers – a game with life-and-death consequences for the rainforest and for Cambodia's biodiversity. Evidence of recent successes fills the station's yard: dozens of confiscated Toyota Camrys, crammed to the gills with raw luxury timber, are kept here as evidence for future trials. On a bulletin board, photos show rangers impounding snares, chain saws and guns. Teams based here often go out on long-range foot patrols, sleeping rough under tarps for a week or more.

Nearby attractions – popular with Khmers on holidays – include the **Chheu Tok Cascades**, a bit to the southeast, and **Odor Rapids**, 26km to the southwest. For information on trans-CCPF treks to/from Kravanh, see p189.

If you contact CI in advance, it may be possible to stay at Kravanh, where life has the pace and feel of a remote military outpost. Another option is to arrange a homestay with a local family.

ROVIENG RANGER STATION

Another impressive collection of seatless cars and ox carts loaded with illegal wood fills the yard at Rovieng, but the most valuable contraband here is aromatic *moras preuv* oil, extracted from the roots of the endangered *Disoxylon loureiri* tree and kept in scores of plastic jerry cans. It has a delightful, sandalwood-like scent and keeps away both mosses and rats but interests smugglers because it can be used to make the drug ecstasy. Other impounded objects stored here include chainsaws, snares (including some specially designed to catch pangolins; see p189) and guns.

Bulletin-board photos show clandestine sawmills, stills used to make *moras preuv* oil, confiscated bush meat and animals observed by rangers while on patrol, including leopards, foxes, crocodiles, monkeys, pangolins, deer, manchettes and wild pigs.

One nearby sight is **L'Bak Kamronh Rapids**, which on attracts holidaying Khmers; the river eventually flows into the Tonlé Sap. About 25km west of Rovieng, in Promoui Commune, is the primary **Chhrok Preal Forest**, which can be visited with a guide.

The land on either side of the road to Rovieng was deforested by the Vietnamese to prevent ambushes and later settled by destitute homesteaders, in some cases before anyone checked for mines. In many areas clear-cut a few years ago but now protected, the forest is growing back – a hopeful sign of regeneration.

By car, Rovieng is an hour from Kravanh and two hours from Pursat. Contact CI to see if it's possible to overnight here.

Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary

Sandwiched between the CCPF and the Thai frontier, the Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary (3338 sq km) is well and truly out in the sticks. Its northern flanks are under pressure because of a copper mining concession and proposed hydroelectric dams.

Boasting Cambodia's second-highest peak, **Phnom Samkos** (1717m), the sanctuary's main town is **Promoui**, 125km and 4½ hours from Pursat over a ruinous road (via Rovieng). An even worse track heads south via **O Som** (where there's a CCPF ranger station) and **Veal Veng** (where there are several guesthouses) to Krong Koh Kong and the Koh Kong Conservation Corridor (see p187). The area is administered by the Ministry of the Environment with help from **Flora & Fauna International** (FFI; www.fauna-flora.org).

KOMPONG LUONG

កំពង់ឆ្នាំង
pop 10,000

Kompong Luong has all the amenities you'd expect to find in an oversized fishing village – except that here everything floats! The result is an ethnic-Vietnamese Venice without the dry land. The cafés, shops, chicken coops, fish ponds, ice-making factory and crocodile farm are kept from sinking by boat hulls, barrels or bunches of bamboo, as are the Vietnamese pagoda (with bougainvilleas on the front porch), the blue-roofed church and the colourful houses, some with flower pots on their verandas – similar, perhaps, to terrestrial homes with aquariums. The cool teenagers zip around in boats with oversized motors while little old ladies paddle rhythmically the old-fashioned way. The only thing you can't do in Kompong Luong, it seems, is play pool – for obvious reasons, the nearest pool halls are on dry land.

In the dry season, when water levels drop and the Tonlé Sap shrinks, the entire aquapolis is towed, boat by boat, a few kilometres

north. That's why there used to be a sign on NH5 indicating that the distance to Kompong Luong is a maximum of 7km, a minimum of 2km. Not much fun for the postman!

There is no guesthouse, so if you'd like to overnight ask around for a homestay.

The population of this fascinating and picturesque village is predominantly Vietnamese, so – reflecting their ambiguous status in Cambodian society – you may find the welcome here slightly more subdued than in most rural Cambodian towns, at least from adults. Khmer Rouge massacres of Vietnamese villagers living around Tonlé Sap Lake were commonplace during the first half of the 1990s, and even as late as 1998 more than 20 Vietnamese were killed in a pogrom near Kompong Chhngang.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Kompong Luong is between 39km and 44km east of Pursat, depending on the time of year. Round-trip transport options include *moto* (one-way/return US\$3/6, 45 minutes) and private taxi (US\$25). The turn-off from NH5 is in Krakor next to the Sokimex petrol station.

From April to June, when Tonlé Sap Lake is very low, the small fast boats that ferry tourists between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap occasionally stop at Kompong Luong for refuelling...at one of the two floating petrol stations, of course!

The official tourist rate to charter a four-passenger wooden motorboat around Kompong Luong – posted on a bright-blue sign near the dock – is US\$5 an hour (locals pay much less), but boatmen complain that fuel prices have skyrocketed since the sign was put up. Since you're paying by the hour expect a very leisurely cruise! Paddle-powered boats, available a few hundred metres north of the motorboat dock, cost about half that per hour.

BATTAMBANG PROVINCE

ខេត្តបាត់ដំបង

Battambang (Bat Dambang), said by proud locals to produce Cambodia's finest rice, tastiest oranges and sweetest coconuts, has a long border with Thailand and a short

stretch of the Tonlé Sap shoreline. Once Cambodia's largest and richest province, it was on the front lines of the civil war for much of the 1980s and 1990s and ceded territory to form two new provinces, Banteay Meanchey and Krong Pailin, but its fortunes are now looking up. The region has a long tradition of producing many of Cambodia's best-loved singers and actors.

Battambang has passed from Cambodia to Thailand and back again several times over the past few centuries. Thailand ruled the area from 1795 to 1907, and as recently as WWII (1941 to 1946), the Thais cut a deal with the Japanese and the Vichy French to take control again, resulting in five years of repression.

The provincial capital, Battambang, is emerging as Cambodia's fourth tourist destination (after Siem Reap, Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville), thanks in part to its colonial architecture and general liveliness. The city is an excellent base for delightful bicycle or *moto* trips to several hilltop temples.

BATTAMBANG

បាត់ដំបង

០៥៣ / pop 140,000

Cambodia's second-largest city is an elegant riverside town, home to some of the best-preserved French-period architecture in the country and to warm and friendly inhabitants. The city itself is developing fast but timeless hilltop temples and scenic villages can be seen on leisurely day-trips. The most scenic river trip in the country links Battambang with Siem Reap.

Battambang has more Hindu representations (eg roundabout statues) than you find in most parts of Cambodia and has long had a sizeable Christian minority.

Orientation

The focal point of Battambang's city centre, on the west bank of Stung Sangker, is Psar Nat (Meeting Market). The city has only five named streets. In the city centre, St 1 runs along the riverfront, St 2 is one block inland and St 3 serves as the main commercial thoroughfare. The liveliest street on the up-and-coming East Bank is Old NH5, linked to the west bank by the Old Stone Bridge (in fact made of concrete). The two banks are also linked by NH5, which passes over the New Stone Bridge.

Information

Available at selected hotels and restaurants, *Around Battambang* (US\$10; updated in 2006) by Ray Zepp has details on Angkorian temples, wats and excursions in the Battambang and Pailin areas. Proceeds go to monks and nuns working to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS and to help AIDS orphans.

Centre Culturel Français (☎952897; www.ccf-cambodge.org) The French Cultural Centre has a *médiathèque* with books, CDs and DVDs, and screens films – some with English subtitles – at 7pm on Friday.

Money changers can be found along the southern and western sides of Psar Nat. In the city centre, internet options are most numerous along St 3 and St 1; an hour online generally costs 1500r.

Aleda Bank On the east bank of the river. Changes travellers cheques and has an ATM.

ANZ Royal (☎953830; St 1) Has ATMs.

Canadia Bank (☎952267) Near Psar Nat. Has ATMs.

Emergency Surgical Centre for War Victims (☎370065; emergency@online.com.kh; ☎ 24hr for emergencies) This 106-bed surgical hospital, free-of-charge thanks to donors in Italy, *cannot* help with tropical diseases or routine illness but may be able to save your life if you need emergency surgery, eg for trauma or appendicitis. Has two ambulances. Located off NH5 on East Bank.

Green Net (St 1; ☎ 6am-7pm or later) Internet access.

KCT Internet Café (☎ 6.30am to 9pm or 10pm) Just off St 2 next to White Rose restaurant.

Polyclinique Visal Sokh (☎952401; NHS; ☎ 24hr) For minor medical problems, including snake bites, malaria and rabies shots. Doctors speak French and some English. Has a pharmacy and two ambulances. Near Vietnamese consulate.

SP Internet (St 3; ☎ 6.30am-9pm) A few doors south of the Chhaya Hotel

Tourist Office (☎730217; St 1; ☎ 7-11am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) In an early-20th-century French-style villa facing the old Governor's Residence, which is worth a look inside. Has little in the way of handouts.

Union Commercial Bank (☎952552; St 1) Has ATMs.

Vietnamese Consulate (☎952894; ☎ 8-11am & 2-4pm) Issues visas (US\$35) in 10 minutes, provided the consul general is in town.

Sights

Much of Battambang's special charm lies in its early-20th-century French architecture. Some of the finest **colonial buildings** are along the waterfront, especially along the two blocks of St 1 south of **Psar Nat**, itself an architectural monument, albeit a modernist one. The four-

faceted clock tower is worth a look. There are also some old **French shop houses** along St 3, eg just east of the train station.

The two-storey **Governor's Residence**, with its balconies and wooden shutters, is another handsome legacy of very early 1900s. The interior is closed but it should be possible to stroll the grounds. Except for the neo-Khmer laterite gate, the intersection out front looks much as it did in the 1930s – check out the French-only distance marker, the neat lawns and the **New Iron Bridge**, now reserved for pedestrians and motorbikes.

Two elegant – though as yet nameless – **avenues**, with parkland down the middle, grace the city centre. One goes by the Centre Culturel Français (one block north of NH5), while the other stretches west from the worthwhile **Battambang Museum** (St 1; admission US\$1; ☎ 8-11am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri). Highlights include fine Angkorian lintels and statuary from all over Battambang Province, including Phnom Banan and Sneng. Signs are in Khmer, English and French.

Battambang's many temples, which survived the Khmer Rouge period relatively unscathed thanks to a local commander who ignored orders, include **Wat Phiphétaram**, a long block north of Psar Nat, built in 1888; **Wat Damrey Sar**, west of the Battambang Museum; and **Wat Kandal** on the East Bank, once famed for its library. A number of the monks at all three wats speak English and are glad for a chance to practise; they're often around in the late afternoon.

In the area around the **old train station** – where the time is always 8.02, according to the clock – and along the tracks just south of there, you can explore a treasure trove of crumbling, French-era repair sheds, warehouses and rolling stock, evocative of times long gone. Check out the wagons' constructor's plates: some read '1930 Köln' (Cologne, Germany). German reparations from WWI, perhaps? Or maybe the wagons were confiscated after WWII and shipped out here in the last days of French Indochina?

Activities

For details on day trips from Battambang, see p246.

Always wanted to learn how to prepare authentic family-style Khmer dishes? Daily from 9.30am to 1pm, **Smokin' Pot** (☎012 821400; vannaksmokingpot@yahoo.com) offers **cooking classes**



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Canada Bank.....	3 B2	Chhaya Hotel.....	26 A2
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Green Net.....	(see 32)	Hotel Asie.....	29 A1
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(US\$8) that start with a trip to the local market and include a three-course lunch (you eat what you cook). Reserve a day ahead.

Phare Ponleu Selpak (☎952424; www.phareps.org), a multi-arts centre for disadvantaged children, puts on circus shows and dance performances. From Monday to Friday, it's often possible to observe the drawing, music, dance and circus students practising and see an exhibition of students' art. To get there from the Vishnu Roundabout on NH5, head west for 900m and then turn right (north) and continue for 600m.

In New York or London they may be achieving inner harmony with tai chi, but here in Battambang they're burning off the rice carbs doing classic Western **aerobics** (500r), held each evening from about 5.30pm to 7pm on the East Bank north of the Old Stone Bridge. Led by a local hunk with a portable sound system, just five minutes of working out should be enough to teach you how to count in Khmer – at least up to four.

You can swim and use the fitness machines at the **Victory Club** (☎092 621616; per day US\$4; ☎ 6am-8pm), a sports club popular with Battambang's *jeunesse dorée* (golden youth). The lockers are lockable but not secure enough for valuables.

At **Seeing Hands Massage** (☎012 724714; per hr US\$5; ☎ 7am-10pm), trained blind masseurs and

masseuses offer Japanese-style therapeutic massage and other soothing work-overs.

For as little as US\$2, you can pose in traditional Khmer costume and have your photo taken at two shops along the waterfront, **Tourism Photo Shop** (☎012 853840; 10 St 1) and **Nikon Photo Studio** (☎012 365987; 23 St 1). Prices include makeup and a suitably kitschy background.

If you'd like to see rural development projects in action, contact **Agricultural Development Action** (☎952551; ans.ada.btg@online.com.kh) a day or two ahead to arrange an all-day (7am to 7pm) tour by 4WD (US\$150 for up to three people, including translator and meals).

Sleeping

CITY CENTRE

Most of the city's veteran hotels are within a few bustling blocks of Psar Nat. The rival Royal and Chhaya Hotels dominate the backpacker market and can help arrange guides and transport.

There are quite a few hotels and guesthouses strung out all along NH5.

Golden River Hotel (☎730165; 234 St 3; r with fan/air-con from US\$5/8; ☎) An old-style guesthouse with dim hallways and 38 serviceable, though somewhat spartan, rooms. Not the place for a romantic getaway. Has the city's cheapest air-con.

Royal Hotel (☎016 912034; www.asrhotel.com; r with fan/air-con from US\$5/13; 🏠 📺) A real hit with independent travellers, the 45-room Royal has the city's widest range of rooms. The worthy rooftop restaurant has panoramic urban views. The same company runs two new hotels on St 3, the Hotel Asie and the plushier Star Hotel.

Chhaya Hotel (☎952170; chhayaotel-bb@hotmail.com; 118 St 3; s/d/tr US\$4/5/7, r with air-con US\$8-10; 🏠 📺) This sprawling, shambolic establishment, long a leading backpacker choice, has 84 uninspiring but serviceable rooms. Tourists generally stay in the new building, away from the sometimes rowdy male Khmer kitchen.

Monorom Guesthouse (☎012 921374; 75 St 1; s/d/tr US\$4.50/5/7, r with air-con US\$10; 🏠 📺) The no-frills rooms at this big, riverfront establishment are a touch fusty, but the price is right for such a popular location.

Angkor Hotel (☎952310; St 1; r US\$6-11; 🏠 📺) Boasting a prime riverfront location, this hotel – a fine example of what was considered the height of modernity in 1973 – has 27 clean rooms with beat-up furniture; ask for one of the seven with river views.

Banan Hotel (☎953242; bananotel@yahoo.com; NH5; r US\$15-30; 🏠 📺) Opened in 2006, this modern place combines three-star comfort with Khmer-style décor. The 30 rooms come with all the mod-cons and there's plenty of parking out back.

EAST BANK

Most of Battambang's new hotels are on the up-and-coming East Bank.

Spring Park Hotel (☎730999; www.springparkhotelb.com; Old NH5; r with fan/air-con from US\$6/11; 🏠 📺) Opened in 2005, this place boasts Battambang's only lift and 90 comfortable rooms, all with either a proper shower stall or a bathtub. Excellent value all around.

Khemara Battambang Hotel (☎732727; www.kmrb.com; Old NH5; US\$12-25; 🏠 📺) With its apricot exterior, tile roof and sandstone-floored hallways, this brand new hotel – the doors opened in late 2007 – stands out. The 32 three-star-comfort rooms tastefully mix Khmer and modern design and come with Western-standard bathrooms.

Golden Palace Hotel (☎953901; www.goldenpalacehotels.com; gph-sale@hotmail.com; Old NH5; r US\$13-20; 🏠 📺) Businesslike in the best sense of the word, this modern place has 50 spotless, nicely laid-out rooms and a business centre with free internet

terminals. Offers solid value and free pick-up from bus stops or the ferry landing.

La Villa (☎730151; www.lavilla-battambang.com; s/d US\$45/50; 🏠 📺) One of the most romantic and evocative boutique hotels in Cambodia, this delightful seven-room hostelry, in a French-era villa built by a rich Sino-Khmer merchant, was totally renovated in vintage 1930s style. Room prices include breakfast. A pool and four more rooms may be added in 2008. Often full, so reserve ahead.

Eating

CITY CENTRE

Cheap dining is available in and around Psar Nat (eg in the space between the two market buildings), but be aware that some places specialise in what can only be described as 'unusable bits' soup.

Riverside night market (St 1; mains 4000-6000r; 🕒 5-9pm) Locals in the mood for good-value Khmer food flock to about a dozen neon-lit eateries across the street from the Battambang Museum.

Fresh Eats Café (☎953912; mains US\$1-1.50; 🕒 6.30am-9pm) Run by an NGO that helps children whose families have been affected by HIV/AIDS, this little place serves Western breakfasts, including bagels, and holds dance performances (US\$3) from 7pm to 9pm on Friday and Saturday.

Sunrise Coffee House (☎953426; mains US\$1-3; 🕒 6.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) Caffeine is blended into a variety of delicious forms here and can be enjoyed with fresh-baked goodies, California-style snacks, pancakes, sandwiches and salads.

Smokin' Pot (☎012 821400; mains 4500-10,000r; 🕒 7am-about 11pm) Popular with the younger NGO crowd, this cheery, laid-back restaurant serves good Khmer, Thai and Western food – burgers and fried beef with ginger are favourites. Doubles as a cooking school (see p241).

White Rose (☎012 693855; St 2; mains 5000-9000r; 🕒 6.30am-10pm) Has a mammoth menu of good-value Khmer, Vietnamese and Chinese dishes, including soups, veggie options and marvellous *tukalok* (fruit shakes).

EAST BANK

A lively restaurant scene is developing on the East Bank, especially on Old NH5 between the Old Stone Bridge and Khemara Battambang Hotel.

Green House Café (☎012 467313; Old NH5; mains US\$1.25-2; 🕒 6.30am-8.30pm) Serves coffee, shakes, Khmer-style rice and noodle favourites, salads and exotic dishes – the menu has photographs so clients know what they're getting – such as pizza, hamburgers and doughnuts. Popular with students from the nearby colleges.

Cold Night Restaurant (☎012 994746; NH5; mains US\$2-4; 🕒 6am-11pm or midnight) With 175 menu items, there are plenty of Asian and Western options, including sandwiches (tuna salad, club), burgers and pasta, plus a local version of pizzas. The name refers to the cold beer on offer.

La Villa (☎730151; mains US\$4-7.50; 🕒 noon-2.30pm & 6-9pm; 🏠 📺) An island of civilised charm, Battambang's finest restaurant, attached to its best hostelry, serves family-style Khmer, French and Italian dishes accompanied by wines from around the world. Specialities include *amoc*, lasagne, French onion soup and *filet de bœuf* (beef filet).

VEGETARIAN

Vegetarian Foods Restaurant (☎012 501408; mains 1500-2000r; 🕒 6.30-11am or noon) Run by an ideologically vegetarian ethnic-Chinese family, this informal eatery serves home-made soy milk and delicious noodle soup breakfasts and brunches made with tofu or mushrooms. Recipes are Khmer, Chinese and Vietnamese.

Mercy House (☎012 243402; mains 2000-4800r; 🕒 6.30am-7pm) Serves Western breakfasts, noodle dishes, fruit-based beverages and even veggie hamburgers (2800r) amid flowery tablecloths and struggling potted plants.

SELF-CATERING

Psar Nat has oodles of food stalls.

Che Neang Grocery (St 3; 🕒 8am-7pm) Facing Psar Nat, Chea Neang stocks Western products, including cheese, wine, yoghurt and Wall's ice cream.

Lux-Tang Bakery (St 3; 🕒 6am-9pm) Facing Chhaya Hotel, this bakery sells baguettes and French pastries.

San Long International Bakery (☎012 530155; St 1; 🕒 6am-7pm or later) Next to the ferry dock, San Long sells baguettes and bread made without sugar.

Drinking & Entertainment

A number of beer gardens and Khmer night-clubs can be found on the East Bank north and east of La Villa.

Riverside Balcony Bar (☎730313; St 1; mains US\$2.50-4; 🕒 4pm-midnight Tue-Sun) Set in a gorgeous wooden house high above the riverfront, this is the most atmospheric bar in town. Renowned for its burgers but also serves pasta, burritos and enchiladas

La Villa (☎730151; 🕒 to 9pm or 9.30pm; 🏠 📺) A Hemingwayesque bar with an elegant colonial ambience. One of the few places in the world that serves Cambodian cognac, distilled just outside town.

Sky Disco (☎012 862777; 🕒 8pm-1am) Just north of the Khemara Battambang Hotel, this is Battambang's hottest dance venue. The DJs play everything from traditional Khmer melodies to hip-hop.

Shopping

Boeung Chhok Market has a whole section selling pre-worn clothes from Thailand for 500r. Quality varies, but finds are always a possibility.

Fresh Eats Café (☎953912; 🕒 6.30am-9pm) Sells purses, *kramas*, stuffed animals and other handicrafts made by vulnerable women.

Rachana Handicrafts (☎952506; 🕒 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, sometimes Sat & Sun mornings) This NGO-run sewing workshop trains disadvantaged women and sells purses, stuffed toys, *kramas* and cotton and silk accessories.

Heng Maly (☎952270; St 1) Sells massive hardwood furniture as well as more portable Khmer-style carved-wood items.

Getting There & Away

Battambang is 290km from Phnom Penh along the heavily trafficked NH5. Travelling after dark is best avoided for safety reasons. Boat and bus tickets can be arranged through hotels and guesthouses.

NH57 to Pailin (80km) is still sometimes referred to by locals as NH10.

BOAT

The boat to Siem Reap (US\$15, daily at 7am), arguably Cambodia's most spectacular boat journey, follows narrow waterways, scrapes marshland trees and passes through protected wetlands – a birdwatcher's paradise – but can take anywhere from five to nine or more hours, depending on the water level. Run by **Angkor Express** (☎012 601287) and **Chann Na** (☎012 354344), boats have room for 25 to 40 people.

In the dry season, passengers sometimes have to be driven to a navigable section of the

river. It's possible to arrange to get off at the Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary (p138) and then be picked up there the next day (US\$5 extra).

BUS & TAXI

Half-a-dozen bus companies have offices and stops on or near NH5, most of them west of the river. All serve Phnom Penh (US\$4, five hours), Pursat (US\$2.50 or US\$3, two hours), Sisophon (US\$2, one hour) and Poipet (US\$4, three hours). Booking through a hotel may incur a US\$1 commission.

Capitol Tours (☎953040) Praised by expats and cheaper than the competition. Has hourly buses to Phnom Penh until 2.30pm and, via Poipet, to Bangkok (US\$10).

Neak Kror Horm (☎953838) Can get you to Siem Reap (US\$4, six hours, one daily) and Bangkok (US\$15, seven hours, two daily).

Phnom Penh Sorya (☎092 181804; NH5) Situated 100m east of the bridge.

Ponleu Angkor Khmer (☎092 517792) Has four buses a day going east (towards Phnom Penh) and one a day going west (towards Poipet).

Rith Mony (☎092 888847; St 1) Next to the ferry landing. Has hourly buses to Pursat and Phnom Penh until about 3pm and two morning buses to Sisophon and Poipet.

At the **taxi station** (NH5), share taxis to Poipet (US\$5), Sisophon (100B or US\$3) and Siem Reap (250B or US\$6) leave from the north side while taxis to Pursat (15,000r) and Phnom Penh (25,000r) leave from the southeast corner. Pickups to Sisophon (100B in the front seat, 60B out back) stop nearby.

For details on getting to Pailin, see p251. A private taxi to Phnom Penh costs US\$38.

Getting Around

A *moto* ride costs 1000r if you stay on one bank of the river, 1500r if you cross the river and 2000r at night. Battambang's very first *tuk tuks* hit the tarmac in 2007.

Hiring a *moto* driver who speaks English or French costs US\$5 for a half-day in and around town and US\$6 to US\$9 (depending on the distance) for an all-day trip out of the city. Many of the *moto* drivers who hang out at the Royal Hotel, and their bitter rivals at the Chhaya Hotel, speak decent English and are good sources of information on things to see and do. Equally competent are the friendly, English-speaking *moto* drivers you'll run into elsewhere around town, though they may avoid picking you up in

front of either hotel as the house drivers jealously protect their turf.

Bicycles are a great way to get around and can be ridden along either bank of the river in either direction. The Chhaya Hotel rents bicycles to nonguests for US\$1.50 a day; the Royal Hotel charges US\$2.

Guesthouses can often arrange motorbike rental – the Chhaya Hotel, for instance, charges guests or nonguests US\$5 or US\$6 a day. They can also arrange taxi rentals, which are handy during the wet season when a motorbike may leave you drenched.

AROUND BATTAMBANG

Before setting out on trips around Battambang, try to link up with an English-speaking *moto* driver, as it really adds to the experience. For details on lots of sites not mentioned below, check out the guidebook *Around Battambang* (p241).

Admission to Phnom Sampeau, Phnom Banan and Wat Ek Phnom costs US\$2. If you purchase a ticket – sold by the Tourist Police – at one site it's valid all day long at the other two.

Local geography lends itself to a number of enjoyable day-trip itineraries. A visit to Phnom Sampeau can be turned into a loop via Phnom Banan, perhaps with a bamboo train ride (opposite) on the way back. Kamping Poy can be combined with Phnom Sampeau and, perhaps, Phnom Banan too. Wat Phnom Sampeau and Sneng (Sneung) can be visited on the way to Pailin.

Depending on the distance, a *moto* to a single site should cost US\$4 (Wat Ek Phnom) or US\$5 (Phnom Banan), while a full-day trip ranges from US\$6 to US\$9.

Wat Ek Phnom

វត្តឯកភ្នំ

Wat Ek Phnom (Aek Phnum; admission US\$2) an atmospheric, partly collapsed, 11th-century temple situated 11km north of Battambang, measures 52m by 49m and is surrounded by the remains of a laterite wall and an ancient *baray* (reservoir). A lintel showing the **Churning of the Ocean of Milk** can be seen above the east entrance to the central temple, whose upper flanks hold some fine bas-reliefs. Construction of the giant Buddha statue next door has been stopped by the government because, they say, it mars the site's timeless beauty. This is a very

ALL ABOARD, EVERYONE OFF, ALL ABOARD, EVERYONE OFF!

The **bamboo train** is one of the world's all-time classic rail journeys. From O Dambong, on the east bank 3.7km south of Battambang's Old Stone Bridge, the train runs southeast to O Sra Lav, via half an hour of clicks and clacks along warped, misaligned rails and vertiginous bridges left by the French.

Each bamboo train – known in Khmer as a *norry* (*nori*) – consists of a 3m-long wood frame, covered lengthwise with slats made of ultra-light bamboo, that rests on two barbell-like bogies, the aft one connected by fan belts to a 6HP gasoline engine. Pile on 10 or 15 people or up to three tonnes of rice, crank it up and you can cruise along at about 15km/h.

The genius of the system is that it offers a brilliant solution to the most ineluctable problem faced on any single-track line: what to do when two trains going opposite directions meet. In the case of bamboo trains, the answer is simple: one car is quickly disassembled and set on the ground beside the tracks so the other can pass. The rule is that whichever car has fewer passengers has to cede priority, though motorbikes pull rank, so if you bring one along – or have a convincing inflatable *moto* decoy – you'll get VIP treatment.

What happens, you may ask, when a bamboo train meets a real train barreling down the track? First, Cambodian trains don't barrel, they crawl. Second, bamboo train conductors know the real train's schedule. And third, the real train can be heard tooting its horn from a great distance, providing more than enough time to dismount and disassemble.

Hiring a private bamboo train from O Dambong to O Sra Lav costs US\$8, though it's much cheaper to take a share-*norry* with locals transporting veggies, charcoal or wood to market.

Sadly, rumour has it that bamboo trains will soon be banned, especially if the rail line to Phnom Penh is – as planned – upgraded.

popular picnic and pilgrimage destination for Khmers at festival times.

On the way from Battambang by bicycle or *moto*, it's possible to make a number of interesting stops. About 1.2km north of Battambang's ferry landing is a 1960s **Pepsi bottling plant**, its logo faded but otherwise hardly changed since production ceased abruptly in 1975. You can still see the remains of the old production line and, in a warehouse out back, thousands of dusty empties – bearing Pepsi's old script logo – whose contents quenched someone's thirst back when Nixon was in the White House.

Drive 700m further and turn left (west) and after 200m you'll get to a signless house behind which is the **Slaket crocodile farm**. It's open all day, including mealtimes – the crocs are always happy to have tourists for lunch.

Return to the main road and drive another 3.5km, past several wats, to the village of **Pheam Ek**, whose speciality is making rice paper for spring rolls. All along the road, in family workshops, you'll see rice paste being steamed and then placed on a bamboo frame for drying in the sun. The income earned is meagre – 100 rice sheets sell for just 2500r. The coconuts grown in this area are said to

be especially sweet. Wat Ek Phnom is 5.5km further on.

The nonprofit **Cambodian Education Center** in Pheam Ek, which provides free English instruction to local kids, is always looking for volunteer teachers. For details contact **Racky Thy** (☎017 829450; rith_gentleman@yahoo.com).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Wat Ek Phnom is 11km from Battambang's ferry landing by the shortest route and 21km if you go via the Pepsi plant and Pheam Ek. Combining both makes for a nice 32km circuit.

Phnom Banan

វត្តប្រាណាណ៍

Exactly 358 stone steps lead up a shaded slope to **Prasat Banan** (admission US\$2), whose five towers are reminiscent of the layout of Angkor Wat. Indeed, locals claim it was the inspiration for Angkor Wat!

Udayadityavarman II, son of Suryavarman I, built Prasat Banan in the 11th century, and its hillside location offers incredible views across the surrounding countryside. There are impressive carved lintels above the doorways to each tower and bas-reliefs on the upper parts of the central tower. Many

RACKY THY *Daniel Robinson*

Racky Thy's earliest memories are of the Khmer Rouge. Born in 1973 in Bay Damram village near Wat Banan (p247), he was of kindergarten age when the Khmer Rouge split up his rice-growing family, forcing his parents to relocate to single-sex encampments and the children to move to a 'children's site', run with an iron hand – and no small degree of sadism – by revolutionary true believers who were almost children themselves. This is the story of his survival, as told in the shade of the timeless ruins of Wat Ek Phnom.

'Each child had to collect 10kg of cow dung and 10kg of plants to make compost fertiliser. If a child cannot, they will give punishments, like don't give porridge water to drink, give more hard work to do. One day, when I come back, nothing to eat. I was very hungry so I went to a big tamarind tree and pick a lot of fruit to eat. Later I got much diarrhoea.

'I got very sick, no strength, cannot stand up. But the children's leaders think that I'm pretending to be ill so they want to teach me a lesson. They force me to pick the tamarind fruit for them. Because the base of the tree was big and I have no strength, I could not climb up the tree. They threatened me, "If you cannot, maybe I kill you under this tree". I pray to Buddha for help. Finally, I could climb up the tree and picked a lot of tamarind fruit for them. Then the cadres don't let me climb down – they cut the lower branches of the tree, cover the base of the tree with thorns and burn [set fire to] the base of the tree. And then they laugh and go away. At that time, I feel this is my final time, my death day is coming. But fortunately there was a little rain that put out the fire. So I climbed down from the tree. I was very happy and walked back to the children's site. When they [the leaders] saw me they were surprised that a little boy can survive their cruel and violent activities. I tell them a lie, that I jumped down through the fire.

'As punishment, they take me to another place for me to jump down, from a cliff into a river with fast-flowing water. The height is around 10m so I feel I die before I jump down. I pray to Buddha and Buddha look after me and he guide me to catch the branch of a tree. And the water flow over my head with air bubbles, they did not see me but I could breathe in and breathe out. Because my body colour is similar to water they think, "he already die", and they go back.

'Then I run fast across the forest. I keep a long time running. Finally I could find my grandfather's place, I cry a lot at that time, and my grandfather carry me into the house and find a way to hide me by digging a hiding hole under the house and he let me breathe in and breathe out with a papaya branch, like a straw. Some of the children's leaders come to find me at the house, many times coming but did not see me. When they came I live in the hole – for around three months [this went on], my grandfather told me later.

'After that I came out from the hole and came to live as other children and change the [family] name so nobody know me, and my grandfather send me to another children's site. The next site is better than the first site but the leader is more strict than the first one, never let children go visit parents, never let children cry at night, never let children urinate at night. If one of the children cry or urinate at night, they bring to kill – they threatened this at mealtimes. So we just cry in [our] mind, never let our tears outside the eyes.'

Racky Thy lives in Battambang with his wife and two young daughters. He is a tour guide and runs a nonprofit English-language school.

of this temple's best carvings are now in the Battambang Museum (p241).

From the temple, 28km south of Battambang, a narrow stone staircase leads south down the hill to **three caves**, two of which are not mined and can thus be visited with a torch/flashlight-equipped local guide. At the first, 25m up the slope from the papaya orchard, you have to crouch to get through the first 5m, but you eventually get to a soaring chamber with a skylight high overhead. At

the second, a few hundred metres west, you clamber over giant boulders to a cavernous space with some Buddhist statues and, way above you, a skylight and chirping bats. A path leads from the caves around the hill to the parking area.

On the way to Phnom Banan, on the river's west bank 1.7km south of Battambang's Riverside Balcony Bar, you can stop at **Wat Kor Village**, which is known for its 21 **Khmer heritage houses**. Built of now-rare hardwoods

almost a century ago and surrounded by orchard gardens, they sport wide verandas and the ambiance of another era. Signs in Khmer, English and French explain each building's history. It's possible to stay in some of the houses – ask around to see who's got a guest room. **Ox-cart rides** may be available just south of the rail bridge.

About 15km further, through an area famous for its hot red chillies, you can visit Cambodia's only winery, **Chan Thai Choeng** (☎012 665238). Local connoisseurs express more enthusiasm for the owner's pioneering spirit than for her reds and rosés, though her cognac-like grape brandy gets better reviews.

Phnom Sampeau

ភ្នំសំបៅ

At the summit of this fabled limestone outcrop, 12km southwest of Battambang along NH57 (towards Pailin), a complex of **temples** (admission US\$2) – several built recently thanks to donations from overseas Khmers – affords gorgeous views of the surrounding plains and, to the south, Phnom Banan. Some of the macaques that live around the summit, dining on bananas left as offerings, are pretty ornery.

Between the summit and the mobile-phone antenna, a **deep canyon** – its vertical sides cloaked in greenery – descends steeply through a natural arch to a 'lost world' of stalactites, creeping vines, air roots, bats and statues of two Angkorian warriors.

In the area between the two sets of antennas stand two government **artillery pieces**, one with markings in Russian, the other in German. They still point westwards towards **Phnom Krapeu** (Crocodile Mountain), a one-time Khmer Rouge stronghold.

About half-way up the cement access road to the summit, a turn-off leads 250m up the hill to the **Killing Caves of Phnom Sampeau**. An enchanted staircase, flanked by greenery, leads into a cavern where a golden reclining Buddha lies peacefully next to a glass-walled memorial, dedicated in 2007, filled with the bones and skulls of some of the people bludgeoned to death by Khmer Rouge cadres before being thrown through the overhead skylight. Nearby is the **old memorial**, a rusty cage made of chicken wire and cyclone fencing.

At the base of the hill, a 15m-high **Buddha** is being carved out of the cliff face, starting with the head. While more funds are raised,

local macaques treat the scaffolding like a giant jungle gym.

Food stalls sell edibles at the base of the hill; snacks are available up top.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Battambang, a return *moto* ride costs about US\$5 (including wait time). To get to the top, you can either walk through the gate and up the stairs, or take the 1km cement road by foot or by *moto* (US\$3 return with an English-speaking guide).

Kamping Poy

កំពង់ព្រួញ

Kamping Poy (Poi or Puoy), also known as the Killing Dam, was one of the Khmer Rouge's many grand, futile irrigation schemes. Some locals claim the hand-built dam, stretching 8km between two distant hillsides, was intended as a sort of final solution for enemies of the revolution, who were to be invited to its inauguration and then drowned following the detonation of dynamite charges. More likely, it was an extravagant Khmer Rouge attempt to re-create the complex irrigation network that helped Cambodia prosper under the kings of Angkor. Whatever the truth, as many as 10,000 Cambodians are thought to have perished during its construction, worked to death under the shadow of executions, malnutrition and disease.

Despite its grim history – and the fact that there's little to see except the sluice gates – the lake is today a popular excursion for locals on weekends and holidays. You can take a boat rowed by local kids to the far shore but they sometimes demand exorbitant prices.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Kamping Poi is 27km from Battambang (if you go via NH5). To get there from the north, turn southwest off NH5 7km north-west of Battambang (across from the much-beloved **Dam Russei Restaurant**) and follow the Khmer Rouge-built irrigation canal. From the south, turn northwest off NH57 2km past Phnom Sampeau.

Sneng

ស្នែង

This nondescript town on the way to Pailin, on NH57 20km southwest of Battambang, is home to two small yet interesting temples. The Hindu **Prasat Yeat Ten** dates from the

end of the 10th century and, although little more than a neat pile of blocks, has above its doorways three delicately carved lintels that somehow survived the ravages of time and war. Dedicated to Shiva, it is on the east side of the highway so close to the road that you can't miss it.

Behind Prasat Yeay Ten, 200m to the east, is a contemporary wat, and tucked away at the back of this compound are three **brick sanctuaries**, which have some beautifully preserved carvings around the entrances. The sanctuaries look like pre-Angkorian Chenla temples, but given the limited Chenla presence in western Cambodia, it is possible that they date from the same period as Prasat Kravan (p169) at Angkor, ie the early 10th century.

KRONG PAILIN

The province-level municipality of Krong Pailin is best known for its gem mines (which are now exhausted), land mines (which are still being removed) and for an equally sinister ideological *mein* – the Khmer Rouge version of *Mein Kampf*.

During the civil war, the Pailin area's gem and timber resources – sold to the world with the help of Thai army generals – served as the economic crutch that kept the Khmer Rouge hobbling along. In the mid-1990s, it was a staging area for regular dry-season offensives that overran government positions as far east as Phnom Sampeau.

DON'T STRAY FROM THE PATH!

Krong Pailin, nearby areas along the Thai frontier and the Battambang Province district of Samlot are some of the most heavily mined places in the world. On the front lines for years, districts such as Treng and Ratanak Mondul (the Sdau area) also have huge quantities of unexploded ordnance lying around. In 2006 and 2007, Krong Pailin had more casualties from mines and unexploded ordnance, per square kilometre, than any province in Cambodia.

The upshot is that you should stick to well-used roads and paths. Carelessness in this part of the country could cost you a leg or your life.

In 1996 the Khmer Rouge supremo in these parts, Ieng Sary (Brother Number Three), defected to the government side, bringing with him 3000 fighters and their dependants. His reward: amnesty and free reign in Krong Pailin, created in 2001 from land carved out of Battambang Province. Only in late 2007 were Ieng and his wife arrested for war crimes and crimes against humanity. Around the same time, two other Khmer Rouge retirees were taken into custody from their homes in Pailin: Khieu Samphan, the Khmer Rouge's one-time head-of-state, and Nuon Chea (Brother Number Two), the group's chief ideologue. Ieng's son, Ieng Vuth, currently serves as deputy governor of Pailin.

The border crossing 22km northwest of Pailin is likely to get more business when, and if, the road to Battambang is paved.

PAILIN

ប៊ែលីន

☎053 / pop 22,000

The fly-blown, Wild West town of Pailin has little to recommend it except a particularly colourful hilltop temple. However, it can serve as a base for visits to the Samlaut Protected Area.

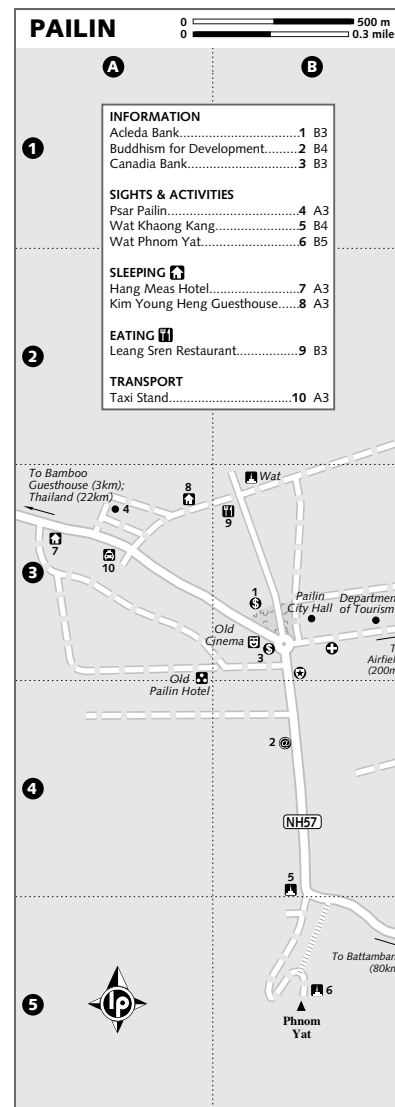
Information

There are no ATMs but money can be changed at **Canadia Bank** (NH57) and **Aceda Bank** (NH57); the latter takes travellers cheques.

The only internet café in town is run by **Buddhism for Development** (NH57; per hr US\$1; ☎ 7am–noon & 2–7pm).

Sights & Activities

The southern gateway to Pailin is marked by a tree-covered hillock, **Phnom Yat**. From NH57, stairs lead through a garish gate – the *nagas* are bubblegum pink, spearmint green and sunflower yellow – up to the equally psychedelic **Wat Phnom Yat**. The temple is centred on an ancient *po* tree and a life-sized cement **tableau** showing butt-naked sinners (about the only nudity you'll see in Cambodia) being heaved into a cauldron, de-tongued (for liars) and forced to climb a spiny tree (for adulterers). Medieval European triptychs never made hell seem so uninviting! Nearby, the repentant pray for forgiveness, which is a highly pertinent message given who lives around here. From Phnom Yat there are clear views across Pailin,



and this is a top spot for enjoying a sunrise or sunset.

At the base of the hill, an impressive gate from 1968 leads to **Wat Khaong Kang**, an important centre for Buddhist teaching before the Khmer Rouge madness.

Moto drivers can take you to several **waterfalls** outside town.

A few stalls in **Psar Pailin** (Psar Pahi; Pailin Market) still sell rubies and sapphires, many of inferior quality.

Sleeping

Just inside Cambodia at the Psar Pruhm–Ban Pakard border crossing are three casino hotels set up to milk cash from Thai gamblers. The Diamond Crown, the **Caesar Casino** (☎017 482414) and the **Pailin Flamingo** (☎from Thailand 081 5635511) offer comfortable rooms for 400B to 600B.

Kim Young Heng Guesthouse (☎012 978430; r with fan/air-con from US\$4/10; ☎) A remnant of Pailin's boomtown days, this is a proper guesthouse whose 72 rooms are clean and come with hot water.

Hang Meas Hotel (☎012 640763; r US\$5–10; ☎) Once Pailin's best hotel, this establishment – like the town – has seen more prosperous days. The 55 smallish, institutional rooms come with TV and fridge.

Bamboo Guesthouse (☎012 405818, from Thailand 01-2799725; r US\$12–15; ☎) This little neighbourhood of bungalows, on the northwestern outskirts of town about 3km from the centre, consists of 20 bungalows with air-con, hot water and cable TV. Pricier units, made entirely of rare, reddish and no-longer-available *beng* wood, have a forest-lodge feel.

Eating

There are food stalls along the northwest and southeast edges of Psar Pailin.

Leang Sren Restaurant (☎016 842115; ☎ 6am–9pm) This informal, open-fronted eatery is known for its soups (big/small 80/150B). The name means 'laughing cow'.

Bamboo Guesthouse (mains 35–150B; ☎ 6am–10pm) Serves Pailin's best Khmer and Thai food in shaded outdoor pavilions.

Getting There & Away

NH57 from Battambang to Pailin (80km, 2½ hours), which passes through fields used to grow corn for the Thai market, is finally being upgraded – and the land alongside is finally being de-mined. Transport options include share taxis (200B; departures are from Battambang's Psar Leu, at the far southern end of St 3) and pick-ups (120/80B inside/out back). If you wish to make stops along the way at places such as Phnom Sampeau and Sngeng, take a private taxi (US\$35 to US\$40 one-way, US\$60 to US\$70 return).

The Psar Pruhm–Ban Pakard border crossing to Thailand is 22km northwest of Pailin. A share taxi, available just past passport control, costs 5000r/50B to Pailin and US\$6.50 to Battambang. Khmers pay 100B for a *moto* from the border to Pailin, but foreigners are hit up for double that.

For details on the rough track from Treng District to Krong Koh Kong, see p187.

SAMLAUT

The northernmost tip of the Cardamom Mountains – a truly remote area that's home to elephants, gibbons, pangolins, hornbills and many other endangered creatures – covers the southern half of Krong Pailin (pretty much everything south of NH57). Known as the **Samlaut Multiple Use Area** (600 sq km; highest point 1164m), this expanse of forested mountains is contiguous with two Thai parks, including Namtok Klong Kaew National Park, and is administered and patrolled with help from the **Maddox Jolie-Pitt Foundation** (MJP; www.mjpasia.org), named after the adopted Cambodian-born son of its founder and president, the American actress Angelina Jolie.

In 2006 the Samlaut administration signed a sister-park agreement with Sequoia National Park in California, coincidentally not far from Fresno, home to one of the largest Cambodian communities in the United States.

MJP is developing plans to run rough-and-ready, **ranger-led tours** of the Samlaut forests using Pailin as a base. For updates see the MJP website or write to info@mjpasia.org.

BANTEAY MEANCHEY PROVINCE

ខេត្តបន្ទាយមានជ័យ

Sandwiched between the casinos of Poipet, Cambodia's most important border crossing with Thailand, and the glories of Angkor, agricultural Banteay Meanchey (Fortress of Victory) – which claims to grow Cambodia's best rice – often gets overlooked by travellers rushing on to Siem Reap or Battambang. But those with an inclination to get off the beaten track can take in the Angkorian temples around Banteay Chhmar, observe

rare birds at Ang Trapeng Thmor Reserve (p139) and visit a wat-based fish conservation project near Sisophon, the best base for exploring the province.

POIPEET

ប៉ៃប៉េត

☎054 / pop 45,000

Long the armpit of Cambodia, notorious for its squalor, scams and sleaze, Poipet (pronounced *poi-peh* in Khmer) has recently applied some deodorant, at least in the casino zone adjacent to the Poipet–Aranya Prathet border crossing with Thailand. Based mainly on the custom of Thais, whose own country bans gambling, eight casino resorts with names like Tropicana and Grand Diamond City are helping turn the town into the Las Vegas of Cambodia, though outside the casino zone it's still a trash-strewn strip mall sprinkled with dodgy massage parlours. In a sign that Poipet is starting to attract Khmers, it has begun hosting outdoor concerts of Khmer pop music.

Poipet offers a lively, chaotic welcome to Cambodia, the Khmers' gentle side little in evidence, but don't worry – the rest of the country does not carry on like this.

Orientation & Information

Poipet stretches from the border (the filthy O Chrou stream) and the casino zone eastwards along NH5 for a few kilometres. Cambodian visas are issued at the Visa Service, to the right as you enter Cambodian territory (the counter faces the ceremonial Kingdom of Cambodia gate). Prices are posted, so don't buy a visa from any of the touts on either side of the border. Passports are stamped a few hundred metres further on, just before the big roundabout at the eastern edge of the casino zone. **Canada Bank** (☎967107; NH5) About 1km east of the casino zone. Has a 24-hour ATM.

Internet Shop (NH5; per hr 40B; ☎ 7.15am–9pm) Internet access 250m east of the roundabout.

Sleeping

There's little reason to spend the night in Poipet, although hotels in the casino zone advertise rooms for 500B to 1500B – good value given the facilities. Cheap guesthouses, some of them brothels, are strung out along NH5 and around the bus station.

Ngy Heng Hotel (☎967101; nopnadr@yahoo.com; NH5; r 200–400B; ☞) Situated 100m west of the sidestreet leading to the bus station, this

hotel's rooms are more than adequate, though not by much.

Orkiday Angkor Hotel (Orchidée Angkor Hotel; ☎012 767676; oa_tour@online.com.kh; NH5; r 400–600B; ☞) Just outside the casino zone on the north side of the roundabout. Rooms at this newish, pink, four-storey place have terracotta floors, large beds and hot water. Although there's no lift, the lower floors are cheaper.

Ly Heng Chhay Hotel (☎967136, Thai mobile 081 6649317; lyfen_poipet@yahoo.com; NH5; r US\$15; ☞) Popular with NGO workers, this comfortable, seven-storey establishment is on the north side of the highway about 1km east of the roundabout.

Eating

Many of the casino-hotels offer all-you-can-eat buffets; culinary options include Thai (200B at Grand Diamond City) and Japanese (300B).

The cheapest eats are inside the market (near the bus station) and along NH5.

Getting There & Away

For details on travelling between Thailand and Cambodia via Poipet, see p329.

A rail line from Poipet to Sisophon – planned by the French but never built – is supposed to be constructed as part of the Trans-Asia Rail Link, which by 2015 may make it possible to take the train all the way from Singapore to Western Europe.

Thanks to the prestige at stake when Cambodia hosted its first international golf tournament, held near Siem Reap in November 2007, the heavily trafficked NH5 between Sisophon and Poipet is *finally* being paved! Poipet is 48km from Sisophon and 153km from Siem Reap.

BUS

All buses depart from the bus station. To get there from the casino zone, go east along NH5 for 1.5km and then turn left (north) for 200m. Bus companies, including **GST** (☎012 727721), **Neak Kror Horm** (☎012 970067, Thai mobile 01-9825610), **Phnom Penh Sorya**, **Ponleu Angkor Khmer** and **Rith Mony** (☎012 579943), have a roadside office along NH5 near the bus station. Word has it that the OSP bus and taxi monopoly, which forced tourists to pay double local prices, has been abolished.

Destinations by bus include Sisophon (10,000r/100B, one hour), Battambang

(15,000r/150B, 2½ hours) and Phnom Penh (22,000r/220B, 7½ hours). All buses leave early in the morning (between 6.15am and 8am) and all take NH5, which runs south of the Tonlé Sap, so for now the only way to get to Siem Reap is via Sisophon or by taxi. However, direct buses to Siem Reap are planned.

TAXI

Share taxis – some of them Thai right-hand-drives that provide front-seat passengers the thrill of seeing oncoming traffic before the driver can – are available all day long, either at the big roundabout just past passport control or along NH5 near the bus station.

Destinations include Sisophon (100B, one hour), Siem Reap (250B, three hours) and Battambang (US\$5, two hours). Private taxis can be hired for as little as US\$20 to Battambang and US\$35 or US\$40 to Siem Reap, though the usual fee is six times the single-seat fare (Cambodian share taxis pack two passengers in front and four in back). Be prepared for a cheerfully chaotic rugby scrum of taxi touts and negotiate hard (smiling helps) or you'll pay above the odds.

Packed-to-the-gills pickups, which stop along NH5, are a bit cheaper, in part because riding in back is so dangerous (even in a minor accident everyone goes flying).

Getting Around

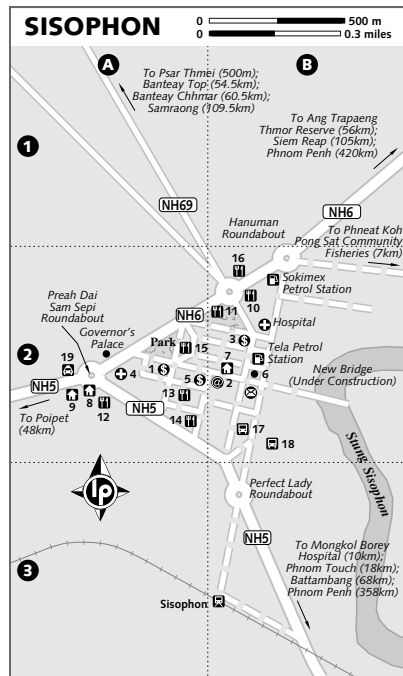
Free shuttles take you from the Visa Service (at the border) through the casino zone to passport control, though it's easy enough to walk. From there, larger buses (US\$1) take you 1.5km to the bus station. For local hops, *moto* drivers wait at the roundabout just beyond passport control.

SISOPHON

ស៊ីស៊ុផុន

☎054 / pop 98,000

Strategically situated at northwest Cambodia's great crossroads, the intersection of NH5 and NH6, Sisophon (often called Svay by locals) makes a convenient first stop in Cambodia if you're coming from Poipet. It's also a good base for exploring the Angkorian temples of Banteay Chhmar and Banteay Top, about 50km north of town, and Ang Trapeng Thmor Reserve (p139), a bird sanctuary 56km (1½ to two hours by car) to the northeast.



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has classes in traditional music, *apsara* dancing, painting, sculpture and shadow puppetry. It's often possible to observe a class or see students practising. Drop by to find out when.

At the **Phneat Koh Pong Sat Community Fisheries**, a community-based fish sanctuary run by monks 8km east of town, you can feed schools of fat, frisky fish from a peaceful riverside pavilion on the grounds of a wat. Monks sell food pellets and dry bread (500r). It makes a delightful excursion by bicycle, *moto* or car, especially in the late afternoon.

Phnom Touch, 18km towards Battambang on the west side of NH5, has several temples on and around it and affords gorgeous views.

Sleeping

As we go to press, the **Phnom Svay Hotel** (NH5) is being totally renovated.

Roeung Rong Hotel (☎092 260515; NH5; r US\$5-10; ♻️) A family-run place with 24 recently renovated rooms. The goings-on out back in and around the private 'karaoke rooms' are kept separate from the hotel.

Golden Crown Hotel (☎958444; r US\$5-15; ♻️) A big hit with the NGO crowd and Khmers of the car-owning class, this new place has 39 rooms with soaring ceilings and fridges; hot water is US\$1 extra. Excellent value.

Eating

Inexpensive **food stalls** can be found at Psar Sisophon (Sisophon Market), especially for breakfast and lunch, and in the evening along the north side of the park on NH6.

Arun Reas Restaurant (☎012 350321; NH6; mains 3000-10,000r; ☎ 6.30am-8.30pm) Popular with deminers and other NGO workers, this airy place has cute café tables and excellent green curry and fried rice.

Suon Kamsan Restaurant (☎012 829006; mains 6000-8000r; ☎ 5am-11pm) A big, popular place with Western and Khmer breakfasts, reliable Khmer mains and some Thai dishes. The Khmer menus are up on the wall. Crooners perform nightly from 6pm to 11pm.

Phkay Preuk Restaurant (☎012 838934; NH5; mains US\$2-4; ☎ 6.30am-10pm) An enormous and energetic place with Khmer and Thai cuisine and a few Western dishes, including breakfast favourites. It may look closed from the front but head on in – the dining goes on out back.

Vichet Pizza Shop (☎012 529820; NH6; ☎ 5am-10pm) Sisophon's first and only pizzeria. The enterprising owner learned how to make pizza by doing research on the internet!

SELF-CATERING

Sorm Rethy Bakery (NH6; ☎ 8am-5pm) Has bread and super sponge cake (1000r per slice).

Sok Yi Grocery (☎ 6am-7pm) Half-a-block south of Psar Sisophon, this grocery stocks fresh milk and yoghurt from Thailand, wine, cheese and ice cream.

Getting There & Away

Sisophon is 48km east of Poipet, 105km west of Siem Reap, 61km south of Banteay Chhmar and 68km northwest of Battambang. In terms of driving time, it's about midway between Bangkok and Phnom Penh (five or six hours from each).

Long-haul buses and most share taxis stop at the bus station (a new bus station is being built near the old one). Companies including **Capitol Tour** (☎012 525782), **Rith Mony** (☎012 637271) and **Neak Kror Horm** serve Phnom Penh (20,000r), Siem Reap (15,000r to 20,000r), Battambang (8000r) and Poipet (5000r). Neak Kror Horm can get you to Bangkok. Most departures, except to Poipet, are early in the morning.

Share taxis link the bus station with Phnom Penh (30,000r), Siem Reap (15,000r to 20,000r) and Battambang (10,000r). Share taxis to Poipet

(100r, one hour) stop on NH5 across the street from the Roeung Rong Hotel. Share taxis north to Thmor Puok and Banteay Chhmar leave from near Psar Thmei on NH69, 1km north of NH6. Private taxis cost six times the share taxi fare. A place on a pickup costs 50% less than a share taxi (30% less if you sit inside).

Pickups to Phnom Srok District (near Ang Trapeng Thmor Reserve) stop on NH6 near the Hanuman statue.

A *moto* ride around town costs 1000r.

BANTEAY CHHMAR & BANTEAY TOP

បន្ទាយច័ន្ទីរ & បន្ទាយតូប

The temple complex of **Banteay Chhmar** (admission US\$5) was constructed by Cambodia's most prolific builder, Jayavarman VII (r 1181-1219), on the site of a 9th-century temple. There is debate over its origins, with some scholars suggesting it was built in tribute to Jayavarman VII's son Indravarman and the Cambodian generals responsible for defeating the Chams, while others propose it was intended as a funerary temple for the king's grandmother.

Originally enclosed by a 9km-long wall, the temple housed one of the largest and most impressive Buddhist monasteries of the Angkorian period. Today, it is one of the few temples to feature the enigmatic, Bayon-style **visages of Avalokiteshvara**, with their mysterious – and world famous – smiles.

On the temple's east side, a huge **bas-relief** on a partly-topped wall dramatically depicts naval warfare between the Khmers (on the left) and the Chams (on the right), with the dead – some being devoured by crocodiles – at the bottom. Further south (to the left) are scenes of land warfare with infantry and elephants. There are more martial bas-reliefs along the exterior of the temple's south walls.

The once-grand entry gallery is now a jumble of fallen sandstone blocks, though elsewhere a few intersecting galleries have withstood the ravages of time, as have some almost-hidden 12th-century inscriptions. All the remaining *apsaras* (nymphs) have been decapitated by looters.

Banteay Chhmar was deservedly renowned for its intricate carvings, including scenes of daily life in the Angkorian period similar to those at Bayon. Unique to Banteay Chhmar was a sequence of eight **multi-armed Avalokiteshvaras** on the outside of the southern section of the temple's western ramparts, but

six of these were hacked out and trucked into Thailand in a brazen act of looting in 1998. Still, the two that remain – one with 22 arms, the other with 32 – are spectacular.

There are as many as a dozen smaller temples in the vicinity of Banteay Chhmar, all in a ruinous state. These include Prasat Mebon, Prasat Ta Prohm, Prasat Prom Muk Buon, Prasat Yeay Choun, Prasat Pranang Ta Sok and Prasat Chiem Trey.

At the headquarters of the **Banteay Chhmar Protected Landscape** (☎017 971225), 2km towards Sisophon from town, it may be possible to hire a guide (non-English speaking) for a nature walk.

Through Agir Pour le Cambodge (see below), you can participate in **traditional activities** such as honey collecting and the hunting of frogs and rice-field crabs (US\$10 for a group). It may also be possible to visit local silk weavers. A ride out to Banteay Top costs US\$5 by ox-cart or US\$6 by *koyun* (tractor). Renting a bicycle costs US\$1.50 a day.

Banteay Top (Fortress of the Army), set among rice paddies southeast of Banteay Chhmar, may only be a small temple but there's something special about the atmosphere here. Constructed around the same time as Banteay Chhmar, it may be a tribute to the army of Jayavarman VII, which confirmed Khmer dominance over the region by conclusively defeating the Chams. One of the damaged towers looks decidedly precarious, like a bony finger pointing skyward. The turn-off from NH69, marked by a stone plinth with gold inscription, is 9km south of Banteay Chhmar.

Sleeping & Eating

A French-based NGO, **Agir Pour le Cambodge** (www.agirpourleCambodge.org in French; aplc@online.com.kh), has launched a pioneering community-based **homestay project** (☎017 782156 or 012 435660; d US\$7) in Banteay Chhmar. Situated both in town and in three nearby hamlets, the homes – marked with handsome brown and yellow signs – offer rooms with mosquito nets, fans that run when there's electricity (6pm to 10pm), and downstairs bathrooms. Breakfast/lunch/dinner cooked by local women costs US\$2/3/4. Forty percent of revenues go into a community development fund.

A couple of small private guesthouses are being built in Banteay Chhmar.

For now, the nearest rooms with private bathrooms are in Thmor Puok, about 15km south of Banteay Chhmar. **Ly Hour Guesthouse** (☎012 622218; r 200B), on the southern edge of the village, has 10 simple rooms with Western toilet and bucket showers.

Getting There & Away

After having its bridges washed out by floods, NH69 – which links Banteay Chhmar with Sisophon (61km to the south; two hours) and Samraong (to the northeast; 1½ hours) – is getting a serious upgrade.

From Sisophon, most northbound pickups only go as far as Thmor Puok, where you can hire a *moto* to the temple (US\$5 return). Or you can take a *moto* all the way from Sisophon (about US\$10 return). Hotels in Sisophon may be able to rent you a motorbike. There's no public transport from Banteay Chhmar to Samraong.

By car, it's possible to get out here on a very long day trip from Siem Reap.

ODDAR MEANCHEY PROVINCE

ខេត្តឧត្តរមានជ័យ

The remote, dirt-poor province of Oddar Meanchey (Otdar Mean Chey), created from parts of Siem Reap Province that the government didn't control for much of the 1980s and 1990s, produces very little apart from opportunities for aid organisations. From a touristic standpoint there are two rather dim bright spots: the seldom-used international border crossings of Choam–Choam Srawngam and O Smach–Chong Jom and, around Anlong Veng, the presence of Khmer

LAND MINE ALERT!

Banteay Meanchey and Oddar Meanchey are among the most heavily mined provinces in Cambodia. In 2006 and 2007, mines claimed more victims in Banteay Meanchey than in any other province in Cambodia, and Oddar Meanchey wasn't far behind. Do not, under any circumstances, stray from previously trodden paths. If you've got your own wheels, travel only on roads or trails regularly used by locals.

Rouge sites that are starting to attract visitors appalled and fascinated by evil and its banality. Illegal logging was rampant for a few years but seems to have stopped for now.

Getting around the province is no picnic during the dry season and tougher during the wet, as there are virtually no sealed roads. NH67 from Siem Reap to Anlong Veng and Choam was recently upgraded with Thai assistance.

SAMRAONG

សំរោង

There are towns called Samraong throughout Cambodia – the name means 'dense jungle', sadly a rarity in this area today. This Samraong, the provincial-backwater capital of Oddar Meanchey, is emerging very slowly from decades of isolation, a legacy of its front-line position in the long civil war. There's nothing for foreigners to see or do up here unless they happen to be in development work – something much in demand around here. There's a border crossing with Thailand 40km to the north at O Smach.

It's worth noting that in 2006 and 2007, mines and unexploded ordnance injured more people in Samraong District than in any other district in Cambodia.

The **Aleda Bank**, facing the scruffy little market, changes travellers cheques.

The best place to stay is the **Meanchey Hotel** (☎011 700099; r US\$5-10; ☹), often used by NGO workers, which has 24 simply furnished rooms. Air-con rooms have hot water.

In the evening food stalls pop up around the market. Next to the Meanchey Hotel, **Heng Heng Restaurant** (☎012 983083; mains 4000-6000r) is hardly more than a shed with red plastic chairs, but the food is decent.

Getting There & Away

To get to most places from Samraong, a long and bumpy journey over terrible roads is in order. Before 8am, share taxis (250B; four hours) and pickups (inside/outside 15,000r/10,000r) to Siem Reap, via NH68 and Kralanh (80km due south on NH6), depart from the market. There may also be a bus (170B).

For details on getting to/from O Smach, see right.

There's no public transport along NH69 to Banteay Chhmar; hiring a *moto* costs 500B, a car 1200B. The backwoods road east towards Anlong Veng, although passable year-round,

is even less travelled; hiring a *moto* costs 500B to 650B.

O SMACH

ផ្លូវស្មាច់

Only a trickle of foreign visitors uses the O Smach–Chong Jom border crossing (see p330), which is pretty remote on the Thai side and in the middle of nowhere on the Cambodian side. At the frontier there's a zone of Thai-style modernity, with two big casino-hotels, a paved dual carriageway a few hundred metres long and a modern market. But from there south you're in outback Cambodia. The road meanders between minefields and at one point you have the choice of paying 20B/2000r for a dodgy private toll bridge built of logs by enterprising locals or driving through a river. All along the way, you pass motorbikes so overloaded with fruit, cheap household items and petrol smuggled in from Thailand that they often topple over.

O Smach shot to fame in July 1997 as Funcinpec forces regrouped here after the coup. Perched on the mountain, soldiers under the command of General Neak Bun Chhay were able to hold out against the superior forces of the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) until a peace agreement was brokered that allowed the 1998 elections to go ahead.

With the advent of peace, the military moved in and cleared locals off safe land to sell it to a casino developer. Meanwhile, the locals who were evicted were forced to relocate to mined land that the military claimed to have cleared. As happens all too often in Cambodia, the strong exploited the weak, but this episode was particularly heartless and brought to international attention the issue of military land grabs in 'peacetime' Cambodia.

The 30-room **Chay Na Guesthouse** (☎011 940533; r 300-500B; ☹), a bit over 1km from the border at the top of the hill near the antennas, is built in a style that can only be described as part neoclassical, part Spanish and part Khmer. For something fancier, you can stay on the border at the Royal Hill Hotel or the O Smach Resort, its entrance flanked by two decommissioned Soviet armoured cars.

About 50m inside Cambodian territory, tens of *motos* and a few taxis await passengers or freight. To Samraong (40km, 1½ to two hours), a *moto* costs 250B, a private taxi 1200B. And once you get to Samraong, where are you? Nowhere.

DEADLY LEGACY OF WAR

Although peace treaties were signed a decade ago, Cambodia's civil war is still claiming new victims: civilians who have stepped on a mine or been injured by unexploded ordnance (UXO).

The first massive use of mines came in the mid-1980s, when Vietnamese forces – using forced local labour – constructed a 700km-long minefield along the entire Cambodian-Thai border. After the Vietnamese withdrawal, more mines were laid by the Cambodian government to prevent towns, villages, military positions, bridges, border crossings and supply routes from being overrun, and by Khmer Rouge forces to protect areas they had captured. Lots more government mines were laid in the mid-1990s in offensives against Khmer Rouge positions around Anlong Veng and Pailin.

Today, Cambodia has one of the world's worst landmine problems and the highest number of amputees per capita of any country – over 25,000 Cambodians have lost limbs due to mines and other military explosives. Despite extensive mine awareness campaigns, an average of 30 victims are injured or killed every month. This is a vast improvement on the mid-1990s, when the figure was more like 300, but it's still wartime carnage in a country officially at peace.

To make matters more complicated, areas that seem safe in the dry season can become dangerous in the wet season as the earth softens. It's not uncommon for Cambodian farmers to settle on land during the dry season, only to have their dreams of a new life shattered a few months later when a family member has a leg blown off.

A number of groups are working to clear mines, whacking through the undergrowth square metre after laborious square metre. If you travel in the more remote parts of provinces such as Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Krong Pailin, Oddar Meanchey, Preah Vihear, Pursat and Siem Reap, you're likely to see de-mining teams run by the **Cambodian Mine Action Centre** (CMAC; www.cmac.org.kh), the **HALO Trust** (www.halotrust.org) and the **Mines Advisory Group** (MAG; www.mag.org.uk) in action.

Some sage advice about mines that's worth bearing in mind in rural Cambodia:

- Always check with locals that paths are not mined.
- Never leave a well-trodden path in remote areas.
- Never touch anything that looks remotely like a mine or munitions.
- If you find yourself accidentally in a mined area, retrace your steps only if you can clearly see your footprints. If not, stay where you are and call for help – as advisory groups put it, 'better to spend a day stuck in a minefield than a lifetime as an amputee'.
- If someone is injured in a minefield do not rush in to assist even if they are crying out for help – find someone who knows how to safely enter a mined area.
- Do not leave the roadside in remote areas, even for the call of nature. Your limbs are more important than your modesty.

Since 1997 more than 150 countries have signed the Ottawa Convention banning the production, stockpiling, use and sale of land mines. Details are available from the **International Campaign to Ban Landmines** (ICBL; www.icbl.org), co-winner of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize.

ANLONG VENG

អង្គរវង់

For almost a decade this was the ultimate Khmer Rouge stronghold: home to Pol Pot, Nuon Chea, Khieu Samphan and Ta Mok, among the most notorious leaders of Democratic Kampuchea. Anlong Veng fell to government forces in April 1998 at the same time as Pol Pot died mysteriously nearby.

Soon after, Prime Minister Hun Sen ordered that NH67 be bulldozed through the jungle to ensure that the population didn't have second thoughts about ending the war.

Today Anlong Veng is a poor, dusty town with little going for it except the nearby Choam-Choam Srawngam border crossing, which takes you to a pretty isolated part of Thailand. The average visitor will find little to see or do here, but for those with a keen inter-

est in contemporary Cambodian history its Khmer Rouge sites are an important – if troubling and enigmatic – part of the picture.

Orientation & Information

Anlong Veng's focal point is the Dove of Peace Monument – a gift of Hun Sen – in the middle of a roundabout. From here, roads lead north to the Choam border crossing, east to Sa Em and Prasat Preah Vihear, and south to Siem Reap (along NH67).

There's nowhere to access the internet. Aceda Bank, the only bank in town, handles travellers cheques.

Sights & Activities

Most of Anlong Veng's sights are connected with the terrible Khmer Rouge years.

PILE OF RUBBLE

An **Angkorian temple** used to stand in the southeast corner of the yard behind Hun Sen Anlong Veng Primary School – formerly Ta Mok Primary School – but it was turned into a jumble of laterite and sandstone blocks by Ta Mok and his army in their search for ancient statues to sell to the Thais. The school is 600m east of the roundabout.

TA MOK'S HOUSE & GRAVE

To his former supporters, many of whom still reside around Anlong Veng, Ta Mok (Uncle Mok, AKA Brother Number Five) was harsh but fair, a benevolent builder of orphanages and schools, and a leader who kept order in stark contrast to the anarchic atmosphere that prevailed once the government took over. But to most Cambodians, Pol Pot's military enforcer, responsible for thousands of deaths in successive purges during the terrible years of Democratic Kampuchea, was best known as 'The Butcher'. Arrested in 1999, he died in July 2006 in a Phnom Penh hospital, awaiting trial for genocide and crimes against humanity.

Ta Mok's house (admission US\$2), on a peaceful lakeside site, is a Spartan structure with a bunker in the basement, five childish wall murals downstairs and three more murals upstairs, including a map and an idyllic wildlife scene. About the only furnishings that weren't looted are the **floor tiles** – on these very bits of ceramic, the men who killed 1.7 million Cambodians planned offensives, passed death sentences and joked with friends. The trees

around the house have been growing quietly since Khmer Rouge times, oblivious to the horrific events swirling around them.

The swampy lake was created on Ta Mok's orders but the water killed all the trees, their skeletons a fitting monument to the devastation he and his movement left behind. In the middle of the lake, due east from the house, is a small brick structure – an outhouse, all that remains of **Pol Pot's residence** in Anlong Veng.

To get to Ta Mok's house, head north from the Dove of Peace Roundabout for about 2km, turn right and continue 200m past the Tourism Information hut, whose posters promote local curiosities such as 'Ta Mok's mango field'. The admission price includes a tour with a knowledgeable English-speaking guide.

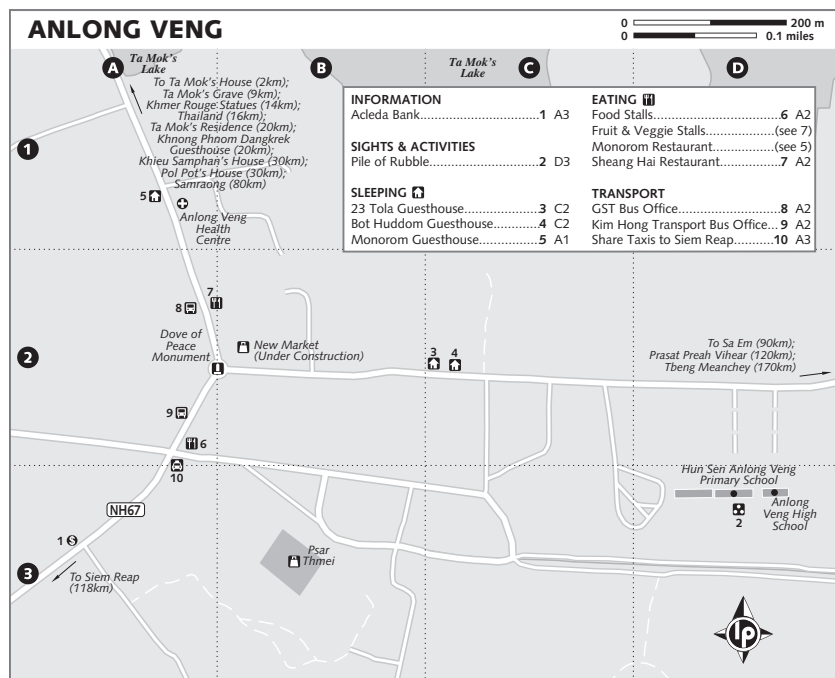
From the turnoff to Ta Mok's house, driving a further 7km north takes you to Tumnup Leu, where a right turn and 400m brings you to **Ta Mok's grave**. Situated next to a very modest pagoda and the concrete foundations of **Ta Mok's sawmill**, it is protected from the elements by a blue roof. The tomb has no name or inscription of any sort but this doesn't seem to bother the locals who stop by to light incense sticks – and, in a bizarre new local tradition, hope his ghost grants them a winning lottery number.

ALONG THE THAI FRONTIER

Further north, atop the escarpment of the Dangrek Mountains, are a number of other key Khmer Rouge sites, each marked with a light blue Ministry of Tourism sign. For years the world wondered where Pol Pot and his cronies were hiding out – the answer was right here, close enough to Thailand that they could flee across the border if government forces drew nigh.

About 2km before the frontier, where the road splits to go around a house-sized boulder, look out for a group of **statues** – hewn entirely from the surrounding rock by the Khmer Rouge – depicting a woman carrying bundles of bamboo sticks on her head and two uniformed Khmer Rouge soldiers, since decapitated by government forces. Now a macabre place of popular pilgrimage, local people come here to leave offerings of fruit and incense to honour the souls of dead Khmer Rouge soldiers.

At the pass (a few hundred metres before the frontier), turn right (east) next to a new, cream-coloured, three-storey building and then, after 50m, hang a left. In front of you,



under a rusted corrugated iron roof and surrounded by rows of partly buried glass bottles, is the **cremation site of Pol Pot**, who was hastily burned in 1998 on a pile of old tyres and rubbish – a fitting end, some say, given the suffering he inflicted on millions of Cambodians.

Bizarre as it may sound, Pol Pot is remembered with affection by some locals, and people sometimes stop by to light incense. According to neighbours, every last bone fragment has been snatched from the ashes by visitors in search of good luck charms – Pol Pot, too, is said to give out winning lottery numbers.

In 1997 Pol Pot ordered that former Khmer Rouge defence minister Son Sen – who was trying to reach a settlement with the government – and his family be murdered and their bodies run over by trucks. This incident led to Pol Pot's overthrow and arrest by Ta Mok, followed by his Khmer Rouge show trial (held near the cremation site) and his mysterious death, ostensibly because of a heart attack.

A few hundred metres north, next to a ramshackle **smugglers' market**, is the old

Choam–Choam Srawngam border crossing (for more information see p331). A bit to the west, right on the nicely paved main road, the Thais have built a spiffy new crossing, but the Cambodians say it's on Cambodian territory – yet another Thai land grab. So for now, with no end to the dispute in sight, the old facilities will have to do.

From the smugglers' market, a dirt road heads east between minefields, parallel to the escarpment. After about 4km you come to the overgrown brick walls and cement floor of another **Ta Mok residence**, shaded by mango, jackfruit and tamarind trees. Nearby is the cement shell of the Khmer Rouge's **radio station** and **Peuy Ta Mok** (Ta Mok's Cliff), where domestic tourists come to enjoy spectacular views of Cambodia's northern plains. Some stay at the six-room **Khngong Phnom Dankrek Guesthouse** (☎012 444067; r 30,000r), from which a path leads a few hundred metres east, through the cliffside jungle, to a **waterfall** (dry except in the west season). In late 2007, this area was being de-mined by the Halo Trust.

From here the road continues northeast past minefields, slash-and-burn homesteads

and some army bases where soldiers wearing bits and pieces of uniforms sometimes demand that tourists pay bribes. A half-hour *moto* ride takes you to **Khieu Samphan's house**, buried in the jungle on the bank of a stream, from where it's a few hundred metres along an overgrown road to **Pol Pot's house**. Both are marked by signs. Surrounded by a cinderblock wall, the jungle hideout of Brother Number One was comprehensively looted, though you can still see a low brick building whose courtyard hides an underground bunker. Many of the courtyard's tiles have been carted off, revealing the frozen-in-cement footprints of the trusted Khmer Rouge cadres who built the place.

Sleeping

Bot Huddom Guesthouse (Bot Uddom; ☎011 500507; r US\$5-15; Ⓜ) Owned by the family of the deputy governor, this establishment – 300m east of the roundabout – has 12 spacious, well-kept rooms with massive hardwood beds.

23 Tola Guesthouse (☎012 975104; r US\$6-15; Ⓜ) Built alongside the owners' family residence, this new place sports hallways tiled in Delft blue and 27 rooms with light-yellow walls.

Monorom Guesthouse (☎012 603339; r US\$7-15; Ⓜ) Anlong Veng's finest hostelry, with 20 big, modern rooms; some of the air-con rooms have hot water. Pay when you check in.

Eating

South of the roundabout there's a row of food stalls, some with pots you can peer into, others with blazing braziers barbecuing chicken, fish and eggs on skewers. There are **fruit and veggie stalls** (☎ 6am–about 6pm) around Sheang Hai Restaurant.

Sheang Hai Restaurant (☎012 786878; mains 5000-12,000r; ☎ 5.30am–9pm or 10pm) Named after the Chinese city of Shanghai (the owner's nickname), this all-wood, mess hall–like place serves Chinese and Khmer dishes, including fried rice and tom yam soup.

Monorom Restaurant (mains 8500r; ☎ 6am–9pm) Next to the Monorom Guesthouse, this brightly lit place is the town's fanciest eatery. If you order a beer, you get hot oily peanuts you can try to eat with chop sticks.

Getting There & Around

Anlong Veng is 118km north of Siem Reap (along NH67), 16km south of the Choam border crossing, 80km northeast of Samraong and 90km west of Sa Em.

Both **GST** (☎012 531490), whose office and bus stop is across from the Sheang Hai Restaurant, and **Kim Hong Transport** (☎012 306862), 70m south of the roundabout, have early morning buses to Siem Reap (15,000r, four hours). A share taxi to Siem Reap (US\$5, 2½ hours) is available a few hundred metres south of the roundabout; a private taxi is US\$30.

A *moto* to/from the Choam border crossing costs 8000r to 10,000r. At the border there aren't any taxi touts but officials should be able to summon a taxi for you.

Precious few vehicles, and no public transport, take the passable dirt road southwest to Samraong, though it's possible to get there by *moto* (US\$20, 1¾ hours) or private taxi (US\$40).

If you're heading east to Sa Em (the turn-off to Prasat Preah Vihear), the transport situation is as dire as the state of the dirt road, with through-traffic virtually nonexistent. A bum-bruising *moto* ride costs US\$20 (three hours) in the dry season, more during the rainy season. In the dry season, hiring a private taxi may be an option but expect to pay through the nose.

To get to Ta Mok's house, locals pay 1000r for a *moto* but foreigners are charged more. A *moto* circuit to the border costs US\$5 (US\$10 including a tour of Pol Pot's House).

PREAH VIHEAR PROVINCE

ខេត្តព្រះវិហារ

Bordering Thailand and Laos to the north, vast Preah Vihear Province – much of it heavily forested and extremely remote – remains desperately poor. This is in part because many areas were under Khmer Rouge control until 1998, and in part because of the catastrophic state of the infrastructure – there's not a single paved road in the entire province!

However, Preah Vihear is home to three of Cambodia's most impressive legacies of the Angkorian era. Prasat Preah Vihear, high atop the Dangrek Mountains escarpment, is truly stunning, though for now this temple is much easier to get to from Thailand than from the provincial capital, Tbeng Meanchey. The trip from the Cambodian side involves a tough

overland journey and, in the wet season, the distinct possibility of a night in the forest. The mighty Preah Khan isn't as far north but is reachable only in the dry season. Fortunately, there's good news regarding the 10th-century capital of Koh Ker, now an easy toll-road drive from Siem Reap (via Beng Mealea).

Hidden Cambodia (www.hidden-cambodia.com) operates dirt-bike tours to these temples during the dry season. For something more upmarket, try the temple safari offered by **Hanuman Tourism** (www.hanumantourism.com).

Getting There & Around

For now, travel around Preah Vihear is only for the most resilient of souls. The province's main transport artery, the north-south oriented NH64 from Kompong Thom to Tbeng Meanchey (157km), is in a truly miserable state. Consequently, most people with their own wheels get to Koh Ker and Tbeng Meanchey by taking the new toll road (10,000r for a car, free for motorbikes) from Dam Dek, on NH6 115km northwest of Kompong Thom and 35km southeast of Siem Reap. This road opened up previously inaccessible areas – some of them mined – to settlement and at many points you can see impoverished peasants setting up homesteads. The police in these parts carry AK-47s.

The morass of potholes and ruts linking Tbeng Meanchey with Choam Ksant and Sa Em (near Prasat Preah Vihear) to the north is passable for only half the year, and that's stretching the definition of passable.

Roadworks are underway – or promised – all over the province, including NH64 (thanks to a World Bank loan). By the time you read this the situation may have improved, though we all know what the road to hell is paved with.

PREAH KHAN

ព្រះខ្ពង់

Covering almost 5 sq km, **Preah Khan** (admission US\$5) is the largest temple enclosure constructed during the Angkorian period – quite a feat when you consider the competition. Thanks to its back-of-the-beyond location, the site is astonishingly quiet and peaceful.

Preah Khan's history is shrouded in mystery, but it was long an important religious site and some of the structures here date back to the 9th century. Both Suryavarman II, builder of Angkor Wat, and Jayavarman VII

lived here at various times during their lives, suggesting that Preah Khan was something of a second city in the Angkorian empire. Originally dedicated to Hindu deities, it was reconsecrated to Mahayana Buddhist worship during a monumental reconstruction undertaken by Jayavarman VII in the late 12th and early 13th centuries.

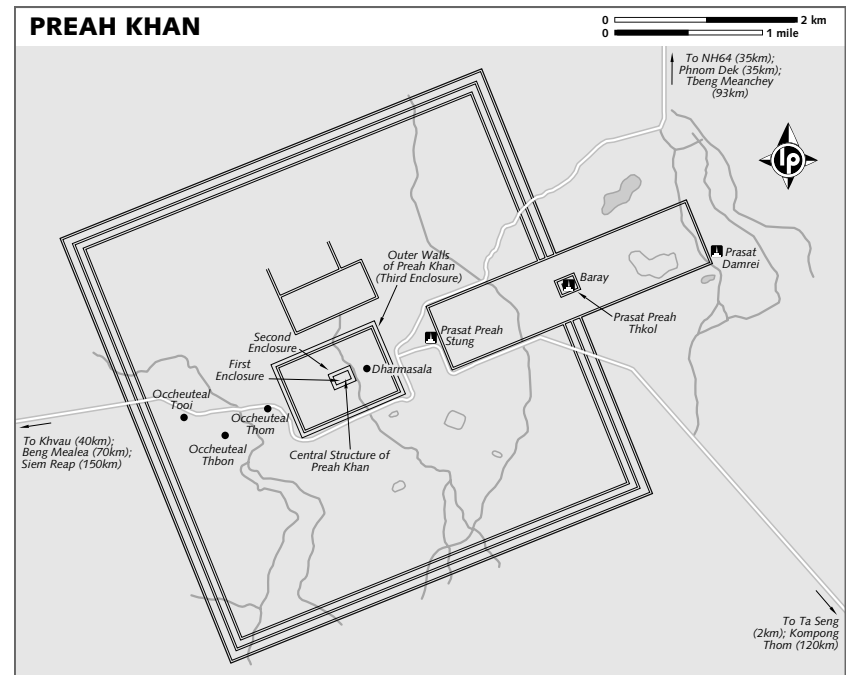
At the eastern end of the 3km-long *baray* (reservoir) is a small pyramid temple called **Prasat Damrei** (Elephant Temple). On the remaining entrance wall, there are several impressive carvings of *devadas* (goddesses). At the summit of the hill, two of the original exquisitely carved elephants can still be seen; two others are at Phnom Penh's National Museum (p84) and Paris' Musée Guimet.

In the centre of the *baray* is **Prasat Preah Thkol** (known by locals as Mebon), an island temple similar in style to the Western Mebon (p173) at Angkor. At the *baray*'s western end stands **Prasat Preah Stung** (known to locals as Prasat Muk Buon – Temple of the Four Faces), perhaps the most memorable of the structures here because its central tower is adorned with four enigmatic Bayon-style faces.

It is a further 400m southwest to the walls of Preah Khan itself, which are surrounded by a moat similar to the one around the walled city of Angkor Thom. Entering through the eastern *gopura* (entrance pavilion), there is a **dharmasala** (pilgrims' rest house). Much of this central area is overgrown by forest, giving it an abandoned feel, though local authorities are undertaking a clearing programme.

The central structure, which included libraries and a pond for ablutions, has been devastated by looting in recent years. As recently as the mid-1990s, it was thought to be in reasonable shape, but some time in the second half of the decade thieves arrived seeking buried statues under each *prang* (temple tower). Assaulted with pneumatic drills and mechanical diggers, the ancient temple never stood a chance and many of the towers simply collapsed in on themselves, leaving the depressing mess we see today. Once again, a temple that had survived so much couldn't stand the onslaught of the 20th century and its all-consuming appetites.

Among the carvings found at Preah Khan was the bust of Jayavarman now in Phnom Penh's National Museum and widely copied as a souvenir for tourists. The body of the statue was discovered a few years ago by locals



who alerted authorities, making it possible for a joyous reunion of head and body in 1999.

Locals say there are no land mines in the vicinity of Preah Khan, but stick to marked paths just to be on the safe side.

Sleeping & Eating

Getting the most out of a visit to Preah Khan really requires an overnight stay. With a hammock and mosquito net, it's possible to camp within the Preah Khan complex (coordinate your location with the tourist police, who will appreciate a small tip for keeping an eye on you), or you can stay in a private house (US\$3 per person, including a meal) in the nearby village of Ta Seng, where there's some electricity, a small restaurant and basic supplies.

Getting There & Away

Unless you enjoy travelling by ox cart, it is extremely difficult to get to Preah Khan between May and November. The best time to visit is from February to April, as the trails are reasonably dry then.

There's no public transport to Preah Khan, so your best bet is to hire a *moto* or

a pickup truck in Kompong Thom (120km, five hours), Phnom Dek (on NH64, 35km east of the temple along an execrable road) or Tbeng Meanchey (four or five hours). If you've got more cash, you might consider chartering a 4WD.

Only very experienced bikers should attempt to get to Preah Khan on rental motorcycles, as conditions are extremely tough from every side. Take a wrong turn in this neck of the woods and you'll end up in the middle of nowhere, so consider bringing along a knowledgeable *moto* driver (US\$15 a day plus petrol).

Coming from Siem Reap there are several options. By car, the easiest route may soon be to take a planned toll road heading due east from Beng Mealea. Until then, take NH6 to Stoeng and then head north. By motorcycle, you can take NH6 to Kompong Kdei, head north to Khvau and then ride 40km east on a miserable ox-cart track. An amazing, exhausting alternative is to approach from Beng Mealea along the ancient Angkor road (Cambodia's own Route 66 – NH66), which in places vanishes into a rough ox-cart track

to nowhere. You'll cross about 10 splendid Angkorian *naga* bridges, including the remarkable 77m-long **Spean Ta Ong**, 7km west of Khvau.

If hitting the road seems like just too much effort, head for the skies: charter a chopper from Siem Reap for the ultimate view (see p153).

KOH KER

ក្រុងក្រែក

Abandoned to the forests of the north, **Koh Ker** (admission US\$10), capital of the Angkorian empire from AD 928 to AD 944, was long one of Cambodia's most remote and inaccessible temple complexes. However, this has now changed thanks to recent de-mining and the opening of a new toll road from Dam Dek (via Beng Mealea) that puts Koh Ker (pronounced kah-*kei*) within day-trip distance of Siem Reap. But to really appreciate the temples – the area has 42 major structures in an area that measures 9km by 4km – it's necessary to spend the night.

Several of the most impressive pieces in the National Museum (p84) in Phnom Penh come from Koh Ker, including the huge *garuda* (mythical half-man, half-bird creature) that greets visitors in the entrance hall and a unique carving depicting a pair of wrestling monkey-kings.

Most visitors start at **Prasat Krahom** (Red Temple), the second-largest structure at Koh Ker, which is named for the red bricks from which it is constructed. Sadly, none of the carved lions for which this temple was once known remain, though there's still plenty to see – stone archways and galleries lean hither and thither and impressive stone carvings grace lintels, doorposts and slender window columns. A *naga*-flanked causeway and series of sanctuaries, libraries and gates lead past trees and vegetation-covered ponds. Just west of Prasat Krahom, at the far end of a half-fallen colonnade, are the remains of an impressive statue of Nandin.

The principal monument at Koh Ker is **Prasat Thom** (Prasat Kompeng), a 55m-wide, 40m-high sandstone-faced pyramid with seven tiers that's just west of Prasat Krahom. This striking structure, which looks like it could almost be a Mayan site somewhere on the Yucatan Peninsula, offers some spectacular views across the forest from its summit. Look out for the giant *garuda* under the collapsed

LAND MINE ALERT!

During the war, many of the Koh Ker temples were mined but by early 2008 most had been cleared – de-mining teams reported removing from the area a total of 1382 mines and 1,447,212 pieces of exploded and unexploded ordnance. However, considering what's at stake, it's best to err on the side of caution, so do not, under any circumstances, stray from previously trodden paths or wander off into the forest.

chamber at the top of the vertigo-inducing stairs. Some 40 inscriptions, dating from 932 to 1010, have been found at Prasat Thom.

South of this central group is a 1185m-by-548m *baray* (reservoir) known as the **Rahal**. It is fed by Stung Sen, which supplied water to irrigate the land in this arid area.

Some of the largest Shiva *linga* (phallic symbols) in Cambodia can still be seen in four temples about 1km northeast of Prasat Thom. The largest is in **Prasat Thneng**, and **Prasat Leung** (Prasat Balang) is similarly well endowed.

Other interesting temples: **Prasat Bram** (Prasat Pram), the first you come to after passing the toll booths (it'll be on your left), which is named in honour of its five towers, two of which are smothered by strangler figs; **Prasat Neang Khmau** (Prasat Nean Khmau), a bit further north and on your right, with some fine lintels decorating its otherwise bland exterior; and **Prasat Chen** (Prasat Chhin), about halfway from the toll booths to Prasat Krahom, where the statue of the wrestling monkeys was discovered.

Koh Ker is one of the least-studied temple areas from the Angkorian period. Louis Delaporte visited in 1880 during his extensive investigations into Angkorian temples. It was surveyed in 1921 by the great Henri Parmentier for an article in the *Bulletin de l'École d'Extrême Orient*, but no restoration work was ever undertaken here. Archaeological surveys were carried out by Cambodian teams in the 1950s and 1960s, but all records vanished during the destruction of the 1970s, helping to preserve this complex as something of an enigma.

Young people in dark khaki uniforms, members of the Apsara Authority's Community Heritage Patrol (www.autoriteapsara.org), keep an eye on the site, which is refreshingly clean and orderly. **Ox-cart tours** of the tem-

ples, lasting an hour-and-a-half, cost US\$12; proceeds go into a community development fund. For information on preservation and sustainable development plans for Koh Ker, visit www.heritagewatch.org.

Sleeping & Eating

If you bring a hammock and mosquito net, it's possible to sleep near Prasat Krahom – ask a police official for a good spot. There are a few **small eateries** (☺ morning-about 5pm) near Prasat Krahom. It should also be possible to find a homestay in the hamlet of Koh Ker, a few hundred metres north of the main pyramid.

Basic guesthouses can be found in the quiet, wood-built village of Srayong, which has electricity from 6pm to 10pm. To get there from the toll plaza, go 1km south and then 1km east. **Ponloeu Preah Chan Guesthouse** (☺12 489058; r US\$5), run by a friendly family, has 12 well-kept but small rooms – there's just enough space for a double bed – with wooden plank floors, walls and ceilings. Toilets and showers are out back, across a covered courtyard. One room has an en suite bathroom with a squat toilet.

Another option is **Kohke Guesthouse** (☺11 578258; r US\$4-5), a two-storey wood building on tall concrete stilts. As is usual in Khmer homes, the bedrooms are upstairs while the bathrooms are downstairs.

There are a few tiny eateries in the market area. Local families are happy to cook meals upon request.

Rumour has it that the two-storey building 200m south of the Koh Ker toll plaza will soon become a guesthouse.

Getting There & Away

Koh Ker is 127km northeast of Siem Reap (2½ hours by car) and 72km west of Tbeng Meanchey (two hours). There are plans to pave the toll road from Dam Dek to Koh Ker, which passes by Beng Mealea (p178), 61km southwest of Koh Ker; one-day bus excursions from Siem Reap often visit both temple complexes. Admission fees are paid at a brand new toll plaza 7km south of Prasat Krahom.

From Siem Reap, hiring a private car for a day trip to Koh Ker costs US\$60 to US\$70. It's a long way by *moto* (US\$15 to US\$20) but travelling this way is possible if you've got a hardy behind and steely nerves.

From Tbeng Meanchey, a private taxi costs US\$70 return, a *moto* US\$10. There may be

occasional pickups from Tbeng Meanchey to Kulen, 40km to the west, though to get from there to Srayong, 23km further west, locals tend to use motorbikes. A minibus from Tbeng Meanchey to Srayong may be in the works.

TBENG MEANCHEY

ត្បែងដីមាជ័យ

☺064 / pop 22,000

Tbeng Meanchey (pronounced tbai man-*chey*), often referred to by locals as Preah Vihear (not to be confused with Prasat Preah Vihear), is one of Cambodia's more out-of-the-way provincial capitals. Sprawling and dusty-red (or muddy-red, depending on the season), it has the grid layout of a large city but, in fact, consists of little more than two parallel main roads, running north to south, on which dogs lounge in the middle of the day. There's very little to see or do here, but the town makes a good staging post for the long haul to the mountaintop temple of Prasat Preah Vihear, 110 punishing kilometres further north.

Until 1999, because of Khmer Rouge activity, the only way in or out of Tbeng Meanchey was by air.

Orientation & Information

The centre of town, insofar as there is one, is around the taxi park and the market, Psar Kompong Pranak.

Aclea Bank (☺12 289851) The only place in the province that changes travellers cheques.

Danik Internet (☺092 476872; NH64; per hr US\$2)

The first internet café in the province, linked with the web by satellite.

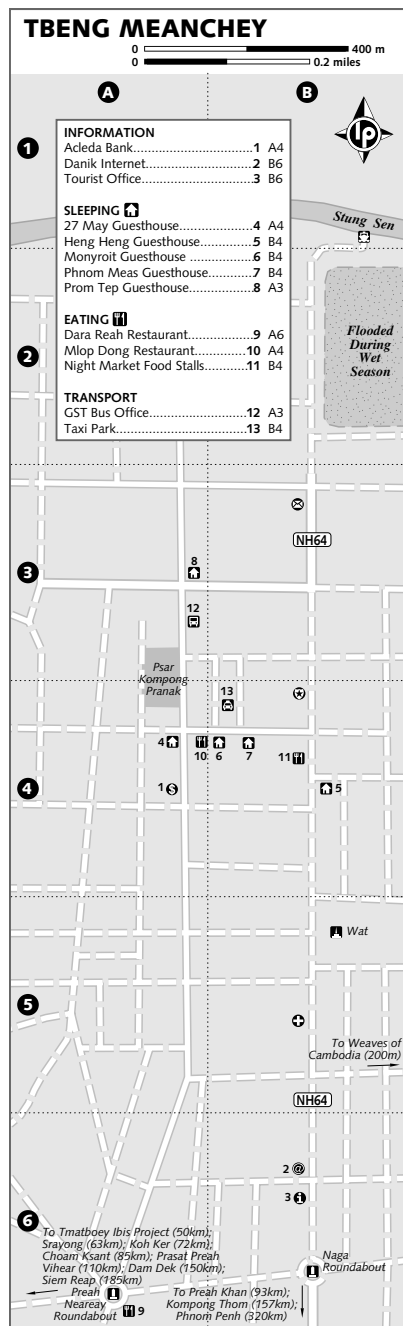
Tourist Office (NH64) Doesn't yet have much to offer tourists.

Sights

The **Weaves of Cambodia** (☺092 346415; www.villagefocus.org, www.joomnoon.com) silk-weaving centre, known locally as Chum Ka Mon, was established by the Vietnam Veterans of

LAND MINE ALERT!

Preah Vihear Province is one of the most heavily mined provinces in Cambodia. Do not, under any circumstances, stray from previously trodden paths. Those with their own transport should travel only on roads or trails regularly used by locals.



America Foundation (VAAF) to rehabilitate amputees injured by land mines. Its artisans – who are at their hand looms from 7am to 11am Monday to Saturday – produce fine silk scarves and sarongs for export to Australia, Japan and the USA. To get there from the hospital on NH64, head four blocks east and half-a-block south.

Sleeping

27 May Guesthouse (☎011 905472; r US\$5-15; ♿) The cheapies with shared bathroom (US\$3) are little more than cells but for US\$2 more you can bed down in the motel-like two-storey section.

Phnom Meas Guesthouse (☎012 632017; r US\$5-15; ♿) Near the taxi park and a number of cheapie guesthouses, this hotel-like establishment has 26 comfortable, mid-sized units with foam mattresses, tile floors, simple furnishings and squat toilets.

Prom Tep Guesthouse (☎012 964645; r US\$5-15; ♿) Large enough to be a hotel, this three-storey place – on a broad avenue that may one day be fashionable – has 28 big, impersonal rooms, all with cable TV and Western toilets, some with fridge.

Monyroit Guesthouse (☎012 789955; r US\$6-15; ♿) Opened in 2007, this three-storey place has 12 spacious rooms with lots of windows, high ceilings, solid wood beds and cold water. Good value.

Heng Heng Guesthouse (☎011 994055; NH64; r US\$7-15; ♿) Opened in late 2007, this enthusiastically run, nine-room place offers the best accommodation deal in town. An internet satellite link is planned.

Eating

Lots of cattle are raised in these parts, so beef is a tasty – if tough – dining option.

There are several small eateries around Psar Kompong Pranak and a row of night-market food stalls on NH64 just north of the Heng Heng Guesthouse, whose capacious restaurant serves tasty dishes.

Mlop Dong Restaurant (☎011 207451; mains 4000-8000r; ☎ 6am-9pm) This timber-shed eatery serves up the standard Khmer favourites, including fried veggies. Mornings are atmospheric as locals drop by for a quick noodle soup, while after dinner this is about the closest thing Tbeng Meanchey has to a pub.

Dara Reah Restaurant (mains 8000-12,000r; ☎ 7am-9pm) Popular with well-to-do locals, this large

garden restaurant has two airy pavilions and generous portions of good grub. Specialities include a sizzling plate of rather chewy sliced beef.

Getting There & Around

Tbeng Meanchey is 157km north of Kompong Thom via NH64, which is in such execrable condition that the trip takes at least five hours. The government has promised to upgrade – or at least grade – this artery in 2008, cutting travel time in half. In other directions, the city is 185km northeast of Siem Reap, 150km northeast of Dam Dek (three hours), 72km east of Koh Ker and 110km south of Prasat Preah Vihear.

GST (☎012 200128) sends one early morning bus a day to Kompong Thom (US\$5) and Phnom Penh (US\$8.75).

Share taxis, which leave from the taxi park, go to Kompong Thom (US\$9 or US\$10) and, much less frequently, to Choam Ksant (US\$9, three hours) and Prasat Preah Vihear (US\$10, 4½ hours). Private taxis can be hired to Siem Reap (US\$65 one-way), Kompong Thom (US\$60 one-way), Koh Ker (US\$70 return), Choam Ksant (US\$90 one-way or return) and Prasat Preah Vihear (US\$90 one-way or return).

For more information on getting to Prasat Preah Vihear and Koh Ker, see p269 and p265 respectively.

Tbeng Meanchey is so far off the tourist track that it's sometimes hard to find a *moto* driver.

TMATBOEY IBIS PROJECT

Cambodia's remote northern plains, the largest remaining block of deciduous dipterocarp forest, seasonal wetlands and grasslands in Southeast Asia, have been described as the region's answer to Africa's savannas. Covering much of northwestern Preah Vihear Province, they are one of the last places on earth where you can see Cambodia's national bird, the critically endangered **giant ibis** (nests from July to November).

In a last-ditch effort to ensure the survival of this majestic bird, protect the only confirmed breeding sites of the **white-shouldered ibis** (nests from December to March), and save the habitat of other globally endangered species, including the Sarus crane (breeds June to October) and greater adjutant, the **Wildlife Conservation Society** (www.wcs.org) has set up a pioneering community ecotourism

project. Situated in the isolated village of Tmatboey (Thmat Baeuy) in **Kulen Promtep Wildlife Sanctuary**, the initiative – a winner of Wild Asia's **2007 Responsible Tourism Award** (www.wildasia.net) – provides local villagers with education, income generated by work in the tourism sector, and a concrete incentive to do everything possible to protect the ibis. Visitors agree in advance to make a donation to a village conservation fund, but only if they actually see one or more of the birds. Other rare species that can be spotted here include the woolly-necked stork, white-rumped falcon, green peafowl, Alexandrine parakeet, grey-headed fish eagle and no less than 16 species of woodpecker, as well as owls and raptors. Birds are easiest to see from December to March.

Tmatboey is about four to five hours from Siem Reap (via Beng Mealea and Koh Ker) and one hour north of Tbeng Meanchey. The site is accessible year-round, though at the height of the wet season the only way to get there may be by *moto*. To arrange a tailor-made visit, which costs approximately US\$65 per person per night (including accommodation, guides and food), contact the Siem Reap-based **Sam Veasna Centre for Wildlife Conservation** (☎063 761597; www.samveasna.org). Visitors sleep in wooden bungalows with en suite bathrooms.

CHHEP VULTURE FEEDING STATION

In an effort to save the critically endangered white-rumped vulture and slender-billed vulture, the **Wildlife Conservation Society** (WCS; www.wcs.org) has set up a 'vulture restaurant' at Chhep, on the edge of the ultra-remote **Preah Vihear Protected Forest**. At the feeding station, with at least a week's advance coordination, visitors can observe these almost-extinct carrion-eaters dining on the carcass of a domestic cow – and, through fees, contribute to the project's funding.

The feeding station, accessible only in the dry season and even then only by 4WD, is about 45km northeast of Tbeng Meanchey (as the endangered crow flies) and 75km south-east of Choam Ksant along Rd 211. From Tbeng Meanchey, the trip takes about six bone-jarring hours. For details, contact the Siem Reap-based **Sam Veasna Centre for Wildlife Conservation** (☎063 761597; www.samveasna.org). Accommodation is at a forest camp maintained by the WCS.

CHOAM KSANT

ជាំក្សាន្ត

Choam Ksant, an overgrown village with an end-of-the-line feel, survives in part thanks to petty trade with Thailand via Anh Seh, 20km north in the Dangrek Mountains. The crossing is closed to foreigners and there's nothing of interest to see up there except some big views. Someday, though, the town may become a gateway to wild places further east, including temples such as the historically important (though heavily mined) **Prasat Neak Buos**, visitable by *moto* or bicycle in the dry season, and the remote **Preah Vihear Protected Forest**, which hugs the Laotian frontier near the so-called **Emerald Triangle** (the point where the Cambodian, Thai and Laotian borders meet).

As far as accommodation is concerned, the best of a sorry lot is **Sok San Guesthouse** (☎012 350187; r US\$3), across the street from the health centre. Sok San has about a dozen very basic, all-wood rooms with shared bathroom. There's electricity from 6pm to 10pm.

There are a few basic food stalls near the market, which is one block north of the Aceda Bank.

Road connections are open year-round west towards Prasat Preah Vihear (1½ hours) and Anlong Veng but are wretched south to Tbeng Meanchey (three hours by car), especially in the wet season, though only a few of the potholes are deeper than 50cm or larger than a car. In places, the road has been washed out and provisionally repaired with rows of rough logs.

PRASAT PREAH VIHEAR

ប្រាសាទព្រះវិហារ

The most dramatically situated of all the Angkorian monuments, 800m-long **Prasat Preah Vihear** (elevation 730m; admission 10,000r) perches high atop the south-facing cliff face of the Dangrek Mountains. The views are

LAND MINE ALERT!

Prasat Preah Vihear was the scene of heavy fighting as recently as 1998 and countless land mines were used by the Khmer Rouge to defend this strategic summit against government forces. In late 2007 mine clearance around the temple was continuing, so do not stray from marked paths – several locals have been killed or maimed in recent years.

breath-taking: lowland Cambodia, 550m below, stretching as far as the eye can see, with the holy mountain of Phnom Kulen (p177) looming in the distance.

Prasat Preah Vihear, an important place of pilgrimage during the Angkorian period, was built by a succession of seven Khmer monarchs, beginning with Yasovarman I (r 889–910) and ending with Suryavarman II (r 1112–1152), builder of Angkor Wat. Like other temple-mountains from this period, it was designed to represent Mt Meru and was dedicated to the Hindu deity Shiva.

Start a visit at the **monumental stairway**, if possible from the bottom (near the market and the crossing from Thailand). As you walk south, you come to four cruciform **gopuras** (sanctuaries), decorated with a profusion of exquisite carvings and separated by esplanades up to 350m long. At the entrance to the **Gopura of the Third Level**, look for an early rendition of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, a theme later depicted awesomely at Angkor Wat. The **Central Sanctuary** and its associated structures and galleries, in a remarkably good state of repair, are right at the edge of the cliff, which affords **stupendous views** of Cambodia's northern plains – this is a fantastic spot for a picnic.

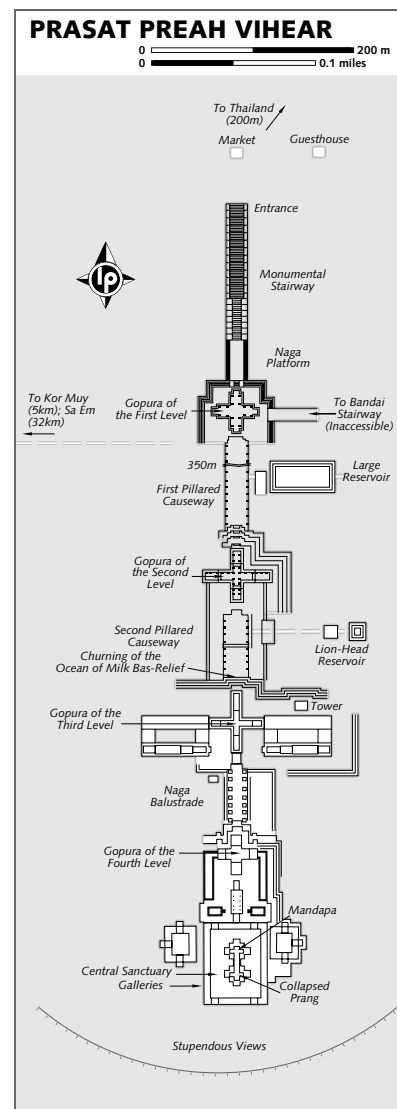
For more on the carvings of Prasat Preah Vihear and the temple's history, look out for market vendors selling *Preah Vihear* by Vittorio Roveda, a readable souvenir book accompanied by some attractive photographs.

Sleeping & Eating

The only way to enjoy both a spectacular sunset and a magnificent sunrise from atop Prasat Preah Vihear is to stay at the very basic **guesthouse** (☎012 472846; r US\$5) in the southeast corner of the border market, situated at the bottom of the monumental stairway. The eight all-wood rooms have glassless windows, shared bathrooms and electricity from 6pm to 10pm. The market has several food stalls.

Kor Muy, the village at the base of the hill, has two rudimentary guesthouses. **Ponleu Pech Mean Lap Guesthouse** (☎012 472795; r US\$3) is an all-wood building whose bathroom is at the end of a long hallway. The 20 2½m-by-2½m cubicles come with mosquito nets. The 10-room **Raksaleap Guesthouse** (☎092 224838) is a bit more comfortable.

The options in the gritty junction hamlet of Sa Em, a half-hour south of Kor Muy,



are hardly better. The second house north of the roundabout – a signless, two-storey grey building – serves as an eight-room **guesthouse** (☎012 435763; r US\$3). The grim bathroom is out in the trash-strewn back yard. Across the roundabout, the tin-roofed **Phoum Sra Em Restaurant** caters to truckers – or you can eat at the guesthouse with the family.

GOOD INTENTIONS

As we go to press, Chinese surveyors and engineers are working to upgrade the road from Koh Ker to Prasat Preah Vihear, a project that – if and when it's completed – will revolutionise access to the temple.

Getting There & Away

The easy way to get to Prasat Preah Vihear – known as Khao Phra Wiharn (Sacred Monastery) to the Thais – is from Thailand, as there are paved roads right up to the Cambodian border market and the adjacent monumental stairway. Anyone coming this way will no doubt be armed with a copy of *Lonely Planet Thailand*, which supplies all the details on getting here via the town of Kantharalak.

Note that Prasat Preah Vihear is not an international border crossing – visitors enter Cambodia without a visa and must return to Thailand by 5pm the same day. Tourist visas for onward travel into Cambodia are *not* available here. It costs US\$10 to visit from the Thai side – US\$5 goes to the Thais for visiting the 'national park' and US\$5/200B goes to the Khmers as the temple fee.

Since the border-crossing agreement is reciprocal, tourists coming from the Cambodian side can go a few hundred metres into Thailand to shop at the border market. Cambodian authorities charge 10B to cross.

Getting to Prasat Preah Vihear from the Cambodian side is a unique and challenging adventure. It can generally be done only between mid-November and May because in the wet season many of the roads in this part of the country are impassable. When you finally reach the temple, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you've completed a modern-day pilgrimage almost the equal of any undertaken at the height of the Angkorian empire. On the downside, you'll have to deal with the disheartening sight of hundreds of Thai-side tourists who have zipped up to the temple in air-conditioned coaches along a sealed superhighway – they'll never know what you've been through.

From Tbeng Meanchey, 110km to the south, you can either take a share taxi (US\$10, 4½ hours) or hire a private taxi (US\$90 one-way or return). Often share taxis and pickups only go as far as Sa Em (Sra Em), 27km south

NEIGHBOURLY RELATIONS

For generations, Prasat Preah Vihear has been a source of tension between Cambodia and Thailand. This area was ruled by Thailand for several centuries but retroceded to Cambodia during the French protectorate, under the treaty of 1907. In 1959 the Thai military seized the temple from Cambodia and then-Prime Minister Sihanouk took the dispute to the International Court, gaining worldwide recognition for Cambodian sovereignty in a 1962 ruling.

The next time Prasat Preah Vihear made international news was in 1979, when the Thai military pushed more than 40,000 Cambodian refugees across the border in what was then the worst case of forced repatriation in UN history. The area was mined and many refugees died from injuries, starvation and disease before the occupying Vietnamese army could cut a safe passage and escort them on the long walk south to Kompong Thom.

Prasat Preah Vihear hit the headlines again in May 1998 because the Khmer Rouge regrouped here after the fall of Anlong Veng and staged a last stand that soon turned into a final surrender.

With peace came an agreement between the Cambodians and Thais to open the temple to tourism. The Thais built a huge road up the mountain and began work along the ill-defined border. Today, a large visitors centre and car park stand on what was – not so long ago – Cambodian land.

of Prasat Preah Vihear, from which it's a 30-minute *moto* ride (3000r) along a remarkably good dirt road to Kor Muy (Koh Muy) at the base of the escarpment. From there you have two options: hire a *moto* (US\$5 return) for a hair-raising, 20-minute ride up gradients of up to 35%; or take a 5km, two-hour walk up the same steep road (bring plenty of water).

For onward transport, you can try to score a ride at Kor Muy, but you'll probably have better luck in the junction village of Sa Em. Arriving at the roundabout from the temple, the road to the right goes west to Anlong Veng while the road to the left goes southeast to Chom Ksant and Tbeng Meanchey. Only to Tbeng Meanchey is there anything resembling regular traffic, including the occasional share taxi. Virtually no vehicles head west to Anlong Veng – from which there's transport south to Siem Reap – so your only option may be to hire a *moto* (US\$20). See p261 for details.

To get a bird's-eye view of the temple – and arrive in style – take a helicopter from Siem Reap. For more information, see p153.

KOMPONG THOM PROVINCE

ខេត្តកំពង់ធំ

Kompong Thom, Cambodia's second-largest province, is starting to draw more visitors thanks to the pre-Angkorian temples of Sambor Prei Kuk, an easy day trip from

the town of Kompong Thom, and the bird-rich marshes and grasslands around Tonlé Sap Lake. The province's most noteworthy geographical feature is Stung Sen, a serpentine river that eventually joins the Tonlé Sap River.

Kompong Thom came under US bombardment in the early 1970s in an effort to reopen the Phnom Penh–Siem Reap road severed by the Khmer Rouge.

Almost all the sights in Kompong Thom Province are along NH6, or accessible via local roads that intersect NH6.

KOMPONG THOM

កំពង់ធំ

☎062 / pop 66,000

A bustling commercial centre, Kompong Thom is situated on NH6 midway between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. It's an ideal

SEARCH FOR THE BENGAL FLORICAN

The northeastern shores of Tonlé Sap Lake are home to scores of bird species, some of them – such as the Bengal florican – endangered. Sites in Kompong Thom Province that are gaining popularity with twitchers include the **Stoeng Chikrieng grasslands** and the **Boeng Tonlé Chmar Ramsar Area**, both straddling the border between Kompong Thom Province and Siem Reap Province, and the **Kru Krom grasslands**, 25km due south of Kompong Thom town.

base from which to explore the pre-Angkorian Chenla capital of Sambor Prei Kuk.

Parallel to the **old French bridge** over Stung Sen, the **new steel bridge**, opened in 1997, was built with Australian assistance. That's why it's decorated with hopping kangaroos at each end.

Information

Aceda Bank (NH6) An ATM is said to be coming.

Department of Tourism (Prachea Thepatay St; ☎ 8-11am & 2-5pm) Upstairs in an old wooden building. May have handouts.

Internet pharmacy (NH6; per hr 3000-4000r; ☎ 6am-8pm) Internet access one block north of the market.

Po Sothea Internet (cnr NH6 & St 5; per hr 4000r; ☎ 7am-9pm) A pharmacy with two computers.

Sleeping

There are bargain basement guesthouses on Dekchau Meas St, but some make more money as brothels and are opposite the taxi park, which means early morning horn action.

Mittapheap Hotel (☎/fax 961213; NH6; r US\$5-10; 🏠) In a neat yellow building just north of the bridge, this smart hotel has 23 comfortable rooms at the right price.

Arunras Hotel (☎/fax 961294; 46 Sereipeap Blvd; r US\$5-13; 🏠) Occupying a seven-storey corner building, this place – with Kompong Thom's only elevator – has 58 smart, good-value rooms. It also runs the cheaper Arunras Guesthouse next door, where fan/air-con rooms start at US\$3/8.

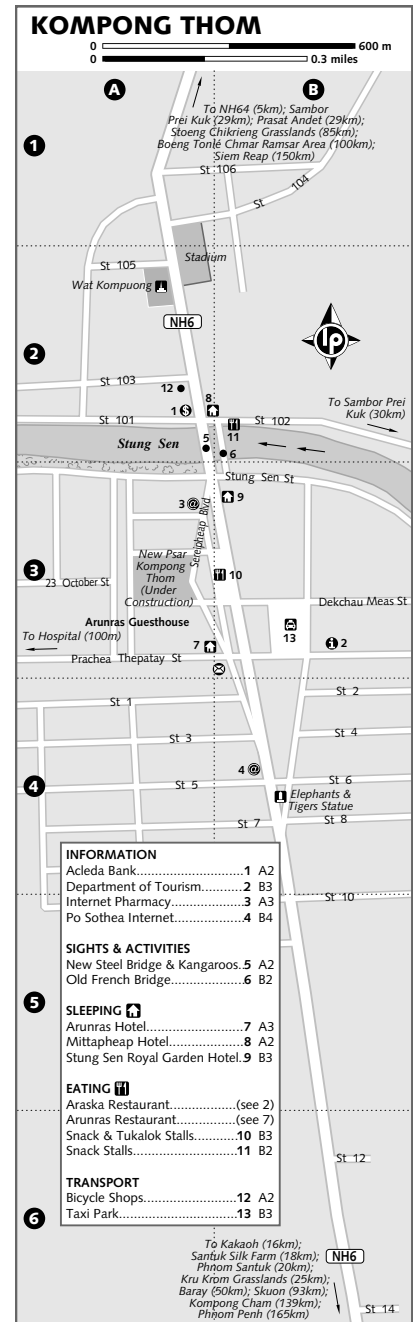
Stung Sen Royal Garden Hotel (☎/fax 961228; Stung Sen St; d/tr US\$20/30; 🏠) Not as plush as the name implies but still comfortable, though showing its age. This place has 32 rooms, some of them huge.

Eating

There are plenty of snack stalls and *tukalok* vendors just north of the river and around the new market, which is supposed to open sometime in 2008.

Araska Restaurant (☎092 289238; mains 5000-12,000r) Run by a Finnish-Khmer couple, this new establishment serves tasty Khmer dishes and good shakes but is best known for its hearty Western fare, including breakfasts, pizza, pasta, hamburgers and veggie options.

Arunras Restaurant (☎012 187107; 46 Sereipeap Blvd; mains US\$1.50-4; ☎ 6am-11pm) Popular with people passing through and has a wide range



SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOODS

Cooperation for the Development of Cambodia (CDC; ☎012 481924; codeckt@yahoo.com), a Kompong Thom-based NGO that works to help the rural poor increase their incomes in a sustainable way, is looking for volunteers who can spend at least two months here.

of Cambodian, Chinese and veggie dishes. Don't expect solicitous service.

Getting There & Around

Kompong Thom is on NH6 165km north of Phnom Penh and 150km southeast of Siem Reap.

Bus companies running between Phnom Penh (14,000r, four hours) and Siem Reap often drop off and pick up passengers when passing through. The Arunras Hotel sells tickets – lots of buses stop out front – but they take a commission, so it's cheaper to flag a bus down yourself and pay on board. Share taxis, which leave from the taxi park, are faster and cost US\$4 or US\$5 to either Phnom Penh (2½ hours) or Siem Reap. Minibuses are slightly cheaper but more crowded.

Heading north to Tbeng Meanchey (often referred to as Preah Vihear by locals) along the atrocious NH64, pickups (15,000/10,000r inside/on the back, six hours) are the most common form of transport, but share taxis also do occasional runs (20,000r to 30,000r). Both can be found at the taxi park. For more on the unholy road conditions, see p267.

The Araska Restaurant rents bicycles and motorbikes. It may also be possible to rent a bicycle at one of the bike shops on St 103.

AROUND KOMPONG THOM

Sambor Prei Kuk

សំបួរព្រៃគុក

Sambor Prei Kuk (admission US\$3), Cambodia's most impressive group of pre-Angkorian monuments, encompasses more than 100 mainly brick temples scattered through the forest, among them some of the oldest structures in the country. Originally called Isanapura, Sambor Prei Kuk was the capital of Chenla during the reign of the early-7th-century King Isanavarmān and continued to be an important learning centre during the Angkorian era.

The main temple area consists of three complexes, each enclosed by the remains of two concentric walls. Their basic layout – a central tower surrounded by shrines, ponds and gates – may have served as an inspiration for the architects of Angkor five centuries later.

Forested and shady, Sambor Prei Kuk has a serene and soothing atmosphere, enhanced by a recent anti-litter campaign, and the sandy paths make for a pleasant stroll. Past the ticket booth, the **Isanborei Crafts Shop** sells a worthwhile English brochure (2000r), high-quality, hand-crafted basket and wood items, and T-shirts with original designs. Nearby, **small eateries** sell drinks and chicken or beef with rice.

The principle temple group, **Prasat Sambor**, is dedicated to Gambhiresvara, one of Shiva's many incarnations (the other groups are dedicated to Shiva himself). Several of Prasat Sambor's towers retain brick carvings in pretty good condition, and there is a series of large *yonis* (female fertility symbols) around the central tower that appear to date from a later period, demonstrating the continuity between pre-Angkorian and Angkorian culture.

Prasat Yeay Peau (Prasat Yeai Poeun) is arguably the most atmospheric complex, as it feels lost in the forest. The eastern gateway is being both held up and torn asunder by an ancient tree, the bricks interwoven with the tree's extensive, probing roots. A truly massive tree shades the western gate.

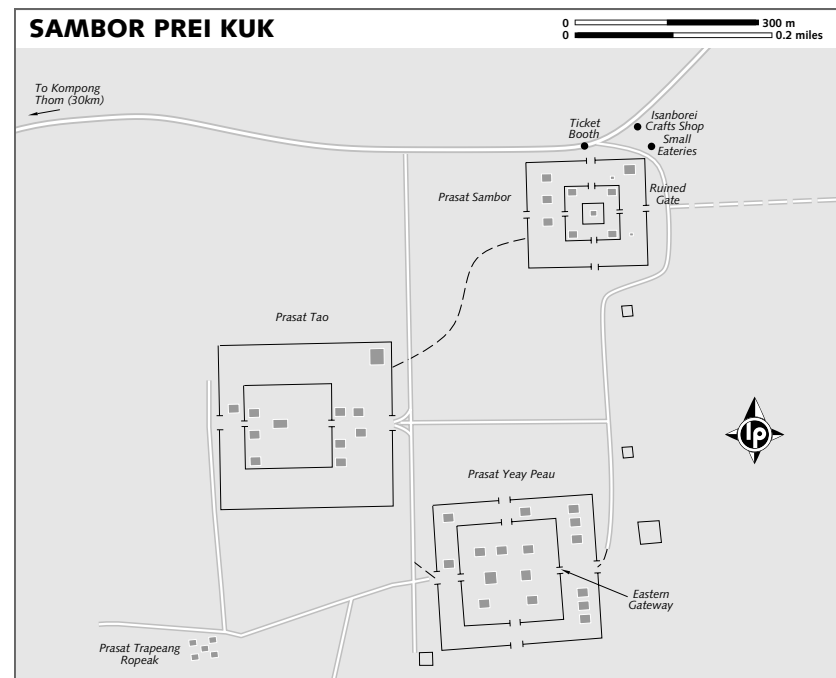
Prasat Tao (Lion Temple), the largest of the Sambor Prei Kuk structures, boasts two excellent examples of Chenla carving in the form of two large, elaborately coiffed stone lions.

In the early 1970s, Sambor Prei Kuk was bombed by US aircraft in support of the Lon Nol government's doomed fight against the Khmer Rouge. Some of the craters can still be seen.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

If you're interested in the chronological evolution of Cambodian temple architecture, you might want to see Sambor Prei Kuk before heading to Angkor.

To get here from Kompong Thom, follow NH6 north for 5km before continuing straight on NH64 towards Tbeng Meanchey (the paved road to Siem Reap veers left). After 11km (look for an elaborate laterite sign) turn right and continue for 14km. Another option is to head east out of Kompong Thom on



St 102 – some *moto* drivers prefer this quiet, circuitous route through the countryside.

From Kompong Thom, a *moto* ride out here (under an hour) should cost US\$7 or US\$8 (US\$10 including Phnom Santuk). By car the trip takes about an hour.

Prasat Andet

ប្រាសាទអង្គរព្រៃគុក

Dating from the same period as Sambor Prei Kuk (7th century), this small, ruined brick temple is set amid the grounds of a modern wat. Prasat Andet would have been the focal point of an important commercial centre trading on the Tonlé Sap, and some researchers believe it continued to play such a role during the time of Angkor. Today, very little remains and it is only worth a visit for dedicated temple-trackers with time on their hands. It is 29km northwest of Kompong Thom and about 2km south of NH6.

Phnom Santuk

ភ្នំសំបួរគុក

Phnom Santuk (Phnom Sontuk; 207m), its flanks decorated with Buddha images and

a series of pagodas, is the most important holy mountain in this region and a site of Buddhist pilgrimage. It's attractively set high above the surrounding countryside, which means there are lots of stairs to climb – 809, in fact. These wind their way up through a forest and emerge at a colourful **pagoda** that has many small shrines quite unlike others around Cambodia. Balanced around the wat are a number of interesting sandstone boulders into which images of Buddha have been carved. Just beneath the southern summit of the mountain are several large **reclining Buddhas** – some modern incarnations cast in cement, others carved into the mountain itself centuries ago.

Phnom Santuk has an active wat and the local monks are always interested in receiving foreign tourists. For travellers spending the night in Kompong Thom, Phnom Santuk is a good place from which to catch a magnificent sunset over the rice fields, though this means coming down in the dark.

The parking fee, which is clearly not being spent on litter pickup, depends on who's collecting it and who you are. Khmer

motorbike/taxi drivers generally pay 500r/2000r; foreigners are hit up for more. There are food stalls and lots of beggars around the car park.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The 2km dirt road to Phnom Santuk intersects NH6 18km towards Phnom Penh from Kompong Thom; look for a sign reading 'Santuk Mountain Site'. From Kompong Thom, a round trip by *moto* costs US\$4 to US\$5, depending on wait time.

Those with trail bikes and a healthy dose of experience can ride up the hill by following the trail to the left of the stairs and veering right when the trail goes up what looks like a rocky dried-out streambed.

Stone Masons of Kakaoh

The village of Kakaoh, along NH6 16km towards Phnom Penh from Kompong Thom (about 2km northwest of the turn-off to Phnom Santuk), is famous for its stone-masons, who fashion Buddha statues, decorative lions and the like with hand tools and a practised eye. It's fascinating to watch the creation of these works, which range in height from 15cm to over 5m. A 2.5m-high Buddha carved from a single block of stone will set you back about US\$2000, not including airline overweight fees.

Santuk Silk Farm

Situated on the other side of NH6 from the access road to Phnom Santuk, the **Santuk Silk Farm** (☎012 906604; budgibb@yahoo.com; admission free) is one of the few places where you can see the entire silk production cycle, starting with the seven-week lifecycle of the silkworm, a delicate creature that feeds only on mulberry leaves and has to be protected from predators such as geckos, ants and mosquitos. Although most of the raw silk used here comes from China and Vietnam, the local worms produce 'Khmer golden silk', so-called because of its lush golden hue. You can watch local artisans

weaving scarfs (US\$15 to US\$25) and other items by hand from 7am to 11am and 1pm to 5pm Monday to Saturday.

The farm is run by Budd Gibbons, an American Vietnam War veteran who's lived in Cambodia since the mid-1990s, and his Cambodian wife. To arrange a visit, call the day – or at least a few hours – before, if possible.

Prasat Kuha Nokor

ព្រះវិហារគុហាណុករ

This 11th-century temple, constructed during the reign of Suryavarman I, is in extremely good condition thanks to a lengthy renovation before the civil war. It is set in the grounds of a modern wat and is an easy enough stop for those with their own transport. From Phnom Penh, the journey takes about two hours, from Kompong Thom about an hour. The temple is signposted from NH6 about 22km north of Skuon and is 2km from the main road. From NH6, you can get a *moto* (US\$2 to US\$3 return) to the temple.

Baray

Khmer Village Homestay (☎092 776067; www.khmerhomestay.com; per person for 1/2 days US\$20/35), an operation that ploughs its profits back into the local community, lets you experience a slice of traditional Khmer village life while enjoying modern toilet and shower facilities. Surrounded by rice fields and sugar palms, guests stay in bamboo, palm leaf or wood chalets and can explore the environs by pony cart and ox cart, meet village families, help the local fishers catch dinner and even have a go at weaving. Prices include activities and full board; breakfast options include noodles at the local market.

The homestay is in Baray, on NH6 about 120km north of Phnom Penh and 50km southeast of Kompong Thom. All the buses and share taxis linking Phnom Penh (two hours) with Siem Reap (195km; three hours) pass by here.

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