

Cambodia



Drop your jaw at the sight of Angkor, a 12th-century wonder of monumental splendour; it will leave you awestruck and wanting more. Cross the ancient bridges and through the depths of jungle and *more* is what you'll discover; a land strewn with temples engulfed by nature, you'll feel like an explorer in a lucid dream.

Welcome to Cambodia! A heart-shaped country nurtured by the Mekong, it once ruled the delta as a mighty empire. A lost civilisation, cloaked in legends and myths, it has re-emerged as a hot destination on the Asian trail.

Cambodia's landscape is a scenic timeline of erratic history; from the vestiges of mysterious god-kings and the colonial imprints left by the imperialist French, its past spans across never-ending rice plains and small town villages, over mighty rivers and exotic wildlife, past palm trees and tropical beaches to reach the energised cities of present-day mayhem.

A land of contrasts, this is where the islands are deserted but the cities heave, where mountains project from emerald forests but secrets lurk underground. Where hill tribes ride elephants to pounding waterfalls and where everybody is happy to simply be alive. Not surprising given that life was so cruelly stripped away in the 1970s by the despotic Khmer Rouge.

Today the Khmers – with their unbreakable spirit and infectious optimism – are finally clambering back; over the ruins of their temples and the sands of their beaches, they are resurrecting an enigmatic nation: Cambodia, the comeback kid of the new century.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Fall under the spell of the mighty Angkor at the mind-blowing structures of divine spirituality: the **Temples of Angkor** (p208), a heroic feat of ancient civilisation
- Take a tuk-tuk through the chaotic capital and wrap your head around the progressive cacophony that is **Phnom Penh** (p188)
- Plunge into the enormous rock pools hidden by a barrage of giant bamboo before gunning through the mangrove forests at sunset at **Koh Kong** (p247)
- Run for the hills in Cambodia's northeast and steer elephants to cascading waterfalls; drink with the indigenous hill tribes and explore their sacred and primitive burial sites as the sun climbs over pristine forests at **Mondulkiri** (p236) and **Ratanakiri** (p233)
- Make like an Angkor Beer on ice and chill on the beaches of **Sihanoukville** (p238); cruise to neighbouring islands for secluded castaway action and cook fresh fish on the bonfire



HISTORY

Scholars argue about the origin of the Khmers, with some claiming they are a hybrid of migrants from China and India, others that they were travellers who settled from the islands from Southeast Asia (today's Malaysia and Indonesia). Discovery of bones in the eastern parts of Cambodia dating from 1500 BC show a resemblance between prehistoric humans and the Khmers of today.

The Early Years

The first Khmer kingdom arose in the 1st century in what is known as the Funan era. The Funan empire was highly influenced by the culture of India and was a sophisticated civilisation of literacy and arts. Indian traders and scholars had reached Cambodia as early as 100 BC and brought with them Sanskrit, Hinduism and Buddhism. The Khmers adopted this process of Indianisation wholeheartedly and between the 1st and the 6th centuries all royal records were kept in Sanskrit and the deities Shiva and Vishnu were most revered.

The word Funan itself is Chinese, though scholars believe it is derived from the ancient Khmer word *phnom*, meaning mountain.

The Funan empire is believed to have been centred around modern-day Ba Phnom (p228) and northern Vietnam near the Mekong Delta. It is largely considered by academics that Funan was not a united kingdom, but one of many factions which often warred against one another but came to present a unified state when offering tributary goods to the Chinese emperor in order to encourage trade.

Around the 6th century, the mighty Funan declined and in its place rose Chenla. Previously a vassal state to Funan, Chenla achieved independence, grew in power and then conquered the Funan empire. It was to reign supreme until AD 802. Once more this was not a unified kingdom; surviving inscriptions in Sanskrit indicate that there were a number of small kingdoms in Cambodia during this time.

Chinese records describe a Water Chenla and a Land Chenla. Water Chenla is placed around the south of the Mekong River and Land Chenla northeast of Tonlé Sap river.

Rise & Fall of Angkor

In 802 King Jayavarman II gained the throne and declared himself *devaraja* (god-king). In

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 181,035 sq km
- **Capital** Phnom Penh
- **Country Code** ☎ 855
- **Population** 14.071 million
- **Money** US\$1 = 4075r (riel)
- **Seasons** wet May-Oct, dry Nov-Apr
- **Phrases** *sua s'dei* (hello), *lia suhn hao-y* (goodbye), *aw kohn* (thank you)

this he began a long line of god-kings spanning centuries and created the kind of devotion that befits a deity.

In the 9th century King Yasovarman I moved the capital to Angkor and a new centre for scholarship, worship and arts emerged. From here on, generations of kings waged wars, alternating between defeat and triumph until, under the rule of King Suryavarman II, Kambuja (as it was then known) grew to encompass Champa (now central Vietnam), Annam (now northern Vietnam) and Siam (now Thailand). In 1130, King Suryavarman II built the temple of Angkor to honour the Hindu god Vishnu.

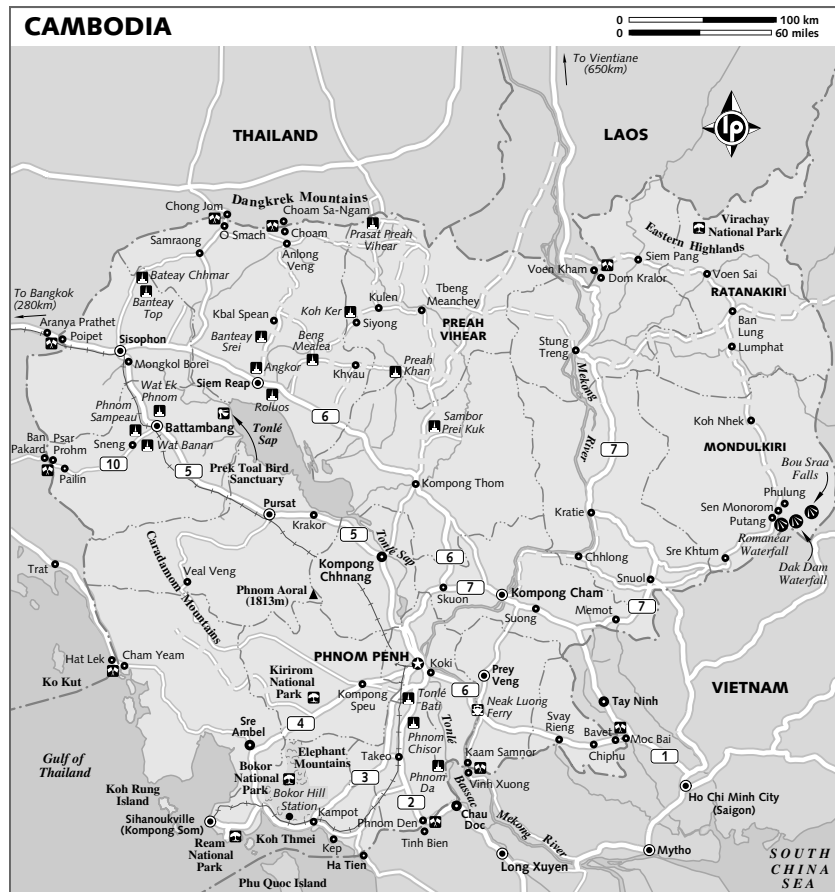
In 1177, rebellious Chams from Vietnam sacked Angkor and it was not restored to Khmer power until Jayavarman VII, who became the kingdom's most prolific builder and is responsible for many of the archaeological treasures known today. After Jayavarman VII, the kingdom steadily declined. In 1432, the Siam kingdom gained power and captured Angkor, and the Khmers packed up and headed towards Phnom Penh.

The succession of feeble monarchs that followed further weakened Cambodia, until eventually it became a puppet state bowing to its now more powerful neighbours, Siam and Vietnam.

Enter the French

The French arrived in Southeast Asia in 1858, ready to conquer. They set up base in Saigon before setting their sights on Cambodia.

At this time, King Norodom requested French aid against the Siamese and they agreed, forcing him to sign a treaty that made Cambodia a French protectorate. He should have known that nothing came for free, and in 1884 under the threat of cannon fire, was



'persuaded' to sign another treaty, turning Cambodia into a French colony.

Years of bitter resentment and uprising against French rule followed; Cambodia felt betrayed when after signing the protectorate, the French honoured Siam with their claim for Siem Reap and Battambang.

In 1953, King Norodom's successor, King Norodom Sihanouk, exited his country and demanded the French leave or he would remain in exile. Embarrassed by the international publicity, the French finally withdrew.

Independence

With pressure from the people for an independently elected head of state rather than an

absolute rule by monarchy, King Norodom Sihanouk took the genius step of denouncing the throne and formed his own political party. He handed the crown over to his father King Norodom Surmarit and was elected as the new prime minister. When his father died he also became head of state, thus becoming Cambodia's all-powerful one-man political road show.

King Norodom Sihanouk declared Cambodia neutral to international quarrels, but his friendly relations with communist China sparked anger with the US, which at the time was fighting the communist North Vietnamese. Meanwhile, trouble was brewing with the uprising of a US supporter, General Lon Nol, who in 1970 overthrew King Norodom with his party, Khmer Republic.

With the support of the new Lon Nol government, the USA bombarded the Cambodian countryside with bombs in an effort to flush out the Viet Cong. This did not go down well with the countryside dwellers and a bitter army grew. This peasant army, called upon by King Norodom Sihanouk himself to rise and fight against Lon Nol, was gaining in power with one man in particular at the helm. King Sihanouk nicknamed the army the Khmer Rouge, and that man was Pol Pot.

Khmer Rouge Takeover

In April 1975, screaming soldiers armed with AK47s entered government buildings, offices and homes in Phnom Penh and ordered everybody out. They then marched them in a mass exodus to the countryside, where for the next four years they were forced into slave labour to meet Pol Pot's revolutionary dream.

Pol Pot had devised a plan of turning the country into an agrarian utopia through an ultra-Maoist regime. He scratched the calendar and began at year zero. The name of the country under his fanatical rule became the Democratic Kampuchea, viciously ironic.

The poor, uneducated and easily moulded peasants of Cambodia became the 'old people' and their deeply despised city counterparts, the 'new people'. Under this regime, the new people had absolutely no human rights.

Literacy, arts, music and religion were all abolished. Any person deemed educated was instantly executed. It is believed that 1.7 million people died during this time. Families were separated and those who survived were either subjected to starvation and torture or escaped.

On 25 December 1978 the Vietnamese invaded. On 7 January 1979 the Khmer Rouge fell and Pol Pot escaped.

A Sort of Peace

It was not over yet for the people of Cambodia, for those who had survived the blood-soaked regime were now faced with a severe famine. In 1979 and 1980, it is estimated that as many as 625,000 more people died from starvation.

In 1989 Vietnam withdrew all of its troops from Cambodia. In the years that followed a scrabble board of political acronyms formed;

CPP ruled by the current-day prime minister, Hun Sen; Funcinpec led by King Norodom Sihanouk's son, Prince Ranariddh; BLDP, directed by former Lon Nol general, Sak Sutsakhan (just to name a few); and the guerrilla Khmer Rouge who were still controlling the north and west of Cambodia. All were vying for control and fighting for political power. This created even more instability and the UN finally stepped in to help after an agreement was signed in Paris for all parties to participate in free elections supervised by the UN.

In 1992 Untac (UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia) arrived. Its task, along with peacekeeping, was to oversee the overall reconstruction of the country and to supervise the democratic election. Although Funcinpec won, CPP's Hun Sen with his trademark bullying and threats managed to muscle into power – demanding the title of Second Prime Minister. To this Untac agreed and the two parties formed a unique coalition. In 1997, Hun Sen staged a bloody coup, overthrowing the First Prime Minister, Prince Ranariddh.

The fact that Hun Sen is a former Khmer Rouge guerrilla has not been lost on the Khmer people. His strongman tactics more than shadow the ruthless ways of his old comrades and the nation's citizens are well aware that they are living under a thinly disguised dictatorship.

End of Khmer Rouge

More than two decades on, the international trial of Khmer Rouge leaders for crimes of genocide is still to take place. The baddest of the KR boys, Pol Pot and Ta Mok, are now dead and the others are ageing rapidly. Though many Cambodians are keen for justice, some new-generation Khmers, who were not present during the regime, believe that the enormous budget allocated to the proposed trial would be better invested in developing Cambodia's future rather than in a past that could never change.

Cambodia Today

The Untac years left a legacy of AIDS when soldiers boosted prostitution activities and Cambodia now has the highest rate of HIV infection in Asia. This can be attributed also to the poor socioeconomic status of the country, where women and children are pushed

into prostitution or exploited by the powerful and rich.

The old adage of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer couldn't be a more accurate description of Cambodia. Those in power line their pockets in short-term personal gain with no regard to their people or the nation's sustainability.

PEOPLE & THE POPULATION

It is difficult to describe the Khmer people without jumping up and down on a spring-board of emotions. Their smiles will lift your spirit and then their stories send you crashing. This is a nation of survivors. From one of the darkest periods of history, they have emerged blinking into the light of hope. They have a fierce pride for their country and are frustrated that throughout history, it has dangled like a marionette, yanked sideways by its neighbours – especially the Thais, whose superior attitude towards Cambodia is loathed.

The Khmers live for today. The idea of short-term gain is not exclusive to corrupt government; the general population cannot see the consequences of burning the country's trees, of overfishing or, in the case of prostitution, submitting to the rich Westerner who will pay for half an hour. The psychological damage caused today will not heal tomorrow, and sometimes in the case of children – they never do.

On the other hand, the Khmers' live-for-the-moment attitude is what makes them so much fun. Walking past a group of Khmers who burst into raucous laughter might make you paranoid that they're making fun of you – they are. Taking the mickey out of others is a national sport, and their wit is as fast as a motorbike speeding through Phnom Penh. They love a good laugh, so make sure to pack your sense of humour.

The estimated population of Cambodia is 14.071 million people, of whom 90% are ethnic Khmers, 5% Vietnamese and 1% Chinese with indigenous hill tribes making up the rest. Life expectancy is 58 years, a stark contrast to the 80 years of life hoped to be enjoyed by Australians and the 78 years expected by Brits.

The official language is Khmer, spoken by 95% of the population; there's also a smattering of French, and a growing number of English speakers.

Lifestyle

Eighty-five per cent of Khmers live off the fat of the land. They are generally farmers, weavers or fishermen, with the majority wet-rice cultivators.

Family is the core and familial bonds are strong. The family unit normally extends far and beyond the immediate members to encompass cousins, second cousins, aunts, great aunts and so on.

Food is incredibly important. Not just because Cambodians know what it's like to be without, but because it acts as a means of connection. In Cambodia, physical displays of affection are awkward and almost nonexistent, except between pals of the same sex. Therefore, a mother will show her adoration for her son through a well-cooked meal: a soup instead of a hug; a well-grilled fish instead of a kiss.

For the older generation, faith is very important and regular trips to shrines to make offerings and to pray are still a part of their regular activities (see below).

The younger generation differ greatly from country to city. The city kids officially want to be doctors, teachers and aid workers, but secretly – like many teenagers – they just want to be pop stars. The country kids just want a way out of poverty.

In any case, this is still very much a traditionalist country. Old customs are practised and values maintained. It helps to keep this in mind when travelling, so as not to offend.

RELIGION

The majority of Khmers (90%) follow the Theravada branch of Buddhism. The main philosophy of this school is to dedicate time and effort to earning merit in this life to gain better karma in the next, until ultimately Nirvana (Nibbana) is achieved. Hinduism is also threaded into the theology, with Hindu symbolism evident in ceremonies and legends.

Other religions found in Cambodia are: Islam, practised by the Cham community; animism, among the hill tribes; and Christianity, which is slowly seeping through the country via missionaries and Christian NGOs.

ARTS

After the Khmer Rouge's attempts to extinguish them, the arts are being revived by a new generation in a bid to preserve Cambodian culture.

Sculpture and carving were traditionally the most practised crafts, and if you take a look at the fine examples at Angkor, you will see that the ancestors had quite a knack for them. Take a walk down Phnom Penh's Ph 178 to see the modern-day artisans at work.

In both style and appearance, the royal dancers of today could have almost stepped off the lintels at Angkor. Their roots lie in India with dances enacting scenes from the Hindu *Ramayana*.

Cambodian folk music is an erratic clanging of instruments smoothed into melody. An orchestra normally includes wood instruments, string instruments, wind instruments, xylophones and drums. The modern stuff seems to be a gross breach of copyright from popular American artists. In fact, everything is copied except the language in which it is sung. Even the video clips are pretty much the same!

Visual artists are now infiltrating Cambodia's art scene and gracing the walls of hip galleries. They usually depict scenes of everyday life with modern styles, borrowing heavily from the West. A group of artists has set up a contemporary arts association, **Saklapel** (www.saklapel.org), which is very active in exposing up-and-coming Khmer artists. Check out Ph 240 in Phnom Penh, where many of the studios and art galleries are concentrated.

The cinema industry isn't about to match Hollywood any time soon, but it is slowly getting off the ground with the majority of films being schlock horrors pinched from Thailand. The most popular film of recent times is *Pos Keng Kong* (The Giant Snake; 2000), the story

of a girl who sprang from the union between a human and a snake.

ENVIRONMENT The Land

Tucked into the arches of its neighbours, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, Cambodia has a total land area of 181,035 sq km and is cut through the middle by the Mekong River.

At the heart of the country is the great Tonlé Sap lake, one of the most productive fisheries in the world; it provides Khmers with 80% of their protein.

The Dangrek Mountain range squiggles across the northern border with Thailand and looms over kilometres of grassy plains. In the east, the mountainous expanse takes the form of the Eastern Highlands and in Cambodia's wild west, the Cardamom and Elephant Mountain ranges jut from dense forests.

The lowlands consist of fields of rice, swamps, lakes and mangrove forests. Palm trees are absolutely everywhere and are usually the coconut-dropping variety or sweet sugar palms.

Wildlife

Wildlife numbers have suffered from civil war and illegal poaching in recent years, but Cambodia still boasts a biodiversity of species that inhabit the jungles and mountains, among them elephants, deer, wild boars, sun bears, gibbons, leopards and the elusive tiger. In lower-lying lands, snakes including the king cobra, which hides in the thickest jungle regions, can be found.

Occupying the swamps of Tonlé Sap are crocodiles, and in the lake itself is the biggest diversity of fish species in the world, including

TONLÉ SAP: THE WORLD'S GREATEST FLOOD BARRIER

Asia's largest freshwater lake and the world's biggest fish bowl, the Tonlé Sap is an ecological wonder.

It is connected to the Mekong at Phnom Penh by a 100km channel, known as the Tonlé Sap river. In the wet season the level of the Mekong rises and backs up into the river, causing it to flow northwest into the lake, which then swells from 2m deep and 2500 sq km to 10m deep and 13,000 sq km.

In the dry season, when the Mekong level is low, the Tonlé Sap reverses its flow, draining the water back from the lake into the Mekong.

This process produces the perfect breeding grounds for fish, supplying Cambodia with 75% of its annual fish catch and earning it a Unesco biosphere status.

To learn more, visit the Tonlé Sap exhibition at the Krousar Thmey Exhibition Centre (p202), in Siem Reap.

some endemic to Cambodia. The birds of Cambodia include the iridescent kingfisher, jungle fowl, crane, pelican and redheaded vulture. Gliding gracefully through the Mekong are freshwater Irrawaddy dolphins (see the boxed text, p232).

Your best chance of seeing these animals is to visit the sanctuaries: Phnom Tmao Wildlife Sanctuary near Phnom Penh (p201) and the Angkor Centre for Conservation of Biodiversity (ACCB) in Siem Reap (p208).

National Parks

To protect Cambodia's rich flora, fauna and wildlife, 23% of the country has been declared protected areas: Kirirom National Park (p201) in the southwest; Ream National Park (p240) near Sihanoukville, which has lowland evergreen forests and mangrove swamps; Virachay National Park (p236), a massive unexplored territory in the top northwest corner; and the magnificent Bokor National Park (p244), which echoes with the ghosts of French settlers and their now abandoned buildings.

Environmental Issues

Mass-scale deforestation has resulted in the depletion of forest coverage from 70% in the early 1970s to a shocking 30% today.

The deforestation has widespread ecological effects. The extensive logging targets rare and exclusive trees, driving these species into extinction. The degradation has been linked to an increase in the number of floods, which in the past has ruined rice crops and caused

food deficits in already poor and struggling areas. The flood-ruined forests are often cut down, removing the natural habitat for wildlife and degrading their breeding grounds; the wildlife either abandon their homes or simply die.

The damming of the Mekong is also causing grave problems. Dams built in China have led to a 12% decrease in river levels and reduced fish catches by an estimated 20%. Now with plans for Cambodian dams in the pipeline (with funding from the World Bank) the villagers have even more reason to be concerned.

PHNOM PENH

☎ 023 / pop 1.5 million

Phnom Penh is an electric bolt to the senses. In recent history it has been both a glamorous hub under Indochinese rule and a soulless basin, emptied of occupants by the tyrannical Khmer Rouge.

At the heart of 'The Penh' is a buzzing culture of cafés, stylish bars and a multinational vibe that is stamped with the definitive imprint of Khmers. The wats are filled with Buddhists lighting incense and chanting prayers and the markets are piled high with bargains and exotic foods just daring you to try them. While the legendary Boeng Kak moves to its own bohemian rhapsody, artisans can be seen sculpting Cambodia's new treasures along Ph 178, or strolling along the cosmopolitan Sisowath Quay.

ORIENTATION

The eastern edge of Phnom Penh hugs the Tonlé Sap, while the haphazardly numbered streets spread outward in a grid. Generally, odd-numbered streets run north-south, and even-numbered streets run east-west. The largest commercial streets, Monivong Blvd and Norodom Blvd run almost parallel to each other north to south, while Sihanouk Blvd cuts the city near the middle running east-west. The river is traversed via the Chrouy Changvar (Japanese Friendship) Bridge to the northeast with the enormous Boeng Kak lake just a few minutes away.

The riverfront Sisowath Quay is where most travellers hang out, but the points of interests are scattered throughout the entire city and beyond.

GETTING INTO TOWN

From the airport you can catch a moto to your hotel for US\$2. Tuk-tuks do the same but charge US\$4 and taxis make the run for US\$5.

Nearly all buses, taxis and pick-ups drop people off at Psar Thmei (New Market, also known as Central Market) from where it is a short ride into any of the hotels or guesthouses (1000r). Boats arriving from Vietnam dock near Ph 6, where again motos will be waiting.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

With so many tourists pouring in there are literally bookshops everywhere.

D's Books (Map p194; www.ds-books.com; 77 Ph

240) The most reasonably priced and comprehensively stocked, it's popular albeit with tattered titles. There's a second branch near the Foreign Correspondents' Club at 12 Ph 178.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 119)

Fire (☎ 118)

Police & Medical (☎ 117)

Tourist police (☎ 724793)

Internet Access

It is not difficult to find somewhere to log on in Phnom Penh. Internet cafés are everywhere and usually charge 4000r per hour. Some bars and cafés also offer free wireless connections for your laptop.

Laundry

Most hotels will include a laundry service, either charging by the kilo (US\$1) or item (1000r). As some of their laundry places hand-wash clothes, you may find that underwear will not be touched.

Medical Services

Calmette Hospital (Map pp190-1; ☎ 426948;

3 Monivong Blvd) A reputable hospital in Phnom Penh.

International SOS Medical Centre (Map p194;

☎ 216911; www.internationalsos.com; 161 Ph 51;

☎ 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat, emergency 24hr) International standards for health and teeth.

Naga Clinic (Map p194; ☎ 011-811175; www.nagadclinic.com; 11 Ph 254; ☎ 24hr) French-run clinic for reliable consultations.

Pharmacie de la Gare (Map p194; ☎ 430205; 81Eo Monivong Blvd) French- and English-speaking pharmacists.

Tropical & Travellers Medical Clinic (Map p194; ☎ 015-912100; 88 Ph 108)

Money

Travellers cheques can be changed at various booths and guesthouses around the city. Below are the banks that offer the widest range of services.

ANZ Royal (Map p194; ☎ 726900) At multiple locations. Cash advances and ATM withdrawal for Visa and MasterCard.

Cambodia Asia Bank (Map p194; ☎ 722105) At multiple locations. Western Union transfers (24-hour) at the Naga Hotel branch.

Canadia Bank (Map p194; ☎ 215286) At multiple locations. Free cash advances on MasterCard and Visa, plus a 24-hour Visa/MasterCard ATM.

Telephone

The cheapest local and domestic calls in Phnom Penh are found at private stalls with the telephone prefixes displayed on them: ☎ 011, ☎ 012 and ☎ 016. Local calls start from 300r a minute.

Many internet cafés offer low-cost international calls via the internet – calls to Europe and North America start from 300r per minute.

Tourist Information

Ministry of Tourism (Map p194; ☎ 426876; www.mot.gov.kh; 3 Monivong Blvd) Not your best source unfortunately; guesthouses and other travellers are much more informative.

Travel Agencies

Hanuman Tourism-Voyages (Map p194; ☎ 218396; www.hanumantourism.com; 12 Ph 310) One of the most reliable travel agencies for air tickets and tour services.

Neak Krorhorm Travel & Tours (Map p194; ☎ 219496; 128 Ph 108) Reasonably priced air and bus tickets.

PTM Travel & Tours (Map p194; ☎ 986363; 200Eo Monivong Blvd) A good spot for discount flight tickets.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Phnom Penh is a big bustling city, but in general it is very safe. Be mindful of the traffic rules that seem to only apply to foreigners; get clued up on these from your moto rental place.

DOING YOUR BIT

Cambodia is still largely unaware of environmental issues and measures due to a lack of education.

Lead by example and dispose of your rubbish responsibly. Try not to buy animal products such as ivory or skins or consume exotic meats as this only generates demand from an already threatened wildlife population. Purchasing coral or furniture and carvings made from luxury woods is also fuelling the demise of Cambodia's diminishing forests and reefs.

Lend your support to the various organisations, tours and programmes set up to promote ecotourism in the country.

SIGHTS

The sights in Phnom Penh sum up the contradictions of Cambodia. The stunning legacy of god-kings exhibited at the National Museum contrasts greatly with the legacy of killers displayed at Tuol Sleng. The grandeur of the Royal Palace is a world away from the gloom at Choeng Ek. All around the city you can see evidence of both splendour and sorrow.

Royal Palace (Map p194; Samdech Sothearos Blvd; admission US\$3, camera/video US\$2/5; ☎ 7.30-11am & 2.30-5pm) is outlined across the city sky by its progressive triangular ceiling and cascading golden tiles. It was initiated by King Norodom in 1886 after the capital was moved from Oudong to Phnom Penh. In the palace grounds is the magnificent **Silver Pagoda**, so named because it is constructed with 5000 silver tiles. In the centre is a 17th-century emerald Buddha statue made of Baccarat crystals and all around are lush gardens manicured in an orderly fashion.

You will not be permitted into the grounds with bare shoulders. There is a clever T-shirt stand by the ticket booth that makes a killing out of this common tourist oversight.

Formerly the Tuol Svay Prey High School, **Tuol Sleng Museum** (Map pp190-1; admission US\$3; ☎ 7-11.30am & 2-5.30pm), off Ph 113, was taken over by Pol Pot's security forces and transformed into a prison and zone of unimaginable torment. Renamed Security Prison 21 (S-21), the classrooms were turned into torture chambers and equipped with various instruments to inflict pain, suffering and death. These instruments are still here, along with graphic photographs of the victims as they lay dying. The long corridor is a hallway of ghosts containing photographs of the victims put to death, their faces staring back eerily from the past.

It was the largest incarceration centre in the country, and at the height of its activity, a shocking 100 victims were killed a day. The lives of some are documented in a gallery upstairs.

Killing Fields of Choeng Ek (admission US\$2; ☎ 7am-5.30pm) is where most of the 17,000 detainees held at the S-21 prison were executed. If walking through the now peaceful grounds with their shady trees and butterflies diffuses the impact of what happened here, then the enormous stupa of skulls will send you reeling back with horror. A looming glass tower, it displays 8000 skulls of victims and their

discarded clothes; piled into a messy heap just like the bodies that once wore them. See p185 for more on the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror.

Choeng Ek is 14km southwest of Phnom Penh. A trip out there on a moto should cost US\$5 round trip.

The **National Museum** (Map p194; admission US\$3, camera US\$1; ☎ 8-11am & 2-5pm Tue-Sun) is in a glorious red building. This airy open-door museum houses national treasures – some unfortunately looted – from the country's most historic sites. Built between 1917 and 1920, it contains objects from all of the mighty empires, including the famous 'fighting monkeys' statue. Taken from the temples at Koh Ker (p224), it is a massive 1.94m limestone statue showing two monkey brothers, Sugriva and Valin, in a wrestle grip fighting to the death.

No photography is allowed except in the courtyard. You can hire English- and French-speaking guides from US\$2.

Very touristy and not particularly pretty, **Wat Ounalom** (Map p194) is still worth visiting just for the one eyebrow hair of Buddha himself, preciously held in a stupa behind the main building.

Wat Phnom (Map p194; admission US\$1), meaning Hill Temple, is appropriately set on the only hill in Phnom Penh. The wat is at the centre of the legend of Phnom Penh and is thus highly revered among the locals. Khmers flock to it to pray for their fortunes. The legend goes that long long ago, in the year 1373, the first temple was built by a lady named Penh to house four Buddha statues that were swept into her home by the Mekong. Penh's statue is in a shrine dedicated to her behind the *vihara* (temple sanctuary). You can also catch sight of Sam Bo here, an elephant who does his day shift giving rides before plodding off home along the river in the evenings.

ACTIVITIES Massage

Receive massages from trained blind masseurs at **Seeing Hands Massage** (Map p194; ☎ 012-680934; 6E Ph 94; per hr US\$4). Helps you to ease those aches and pains, helps them stay self-sufficient.

Swimming

Unless you have the iron-guts immune system of a Khmer, don't go jumping into the Mekong to cool off. Instead head for one of

the hotel saviours that offer a swimming pool open to the public:

Himawari Hotel (Map pp190-1; ☎ 214555; 313 Sisowath Quay; US\$10)

Hotel Cambodiana (Map pp190-1; ☎ 424888; 313 Sisowath Quay; US\$8)

Hotel Le Royal (Map p194; ☎ 981888; Ph 92; US\$3)

Boat Tours

There are many companies that offer boat cruises up and down the Mekong. They are stationed along Sisowath Quay and most offer a lunch or dinner cruise for one to two hours for around US\$8.

Compagnie Fluviale du Mekong (Map p194; ☎ 012-240859; 30 Ph 240) offers an excellent tour up to Angkor in a beautiful traditional boat with comfy cabins. On the way, it accesses small villages for a truly memorable trip. Tours leave every Monday; contact for bookings and quotes. You can buy tickets from where the boat leaves at Sisowath Quay.

SLEEPING

Budget travellers usually head for Boeng Kak where cheap accommodation lines the lakeside. Those with a more flexible wallet can choose from an array of budget hotels or head for the swankiest of suites. Reservations aren't normally required except when it's peak holiday season.

Boeng Kak Area

Phnom Penh's own budget paradise. Most of the lodgings cluster around this green lake of questionable purity; a murky expanse of water that transforms into a glistening loch of golden shimmers at sunset, a sight worth a thousand mosquito bites and more.

Lake Side 2 Guest House & Restaurant (Map p194; ☎ 012-973811; 3 Ph 93; r US\$2-7) For US\$2 you'll be sharing the bathroom, but from there on up it's en-suite luxury with the added bonus of hot water. Safety lockers are available for your worldly goods and the atmosphere is suitably island.

Floating Island Guest House (Map p194; ☎ 990887; floatingisland_pp@yahoo.com; 11 Ph 93; r US\$3-9) Not quite afloat and not quite an island but the upstairs deck could easily win the title of 'best place to view the sunset' and the cleaning lady deserves a pat on the back for spotless rooms.

Number 9 Sister Guest House (Map p194; ☎ 012-424240; 8A Ph 93; r US\$3-8) They sure know how to jazz up a walkway here, where the long,

tiled passageway is flanked by pretty orchids, leading onto the lakeside veranda and its magnificent view. A great first impression that actually lasts thanks to clean rooms and an affable atmosphere.

Riverfront Area

Bright Lotus Guest House (Map p194; ☎ 990446; sammy_lotus@hotmail.com; 22 Ph 178; r US\$10-18; ☎) Looking a little outdated now compared to the new hotels popping up, but its location just can't be beat. Balconies overlook the action-packed Ph 178 and it is within short walking distance of the Royal Palace, Silver Pagoda, National Museum and river.

Paragon Hotel (Map p194; ☎ 222607; info_paragon_hotel@yahoo.com/phannakh@yahoo.com; 219B Sisowath Quay; r US\$15-30; ☎) This is the new kid on the riverfront block. Staying in rooms on the 3rd floor and up begins to hurt due to the lack of a lift, but the river views are fabulous.

California 2 Guest House (Map p194; ☎ 982182; 317 Sisowath Quay; r US\$20-25; ☎) Rooms are clean and comfortable, the café downstairs is cracking and the staff are informative, fun and friendly.

Bougainvillier Hotel (Map p194; ☎ 220528; www.bougainvillierhotel.com; 277G Sisowath Quay; r US\$52-128; ☎) This charming hotel adds the aah to ooh with contemporary oriental décor. Dry-cleaning and safety deposit boxes mean clean clothes and secure valuables, while the restaurant serves up well-regarded Khmer and French cuisine.

Himawari Hotel (Map pp190-1; ☎ 214555; reservation@himawari.com.kh; 313 Sisowath Quay; ste US\$113-306; ☎) For some posh pampering, check into one of the large and tastefully decked out Himawari suites. The hotel has every facility imaginable to keep you from leaving: a fitness centre, pool and wi-fi access.

our pick Amanjaya Pancam Hotel (Map p194; ☎ 214747; www.amanjaya.com; 1 Ph 154; r US\$155-265; ☎) Disappear into this stylish and slick hotel with its opulent furnishings and classy service and you could be in any upscale city in the world. But look out the window to the wide Tonlé Sap and distinguished Wat Ounalom and there's no mistaking you're in Phnom Penh – and one of its most superb locations at that.

Also recommended are these two Sisowath Quay favourites with decent rooms and friendly service:



INFORMATION		SLEEPING		DRINKING	
Acleda Bank.....	1 B4	Amanjaya Pancam Hotel.....	35 D3	Blue Chili.....	74 C4
Anz Royal Bank.....	2 B3	Bodhi Tree Aram.....	36 D5	Elsewhere Bar.....	75 C5
Anz Royal Bank.....	3 C6	Bodhi Tree Del Gusto.....	37 D6	Freebird Bar.....	76 C5
Australian Embassy.....	4 C5	Bougainvillier Hotel.....	38 D3	Green Vespa.....	77 C2
Bright Lotus Guest House.....	5 A4	Bright Lotus Guest House.....	39 D3	Jungle Bar & Grill.....	78 D3
Cambodia Asia Bank.....	6 B5	California 2 Guesthouse.....	40 D3	Magic Sponge.....	79 A1
Canada Bank.....	7 B2	Floating Island Guest House.....	41 A1	Monsoon.....	80 C2
Canadian Embassy.....	(see 4)	Hotel Le Royal.....	42 A2	Peace Pub.....	81 C3
D's Books.....	8 C5	Hotel Scandinavia.....	43 C6	Pontoon Lounge.....	82 C2
D's Books.....	(see 55)	Indochine 2.....	44 C3	Riverhouse Lounge.....	83 C2
Foreign Trade Bank.....	9 B2	Indochine Hotel.....	45 D3	Talkin to a Stranger.....	84 D6
German Embassy.....	10 B5	Lake Side 2 Guest House & Restaurant.....	46 A2	ENTERTAINMENT	
Hanuman Tourism-Voyages.....	11 C6	Manor House.....	47 C6	Equinox Bar.....	85 C6
International SOS Medical Centre.....	12 C5	Number 9 Sister Guest House.....	48 A2	French Cultural Centre.....	(see 63)
Main Post Office.....	13 C2	Paragon Hotel.....	49 C3	Memphis Pub.....	86 C2
Malaysian Embassy.....	14 C5	Spring Guest House.....	50 A5	Movie Street.....	87 B6
Mekong Bank.....	15 B2	Top Banana.....	51 C6	Riverside Bar & Bistro.....	88 D3
Ministry of Tourism.....	16 B5	EATING		Salt Lounge.....	89 C3
Naga Clinic.....	17 C5	Café El Mundo.....	52 D3	SHOPPING	
Neak Krhorom Travel & Tours.....	18 C2	Cantina.....	53 D3	NCPD Handicrafts.....	90 B2
Pharmacie de la Gare.....	19 A2	Flying Elephant.....	54 A1	Psar O Russei.....	91 A4
Philippines Embassy.....	20 D6	Foreign Correspondents' Club.....	55 D3	Psar Thmei.....	92 B3
PTM Travel & Tours.....	21 A3	Friends.....	56 C3	TRANSPORT	
Singaporean Embassy.....	22 C5	Garden Bar In The Shade.....	57 C2	Bangkok Airways.....	93 B5
Tropical & Travellers Medical Clinic.....	23 B2	Golden Garden.....	58 C5	Boats to Siem Reap & Chau Doc.....	94 C2
US Embassy.....	24 B2	Java Café.....	59 D5	Capitol Tour.....	95 A4
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		Khmer Borane Restaurant.....	(see 66)	China Southern Airlines.....	96 A1
Compagnie Fluviale du Mekong.....	25 D3	King's Court Restaurant.....	60 D3	GST.....	97 B3
Compagnie Fluviale du Mekong Head Office.....	26 D5	La Dolce Vitae.....	61 A1	Hour Lean.....	98 C2
Hotel Le Royal.....	(see 42)	Lazy Gecko Café.....	62 A1	Lao Airlines.....	99 D5
National Museum.....	27 C4	Le Café du Centre.....	63 B4	Lucky! Lucky!.....	100 B4
National Museum Entrance.....	28 C4	Nature and Sea.....	65 C6	Malaysia Airlines.....	101 A3
Royal Palace.....	29 D4	Pacharan.....	66 D4	Narin Transport.....	102 A5
Royal Palace & Silver Pagoda Entrance.....	30 D4	Peking Canteen.....	67 B3	Neak Krhorom.....	(see 18)
Silver Pagoda.....	31 B1	Pencil Supermarket.....	68 C4	New! New!.....	(see 100)
Wat Ounalom.....	33 D3	Phò Fortune.....	69 D3	Phnom Penh Sorya Transport.....	103 B3
Wat Phnom.....	34 B2	Romdeng.....	70 B6	President Airlines.....	104 C3
		Seeing Hands Massage.....	31 B1	Share Taxis, Pick-ups & Minibuses.....	105 B3
		Silver Pagoda.....	32 D4	Siem Reap Airways.....	(see 93)
		Wat Ounalom.....	33 D3	Vietnam Airlines.....	106 B5
		Wat Phnom.....	34 B2		

Indochine Hotel (Map p194; ☎ 724239; indochineht@camnet.com.kh; 251 Sisowath Quay; r US\$10-20; 🚻) **Indochine 2** (Map p194; ☎ 211525; 28-30 Ph 130; r US\$10-20)

Around the City
Top Banana (Map p194; ☎ 012-885572; topbanana_guesthouse@yahoo.com; 9E cnr Ph 278 & Ph 51; r US\$5; 🚻) The rooms are basic but this is a great spot for meeting other travellers. The place is designed for ultimate chill-out: lounges, cushions, hammocks and the most welcoming of staff.

Spring Guest House (Map p194; ☎ 222155; spring_guesthouse@yahoo.com; 34 Ph 111; r US\$5-10; 🚻) This unpretentious hotel has a list of valuable and friendly services that make it a real winner. Airport transfers are on the house.

our pick **Bodhi Tree Umma** (Map pp190-1; ☎ 011-854430; www.bodhitree.com; 50 Ph 113; r US\$8-24; 🚻) Full of charisma. All the timber and stone rooms come with beds romantically draped in mosquito nets. The small bathrooms are tiled with colourful mosaics and leafy plants graze the windows.

Manor House (Map p194; ☎ 992566; www.manorhousecambodia.com; 88 Ph 288; r US\$25-33; 🚻) So clean it shines, this gay-friendly boutique hotel offers a quieter place to rest. The rooms are modest but comfortable and breakfast is included.

Hotel Le Royal (Map p194; ☎ 981888; www.phnompenh.raffles.com; Ph 92; r US\$184-1793; 🚻 🍷 🍴) Like stepping back in time, this elegant affair is rich in heritage. It has maintained its old-French charm, blending it ostentatiously with Royal

CAMBODIA

CAMBODIA

Khmer style and modern luxury. It boasts 170 rooms, a spa, gym, pool and some of the most sumptuous restaurants and bars in town.

Also recommended:

Bodhi Tree Del Gusto (Map p194; ☎ 998424; 43 Ph 95; r US\$7-24) Equally charming sister hotel to Bodhi Tree Umma.

Bodhi Tree Aram (Map p194; ☎ 998424; 70 Ph 244; r US\$13-46; 🍷) Another charming sister hotel to Bodhi Tree Umma.

Hotel Scandinavia (Map p194; ☎ 214498; www.scandinavia-hotel-cambodia.com; 4 Ph 282; r US\$30-55; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Trendy boutique hotel with swimming pool.

EATING

For something cheap and colourful, head for the food stalls at the markets, or cross the Japanese Friendship Bridge over to Prek Leap. In the city itself, there is an overwhelming choice, following is just a taster.

Bodhi Tree Umma (Map pp190-1; ☎ 011-854430; www.bodhitree.com; 50 Ph 113; mains US\$1-3; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Opposite the Tuol Sleng Museum, this is a secret hidey-hole in which to nibble tapas and drink fruit cocktails. The restaurant provides a much needed

sanctuary after the ghostly horror of that macabre visit.

Flying Elephant (Map p194; ☎ 012-263332; 3A Ph 93; mains US\$1-6; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Eclectic and fun, it's what a restaurant might look like if a bunch of uni students turned their living room into a diner. The lounges are comfortable, the staff are energetic and free beer comes with every delicious pizza or burger ordered.

Peking Canteen (Map p194; ☎ 011-909548; 93 Ph 136; mains US\$1-8; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Tiny and packed full of chopstick clickin' action and flavour. The noodles and dumplings are fast becoming famous.

Shop Bakery & Delicatessen (Map p194; ☎ 986964; 39 Ph 240; mains US\$1.50-5; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This tranquil café is a great place to come for a light bite or to grab and go. The freshly baked breads and pastries are excellent, and so is the coffee.

Nature and Sea (Map p194; ☎ 012-879486; cnr Ph 51 & Ph 278; mains US\$1.50-5; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This relaxed eatery is all about natural and organic foods. The salads are lovely and fresh but it's the French crepes and galettes that are the real draw.

our pick Khmer Borane Restaurant (Map p194; ☎ 012-290092; 389 Sisowath Quay; mains US\$1.50-4; 🍷 noon-midnight) A charming restaurant that exudes a humble grace reminiscent of the French colonial days of elegant dining. Delicious and authentic Khmer food.

Jars of Clay (Map pp190-1; ☎ 300281; 398 Ph 155; mains US\$2-3; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Scones in Cambodia? Yes, and they aren't half-bad. Just one of the baker's delights to be found in this café near the Russian Market.

Del Gusto (Map pp190-1; ☎ 998424; 43 Ph 95; mains US\$2-4; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Following the same formula as the Umma with a similar Mediterranean/Asian menu, the Del Gusto is set in a creaky old villa that whiffs of the colony. The old French building is perfect for the classical and jazz music that fills its space, adding a relaxed groove to the laid-back ambience.

Cantina (Map p194; ☎ 222502; 347 Sisowath Quay; mains US\$2-5; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A taste of Tijuana riverside. The Mexican food is worth raving about with tortillas and salsa made fresh daily.

Garden Centre Café (Map pp190-1; ☎ 363002; 23 Ph 57; mains US\$2.50-11; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed Mon) A tropical garden setting and an enormous selection of wholesome and healthy food. The homemade yogurt and muesli will get you started on the right foot and the freshly baked bagels are fabulously filling fare.

Pacharan (Map p194; ☎ 224394; 389 Sisowath Quay; mains US\$2.50-18; 🍷 11am-midnight) A fashionable Spanish restaurant with an open kitchen, sleek bar, and stylish interior of Spanish sunburnt colours. The wines are fine and the tapas excellent.

Pyeong Yang Restaurant (Map pp190-1; ☎ 993765; 400 Monivong Blvd; mains US\$3-15; 🍷 lunch & dinner) A quirky North Korean restaurant of singing and dancing waitresses, live music and delicious cold noodles.

Java Café & Gallery (Map p194; ☎ 987420; 56 Sihanouk Blvd; mains US\$3-4.75; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Interesting art exhibitions, wi-fi access, a large airy terrace, and that's before we even get to the menu. Wholesome and filling sandwiches and wraps are the speciality.

Café El Mundo (Map p194; ☎ 012-520775; 219 Sisowath Quay; mains US\$3-7; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) If you're on a mission to mellow after a frantic day, sneak inside this café and the madness of Phnom Penh will feel like a world away.

The mezzanine level has wall-to-wall lounges, which makes staying here all day a very tempting prospect. Fruit teas and West-meets-East food.

Foreign Correspondents' Club of Cambodia (FCC; Map p194; ☎ 724014; www.fcccambodia.com; 363 Sisowath Quay; mains US\$5-15.50; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A favoured haunt of local expats, the FCC has big views and a big menu. The food leans heavily to the West and in particular Italy, but there are some Cambodian dishes in there to mix it up.

Irina Russian Restaurant (Map pp190-1; ☎ 012-833524; 15 Ph 352; mains US\$3-8; 🍷 lunch & dinner) A jovial restaurant where the meals are washed down with vodka. The food is authentically Russian and so heavy, it will leave your jeans happily strained across a stuffed belly.

Tamarind (Map p194; ☎ 012-830139; 31 Ph 240; US\$5.50-14; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A classy and ambient restaurant dishing out a blend of North African and French cuisine. The bar downstairs is happy between 5pm and 7pm with half-price cocktails, but opt to have your shwarma and tajines upstairs on the breezy terrace.

Also recommended:

La Dolce Vita (Map p194; ☎ 012-610015; 78 Ph 93; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Italian food.

Phò Fortune (Map p194; ☎ 012-871753; 11 Ph 178; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Vietnamese food.

Garden Bar In The Shade (Map p194; cnr Ph 148 & Sisowath Quay; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) International food.

King's Court Restaurant (Map p194; ☎ 986469; 341Eo Sisowath Quay; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) International food.

When the hunger hits at an ungodly hour, **Midnite Train** (Map p194; Ph 51), a permanently parked truck on Phnom Penh's strip of late-night bars and clubs doles out burgers, kebabs and hot dogs to those just stumbling out, closing its shutters at around 5am, while the weird and wonderful **Walkabout Hotel** (Map p194; ☎ 023-211715; 109 Ph 51; 🍷 24hr) serves standard Western and Khmer food 24 hours.

Self-Catering

Golden Garden (Map p194; ☎ 211534; 23 Ph 240) A range of imported goods from Europe and the USA with fresh produce.

Pencil Supermarket (Map p194; Ph 214; 🍷 7am-9pm) This is a large international supermarket that is generally well stocked.

DINING FOR A CAUSE

These fantastic eateries are established as funding vehicles for worthy causes and training centres for young staff.

- our pick Friends** (Map p194; ☎ 012-802072; gustav@friends-international.org; 215 Ph 13; mains US\$3-5; 🍷 lunch & dinner) The delightful Friends restaurant is run by the Mith Samlanh Friends NGO. Staffed by street youths training for the hospitality industry, it offers healthy international dishes and delicious fruit cocktails.
- Le Café du Centre** (Map p194; ☎ 992432; French Cultural Centre, Ph 184; mains US\$1.50-4.40; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The third training restaurant of the Mith Samlanh Friends NGO comes in the form of this French café. It serves light meals such as sandwiches and crepes, plus a good selection of ice creams.
- Lazy Gecko Café** (Map p194; ☎ 012-619924; 23B Ph 93; mains US\$1.50-4.50; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This little eatery serves international dishes. Throwing some weighty support behind the Jeannine's Children Association (JCA) Orphanage, it hosts a quiz and raffle night on Thursdays and loads guests and donated goods onto an orphanage-bound minibus on Saturdays, where they can enjoy dinner and a performance by the children.
- Lotus Blanc** (☎ 995660; Stung Mean Chey; mains US\$3-6; 🍷 noon-2pm Mon-Fri) Fifteen minutes from the city centre, this restaurant acts as a vocational training centre for youths who were found scouring the area's garbage dump for a meagre living. Run by French NGO, PSE-Pour un Sourire d'Enfant (For the smile of a child), it serves Western and Khmer cuisine.
- Romdeng** (Map p194; ☎ 092-219565; 21 Ph 278; mains US\$4-6.50; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed 2-6pm & Sun) Also under the Mith Samlanh umbrella, the elegant Romdeng specialises in traditional food from the provinces and offers a staggering choice of traditional Khmer fare.

DRINKING

Talkin to a Stranger (Map p194; ☎ 012-798530; talkintoastranger@yahoo.com; 21B Ph 294; ☎ 5pm-late, closed Mon) The strangers here must be very good-humoured as this place is always filled with convivial cheer. A great garden bar that is very popular with local expats, it hosts regular shows and events with live bands sometimes performing.

Elsewhere Bar (Map p194; ☎ 211348; 175 cnr Ph 51 & 254; ☎ 10am-late, closed Tue) Why go Elsewhere? Ambient vibes, lush garden setting, great drinks menu and a beckoning swimming pool, that's why! Happy hour 5pm to 8pm.

Riverhouse Lounge (Map p194; ☎ 220180; 6 Ph 110; ☎ 4pm-2am) Housed in a beautiful colonial building with grand views over the balcony, this richly decorated lounge has regular DJ nights and happy hour 4pm to 8pm.

Magic Sponge (Map p194; ☎ 012-968512; dmriley40@hotmail.com; 12-13 Ph 93; ☎ 6pm-late) The healthy dose of double shots aside, this little bar is a friendly spot for exchanging travel tales and perhaps a game or two of cards.

Pontoon Lounge (Map p194; ☎ 11.30am-late) Floating on the Tonlé Sap at the end of Ph 108, this modish bar with its house and electro DJs is where the beautiful people come. Happy hour 5pm to 8pm.

Blue Chilli (Map p194; ☎ 012-566353; bluechilli.pub@gmail.com; 36Eo Ph 178; ☎ 7pm-late) Gay-friendly, this contemporary bar is a good place for some banter and booging. It also has some private booths for those more intimate moments.

Gasolina (Map pp190-1; ☎ 012-373009; 56-58 Ph 57; ☎ 6pm-late, closed Mon) Filled with the sensual

sounds of South America, this Latin bar is housed in a simple Spanish-style villa with a large garden. Chilean wines accompany cocktails on the drinks list and salsa lessons are held every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights.

Monsoon (Map p194; ☎ 016-355867; 17 Ph 104; ☎ 6pm-late) This is a cool little bar with an inviting atmosphere, moody music and a good selection of international drops to get you warmed up. Happy hour 6pm to 8pm.

Also recommended:
California 2 Guesthouse (☎ 982182; 317 Sisowath Quay) Great Mexican food, even better burgers and lively conversation, this bar has long been the watering hole for bikers and adventure travellers. It is also a reliable place for travel information.

Peace Pub (Map p194; ☎ 012-790898; 126 Ph 136; ☎ 4pm-late) A bar with reasonably priced drinks and regular quiz and movie nights, including some arthouse films. Happy hour 4pm to 8pm.

Jungle Bar & Grill (Map p194; ☎ 012-474230; 273 Sisowath Quay; ☎ 7am-2am) An airy and relaxed riverfront bar that has speedy internet access for laptops and serves food until 2am.

Freebird Bar (Map p194; ☎ 224712; 69 Ph 240; ☎ 7am-midnight) An American-style bar also with laptop internet access.

Green Vespa (Map p194; ☎ 012-887228; 95 Sisowath Quay; ☎ 6am-2am) This bar is full of spirit, of both the character and alcohol variety.

ENTERTAINMENT

Entertainment listings can be found in the *Phnom Penh Post*, *Bayon Pearnik* and *Cambodian Daily*.

HAGGLE ME THIS...

Bargains galore can be found at Phnom Penh's vibrant markets. Navigating the labyrinths of shoes, clothing, bric-a-brac and food is one of the most enjoyable ways to wear your feet out. Markets are open from 6.30am to 5.30pm.

- **Psar Thmei** (Map p194) Sooner or later you'll see this concrete custard pie. Also known as the New Market or the Central Market, the big yellow building is adjacent to the bus station and houses an array of stalls selling jewellery, clothing, coins and other such curios. The food section is enormous with produce spilling onto the streets.
- **Psar Tuol Tom Pong** (Map p194) Hagglng at this market requires peering over mounds and mounds of clothing and quality *kramas* (chequered silk scarves). It is often referred to as the Russian Market, as back in the 1980s it was the Russians' retail outlet of choice. It is the best place for souvenir T-shirts, CDs, DVDs and miniature carvings.
- **Psar O Russei** (Map p194) Housed in a sprawling mall-like space, this is the place to come if you want to lose your legion of adoring tuk-tuk fans. It is a complete maze selling everything you can think of.

Live Music

Equinox Bar (Map p194; ☎ 012-586139; 3A Ph 278; ☎ 11.30am-late) Acoustic jam sessions are held every Thursday and Saturday night in this animated bar. Happy hour 5pm to 8pm.

Miles (Map pp190-1; ☎ 011-698470; 17C Ph 370; ☎ 4pm-midnight Tue-Sun) Live jazz Fridays and Sundays in a rooftop bar that offers great views.

Memphis Pub (Map p194; ☎ 012-871263; 3 Ph 118; ☎ 5pm-late) Live rock and blues can be enjoyed most nights but weekends are the best, when it really gets going.

Riverside Bar & Bistro (Map p194; ☎ 213898; cnr Ph 148 & Sisowath Quay; ☎ 7am-1am) A mainstay of the riverfront scene, it often has bands jamming away in the back room at weekends. Happy hour is a liver-threatening noon to 7pm.

Salt Lounge (☎ 012-289905; 217 Ph 136; ☎ 6pm-1am) There are not many full-blown nightclubs in town; this industrial-looking nightclub of steel and strategic lights is probably the best of them. It plays host to regular guest DJs, is gay-friendly and has a decent menu of cocktails and shooters.

Cinemas

Movie Street (Map p194; Sihanouk Blvd) Private viewing booths with big TVs to watch the latest Hollywood and European titles.

French Cultural Centre (Map p194; Ph 184) Frequent weekday movie screenings in French. Ask for the monthly programme.

Peace Pub (Map p194; ☎ 012-790898; 126 Ph 136; ☎ 4pm-late) A drinking spot (see opposite) that has regular film nights, including documentaries and arthouse flicks.

Classical Dance & Arts

The Royal University of Fine Arts and **Apsara Arts Association** (71 Ph 598; ☎ 7.30-10.30am & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) teach students the fine art of Khmer royal ballet. The university dance programme has now moved to a new campus way north of town in Russei Keo district. Alternating performances of classical dance and folk dance are held at Apsara every Saturday at 7pm (admission US\$5).

SHOPPING

The national *krama* (chequered silk scarf) is worn around the necks, shoulders and waists of nearly every Khmer – it's almost a uniform. The scarves make superb souvenirs, as do Cambodia's gems, sculptures and handicrafts.

The stores below sell high-quality goods while supporting community organisations. Their aims are to provide the disabled and disenfranchised with valuable training for future employment and business management plus a regular flow of income to improve lives.

CHA (Map pp190-1; 54-56 Ph 113) This well-stocked boutique and workshop sells fine handmade clothing, scarves, toys, bags and photo albums. It is an interesting place to shop as you can poke your head behind the curtain and watch the process.

NCDP Handicrafts (Map p194; 3 Norodom Blvd) Exquisite silk scarves, throws, bags and cushions. Other items: *kramas*, shirts, wallets and purses, notebooks and greeting cards.

Rajana (Map pp190-1; 170 Ph 450) Beautiful selection of cards, some quirky metalware, quality jewellery, bamboo crafts and a range of condiments from Cambodia. It also has a booth in nearby Psar Tuol Tom Pong.

Tabitha (Map pp190-1; cnr Ph 360 & Ph 51) Premium-quality silk with a fantastic collection of bags, tableware, bedroom decorations and children's toys.

Wat Than Handicrafts (Map pp190-1; Norodom Blvd) Similar goods to NCDP. It's set inside Wat Than.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

See p256 for a list of airline offices based in Phnom Penh. See the boxed text, p189, for details on getting to/from the airport.

Boat

During the wet season, boats depart daily at 7am from the tourist boat dock to Siem Reap up the Tonlé Sap river (US\$25, five to six hours). Heading to Vietnam, there are daily departures from the same dock at 9am to Chau Doc (US\$15, four to five hours).

Bus

Phnom Penh is connected to nearly all of the provincial capitals by bus. There's healthy competition to keep prices down and all the companies are much of a muchness in terms

DEPARTURE TAX

The departure tax for domestic flights is US\$6 from Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, and US\$5 from Ban Lung.

CROSSING INTO VIETNAM: DIRECT TO HO CHI MINH CITY

The easiest way to get to Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City is to catch a Phnom Penh Sorya bus from Psar Thmei (US\$12, six hours). They leave every morning at 8am, 9am and 11am and go directly there with no changes at the Bavet-Moc Bai border crossing. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see p417.

of comfort and price. Their ticket booths are at Psar Thmei, which is also where they depart.

See the relevant sections for individual destinations and details on price and journey times.

Capitol Tour (Map p194; ☎ 217627; 14 Ph 182)

GST (Map p194; ☎ 012-895550; Psar Thmei)

Hour Lean (Map p194; ☎ 012-939905; 97 Sisowath Quay)

Narin Transport (Map p194; ☎ 991995; 50 Ph 125)

Neak Krorhorm (Map p194; ☎ 219496; 127 Ph 108)

Phnom Penh Sorya Transport (Map p194; ☎ 210359; Psar Thmei)

Car & Motorcycle

Guesthouses and travel agencies can arrange a car and driver from US\$20 a day, depending on the destination. See right for motorcycle rental details.

Share Taxi, Pick-up & Minibus

Share taxis are an option if you need to travel outside of the bus schedules. Expect to pay US\$2.50 for a space at the back and US\$5 for a front seat. For Kampot, Krong Koh Kong and Sihanoukville they leave from Psar Dang Kor (Map pp190-1), while minibuses, pick-ups and taxis for most other places leave from near Psar Thmei (Map p194). Vehicles for Sway Rieng and Vietnam leave from Chbah Ampeau taxi park (Map pp190-1).

GETTING AROUND**Bicycle**

Bicycles can be hired from most guesthouses and hotels from US\$1 a day.

Cyclo & Tuk-tuk

Cyclos aren't so common now that tuk-tuks have invaded the city. Tuk-tuks are a pleasant way to get about town but much slower than

a moto. Cyclos cost 1000r for a short ride. Tuk-tuks are double.

Moto

Motos are everywhere and can be recognised by their baseball caps. The ones near the tourist areas can generally speak a good level of street English. Short rides around the city cost 1000r, and 2000r to venture out a little further towards the market areas. At night these prices double. To charter one for a day, expect to pay US\$6 to US\$8. Night-time prices are double.

Motorcycle

Exploring Phnom Penh and the surrounding areas on a motorbike is a very liberating experience. The following places rent for between US\$5 and US\$9 per day.

Lucky! Lucky! (Map p194; ☎ 212788; 413 Monivong Blvd)

New! New! (Map p194; ☎ 012-855488; 417 Monivong Blvd)

Taxi

There aren't many metered taxi companies in the city. The most reliable is **Taxi Vantha** (☎ 012-855000), offering taxis 24 hours a day.

AROUND PHNOM PENH

There are several sites close to Phnom Penh that make for interesting excursions. While the significant town of Oudong and the Kirirom National Park each require an entire day on their own, the others are close enough to one another to be realistically combined into one busy day trip.

OU Dong

Before the capital moved to Phnom Penh in 1866, it was based here in Oudong, ruling over the country for more than two centuries from its hilltop location. Now it seems rather abandoned with only a few scattered temples and stupas left standing, some of which contain the royal remnants of King Monivong (1927-41) and King Ang Duong (1845-59). The climb up the hills is steep but offers a great view.

Buses depart from Phnom Penh for Oudong every hour (4500r, one hour). They drop you off at the access road and from there it's another 4000r by moto.

Tonlé Bati

Locals love to come to this **lake** (admission US\$3) for picnics, as along the way they can stop off at the two 12th-century temples: Ta Prohm and Yeay Peau. Ta Prohm is the more interesting of the two; it has some fine carvings still in good nick, depicting scenes of birth, dishonour and damnation.

Buses going to Takeo (5000r) can drop you off here, then it's a quick moto to the temples.

PHNOM CHISOR

This 11th-century structure is a well-preserved laterite **temple** (admission US\$3) that runs in a straight line in the direction of Angkor. It has a peaceful locale on the top of the hill, with stunning views of the countryside and the sacred pond, Tonlé Om.

To get here, follow the directions for Tonlé Bati (above), but stay on the bus a little longer.

PHNOM TAMAO WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

The **Phnom Tamao sanctuary** (admission 1000r) for rescued animals is home to gibbons, sun bears, elephants, tigers, deer and a massive bird enclosure. They were all taken from poachers or abusive masters and are kept here for safe keeping and a sustainable breeding programme. All the money raised goes back into protecting Cambodia's frequently preyed upon wildlife.

To get here you will require your own wheels or a moto. A moto should cost around US\$8. It is about 45km south of Phnom Penh. Take the NH2 for about 39km then turn right at the sign. From here, head straight down the sandy track and past the side show.

KIRIROM NATIONAL PARK

This is a lush elevated park 112km southwest of Phnom Penh. There are some winding walking trails that lead to cascading waterfalls (in the wet season) or light showers in the dry season. Hiking up the Phnom Dat Chivit (End of the World Mountain) you will arrive cliff side to face an amazing view of the Elephant and Cardamom Mountain ranges.

Kirirom offers a community tourism programme with the proceeds from the educational walks going directly back into the

community. For details, contact **MLup Baitong** (☎ 023-214409; mlup@online.com.kh).

SIEM REAP

☎ 063 / pop 862,500

Before the world's spotlight shone on Siem Reap as home to what some consider the eighth wonder of the world (that's Angkor Wat by the way, not Khmer traffic), it was a sleepy province, somewhere out in the sticks in northwestern Cambodia. Re-wind to the 16th century, and the battle between the Siamese and Khmers for control of the area ended with the Khmers as victors and a nose-waving name change; Siem Reap diplomatically means 'Siamese Defeated'.

These days it is a large precinct of sprouting hotels, restaurants and bars, an enviable combination of mind-blowing sights, wildlife activities and a friendly and safe town with a lively nightlife scene.

ORIENTATION

The Stung Siem Reap divides the city into eastern and western blocks that seep out away from the city and into little villages. Most of the action is centred around Psar Chaa, a compact area crammed full of boutiques, eateries and drinking holes. The NH6 leading to the airport is flanked on either side by luxury hotels, and the star attraction, Angkor Wat, is just a few minutes north from the edge of town.

INFORMATION

For up-to-date information on the region, grab a copy of the *Siem Reap Angkor Visitors Guide*.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 119)

Fire (☎ 118)

Police (☎ 117)

Tourist police (Map pp210-11; ☎ 012-402424) At the main Angkor ticket checkpoint.

Internet Access

There are internet cafés everywhere. Most of them can be found in the Psar Chaa area and charge between 2000r and 4000r an hour. Laptop users can tap into wi-fi at the Blue Pumpkin (p205).

GETTING INTO TOWN**Airport**

Once you have landed, there is a ticket booth just outside the arrivals department selling rides into town. The prices are fixed: moto US\$1, taxi US\$5 and van US\$7. The airport is 8km from town on a pleasant route that is best enjoyed in a tuk-tuk. Tuk-tuks are not allowed in the airport complex, but wait just outside; they cost US\$3.

Boat

After pulling into the boat dock at Chong Kneas, there will be a horde of motos waiting for your custom. If you have organised your hotel beforehand then their chariots are normally there waiting for you, otherwise it's US\$1 to town.

Bus

Buses drop passengers off at the transport stop about 10 minutes out of town. A moto from here will cost US\$1 and you'll pay US\$2 for a tuk-tuk. Of course, many will be very insistent on taking you to their guesthouse of choice.

Money

ANZ Royal Bank (Map p204; ☎ 023-726900) In multiple locations. Visa/MasterCard ATMs.

Cambodia Asia Bank (Map p204; ☎ 964741; cnr Ph Sivatha & NH6; 🕒 7.30am-11pm) Cashes travellers cheques. Minimum US\$5 charge for credit-card cash advances. Also a booth at the airport.

Canadia Bank (Map p204; ☎ 964808; Psar Chaa) Free credit-card advances and changes travellers cheques. ATM is Visa/MasterCard-compatible.

Union Commercial Bank (Map p204; ☎ 963703; Psar Chaa) Changes travellers cheques and offers free Visa advances.

Post

Main post office (Map p204; Pokambor Ave; 🕒 7am-5.30pm) Make sure your items are franked before you watch them disappear.

Telephone

There are international and domestic phone booths all over the city. Phone cards are sold at the markets and the post office.

Tourist Information

Tourist office (Map p204) Near the Royal Gardens, operates regular opening hours and is quite helpful, though staff are a bit gruff. The Khmer Angkor Tour Guides Association is also based here.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Giddy-up cowboys! **Happy Ranch** (Map pp210-11; ☎ 012-920002; www.thehappyranch.com; Kraum 4 Svay Dang Kumli; tours US\$15-80), a horse ranch situated approximately 1.5km out of town, offers the

chance to explore Siem Reap on pure Cambodian horseback. Tours range from one hour to six hours and take you through the surrounding villages and secluded temple spots.

Artisans d'Angkor (Map p204; ☎ 963330) is a centre of arts and ancient crafts with two workshops that you can visit. The Chantiers Écoles branch is the centre of traditional carving and masonry and can be visited from 7.30am to 6.30pm. The Angkor Silk Farm can be visited to see the entire process; from mulberry trees to silk worms and spinning to weaving (8am to 5pm).

Forming part of the NGO, CLMMRF (Cambodian Land Mine Museum Relief Fund), **Cambodia Landmine Museum** (Map pp210-11; ☎ 012-598951; admission free, donations accepted; 🕒 7am-6pm) showcases a large collection of mines and artillery with a fascinating documentary of their destructive capabilities and consequences to the land and victims. Check out the garden of hidden mines (deactivated of course!) that visitors are challenged to find.

Krousar Thmey Exhibition Centre (Map pp210-11; ☎ 964694; www.drousar-thmey.org), meaning 'new family', was set up as an education facility for deprived children, including the blind and deaf, and was responsible for creating a Khmer version of Braille and sign language. The permanent exhibition, 'Tonlé Sap, sources of lives', showcases the significance of the Tonlé Sap and all its ecological and cultural glory.

Massages & Spas

With all that traipsing around temples, exhausted limbs and muscles are an inevitability. Thankfully Siem Reap has tapped into the lucrative market of rejuvenation and is crammed with spas and treatment centres. Most of the large resort hotels will have in-house spas that are also open to the public, with the added luxury of swimming pools.

Body Tune (Map p204; ☎ 764141; Psar Chaa area; massage US\$16.50) A range of massage styles offered here, including Swedish, Thai and reflexology.

Frangipani (Map p204; ☎ 964391; frangipani_siem_reap@yahoo.com; The Alley; massage US\$18) Massages are offered alongside body and facial beautifying treatments.

Krousar Thmey (Krousar Thmey Tonlé Sap Exhibition Centre; Map pp210-11; massage US\$6) This well-known NGO offers massages by professionally trained blind masseurs in its school behind the exhibition centre.

Seeing Hands Massage (Map p204; ☎ 012-836487; 324 Ph Sivatha; massage US\$4) Performed by the blind with part of the profits going to help the blind in the province.

Visaya Spa & Pool (Map p204; ☎ 760814; FCC Pokambor Ave; massage US\$25) The usual spa and massage treatments plus manicures and pedicures and some indulgent aqua therapies.

You can also try the cheerful massage places centred around the Psar Chaa area for a cheap but effective rubdown:

BE VIP Khmer Massage (Map p204; ☎ 012-275051; massage US\$6-12)

Khmer Massage (Map p204; ☎ 012-757120; massage US\$6-10)

Traditional Khmer Massage (Map p204; ☎ 012-757120; massage US\$6-10)

SLEEPING**Psar Chaa Area**

Shadow of Angkor Guesthouse Bar & Restaurant (Map p204; ☎ 964774; shadowofangkor@hotmail.com; Pokambor Ave; r US\$6-20; 🍷 🍷 🍷) This is a smart choice for budget travellers; a colonial building of fine rooms and a brilliant riverside location, plus a balcony restaurant that catches the breeze.

Steung Siemreap Hotel (Map p204; ☎ 965167; www.steungsiemreaphotel.com; Ph 9; r US\$70-250; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Located in the quiet back streets, this upmarket hotel is a surprising find. It offers all of the trimmings one would expect from a top-end establishment and is just seconds away from all the action.

Phlauh Sivatha Area

Dead Fish Tower Inn (Map p204; ☎ 012-630377; www.deadfishtower.com; r US\$5-20; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Good, friendly, no-fuss accommodation right next to its famous restaurant (p205).

our pick Hotel de la Paix (Map p204; ☎ 966000; www.hoteldelapaixangkor.com; US\$300-750; 🍷 🍷 🍷) A highly stylised hotel that is fresh, sumptuous and a touch art nouveau. Its top suite with private swimming pool is the ultimate in luxury.

N6 West

Earthwalkers (Map pp210-11; ☎ 760107; www.earthwalkers.no; dm US\$4, s/d/tw US\$9-17, f US\$25; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Run by Norwegians in a quiet location. Comfortable rooms, and an intimate bar and restaurant.

Prince Mekong Villa (Map pp210-11; ☎ 012-437972; www.princemekong.com; s/tw/tr US\$7/10/11) Happy guests buzz about the range of services provided here; free laundry, breakfast, bicycle and a knowledgeable and helpful manager. The vibe is cordial and communal.

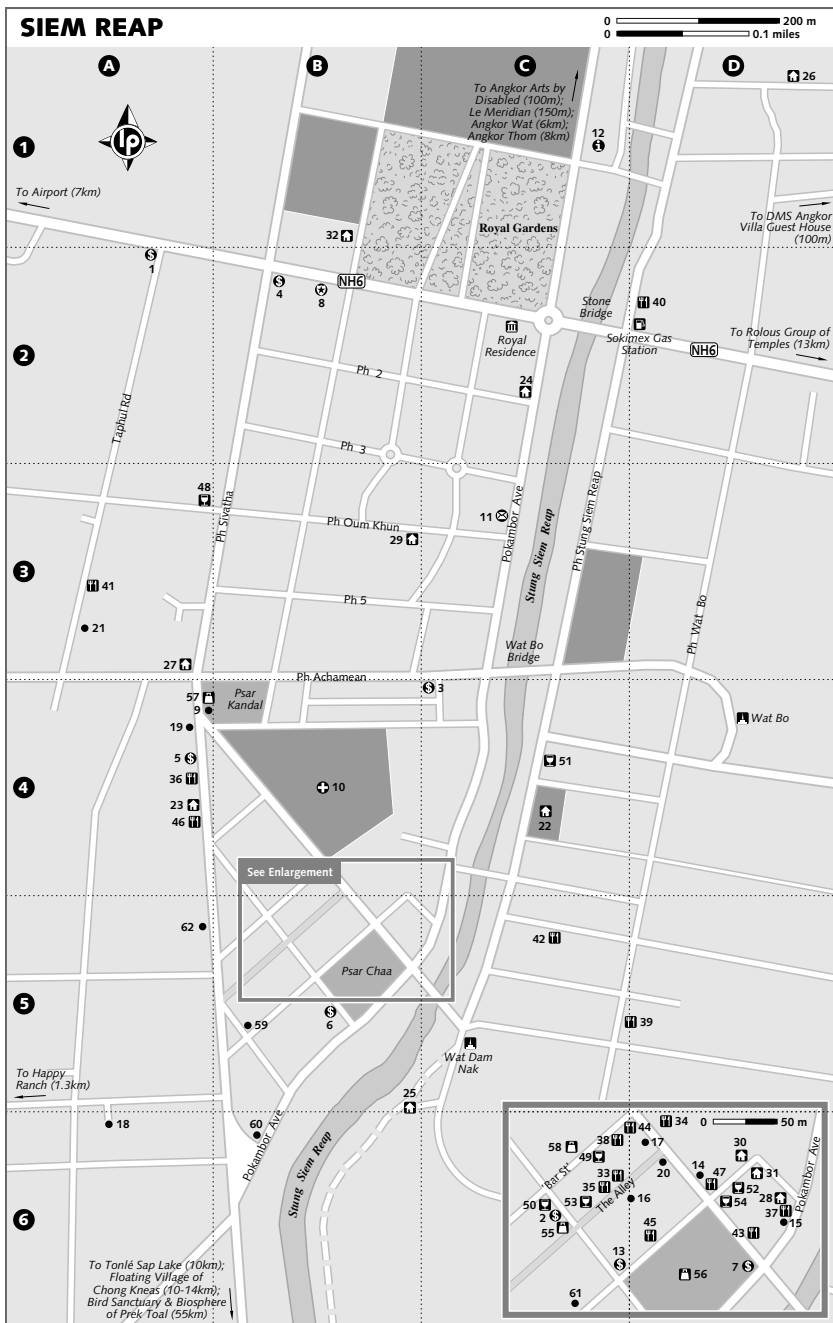
Paul Drubule Hotel & Tourism School (Map pp210-11; ☎ 963673; www.ecolepauldubrule.org; r US\$20-35; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Paul Drubule cofounded the Novotel hotel group, so it's no surprise that his student-run hotel offers high-quality service and well-maintained rooms. Proceeds go back into maintaining this tourism education centre.

East Bank of the River

Golden Banana Boutique Hotel & B&B (Map p204; ☎ 012-885366; www.golden-banana.com; B&B r US\$19-25, hotel r US\$35-50; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) Tranquil pagodas garnished with leafy plants, a swimming pool and wireless internet connection. This boutique hotel packs a lot in and has gained itself a loyal following among regular visitors.

Bopha Angkor Hotel & Restaurant (Map p204; ☎ 964928; www.bopha-angkor.com; r US\$38-58; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) On the breezy east bank of the river and hiding behind a barrage of plants, this upscale hotel offers tastefully decorated rooms and a comprehensive range of services.

Heritage Suites Hotel (Map p204; ☎ 969100; www.heritage.com.kh; r US\$95, ste US\$160-225; 🍷 🍷 🍷 🍷) Jacuzzi floozies will be impressed with the jet-stream baths in this stylish hotel. With its sleek, oriental-inspired interiors, built-in saunas and private gardens, it has created a zone of glamorous Zen.



INFORMATION		SLEEPING		DRINKING	
Anz Royal Bank	1 A2	Bopha Angkor Hotel	22 C4	Abacus Garden Restaurant & Bar	48 A3
Anz Royal Bank	2 C6	Dead Fish Tower Inn	23 A4	Angkor What? Bar	49 C6
Anz Royal Bank	3 C4	FCC Angkor	24 C2	Boosters	50 C6
Blue Pumpkin	(see 34)	Golden Banana	25 B5	Chilli Si-Dang Wine Bar	51 C4
Cambodia Asia Bank	4 B2	Heritage Suites Hotel	26 D1	Laundry Bar	52 D6
Cambodia Commercial Bank	5 A4	Hotel de la Paix	27 A3	Linga Bar	53 C6
Canada Bank	6 B5	Shadow of Angkor Guesthouse	28 D6	Warehouse	54 D6
CCB Exchange Booth	7 D6	Shinta Mani Hotel & Institute of Hospitality	29 B3		
Central Police Station	8 B2	Steung Siemreap Hotel	30 D6	SHOPPING	
DHL	9 A4	Steung Siemreap Hotel	31 D6	Colors of Cambodia	55 C6
EMS	(see 11)	Victoria Angkor Resort & Spa Hotel	32 B1	Psar Chaa	56 D6
Hospital	10 B4			Psar Kandal	57 A4
Khmer Angkor Tour Guides Association	(see 12)			Rajana	58 C6
Main Post Office	11 C3			Shenga	(see 38)
Tourist Office	12 C1	EATING			
Union Commercial Bank	13 C6	Amok	33 C6	TRANSPORT	
		Blue Pumpkin	34 D6	Capitol Transport	59 B5
		Body Tune	15 D6	GST	60 B6
		Frangipani	16 D6	Helicopters Cambodia	61 C6
		Khmer Massage	17 D6	Hour Lean	62 A5
		Les Chantiers Ecoles	18 A6		
		Seeing Hands Massage 4	19 A4		
		Traditional Khmer Massage	20 D6		
		Funky Munky Bar & Diner	37 D6		
		Le Tigre de Papier	38 C6		
		Les Orientalistes	39 D5		
		Local Food Stalls	40 D2		
		Sala Bai	41 A3		
		Singing Tree Café	42 C5		
		Socheata 2 Restaurant	43 D6		
		Soup Dragon	44 D6		
		Taj Mahal	45 D6		
		Tell Restaurant	46 A4		
		Viva	47 D6		

Further Afield

DMS Angkor Villa Guest House (☎ 012-531037; svaysavong@gmail.com; s US\$5-10, d US\$6-12; 🏠 📶) Housing intrepid travellers with a conscience, this ethical accommodation has spotless units with attached bathrooms. A percentage of the profits go to the Savong Language School.

Shinta Mani Hotel & Institute of Hospitality (Map p204; ☎ 761988; www.shintamani.com; r US\$80-105; 🏠 📶) This plush hotel of modern Khmer furnishings and enormous Khmer smiles also offers free hospitality training to high-risk youths. It has an excellent spa offering hot-stone therapy, body wraps, herbal baths and facials.

FCC Angkor (Map p204; ☎ 760280; www.fccambodia.com; r US\$90-330; 🏠 📶) Reliably sophisticated, the Siem Reap branch of the famous Foreign Correspondents' Club is set in the former governor's mansion. The glamorous hotel has calming rooms and is surrounded by its chic boutiques and gallery.

Victoria Angkor Resort & Spa Hotel (Map p204; ☎ 760428; www.victoriahotels-asia.com; r US\$285-440; 🏠 📶) An enormous resort of 120 consistently luxurious rooms. Book on the net for dramatically reduced rates.

EATING

Taj Mahal Restaurant (Map p204; ☎ 963353; Psar Chaa area; mains US\$1.50-4; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This halal restaurant may not look much from

the outside, but while it lacks in design, it packs in flavour. Northern Indian cuisine is the speciality.

Blue Pumpkin (Map p204; ☎ 963574; www.tbumpkin.com; Psar Chaa area; mains US\$1.50-5; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner; 📺) Climb the stairs of this café and bakery and enter a world of expressionist industrial design and Head Kandi tunes. The wall-to-wall sofa beds incite a gleeful kicking off of dusty flip-flops, while bed-tray refreshments make you feel truly spoilt.

Socheata 2 Restaurant (Map p204; ☎ 761416; socheata_2@yahoo.com; Psar Chaa area; mains US\$1.50-12; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A Khmer restaurant that does not drown everything in oil, it offers a big range of Cambodian salads including banana leaf, pomelo and watergrass.

Viva (Map p204; ☎ 092-209154; Psar Chaa area; mains US\$2-5; 🍽️ lunch & dinner) Mexican food and frozen cocktails are served at this kerbside restaurant, bringing the colour and spirit of Mexico to Siem Reap.

Soup Dragon (Map p204; ☎ 964933; 'Bar St'; mains 3000r-US\$4; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Specialising in Asian breakfasts, including a tasty version of *phò* (noodle soup), this speedy restaurant also does sandwiches and burgers. Cutlery is hidden in the wooden box.

Dead Fish Tower (Map p204; ☎ 012-630377; Ph Sivatha; mains US\$3-19; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Jungle junk meets tin shed; the radical Dead Fish with its lofty levels, live crocodile pit and appetising

CAMBODIA

CAMBODIA

Thai food offers a unique and surreal dining experience.

Amok Restaurant (Map p204; ☎ 012-800309; The Alley; mains US\$3.50-6; 🍴 dinner) This ambient little restaurant is a consistently excellent provider of authentic Khmer dishes, including of course the famous *amok* (baked fish with lemongrass and lemongrass in banana leaf).

Les Orientalistes (Map p204; ☎ 012-440627; entenu@online.com.kh; 613 Ph Wat Bo; US\$4-12; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This bright and exotic restaurant with its voluptuous archways and Turkish rugs channels the souqs of North Africa. It serves an international mix of Khmer, French and Moroccan cuisine.

Le Tigre de Papier (Map p204; ☎ 012-265811; mains US\$5.50-9; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Heaving every night, this restaurant serves everything from Vietnamese *nem* (spring rolls) to Greek mous-saka. It also acts as a movie house, used bookstore and is topped off by a lingerie boutique upstairs.

Cambodian BBQ (Map p204; ☎ 965407; cambodianbbq@angkorw.com; The Alley; mains US\$8-9; 🍴 dinner) This pleasant restaurant has traditional Phnom Pleung stoves to grill up crocodile, snake, ostrich and kangaroo alongside unlimited free noodles and vegetables.

Tell Restaurant (Map p204; ☎ 963289; 374 Ph Sivatha; mains US\$1.50-18.50; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Enjoy cheese fondue while overlooking the busy street below. This restaurant specialises in

German food and beverages, including heavy schnitzels and sausages that will leave you stuffed.

DRINKING

Warehouse (Map p204; Psar Chaa area; ☎ 10.30am-3am) A Western bar where you can hear yourself think and your mates talk. There is also a gallery upstairs that features local arts.

Abacus Garden Restaurant & Bar (☎ 012-644286; Ph Oum Khun; ☎ 11am-late, closed Sun) This is an exceptional bar of alluring grace. A flourishing garden surrounds a traditional villa that serves outstanding food and wine.

Boosters (Map p204; ☎ 012-726758; 'Bar St'; 🍴 6am-late) This casual corner bar blends delicious fruit juices to make an assortment of non-alcoholic cocktails and shakes.

Chili Si-Dang Wine Bar (Map p204; ☎ 012-723488; ☎ 11.30am-late) Riverside and with a balcony to make the most of the location, this is a tranquil bar offering a good selection of international and vintage wines.

Linga Bar (Map p204; ☎ 012-246912; The Alley; 🍴 5pm-late) Madonna hogs the stereo at this gay-friendly bar. Colourful, cool and contemporary, most people are content to sip cocktails on the lounge, but a mirror ball does spin optimistically in the background.

Angkor What? (Map p204; ☎ 012-490755; tastypuddings@yahoo.co.uk; 'Bar St'; 🍴 6pm-late) This Siem Reap institution manages to pack them in

every night. The later the night the louder the revelry, with regular drink deals to keep the punters well and truly liquefied.

Laundry Bar (Map p204; ☎ 016-962026; www.laundry-bar.com; 🍴 6pm-late) One of the few options for late-night grooving. The tunes are cool and the atmosphere is one of passive partying.

ENTERTAINMENT

Nearly all of the major hotels offer nightly *apsara* dances (royal ballet), though they are often touristy and not so authentic. Another alternative is a pleasant evening of classical music. **Beatocello** (Map pp210-11; Jayavarman VII Children's Hospital; admission by donation; 🎻 7.15pm Sat) has cello concerts featuring original music and Bach compositions. It funds free medical treatment to local children.

SHOPPING

Angkor Arts by Disabled (Map p204; ☎ 012-538059; www.aadcam.org) Stone and marble carvings brought to you by Siem Reap's disabled community. Near Spean Neak or Dragon Bridge.

Colors of Cambodia (Map p204; ☎ 965021; Psar Chaa area) Bright and fun books, cards and works of art by young local painters.

Rajana (Map p204; ☎ 964744; Psar Chaa area) Traditional handicrafts, paintings and clothing can all be found here.

Shenga (Map p204; ☎ 012-260015) A fair-trade boutique of sexy lingerie. Above Le Tigre de Papier restaurant, in Psar Chaa.

Psar Chaa

The old market is a treasure-trove of silks, woven bags, trinkets and souvenirs. Past all the stalls there is an interesting mall just selling jewellery. You will see it blinking in the distance.

Psar Kandal

Just up the road from the old market is Psar Kandal (Central Market). This is a newer, smaller version of the old market selling the same sort of stuff. If it gets too cramped at Psar Chaa, then come here, it's much quieter and the vendors are less in-your-face.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Siem Reap is now well connected to most neighbouring Asian cities. Prices for a domestic flight to Phnom Penh normally start at

CROSSING INTO THAILAND: SIEM REAP TO BANGKOK

From Siem Reap you can catch a direct bus – with one change over at the Poipet border crossing – to Khao San Rd in Bangkok for US\$11. You can arrange tickets through any travel agency. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see the boxed text, p158.

US\$75 (45 minutes). See p256 for a list of airlines in Siem Reap.

Boat

Boats from Battambang to Siem Reap take anywhere from three to eight hours depending on the season. The trip costs US\$15 and boats leave from the dock. Travelling in the other direction, boats leave from Chong Kneas.

Bus

The roads from Siem Reap to the major cities are now very much improved. Buses depart from the transport stop.

Buses to Phnom Penh (US\$3.50, five to six hours) will normally stop off in Kompong Thom en route so you can hop off there if need be. Buses also travel to Battambang (US\$4, four hours) but the boat trip is a far more exciting option. Buses to Poipet (US\$4 to US\$8, five hours) will normally collect you from the hotel where you are staying. All the major bus companies are represented in Siem Reap, the more reliable ones being Hour Lean, Capitol and GST. Tickets can be purchased at bus company offices prior to departure.

Share Taxi & Pick-up

Taxis leave from the Sokimex gas station (Map p204) near the Stone Bridge. Negotiate before you hop in. See the relevant destination sections for details of prices and journey times.

GETTING AROUND

Siem Reap is easily navigated on foot, but if all that exploring has worn you out then short trips around the town on a moto are 1000r, double that for a tuk-tuk. Motorcycles are not permitted to be driven by foreigners in Siem Reap.

DINING FOR A CAUSE

These are some fabulous restaurants that support worthy causes or assist in the training of Cambodia's future hospitality gurus.

- **Our pick Singing Tree Café** (Map p204; ☎ 965210; info@singingtreecafe.com; mains US\$1.50-3; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed Mon) Also a community centre, yoga studio and gallery, this garden café of scrumptious muffins, decent coffee and health food dedicates a percentage of profits to worthy sectors of wildlife conservation and street children.
- **Funky Munky Bar & Diner** (Map p204; ☎ 012-1824553; www.funkymunkycambodia.com; 🍴 lunch & dinner, closed Mon) There's no 'Royale with cheese' here, but Vincent Vega of *Pulp Fiction* would still enjoy this friendly rock 'n' roll biker bar serving the appealingly named 'Cardiac Arrest' burger with everything needed to clog a good artery. Quiz nights are held every Thursday with proceeds going to a different worthy cause each week.
- **Sala Bai** (Map p204; ☎ 963329; salabai@online.com.kh; set lunch US\$5; 🍴 noon-2pm Mon-Fri Nov-Jun) This school trains young Khmers in hospitality services. It is run by the NGO, Agir Pour Le Cambodge (To Act for Cambodia), and serves a menu of Western and Cambodian cuisine.
- **Les Jardins des Delices** (Map pp210-11; ☎ 963673; Paul Dubrule Hotel & Tourism School, Airport Rd; set lunch US\$7; 🍴 noon-1pm) You can have a three-course meal of Asian and Western food, prepared by students training in culinary arts.

AROUND SIEM REAP

ANGKOR CENTRE FOR CONSERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY (ACCB)

At Kbal Spean, this conservation centre shelters a hundred native animals appearing on the endangered species list. Tours of the centre are free and kick off at 10.30am each day.

It also operates a 'Day in the Life of Tour' where you can take part in rural activities such as roof weaving, rice planting and harvesting, cow cart/tractor driver training and cooking classes. All the proceeds benefit the participating communities.

Currently these tours (paid for by donation) are organised through **Villa Siem Reap Guest House** (Map p204; ☎ 761036; info@thevillasiemreap.com; 153 Taphul Rd).

FLOODED FOREST OF KOMPONG PHHLUK

As part of an Integrated Women Empowerment Project, the young women of Phum T'nout Kombot village take visitors on excursions through the flooded forests of Kompong Phhluk. The money raised supports the conservation of their fisheries. The trips in wooden dugouts weave between the trees and duck beneath the thick foliage. Fantastic fun!

A little further along is Kompong Phhluk's floating centre for ecotourism sponsored by the UNDP, which also houses a small restaurant.

A boat from the town of Roluos costs US\$15 to the villages of Kompong Phhluk. A trip in the dugouts is US\$2 with all profits going back into the programme.

TEMPLES OF ANGKOR

ANGKOR WAT

Angkor Wat is more than just an astounding architectural feat; it is the national symbol, the source of fierce Khmer pride and the epicentre of their civilisation. At first sight, it is a sumptuous blend of towers and sky, a magnificent spellbinding shrine to Vishnu with its captivating image replicated in the reflective lake below, a feast for unbelieving eyes.

This vision is the creation of King Suryavarman II, the powerful king who, during his reign (1112–52), defeated Champa and

extended the empire to northern Thailand, Burma and the northern tips of Malaysia. He built it to serve as a holy capital city and eventually as his funerary temple.

Angkor Wat is surrounded by a wide moat and enclosed by a laterite wall. The centrepieces are the five magnificent towers representing the heavenly peaks of Mt Meru, the tallest of which was the home of Vishnu. The third gallery is famous for its superb bas-reliefs of scenes extracted from the Hindu epics. Among them in the eastern section is the 'Churning of the Ocean of Milk' theme. Carved to dramatic glory, it shows the *asuras* (demons) and *devas* (gods) churning the ocean to produce an elixir of immortality. Also churned from the ocean's waters are the *apsara* (heavenly nymph or angelic dancer) girls; 1876 of the celestial nymphs are carved into the walls and pavilions of Angkor Wat.

Climbing the well-worn steps to the highest point is a vertigo nightmare. Angling at 70 degrees and rising 42m above the base of the upper level, it contains a 27m vertical shaft that once held treasures.

At sunset, Angkor Wat turns into an ancient city of gold. This is the best time to view it in all its glory, but it is also one of the busier times. The quietest is around lunchtime when all of the tour groups return to Siem Reap for lunch.

ANGKOR THOM

The bridge leading to the south gate of Angkor Thom has two incredible balustrades of giants handling *nagas* (mythical serpents, often multiheaded), an incredible first impression made only more dream-like by the elephants plodding out of the arched entrance topped by the four enormous faces of Avalokiteshvara (the Buddha of Compassion).

Angkor Thom (Grand Angkor) is a walled compound bordered by a 100m-wide moat. It was built by the great King Jayavarman VII (r 1181–1219) as his royal palace. The complex has five gateways, each with double portals. Four of the gateways point to each side of the compass, while the fifth is a Victory Gateway.

Behind the 8m walls lie some of Angkor's most important monuments: the Bayon, the Terrace of Elephants and the Terrace of the Leper King.

EXPLORING THE TEMPLES

One Day

After a morning of exploring Ta Prohm, where the temples have been gripped by the hands of nature, head for Angkor Thom and stare at the serene faces at the Bayon. After lunch stop by Phnom Bakheng before savouring the sunset at Angkor Wat.

Three Days

After the first action-packed day, beat the tourists to the beautiful Banteay Srei with a quick visit to Preah Khan along the way. Then make your way to Kbal Spean to see the carved river bed with a thousand *lingas* (phallic symbols). On the third day, slow it down with a peaceful ride through the tree-lined streets to the Roluos group before visiting the more secluded temples dotted about the area.

One Week

All of Angkor at your own pace plus the long haul out to the abandoned Beng Mealea. Enjoy!

Tickets

The **ticket office** (Map pp210-11; 1-day/3-day/1-week pass US\$20/40/60) and checkpoint are on the road to Angkor. One-week passes require a passport photo. You'll be whacked with a US\$30 fine if you are found at the temples without a pass.

Sellers

As soon as you dismount your moto/bike/tuk-tuk you will be accosted by hordes of youngsters selling guidebooks, bottles of water and souvenirs. They may form an unwanted gauntlet to the actual temples, but the books are very informative and the bottles of water much needed in the hot sun after some sweaty scrambling over ruins. At least they're not begging.

Eating

Nearly all of the temples have food stalls cluttered about the entrances so you'll never go hungry.

Transport

Motos are the most popular form of transport around the temples, they are zippy and inexpensive (US\$6 to US\$8 per day). Tuk-tuks take a little longer for those who have the time to savour the experience (US\$10 to US\$15 per day). Bicycles are great and environmentally friendly, and can be arranged through most hotels for US\$2 a day. Hotels can also arrange cars for US\$25 to US\$30 a day. If you want to travel like the ancient Khmers then leap onto an elephant – they wander around Angkor Thom for US\$15.

Those who want to take to the skies can opt for the **hot-air balloon** (☎ 012-814500; helicopter .cam@online.com.kh), attached by a line (US\$11), or chopper (around US\$140) for 15 minutes.

The Bayon

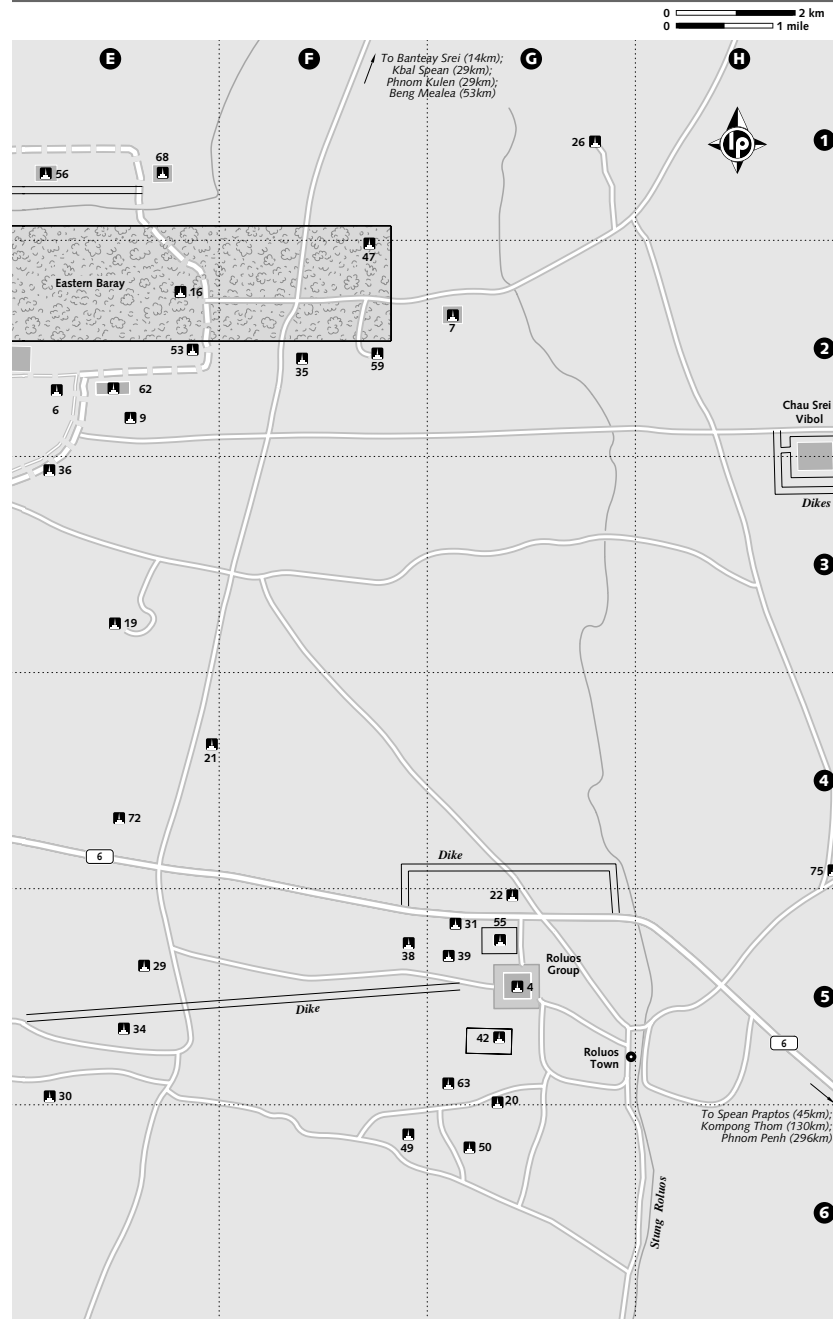
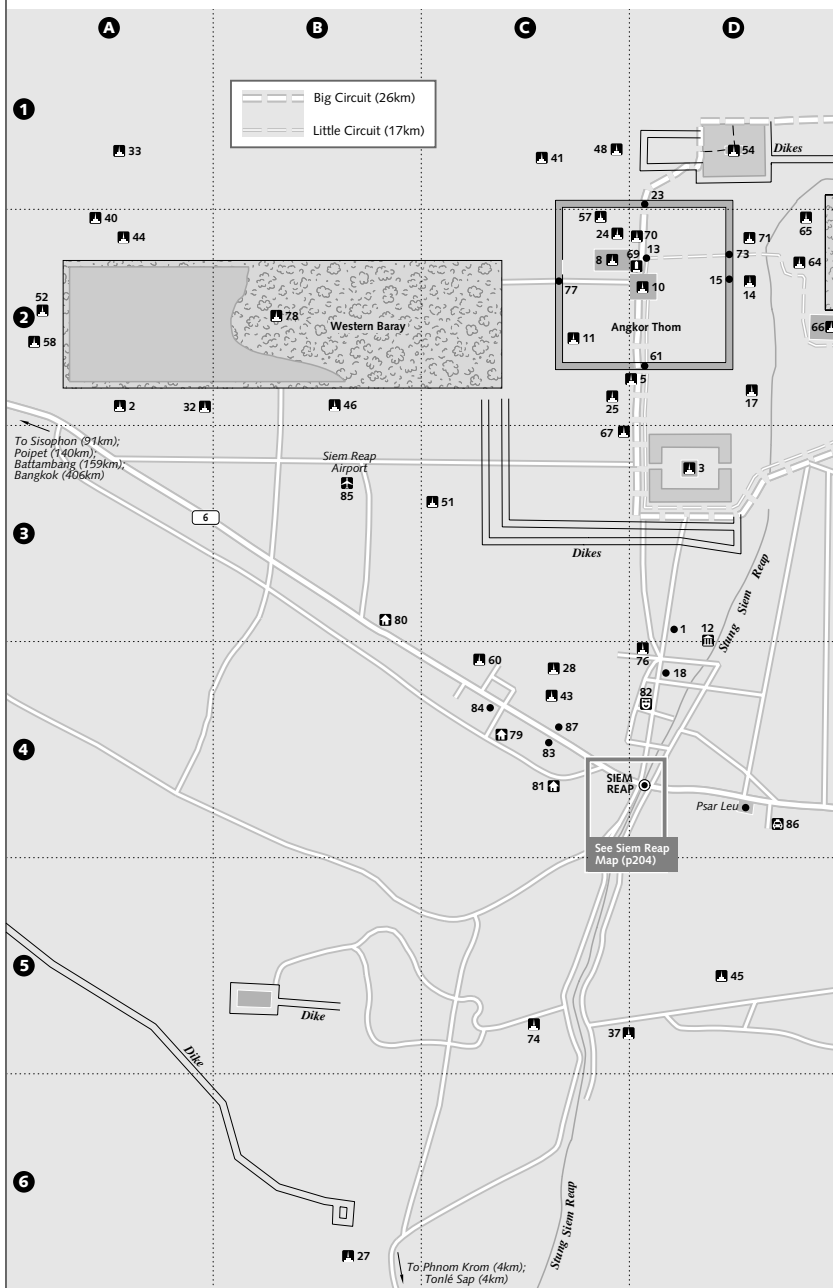
The Bayon was the King's state temple. It rises from the centre of Angkor Thom's compound in a cluster of conical towers. Smiling in every direction are the four divine faces of Avalokiteshvara, carved with a great likeness to King Jayavarman VII in his state of peaceful meditation. There are 54 towers in total with a staggering 216 faces. Complementing the faces are the intricate bas-reliefs depicting

daily life in the king's court and the bloody battles against the Chams.

Terrace of Elephants

East of the Royal Palace is the remarkable Terrace of Elephants. Royal war elephants march along its 350m length topped with hunters and warriors who are seated high enough to avoid the claws of tigers below. At the northern end is a splendid royal horse protected by

TEMPLES OF ANGKOR



CAMBODIA



CAMBODIA

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umbrellas and accompanied by *apsaras* and demons. The terrace was originally used as the reception hall for royal parties and guests and as the platform from which processions and performances were viewed.

Terrace of the Leper King

North of the Elephant Terrace, the Terrace of the Leper King is the topic of many scholarly arguments. It is so named after the statue which sits on the 6m-high platform. Some believe it represents King Yasovarman I, who allegedly died of leprosy, hence the name 'Leper King'. This theory was borne out of the lichen growth marks left on the statue, mottling it like the skin of those suffering from leprosy. On the statue itself is a 15th-century inscription that indicates the figure to be Yama, god of death. Historians believe that it was placed here to symbolise the terrace's primary use as the royal cremation site.

The Baphuon

Constructed by King Udayadityavarman II (r 1049–65), the Baphuon is a three-tiered

temple-pyramid with exquisite bas-reliefs depicting scenes from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. At the end of the 15th century, parts of the tower were dismantled to create a 70m reclining Buddha in a bid to turn the Shiva-devoted temple into a Theravada sanctuary; the Buddha is still there on the western wall.

**AROUND ANGKOR THOM
Ta Prohm**

This temple is as seductive as Lara Croft. The site of some of her cinematic adventures, it is a series of dark galleries and pillars held hostage under the iron clasp of gigantic roots. The walls are decorated with carvings of sensuous celestial nymphs with smaller roots crawling across them like a rash.

Built in AD 1186 by King Jayavarman VII, the temple was dedicated to his mother. In its prime it was a holy trunk of great treasures. According to the Sanskrit inscriptions on the walls, the temple held thousands of pearls, precious stones and golden dishes weighing more than 500kg.

Phnom Bakheng

When King Yasovarman I (r 889–910) moved the capital to Angkor proper, he built Phnom Bakheng as his capital. The temple, a 65m five-tiered pyramid, is a study of Hindu numerology. At the summit, five towers form a quincunx to echo the five peaks of the heavenly mountain. At its most magnificent, the pyramid was surrounded by 108 towers representing the 27 days of four lunar cycles.

An ascending temple of towers, this is a great place to view the rise and fall of the sun over the distant Angkor Wat. However, a gazillion others try to do the same so it can be rather frustrating to get that money shot.

Preah Khan

Where all faiths collide, this temple is a Buddhist complex with parts dedicated to Vishnu and other sections to Shiva. Part of King Jayavarman VII's impressive portfolio, Preah Khan was dedicated to his father, the multisyllable Dharanindravarman. It was originally a Buddhist complex housing more than 1000 Buddhist teachers. Covering 56 hectares, it is also another compound where temples and trees intertwine, evoking the conquistador feeling of discovering ancient secrets.

Prasat Neak Pean

An island temple, the Prasat Neak Pean is believed to celebrate Buddha's achievement of Nirvana. Sitting pretty in the middle of the Jayatataka reservoir (Northern Baray) it acted as a sacred shrine where pilgrims came to swim in the surrounding waters. The four fountains take four forms: elephant, human, lion and horse sprouted holy water that could cure the pilgrims of their ailments.

Roluos Group

The very first site of the ancient Khmer civilisation was here in Roluos, then known as Hariharalaya. The temples of Roluos were built by King Indravarman I (r 877–89). The first was Preah Ko (Sacred Bull) named after the Nandi statue found on site. Preah Ko has six brick towers each dedicated to his parents, maternal grandparents and to King Jayavarman II and his wife.

Next came Bakong, a terrestrial version of the celestial Mt Meru. It is a five-tiered pyramid-temple and was the inspiration for many of the temples that followed.

**FURTHER AFIELD
Banteay Srei**

This 'Citadel of Women' dedicated to Shiva is a stunning tour de force of classical art and the most ornate of all of the temples. Though it is relatively tiny in size compared to its mammoth counterparts, it has the most intricate carvings and is believed to be the instigator of the Khmer art movement. The detail is astounding and each doorway, each lintel and every wall is a masterpiece.

Kbal Spean

In the midst of the jungle, cool water rushes over a skilfully carved river bed, known as the 'River of a Thousand Lingas'. The phallic symbols of fertility have been shaped into the rocks along with some deities that recline under a set of rapids. Fifty kilometres northeast of Siem Reap, it takes about 1½ hours to get here from Banteay Srei on a sandy track. From the entrance, it is another 30-minute walk. The trip out here is best combined with a visit to Banteay Srei. Last admission is 3.30pm.

Phnom Kulen

From a lofty height of 20m, the Phnom Kulen waterfall cascades off the mountain where King Jayavarman II announced independence from Java and proclaimed himself god-king. The river here also runs over *lingas* and is an attractive sight for modern-day pilgrims. There is also an 8m-long reclining Buddha and a small temple nearby. It costs US\$20 to visit the sight, 60km from Siem Reap. Last admission is 3.30pm.

There is also a little-explored, unnamed set of ruins at the foot of the mountain that is gaining mythical status among locals. Not many know how to get there, though they know of its existence. Would-be explorers are challenged to find it!

Beng Mealea

Visitors to this temple (admission US\$5) are confronted with a mass of ruins half devoured by a ravenous jungle. Its abandoned stones lie like forgotten jewels swathed in lichen and its temple complex strangled by ivy and vines. Brought to you by the same man who built Angkor Wat, King Suryavarman II, it is similar in style to his later effort but receives only a fraction of the guests.

Beng Mealea is 70km northeast of Siem Reap on a sealed private road. It costs US\$40

to get there in a chartered taxi. Or you could combine it with a trip around the temples of Angkor for US\$65.

NORTHWESTERN CAMBODIA

Throughout history this has been the most war-torn region in Cambodia. Blessed with a lush wilderness in the mountainous Veal Veng, gem-rich terrain in Pailin and stunning temples in Preah Vihear, it's easy to see why it has been fought over.

KOMPONG CHHNANG PROVINCE

Named after its famous clay pots (*chhnang* means pot), this region has been producing them the traditional way for 5000 years and supplies most of the country. The surrounding area of rich soil benefits the agricultural farmers, who along with the pot makers make up most of the population.

Kompong Chhnang

☎ 026 / pop 44,100

Kompong Chhnang is a city divided. At first sight you would be led to thinking it was a lively port of docking boats and floating villages. Venture into town and a colonial municipality seeping with quiet charm gives way to the Cambodia of intrepid dreams: fields of lush rice paddies, languid oxen and smiley Khmers.

INFORMATION

There is an **Aceda Bank** (☎ 988809) near the market representing Western Union for money transfers. Phone calls can be made at the kiosk next to Sokha Guest House (right) or around the market.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Clay pot central, Kompong Chhnang is home to gold-specked ceramic pots, made from the earth aggregated from nearby **Phnom Meas** (Gold Mountain). Nearly every dwelling in the village of **Ondong Rossey**, 7km out of town, produces them by hand. If you are curious about their craft, the incredibly cordial people will muck you up with clay and show you how it's done. On your own steam, just head north on the NH5 and turn left at the sign, or hire a moto driver at sunset and travel along the dusty red trail that weaves through tranquil

rice fields. Towering sugar palm trees shoot out at regular intervals, punctuating the sky with their tufted silhouettes. With not a tourist in sight, bare-chested Khmers herding cows and chickens will be the only people you will see. If ever there was a reminder of the magic of travel, this simple moto ride is it.

SLEEPING

Holiday Guesthouse (☎ 988802; N5; r US\$3-10; ☹ ☹) 'Bending over backwards' does not half-describe the efforts here: free pick-up, bicycle, and basic Khmer lessons with every room rented over US\$5. Internet is available and a restaurant has been recently added on site.

Sokha Guest House (☎ 988622; r US\$5-15; ☹ ☹) Great rooms set back from the road in a peaceful garden setting with palm-shaded mat swings and cool verandas. This hotel has a definitive aura of calm.

Sovannphum Hotel (☎ 011-886572; N5; r US\$10-15; ☹ ☹) This is the poshest accommodation in town; ornate with carved wooden detailing, lofty ceilings and sun-drenched terraces. The back terrace has a spectacular view of the verdant village and mountain.

Sok Thai San Guesthouse (☎ 012-854595; N5; r US\$5-10; ☹ ☹) Another recommended accommodation option.

EATING

Rough-and-ready food stalls are aplenty in both the Psar Krom and Psar Leur markets, and along the river bank.

Restaurant Phnom Meas & 98 (☎ 012-800553; N5; mains 6000-10,000r; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A roadside diner out the front, palm-thatched bungalow out the back. The menu is exotic with pig stomach the most heavily featured ingredient.

Monorom Restaurant (☎ 012-785172; N5; mains 6000-20,000r; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Only Khmer spoken here, thus a display of pantomime ensues with the *barang* (foreigner) using actions and mime to describe their culinary desire, causing great mirth to the staff who must watch and decipher. The result is generally well-prepared and tasty meals. Prices are not listed, so get them to write it down beforehand.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Phnom Penh buses depart from Psar Thmei (8500r, two hours).

Buses bound for Battambang, Sisophon, Pursat, Poipet and Siem Reap will also pick

up and drop off in Kompong Chhnang. Just let them know where you are heading along the route so that they charge you accordingly. Prices can go up to US\$4 for a two-hour trip to Pursat during festivals.

GETTING AROUND

Motodups charge 500r to 1000r for short spins around town and US\$6 for a day.

PURSAT PROVINCE

Encompassing six districts, Pursat is one of Cambodia's largest and most diverse provinces. From the floating villages of Kompong Luong to the jungles afoot the Cardamom Mountains, the region offers a glimpse into the wildly varied Cambodian environment and way of life.

Pursat

☎ 052 / pop 59,850

Pursat is a busy town due to its location smack bang in the middle between Phnom Penh and Battambang. There is not much to do here except catch dust but it is the easiest base for exploring the region's sights.

INFORMATION

Telephone and fax outlets can be found around the market on the west bank of the river. An internet café is next door to the Phnom Pich Hotel.

Aceda Bank (☎ 951434) On the north side of the N5, allows you to transfer money, while moneychangers in the market will convert dollars into riel.

Tourist office (☎ 012-838854; Ph 1) Is very helpful and has a comprehensive brochure on the region.

SLEEPING

New Thansour (☎ 951506, 012-962395; Ph 2; s US\$3, d US\$5-15; ☹ ☹) The New Thansour (aka Thansour Tmey) is almost identical to the Phnom Pich in comfort and services, except more effort has been thrown into decorating.

Phnom Pich Hotel (☎ 951515; Ph 1; r US\$6-18; ☹ ☹) Resembling a Hong Kong housing estate, this trusted guesthouse has spacious rooms all with air-con and hot water and a downstairs restaurant. It has a handy internet café next door.

EATING

Mlop Svay (☎ 012-429787; N5; mains 5000-10,000r; ☹ breakfast & dinner, closed 2-5pm) A small and intimate restaurant oozing ambience. Due to the well-prepared meals, it is very popular

with visiting ministers and NGO personnel – the pretty young waitresses may also be a contributing factor.

Borei Thmei (☎ 951605; N5; mains 5000-20,000r; ☹ lunch & dinner) Dishes out Khmer, Chinese and Western food. Some of the bungalows come complete with hammocks – that way you can rest easy after the laborious task of stuffing yourself with delicious food.

Sensabymen Restaurant (☎ 012-927036; N5, Pth Prey village; mains 5000-30,000r; ☹ breakfast, lunch & dinner, 11am-last customer) Set on a sprawling property a few moto minutes out of town, this modern Khmer restaurant boasts a huge beer garden with bungalows and an unspoilt view of the green fields beyond.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are many bus companies serving the Phnom Penh to Battambang–Sisophon–Poipet route that stop at the Pursat bus terminal on the N5. To Phnom Penh costs 10000r to 10400r (two hours) and to Battambang 7000r (one hour).

Around Pursat

KOMPONG LUONG

Wooden planks tied to steel barrels is the ingenious construction method used by over 10,000 people keeping their homes afloat on the Tonlé Sap river. A large community, the majority of whom are ethnic Vietnamese, live, trade, play and pray entirely on water. The floating village is just like any other found in Cambodia, complete with happy children.

Motorboats can be chartered to take you out to the village for US\$5 an hour. A friendly wave from a passing tourist is enough to send youngsters into an ecstatic frenzy.

The Vietnamese of the Tonlé Sap have historically been discriminated against throughout time. Most recently at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, the residents, if not killed, were repatriated to Vietnam, only returning after the 1990s when the Khmer Rouge dwindled in numbers and were forced to retreat.

Depending on the season, Kompong Luong can be reached by hired moto from Pursat in 45 minutes to an hour and should cost US\$6 for the round trip, US\$25 by car.

VEAL VENG

Veal Veng is well and truly out in the sticks. A remote highland district 125km southwest of Pursat, this area forms part of the

Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary in the Cardamom Mountains. This secluded wilderness of overgrown bamboo, hanging ravines and small waterfalls offers the rare opportunity to view and track jungle animals (elephants, sun bears and, in rare cases, tigers) in their natural habitat.

Local guides with knowledge of animal tracks can take you camping up in the **Phnom Samkos Mountain** and show you what to look for.

Pramoy is the nearest town, set at the base of the Cardamom Mountains. The only decent place to stay is the no-name **guesthouse** (r US\$5-7), with no address and no telephone number, but it's a piece of cake to find as everyone knows of it. Referred to as Pthai Om Bol (Uncle Bol's House), it is made up of quaint log cabins with romantic four-poster beds, no running water but plenty of chickens, cicadas and twittering birds.

To reach the jungles of Veal Veng, you must go to the town of Pramoy from Pursat. Pick-up trucks load up as many people as life-threateningly possible and set off from the main gas station in front of the Pursat market (inside/back of 10,000r/US\$5, three hours).

Once there, hire a local moto (two hours to reach Phnom Sam Kos Mountain). The road is rough but spectacularly exhilarating, taking you past isolated jungle villages, wild rice and trickling brooks. Bank on US\$4 to US\$5 for the outing. Negotiate fees if you plan to camp the night on the mountain and explore deeper into the forest.

BATTAMBANG PROVINCE

Between 1795 and the early 1940s Battambang Province was the object of an entangled-custody battle between the Khmers and the Thais, ping-ponging back and forth between them. After some destructive turbulence at the hands of the Khmer Rouge in the 1990s, Battambang, Cambodia's largest producer of rice and gemstones, has returned to its peaceful state once more.

Battambang

☎ 053 / pop 154,000

Full of old-world charm, Battambang city stretches like a yawning cat – languorously awakening from a historical coma – along both sides of the Sankor River. The residents are friendly and composed and the elegant architecture is a sweet reminder of the colonial days of yore.

ORIENTATION

Split in half by the river, most of the city's commercial activity is centred on the west bank. Though the town is spreading, it is still relatively compact and easy enough to navigate on foot.

INFORMATION

There are phone booths all over town and some internet booths near Psar Nat by the river. There are also a few internet cafés dotted about charging US\$1 an hour. The main post office offers international telephone services as well but it is cheaper to go to the internet cafés and phone kiosks.

Conveniently there are a few banks in town that offer money transfers, travellers-cheque services and now finally an ATM at the Canadia Bank.

Acleda Bank (☎ 370122) Money transfers.

Cambodia Commercial Bank (☎ 952267) Cash advances.

Canadia Bank (☎ 952267) The ATM takes Visa and MasterCard.

Tourist office Near the governor's residence.

Union Commercial Bank (☎ 952552) Cash advances.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

You can catch circus shows and dances at **Phare Ponleu Selpak** (☎ 952424; www.phareps.org), a multi-arts centre for disadvantaged children. Phone, or look out for its posters for schedules. Motos can get you to the location out of town.

Battambang Museum (Ph 1; admission US\$1; ☎ 8-11am & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) has some fine lintel carvings. The small museum also houses a limited collection of artefacts from around the province.

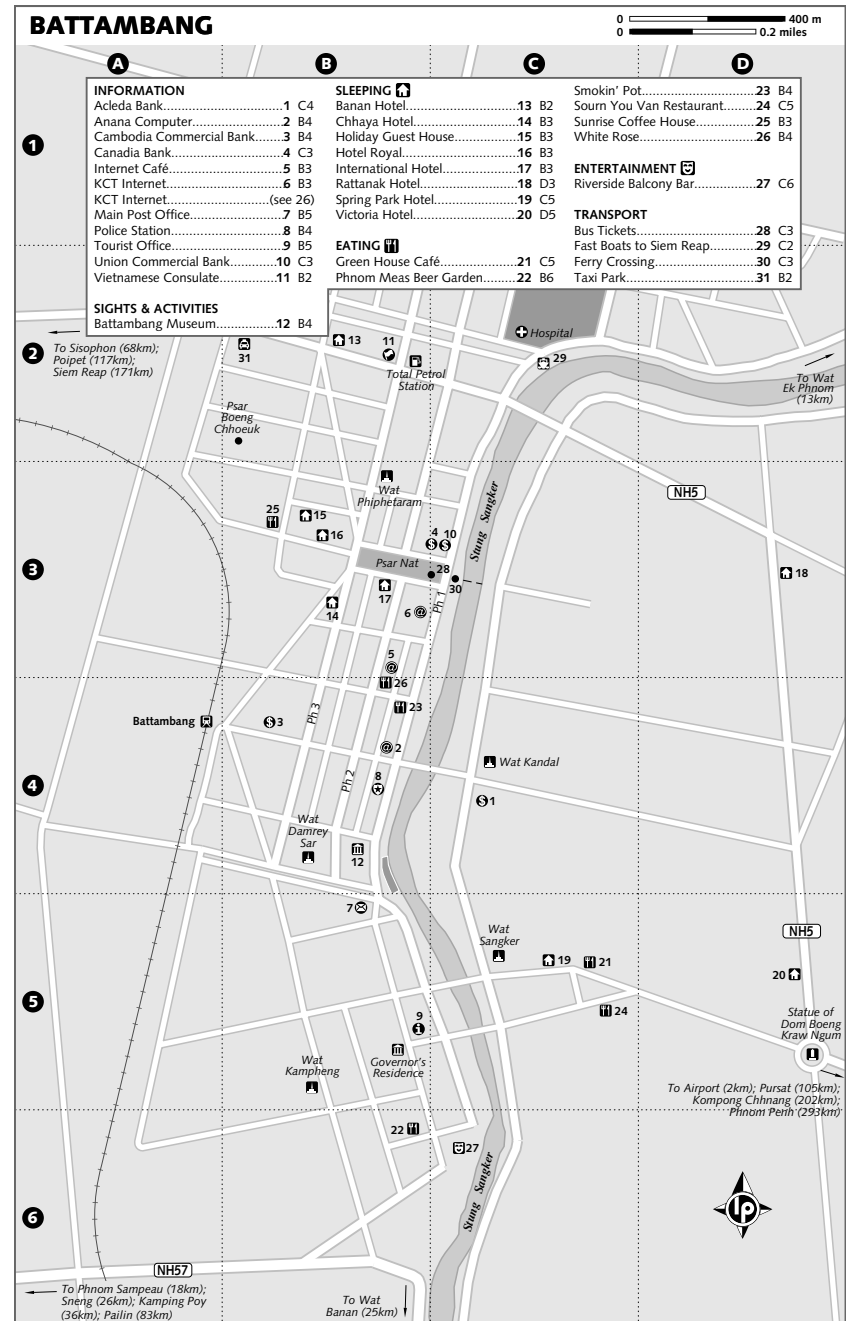
SLEEPING

Traditionally, accommodation was centred west of the river, but with the town's expansion there has been an upsurge in offerings eastside.

Westside

Chhaya Hotel (☎ 952170; chhaya.best@yahoo.com; Ph 3; r US\$4-12; 📶) A free shuttle bus to and from the boat station, helpful staff and some of the best English- and French-speaking guides available have kept the Chhaya popular and well reputed.

Hotel Royal (☎ 016-912034; royalasiahotelbb@yahoo.com; r US\$4-20; 📶) Large comfortable rooms



complete with all amenities and bustling with go-get-'em travellers. English-speaking guides wait dutifully in the lobby.

Holiday Guest House (☎ 012-647648, 092-215880; r US\$5-10; ♿) Very 'Being John Malkovich', the low ceilings and sterile corridors make six-foot-plus guests need to stoop and shuffle. The rooms, however, are pleasingly clean and utterly quiet, thanks to its location down a back street.

International Hotel (☎ 953999; Ph 2; r US\$10-15; ♿) Smart rooms with heavy wood detailing. Despite being opposite the market it manages to block out most of the noise. An atmosphere of calm belies the hotel's lively location.

Banan Hotel (☎ 016-509349; www.bananhotel.com; NH5; r US\$20-80; ♿) Bringing the bling to Battambang, this enormous and only-getting-bigger hotel is adorned with as many carvings as Angkor itself. VIPs can plunge headfirst into the free minibar before collapsing onto US\$3000 beds flanked by carved wooden thrones.

Eastside

Spring Park Hotel (☎ 015-789999; r US\$6-35; ♿) Modern and well-kept rooms make for a comfortable stay. The most expensive are suites that come with bathtubs and large adjoining sitting rooms.

Rattanak Hotel (☎ 953559; www.rattanakhotel.com; 85 NH5; r US\$11-20; ♿) Large Western-style showers with shower screens mean an end to sloshed tiles and wiping down loo seats. Not the only good thing about this hotel; every room comes with a family sized fridge-freezer.

Victoria Hotel (☎ 730364; NH5; r US\$13-20; ♿) Don't let the bunny on the big sign put you off, there are no playboys in this recently opened hotel, just spacious rooms with luxuriously mounted bathtubs and that hint of sparkle that comes with brand-new things.

EATING & DRINKING

Westside

Sunrise Coffee House (☎ 953426; 630 Ph Royal; mains US\$1-3; ☺) breakfast & lunch, closed Sun) A seriously laid-back café. Caffeine is blended into a variety of delicious forms here and can be enjoyed with fresh baked goodies or an assortment of California-style bistro snacks.

White Rose (Ph 2; mains 2000-6000r; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) If the bright, colourful fruit dis-

plays don't draw you in, then the bright, colourful people wolfing down their Asian meals will. Forever busy with fresh sandwiches and delicious fruit shakes always at the ready.

Smokin' Pot (☎ 012-821400; vannaksmokinpot@yahoo.com; mains 3000-6000r; ☺) lunch & dinner) Also a cooking school, the Thai and Khmer food here is simple yet tasty; the setting is easy and breezy.

Phnom Meas Beer Garden (☎ 012-510989; mains US\$1.50-4.50; ☺) dinner) Duck behind the veil of greenery into your own private bungalow and a traditional charcoal *chhnang* will be presented for all your barbecuing needs. You select the ingredients; everything from duck feet to seafood, and the waiter will do the rest.

Eastside

Green House Café (☎ 012-467313; mains US\$1-2; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) This café is indeed green and very leafy with lots of plants to freshen up an otherwise narrow and claustrophobic space. A good place to come for both Khmer and Western staples.

Souru You Van Restaurant (☎ 952080; mains 20,000-25,000r; ☺) breakfast, lunch & dinner) 'Contemporary Jungle' must have been the style brief for this restaurant. A chic log cabin with stylish forest décor and stylish (mostly Khmer) diners. The food is typically Khmer, but you really come here for the setting.

ENTERTAINMENT

Riverside Balcony Bar (☎ 730313; ☺) 5pm-late, closed Mon) In an old wooden villa overlooking the river, punters are soothed by a soft breeze while sipping on cocktails and listening to great music.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The NH5 from Phnom Penh is in good condition. Buses depart from Psar Thmei via Pursat (18,000r, six hours).

To and from Pailin, share taxis take about four hours (20,000r or 200B). From Poipet, private buses leave from the Tourist Lounge (32,000r, three hours). Or try Capital and Neak Krrohorm around the corner, which normally undercuts them.

From Battambang, buses leave from the transport station near Psar Boeng Chhoeuk to Siem Reap (US\$4, four hours) and Sisophon (US\$2, two to three hours).

Tickets can be purchased from booths near Psar Nat. Share taxis also leave from the transport station and depart once full.

Boat

The fascinating boat trip up the Stung Sangker and down the Tonlé Sap to Siem Reap is one of the most picturesque journeys through Cambodia. After chugging through the floating tip of bank-side settlements, the route soon turns into a people- and bird-watcher's paradise. Sailing through wetlands, weaving around water greens and scraping the marshland trees that whip inert heads (or legs depending on the water level) you will see rural Cambodia at its authentic best.

Tickets cost US\$15, and boats depart every morning from the dock at 7am. The journey times vary drastically depending on the season; a speedy four hours in the wet and up to eight in the dry.

GETTING AROUND

Motodups around town should cost US\$5 a day with that doubling if you take in the provincial sights. Single trips about town should set you back 1000r.

A novel way to cross the river is by remote ferry, pulled by rope. It travels to and from Psar Nat and the east bank for 200r.

The legendary Norry is a bamboo cart (nicknamed bamboo train) powered by motor engine. Travelling along the sporadically used railway tracks is exhilarating fun so long as a train isn't chasing you. Motos can take you for US\$10 return to the boarding spot where you climb on for a 30-minute ride (3000r).

Around Battambang

Outside the provincial town lie some picturesque villages of packed-earth boulevards and well-preserved villas. The villagers make their dough by producing banana chips, rice paper and fermented fish paste. Scenic journeys tracing the river can be arranged to see the traditional methods and to sample the goods. Motos will charge US\$5 for a trip out from town, and US\$10 if you combine it with other sights.

PHNOM SAMPEAU

High on a hill 18km away is the stunning Phnom Sampeau. With its limestone cavities and memories of genocide, it is a sad juxtaposition of beauty and brutality. The eerie

SCAM - CROSSING INTO THAILAND: THE SCENIC ROUTE

There is a bus scam operating from Thailand that takes travellers wishing to cross at Pailin through the rarely accessed crossing at Daun Lem-Ban Laem instead. They do this as the route to Battambang city from here is less straightforward than from Pailin thus dragging out travel time, and making travellers arrive too late to look for their own accommodation. The bus can then take them to their partner guesthouse for a commission. A similar scheme operates through O Smach in Samraong or Choa in Anlong Veng (see the boxed text, p222).

caves were used as slaughter chambers by the Khmer Rouge and still contain the skeletal remains of their victims. More than likely these victims were taken from the old temple at the rear, which was used as a makeshift prison.

The hill splits and opens in varying places to a series of grottoes that are decorated with shrines and Buddhas. There is enough of a depression to make for some interesting abseiling and cave exploration. Abseilers need to bring their own equipment and hire a guide.

A stairway to heavenly views can be found near the peak; 700 sweaty steps later, it delivers you to the summit, a golden stupa and a glorious view.

WAT BANAN

'Wat Banana' as it is affectionately known to locals - and the 'mini Angkor Wat' to everyone else, is a 12th-century temple bearing five towers sitting atop a 400m hill. Lying 25km southwest of Battambang, the unpronounceable King Udayadityavarman II is credited for building most of it in the 11th century, but it was that prolific Angkorian property developer, King Jayavarman VII, who finished it off.

WAT EK PHNOM

Built in the 11th century, this temple (admission US\$2) may not possess the grandeur of Angkor Wat or the drama of Prasat Preah Vihear but it is home to some intact and intricate carvings and the spot is a shady and peaceful place ideal for a lazy picnic.

CROSSING INTO THAILAND: PSAR PROHM TO BAN PAKARD

Catch a moto (100B, one hour) from Pailin to Psar Prohm. In a pick-up this costs 100B to sit in the front and half that to hold on in the back. Cross immigration into Ban Pakard and from there a bus to Bangkok should take four hours. For details of travel between Pailin and Battambang (including the bus scam), see p218.

KAMPING POY

This pretty dam is triumphantly used for recreation and fun; the sort of gaiety its builders, the Khmer Rouge, had not intended it for. As part of a grand irrigation system, the dam was to provide water for the rice fields allowing year-round rice cultivation, which could then be sold to fund the Khmer Rouge's murderous war efforts. However, locals believe it was designed to lure enemies into a watery grave. Whatever the reason, the dam now provides a cool spot to splash about on a hot day. You can also hire a boat for around US\$1 an hour. You can incorporate this dam into a day trip with the temples for US\$10 by motodup.

Pailin

☎ 053 / pop 23,100

Despite being the gem-mining capital of Cambodia, Pailin's reputation and history lack the sparkle of its precious stones. Once the stronghold of the Khmer Rouge, the majority of its residents are former revolutionaries who struck a deal with the government in 1996 to lay down their guns for an autonomous reign of the region.

Telephone calls can be made at kiosks near the Psar Pailin market. The **Canadia Bank** (☎ 952005) does not cash travellers cheques.

On top of Phnom Yat Hill, **Wat Phnom Yat** is a colourful complex where Buddhists worship; it's enjoyed by all for its hilltop view. The site also contains a century-old stupa and meditation centres. The monks used to be nervous about practising their faith here due to the omnipresent Khmer Rouge population, but with the influx of Khmers from other parts, who are almost all Buddhist, they have relaxed a little.

Twenty kilometres from town, **Phnom Kieu waterfall** is set in pleasant jungle surrounds on

the Phnom Kieu (Blue Mountain). The water runs into pools that are invigoratingly cold, which is great for cooling off after the 5km hike it takes to get here. A moto guide should get you out here for about 100B.

There are quite a few guesthouses in town, but they are normally fronts for festivals of the flesh, and best to avoid. The best of the bunch is **Hang Meas Pailin Hotel** (☎ 012-787554; r US\$11-50; 🍷), featuring a restaurant and nightclub. The rooms are smart and clean and have all the amenities like satellite TV, fridge and hot water, and there is a massive selection to suit all budgets.

To and from Battambang, a share taxi should cost 200B for a four-hour journey on a very bad road.

BANTEAY MEANCHEY PROVINCE

Battambang is a little smaller these days, its top half having been lopped off in the 1980s to create Cambodia's newest province Banteay Meanchey. The accents are a little different here and so are the temperaments – with its close proximity to Thailand and a busy overland commercial trade, the inhabitants are all go go go!

Sisophon

☎ 054 / pop 102,900

'Svay' to the locals, Sisophon acts as the refuelling spot for travellers on their way to Poipet and Siem Reap. Though there's nothing much to see and do here, it does make a convenient base to explore the temple of Banteay Chhmar.

Prices are quoted in baht, but riel and dollar are accepted readily. **Aleda Bank** (☎ 958821) acts for Western Union money transfers. Telephone calls can be made at kiosks dotted throughout, and internet is available at the decent price of 2000r an hour at cybercafés around town, though the connection can be frustratingly slow.

The permanently shut-for-something-or-other tourist office is hiding behind the Neak Meas hotel, between the hotel and the NH5. The tourist office staff are hiding too, but we don't know where they are.

Accommodation includes the small, family-run **Roeng Reung Hotel** (☎ 092-260515; s/d US\$6/7; 🍷), with snug and tidy chambers. Add \$4 to any room and the air shall blow forth strong and cool; in other words you get air-con. At **Phnom Svay Hotel** (☎ 012-656565; NH5; r US\$10-12;

🍷) US\$12 buys a shabby room, US\$10 an even shabbier one. It may not be as well maintained as the others, but nights here are the quietest.

Neak Meas Hotel (☎ 012-555349; r US\$12-20; 🍷) is the largest hotel in town, with expansion currently under way. Ears may want to be plugged as the karaoke bar and nightclub swing every night. A great all-rounder, but skip the restaurant; sadly it brings the good team down.

A bustling market doing furious trade provides self-caterers with an interesting shopping and dining experience. Otherwise, the best restaurant is **Phkayproek Banteay Meanchey Restaurant** (☎ 012-838934; NH5; mains US\$1.50-5; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner), an enormous and energetic place popular with travellers en route to elsewhere. Khmer, Thai and Western food make up the menu. Diligent and attentive locals make up the staff.

To reach Sisophon, from Poipet you can hail a pick-up either from the market near the roundabout or the Tourist Lounge (one hour). A cabin seat costs 100B, half that to cling on in the back. From Samraong, share taxis leave the transport stop near the market (200B, two to three hours).

Leaving Sisophon, buses and share taxis depart from the transport stop west of the market; to Phnom Penh it's US\$4.50, five to six hours, to Battambang it's 8000r, two to three hours.

Single motodup trips around town cost 500r. Venture further out along the NH6 and make it US\$1.

Banteay Chhmar

Sixty-one kilometres north of Sisophon are the abandoned ruins of this extravagant symbol of love and gratitude by King Jayavarman VII to his deceased son and the generals who assisted him in his final battle against the Chams. These battles are featured in the bas-relief carvings that depict fierce fighting with the insurgents along with other carvings of *apsara* dancers, and the well-preserved *Lokesvara* with his 32 arms (that actually represent 1000 arms). The complex of crumbling stones and invading jungle make it a scrambler's delight. It consists of a narrow central sanctuary or fortress, after which it is named (Banteay Chhmar means 'narrow fortress'), a moat, some temples and towers featuring those enigmatic faces (as featured

at the Bayon; p209) and their tight-lipped smiles.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Sisophon you can hire a motodup for the day for around US\$10 (two hours). On your own steam, head north along NH69 for about 40km until you reach Thmor Puok, and then from there it's about another 20km to the complex.

From Siem Reap, a Camry can be chartered for around US\$60 (about four hours).

Poipet

☎ 054 / pop 47,250

As soon as you get here, you should think about getting out. Nothing much to offer except soulless casinos and perhaps soulless scammers, providing the fresh bait from Thailand a less than favourable first impression of Cambodia.

The Cambodian immigration office is near border control (8am to 4pm). Also close by is the **Canadia Bank** (☎ 967101; NH5) for cashing travellers cheques.

Theaksmeay Guest House (r 200-400B; 🍷) is charming little guesthouse a stone's throw from the Tourist Lounge. Clean rooms with nicely papered walls are a nice change from the dirt-stained paint-peelers of norm. Ask the guys at the Tourist Lounge and they'll point you in the right direction. Another option is **Orkiday Angkor Hotel** (☎ 967502; oa_tour@online.com.kh; r 400-680B; 🍷), where the bamboo-green marbling creates a cooling effect the minute you step inside. There is a decent restaurant downstairs, while upstairs the rooms are cavernous with all mod cons.

From Thailand, there is a free OSP shuttle bus to the Tourist Lounge. From here coach tickets can be bought to the major cities: Phnom Penh (60,000r, seven to eight hours); Siem Reap (40,000r, five hours); and Battambang (32,000r, 2½ hours). The buses are comfortable, though a little expensive. You can walk around the corner to the Phnom Penh Sorya Transport and Neak Krhorhorm offices for cheaper fares.

Private taxis can also be caught from the Tourist Lounge and are priced per car: Siem Reap US\$50; Phnom Penh US\$70 to US\$80; and Battambang US\$40.

To climb aboard a pick-up truck, look for the frantic loading of Nissans in front of the market near the central roundabout (50B to Sisophon).

CROSSING INTO THAILAND: POIPET TO ARANYA PRATHET

Once in Poipet, independent travellers not on a direct bus from Siem Reap (p207) need to tell their pick-up drivers or motos to drop them off at *Rong Mool* (roundabout), which is the massive roundabout just in front of the border crossing. From here it is straightforward; pass through immigration and cross to Aranya Prathet, then catch a tuk-tuk 6km to the bus station (50B to 60B) where buses can get you into Bangkok in about four hours. You can also catch the train to Hualamphong station in Bangkok, which will get you there in six hours. For details on the 'scam bus' coming in from the opposite direction see the boxed text, p219. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see the boxed text, p158.

ODDAR MEANCHEY PROVINCE
Samraong to Anlong Veng
SAMRAONG

This is a transit town west of Anlong Veng. People come here from the O Smach border crossing to pick up connecting transport to elsewhere. There is nowhere to access internet or make telephone calls. **Aleda Bank** (☎ 012-200468), opposite the market, offers the usual Western Union money transfers and cash advances.

There's no reason to stay here, but if you get stuck, the following are your best bets for a bed and food. **Meanchey Hotel** (☎ 011-700099; r US\$5-10; 🏠), with quality rooms and all the amenities, is fitted out to suit the NGO workers who often stay here; it is all business, no fuss. **Ryk Reak** has no menu (prices on application); just tell them what you feel like and they'll cook it up from whatever ingredients are stocked in the kitchen that day. Opposite Meanchey Hotel, it is very popular with the locals.

To get to most cities from Samraong, a long and bumpy journey along terrible roads is in order. A moto to/from the O Smach border crossing will cost 200B (two hours). There are very few share taxis to O Smach or Anlong Veng.

CROSSING INTO THAILAND: O SMACH TO CHONG JOM

This is not the easiest border crossing to access. From the nearest town of Samraong it is a two-hour bumpy dusty ride to O Smach (see above), but once in O Smach it's easy-peasy – just cross the border into Chong Jom where buses can take you on to Surin (two hours). For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see the boxed text, p158.

A moto to/from Anlong Veng takes around two hours and costs US\$10 to US\$15 depending on road conditions – usually bad. Cars find it more difficult than a moto due to the trenches.

Share taxis go to Poipet via Sisophon and leave from the taxi station in front of the market around 7am to 8am (200B for a seat, two to three hours).

ANLONG VENG

Anlong Veng is 'up and coming', with money flooding in from the O Smach border crossing and tourists stopping by for a slice of Cambodia's modern and macabre history. It is fast becoming one of the country's most developed destinations.

Information

There is an Aleda Bank on the road to Siem Reap for Western Union money transfers and cash advances. There are a few phone kiosks around town, but no internet access.

Sights

Ta Mok, the ruthless murderer of millions and Pol Pot's right-hand man, died on 21 July 2006. Nicknamed 'The Butcher', he had been awaiting trial on charges of genocide in a Phnom Penh prison. Amid much controversy and protest, his body was permitted to be brought home by his children for a proper funeral and burial. Surrounded by the green Dangkre Mountains on one side and watched over by monks, his **grave** is a well-tended plot of (some would say) undeserved serenity.

Set as the foreground to the stunning lake he constructed to quell his paranoid fears of attack, Ta Mok's **former residence** now stands empty. The dwelling itself is not much to look at, but the up-close-and-personal views of the lake and wildlife are spectacular. Admission is a cheeky US\$2.

In an unkempt field around the corner from the Thailand border crossing is the blink-and-you'll-miss-it **tombstone of Pol Pot**. Nothing more than an unremarkable memorial, it marks the spot of the former Khmer Rouge leader's cremation; reportedly performed by Ta Mok on a disgraceful pile of burning tires.

Sleeping

Bot Uddom Guest House (☎ 012-779495; r US\$5-15; 🏠) The best thing about this guesthouse is that its back yard merges into the pretty lake. Rooms are very clean and upstairs a setup of large wooden tables and chairs is ideal for cards and chinwag sessions.

Monorom Guest House (☎ 012-900726; r US\$7-15) There is no hot water here but the staff will boil some up if you need it. Rooms are large and comfortable.

Eating

Pounlok Trorchekchet Restaurant (mains 6000-20,000; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) About 500m north of the central roundabout is this shady bungalow-style restaurant. Mostly Khmer food, but Western meals such as fish and chips also make an appearance.

Dara Reah Restaurant (mains 7000-10,200; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Locals come here for the steaming-hot noodles, which come buried under strips of meat and herbs. And also for a drink, as this is the closest thing to a bar the town has; it stocks a varied selection of beer.

Getting There & Away

From the Choam border crossing to Anlong Veng, it is a straightforward ride on a sealed road for US\$2 (15km). From Choam to Siem Reap, you can catch share taxis for US\$5 for a front seat, US\$2.50 to sit in the back.

From Siem Reap, there is a cluster of taxis that waits by the Sokimex station by the Stone Bridge.

For travel between Anlong Veng and Samraong, see opposite. For more details on the challenging route to the Preah Vihear temple, see p225.

Getting Around

The town's centre is tiny and easily navigated on foot. To the nearby sights, a moto can be hired for US\$5 to US\$6 a day. A single trip to the border crossing should cost US\$2.

CROSSING INTO THAILAND: CHOAM TO CHOAM SA NGAM

The border crossing with Thailand is just a few kilometres north of Anlong Veng. Catch a moto (US\$2) and hop off en route to see the semiblasted statue of soldiers, placed by Khmer Rouge and destroyed by Khmer soldiers. On the other side, transport is not so frequent. You can catch a taxi to Sisaket, which is the closest town. For details about getting to the major Cambodia cities from Choam, see left.

PREAH VIHEAR PROVINCE

Preah Vihear is a vast and far-reaching province that has had the gloomy job of watching its neighbours prosper while it remained constantly struggling in the background. But now with a commitment to making its treasures – three remarkable Angkorian temples – more accessible with better roads, its future is finally looking up.

Tbeng Meanchey

☎ 064 / pop 23,100

A small and nondescript town, the only thing going for it is its proximity to the temples. Khmers rarely call it Tbeng Meanchey, instead referring to it as Preah Vihear after the province.

INFORMATION

There's a bit of a tourist mafia, whose behaviour exasperates the helpful staff at the **tourist office** (🕒 7-11am & 2-5pm), who themselves are keen to promote tourism in the area and eager to dissipate the city's bad reputation. The tourist office is located at the southern end of town on the NH64.

Prices are quoted in baht but dollars and riel will never be knocked back. Bring a sizable amount of cash as there is nowhere to cash travellers cheques.

Aleda Bank (☎ 012-289851) Representing Western Union transfers.

SLEEPING

Bakan Guest House (☎ 012-694209; s/d 10,000/10,500r) Tentative steps across the rickety terrace of this quiet Khmer home will lead you to basic but pleasant rooms. Below is a swinging hammock tied to the home's supporting stilts; this is reception.

Phnom Meas Guest House (☎ 012-632017; s/d US\$5/6) Next door to the Bakan, this place comprises comfortable small units with fans and squat toilets.

Mohasambath Guest House (☎ 012-901844; r 8000-10,500r) An extra couple of thousand riels here is all that it takes to stop others showering in the same bathroom. Clean enough, but hard to distinguish from the others next door.

27 Usaphea (May) Guest House (☎ 011-905472; s US\$5-16; 🚻) Small rooms good enough to crash in but not much else. The most expensive come with air-con.

EATING

Mlop Dong Restaurant (mains 2000-5000r; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) Conveniently near the guesthouses and taxi station, this timber-shed restaurant doles out regular Khmer dishes. Mornings are the most atmospheric as locals on their way to Prasat Preah Vihear fill up the tables to wolf down their breakfast.

Dara Reah Restaurant (☎ 012-556146; mains 8000-15,000r; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A large and airy garden restaurant with a standard Khmer menu sprinkled with some Chinese and Thai dishes.

Langeach Sros Restaurant (☎ 012-1879241; mains 10,000-10,200r; 🍴 lunch & dinner) All of your Khmer faves and some Western dishes are served at this breezy eatery. Diners can also request tables to be set up in the upstairs area, good for those wanting a quieter, more secluded meal.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Share taxis ply the not so bad, but not so good NH64 from Kompong Thom to Tbeng Meanchey (20,000r, four hours).

Phnom Penh is 294km away; pick-ups leave 7am to 8am every day from Psar Thmei (25,000r to 30,000r, eight hours).

Leaving Tbeng Meanchey, share taxis leave from the taxi stand in front of the Bakan and Mohasambath guesthouses.

Preah Khan

Known also as Prasat Bakan, Preah Khan is a 12th-century complex that once served as a Buddhist monastery and for a brief period as the residence of King Jayavarman VII. The largest enclosure of the Angkor period, a mega 5 sq km, it contains numerous temple structures (some dating back to the 9th century), impressive carvings and a 3km-long *baray*

(reservoir). The Prasat Damrei (Elephant Temple) at the east end has fine carvings of deities and stone elephants. In the centre of the *baray* is the island temple of Prasat Preah Thkol and to the west, Prasat Preah Stung, a serene temple with a tower bearing four enormous faces.

Preah Khan is not a well-trodden tourist spot and is therefore a calmer way to experience the grandeur of Angkorian temples.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Kompong Thom or Tbeng Meanchey it is a tough five- to six-hour trip. Expect to pay around US\$50 for a chartered car, or US\$15 to US\$20 for a moto. From Siem Reap, bikers can take the rough and romantic Route 66 through Khvau, crossing ancient bridges including the Spean Ta Ong.

Koh Ker

Koh Ker was once the capital of the Angkorian empire under the rule of King Jayavarman IV. Now it plays a subordinate role to the jungle, which has taken over the site of close to 30 structures. The most notable can be found in **Prasat Thom** (admission US\$10), a seven-tiered pyramid, which is carpeted in greenery and resembles the Inca formations in Peru. A breathless 40m climb to the top is worth the shin splits for a stunning view. Just beyond is the jungle-immersed Prasat Krahom (Red Temple) that is reached via a causeway of *naga* barriers and made entirely of red blocks. Further still are the outlying temples that are also worth exploring: Prasat Bram for its five towers; Prasat Chen where the 'fighting monkeys' statue was discovered (now in Phnom Penh's National Museum, p192); Prasat Leung with its well-preserved Shiva *linga*; and Prasat Neang Khmau with its fine lintel carvings.

It is possible to stay in the complex in a wooden cabana if you bring your own hammock and food. Otherwise, the nearby town of Siyong (8km southeast of Koh Ker) has one basic guesthouse that offers clean beds, mosquito nets and candles for US\$2.50.

To reach Koh Ker, there are two alternatives. The first is to approach from Siem Reap via Beng Mealea on the private toll road. The three-hour journey in a chartered Camry costs US\$65 to US\$80. From Tbeng Meanchey in the east, the two-hour journey (72km) costs US\$10 return by moto.

Prasat Preah Vihear

Perched on the crest of the **Dangkrek Mountains**, the Preah Vihear Temple is divided into four *gopuras* (entrance pavilions) and courtyards. Connected by wide avenues and steep steps, these crumbling relics on the Cambodian side make a sharp ascent to reach its dramatic cliff-top climax and the serene views below.

Occupying the hair-split border between Thailand and Cambodia, Prasat Preah Vihear still remains a knot in the rope in the tug of war between them. Given to Thailand by the generous French in 1954, it was finally handed back after an international ruling in 1962. Despite this, the Thais are still grumbling that the temple belongs to them.

The temple began life in the 9th century and construction spanned the lives of four kings with the final touches added by King Jayavarman VI in the 10th century. It has only become accessible in recent years after the Khmer Rouge, who gained control in the early 1990s, finally waved the white flag in 1988.

SLEEPING

Raksaleap Guest House (☎ 092-224838; Kor Muy Village; r US\$5) Situated in the mountain-base village on the way up to the temple is this cosy wooden guesthouse. The rooms here come with a fan and mosquito nets. The bathrooms and toilets are shared and of the squat variety.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ignore the locals who tell you there are no share taxis from Tbeng Meanchey to Preah Prasat Vihear. They are the ones who will graciously offer their own car to be chartered for about seven times the price of a seat in a taxi; US\$70 is the opportunistic quote.

Pick-ups and share taxis *do* go to the temple and leave from the taxi station at around 9am daily (inside/back of US\$2.50/5, entire front cabin US\$10, two hours). If you do charter your own vehicle, the official price quoted by the tourist office is US\$30 to US\$40. From the bottom of the mountain at Kor Muy Village, hire a moto to reach the temple (10,500r up and back).

Starting from Anlong Veng, the moto journey on a horrific road takes about three hours in the dry season, double that in the wet. Cars find it difficult and bog often. Due

MINE YOUR STEP

Stick to well-marked paths as the Khmer Rouge laid landmines around Prasat Preah Vihear like they were going out of fashion.

to the ghastly conditions, expect to pay US\$18 for a moto to the base of the mountain. Some may only want to take you to Sa Em Village. From there you will need to hire a moto to get to Kor Muy (US\$2).

KOMPONG THOM PROVINCE

The birthplace of Pol Pot and the second-largest province in Cambodia, Kompong Thom bills itself as the 'Province of a Thousand Temples', and the impressive Sambor Prei Kuk contributes a hundred of them to that total. It can also lay claim to some beautiful countryside, which after the destruction of war is well on the way to recovery.

Kompong Thom

☎ 062 / pop 69,300

Kompong Thom is an ungainly city that curves around the Stung Sen to the east and west and is slashed down the middle by the NH6. Unfortunately, there's nothing to see in town. But beyond, the heritage site of Sambor Prei Kuk (p226) lies in a forest waiting to be explored.

INFORMATION

Aclea Bank (☎ 961243) Opposite Mitthapheap Hotel, for money transfers.

Tourist office (🕒 8-11am & 2-5pm) The director is very helpful and it has some good handouts.

SLEEPING

Prasat Prak Guest House (☎ 012-215536; r US\$3-5) A cosy new guesthouse, with the warmth of a family home, it has six basic but well-kept rooms that are tucked far enough back from the busy street to be peacefully quiet.

Arunras Hotel (☎ 961294; 39Eo Ph Sereipheap; r US\$4-13; 🚻) Dominating the accommodation scene in Kompong Thom, this enormous hotel offers something for every wallet, though nothing will send you broke.

Also recommended:

Mitthapheap Hotel (☎ 961213; NH6; r US\$5-10; 🚻) Part of the big Mitthapheap family and looks just like its brothers and sisters, with functional rooms without any fuss.

Stung Sen Royal Garden Hotel (☎ 961228; Ph Stung Sen; r US\$15-35; 🍴) Great big rooms, decked out like a British B&B, it sits next door to its equally sizable restaurant.

EATING & DRINKING

The Arunras and Stung Sen Royal both have large and busy restaurants on their premises catering for the hordes of travellers in transit. But for a more interesting and atmospheric dining experience, head away from the centre.

our pick Jamnorch Beong (☎ 011-683752; mains 3000-8000r; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) In a magical lakeside setting where individual bungalows hover delightfully over lilies, diners sit cross-legged around a barbecue stove to grill up their meat or veggies of choice.

Mlop Grawrch (Prey Malech Village; 🍴 dinner) Meaning 'orange shade', this outdoor restaurant is appropriately set in a private orchard bearing the citrus fruit. An interesting spot to drown a few whiskeys, it is known locally as 'the soup place'. It does indeed serve soup, and stirring begins from about 4pm.

Jamnorch Prey Malech (☎ 012-637455; Prey Malech Village; mains 10,000r; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Dine like a true Khmer, squatting on stilted tables laid with grass mats. A menu does not exist, but ask the matriarchal mamma for your favourite Khmer dish and she'll whip it up in the outdoor kitchen. Get there after 3pm; she won't roll her sleeves up until then.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Siem Reap, bus companies leave from the transport stop and head down the easy-peasy NH6 en route to Phnom Penh (US\$3, one hour).

Leaving Kompong Thom, share taxis depart from the taxi station, west of the tourist office. It is divided into sides; the south side holds taxis heading south to Phnom Penh (10,000r, 2½ hours) and the north-side taxis head to Tbeng Meanchey (20,000r, four hours).

Around Kompong Thom SAMBOR PREI KUK

Thirty kilometres out of town, the site of **Sam-bor Prei Kuk** (admission US\$3) spreads through the forest in the same way it did eons ago, when back in the 7th century it served as the capital of Chenla. It was built by King Isanavarman and was originally called Isanapura. The site

consists of hundreds of monuments scattered around four principal complexes: **Northern Group** (Prasat Sambor), **Small Group**, **Central Group** (Prasat Tao) and **Southern Group** (Prasat Neak Poan). All are dedicated to Shiva with the Northern Group being dedicated to one of his many incarnations, Gambhiresvara. It is an incredible complex, which despite being in a state of ruin and missing its best (bloody looters!) still emanates an aura of quiet splendour.

In the Northern Group there is a central tower and others around with carvings that are still in relatively good condition. There were more, but they fell victim to US bombing. The Central Group bears the stone lions that typify the Chenla period and some beautifully carved lintels. The Southern Group is perhaps the most impressive. It contains eight octagonal towers with relief carvings and is being engulfed by the forest.

To get here from Kompong Thom, a moto can be hired for US\$7 for the day. The journey takes about one hour.

PHNOM SONTUK

Phnom Sontuk, the holiest hill in the region, is topped by Wat Kiri Chom Chong, a colourful pagoda with many Buddha images. Some of these images are of the reclining Buddha carved directly into the rocks and have been there for centuries. Climbing up the punishing steps to the top (nearly a thousand of them!) will reward you with an incredible view of the flat plains below. The steps are lined with hundreds of statues, men on one side, women on the other and they all appear to be holding *nagas*.

To get here, motos can be hired from Kompong Thom to travel the 20km to Phnom Sontuk for US\$5. If you have your own transport, take the NH6 bound for Phnom Penh for 18km then take the sandy road on the left that leads to the mountain.

EASTERN CAMBODIA

The most diverse region of the country, you can go from seeing freshwater dolphins and sugar-loaded palm trees one day to bamboo-munching elephants and pine cones the next. If you want a little bit of everything then the east is a veritable smorgasbord of Cambodia's best.

SVAY RIENG PROVINCE

Bordering Vietnam, this is the province that everybody blitzes through on their way to more appealing places. Fortunately, due to its crossroads location, commercial business is starting to seep through and it is beginning to prosper.

Svay Rieng

☎ 044 / pop 22,050

A laid-back town that sits by the Wayko River, there is literally nothing to do here. **Aclea Bank** (☎ 9455545) represents Western Union for money transfers.

If you do get stuck here the best place to stay is **Tonle Waikor Hotel** (☎ 945718; r US\$10; 🍴), where spacious rooms have all the basic luxuries you need for a quick stopover, including a TV and fridge. **Vimean Monorom Hotel** (☎ 945817; r US\$5-10; 🍴) offers clean, decent-sized rooms. There are snack stalls along the river and others around the market, otherwise the best of the restaurant bunch is **Boeng Meas Restaurant** (mains US\$1-2; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner).

Buses leave from Phnom Penh's Psar Thmei (8000r, three hours). To and from the Bavet border crossing, secure a spot in a share taxi for US\$2.

PREY VENG PROVINCE

Whether or not the inhabitants know it, they are the subject of nationwide sympathy due to its reputation as one of the most poverty-stricken provinces in the kingdom. But it does boast one gem: the historical Ba Phnom, a 5th-century religious centre and the only reason to come to Prey Veng.

Prey Veng

☎ 043 / pop 57,750

This sleepy little town is a pretty mix of old colonial buildings, tree-lined boulevards and a reflective lake. There's not a great deal to do here, but it does make for a mellow stopover on the way to Kompong Cham.

Aclea Bank (☎ 944555), representing Western Union, will sort out your money transfers.

SLEEPING

Angkor Thom Hotel (☎ 011-773088; r US\$5-10; 🍴) Spotless, professional and helpful service has made this Chinese-style hotel the most popular place to stay in Prey Veng. Book ahead, as it can fill up quickly.

Chan Kiry Guest House (☎ 011-746014; r US\$5-10; 🍴) Overlooking the lake, this guesthouse has basic rooms in unit-style lodgings. Top dollar brings air-con, though the breezy location means you don't really need it.

Rong Damrey Hotel (☎ 011-761052; r US\$5-10; 🍴) A large concrete hotel, lacking in character but in better condition than the others, it recently added a whopping 20 new rooms to its quarters.

EATING

Chan Kiry Restaurant (☎ 011-746014; mains from 2000r; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This wonky bamboo restaurant sits on stilts above the lake and looks as though it was erected overnight, possibly in the dark, by children. It offers incredible shade, delicious food and a big challenge – no English, no menu. Good luck!

Mithapeap Restaurant (☎ 011-939213; mains 6000-8000r; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) If you fancy some sparrow, then this restaurant fries them up with rice. A family-run establishment, it also serves the usual Khmer and Chinese dishes that may appeal to a tamer stomach.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Phnom Penh, minibuses leave Psar Tmei for Neak Luong (7000r, two hours); once there, disembark and head to the ferry crossing. Here you can pick up a share taxi for 4000r to get you across the bridge and all the way into Prey Veng.

Heading to Kompong Cham, you can squeeze onto a minibus for 4000r or charter a whole car yourself (US\$15). The journey only takes 1½ hours on a good road.

Neak Luong

This is the parched, dry interchange that is the first step in the Vietnam–Cambodia overland crossing. To get here from Phnom Penh catch

CROSSING INTO VIETNAM: BAVET TO MOC BAI

From Svay Rieng, a share taxi to Bavet takes 45 minutes. Once there, walk through immigration to Moc Bai in Vietnam's Tay Ninh Province, and from here vans and taxis can get you to HCMC in two hours. For details of direct travel from Phnom Penh to HCMC see the boxed text, p200. For info on crossing this border the other way, see p417.

a bus from Psar Thmei (4500r, 1½ hours) to the drop-off point and then walk a few metres towards the cloud of exhaust fumes. Here you can pay from 4000r up (including the 100r ferry charge) to catch a minibus north to Prey Veng, south to Svay Rieng or all the way to the Kaam Samnor border.

At the time of writing there was still no bridge and the latest news was that it would not be completed until the end of 2007 or the beginning of 2008.

Ba Phnom

Based in the valley between four hills, this 5th-century archaeological site is credited with being the capital of the Funan empire and the birthplace of the Cambodian nation. Ancient documents report that back in its heyday, it produced precious metals such as gold, silver and lead as well as ivory. It is also said to have been the site of human sacrifices up until the 19th century.

Now the compound contains the ruins of **Preah Vihear Chann**, an 11th-century temple. There is also a present-day wat and some small pagodas; a sad lack of sights for such a significant historical spot.

To reach Ba Phnom from Prey Veng, motodups can be hired for around US\$7 to travel the 45km. If you are in Neak Luong, a moto can be hired for around US\$4.

KOMPONG CHAM PROVINCE

Kompong Cham gained its name after the exodus of the Chams from Vietnam into Cambodia in 1720. An ethnic group of Muslims, their origins lay in the Champa kingdom that once controlled the Mekong Delta. Nowadays, they and other non-Cham Khmers work the land, cultivating rice, tobacco and rubber.

Kompong Cham

☎ 042 / pop 48,300

Kompong Cham mills along the Mekong quietly and in no particular hurry. With the rise and rise of Siem Reap and other provincial towns, it seems, at first glance, to be trailing behind. But with the completion of a super bridge across the Mekong and a sexy new esplanade along the west bank, this city is set for cosmopolitan cool.

INFORMATION

Aceda Bank (☎ 941703; Ph Khmerak Phomin) Western Union money transfers.

CROSSING INTO VIETNAM: KAAM SAMNOR TO VINH XUONG

This is the most scenic route from Cambodia to Vietnam. First thing to remember is don't cross the bridge! Instead ask around for ferries to take you down the Mekong to Kaam Samnor (US\$2.50, one hour). From here, cross over the border to Vinh Xuong where local Vietnamese transport waits to transfer you to Chau Doc an hour away. For details about travel between Neak Luong and Phnom Penh, see under Neak Luong, p227. For information on crossing this border in the other direction see the boxed text, p424.

Cambodia Asia Bank (☎ 942149) Near the transport stop, this bank offers 24-hour ATM services for Visa and MasterCard.

Canadia Bank (☎ 941361; Preah Monivong Blvd) Cash advances and travellers cheques.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

A pleasant island in the Mekong River, **Koh Paen** is an interesting place for a leisurely bike ride. In the wet season, a local ferry transfers you across, but in the dry, it is connected by a bamboo bridge that is built fresh each year, with locals competing for the honour of constructing it. The island itself is home to some rural Cham communities, who make their living by fishing and silk weaving.

SLEEPING

Phnom Brak Trochak Cheth Guest House (☎ 941507; s/d US\$4/5) Ten points if you can say this name after a few. This elaborately titled guesthouse with no air-con and no hot water has been upgraded by its new owners and is now in great condition with spic-and-span rooms.

Phnom Pros Hotel & Restaurant (☎ 941444, 012-757060; r US\$5-10; ☺) A 10-minute walk northwest from the market and main cluster of accommodation, this large, fairly modern hotel has a more upmarket feel than its competitors in town. The top end brings hot water and air-con.

Mekong Hotel (☎ 941536; r US\$5-20; ☺) Great views of the Mekong if you bag a riverside room. This hotel is of great standard and the gigantic corridors provide a spacious landing strip for tipsy tumbles.

Mittapheap Hotel (☎ 941565; 18 Ph Kosamak Ngray Roth; r US\$5-20; ☺) Subtract the oversized cor-

ridors, add a little shabbiness and you have a mini replica of the Mekong Hotel. The US\$5 room brings you down to budget with no air-con or hot water, while US\$20 makes you a VIP and you get it all.

EATING & DRINKING

The market has some excellent food stalls that sizzle all the way into the night and when the sun goes down along the river, the tables pop up. Impromptu food stalls and mini bars are set up riverfront opposite the Mekong Hotel. Here locals congregate to socialise, look across at the river, up at the stars and out for the town's old monkey that lives in the trees.

Tiger Bar & Restaurant (☎ 012-732379; 25 Vithei Pasteur; mains US\$1-3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This tiny hole in the wall turns out Khmer and Western meals. Those catching the early bus are welcome to bang on the door for an early breakfast before official opening time; just look for the bright pink walls.

Lazy Mekong Daze (lmdaze@hotmail.com; mains US\$1.50-3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Run by a British-Khmer couple and bringing a mixture of both into the décor and menu, this restaurant-bar on the river front is a great place to unwind with Mekong views and tasty food. Bicycles are available for rent and a helpful bus timetable is posted up to keep you informed.

Mekong Crossing Restaurant and Pub (☎ 012-432427; 12 Vithei Pasteur; mains US\$1.50-4; ☺ lunch & dinner) An old Kompong Cham fave. Khmer and Western staples plus the best Khmer interpretation of spaghetti bolognese found this end of Cambodia. Travel information is abundant here; just ask for the owner Joe, a longtime resident with extensive knowledge of the hottest spots to visit.

Two Dragons Restaurant (☎ 011-888745; Ph Tuol Show; mains US\$2-3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Incredibly popular with Khmers, this restaurant has exotic dishes with exotic ingredients and an ever-changing specials menu. Try the ginger fried eel, the most popular dish here.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Phnom Penh, buses leave from Psar Thmei (10,000r, three hours), and share taxis leave from the southwest corner of the same market (10,000r, two hours).

To and from Kratie, Hour Lean buses depart from their designated stops: near the roundabout in Kompong Cham; and just

south of the boat dock in Kratie (17,000r, three to four hours).

In the wet season, you can catch a boat (from south of the bridge) that goes all the way up to Stung Treng via Kratie (US\$15, eight hours).

GETTING AROUND

It'll cost 1000r to get from A to B around town. Motodups for a day will set you back around \$10. You can negotiate a cheaper fare if you see fewer sights or travel shorter distances.

There are possibly only two to three tuk-tuks in Kompong Cham, and they are driven by knowledgeable and friendly guides with excellent levels of English and French. Short trips should cost US\$1 to US\$2.

Bicycles can be hired from Lazy Mekong Daze (left; US\$2).

Around Kompong Cham MAHA LEAP PAGODA COMPLEX

The Maha Leap holds significance for the locals as this is one of the last remaining wooden pagodas left in the country. Over a century old, it was only saved by the temple-burning Khmer Rouge because they found use for it as a hospital. Many of the Khmers who were put to work in the surrounding fields perished here, and 500 bodies were thrown into graves on site, now camouflaged by a tranquil garden.

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

Take socks! You must always remove your shoes to enter a pagoda and this one is carpeted in thick goeey (and fresh) pigeon poop. So unless you want to export some of it between your toes, it is advisable to cover them in something you can dispose of straightaway.

The pagoda is about 40 minutes south of town on the banks of a Mekong tributary. A moto will charge around US\$5 for a trip out here, but it is best to pay extra and combine it with the other sites around Kompong Cham. A boat can also get you out here for around US\$6 to US\$7 per person.

PREY CHUNG KRAN WEAVING VILLAGE

This is a tiny village set on the banks of the river where nearly every household has a weaving loom. Under the cool shade provided by their stilted homes, they work deftly to produce the *sampots* (the national sarong-like garments, usually worn at important occasions) and *kramas* of fashion and tradition. The most interesting thing to watch is the dyeing process as the typical diamond and dot tessellations are formed at this stage. The village is a further 20 minutes down river from the Wat Maha Leap and most motos or boats will combine the two in one excursion.

PHNOM PROS & PHNOM SREI

'Man Hill and Woman Hill' are the subjects of a local folklore with many variations, one of which describes a child taken away at infancy and returning as a powerful man to fall in love with the mother he no longer recognised. Disbelieving her proclamations of identity, he demanded her hand in marriage. Desperate to avoid this disaster, the mother cunningly devised a deal; a competition between her team of women and his team of men to build the highest hill by dawn. If the women won, she would not give her hand. As they toiled into the night, the women built a fire with the flames reaching high into the sky. The men mistaking this for the sun lay down their tools and thus the impending marriage was foiled. The versions of this famous story are comparable to zebra stripes – no two are exactly the same. Locals love to relay it, each adding their own herbs and spices as the tale unfolds.

Due to men being stupid and easily manipulated (hey, that's the moral of the story – not our stance!), the Phnom Pros is lower than the Phnom Srei and does not offer the same views. It does, however, have several pagodas and trees full of curious monkeys. Phnom Srei offers great views and a very strokeable Nandi (sacred bull) statue.

The hills are about 7km northwest of town. A moto can get you out here for around US\$3.

RUBBER PLANTATIONS

Supplying one of Cambodia's largest industries are the resin tappers working in the large rubber plantations around Kompong Cham. Using an extended scraping instrument, they graze the trunks until the sap appears, drip dripping into the open coconut shells

waiting on the ground. In 1921, it was discovered that rich soils from Chub Hill on the left bank of the Mekong were ideal for the cultivation of rubber. From this, the Chub Plantation arose. The plantation is a few minutes from town; its towering trees and their flimsy canopies make for a shady destination to take a leisurely ride.

KRATIE PROVINCE

The upbeat Kratie lies on the banks of the Mekong and is the best place to view Irrawaddy dolphins. During the dry season, the river dries up to reveal sand-bank islands and rocky outcrops, while all around the buzz of activity reverberates from the cheerful people: in their patchwork rice fields, hanging from palm trees or in musical ceremonies. If the provinces were Cambodia's children, then Siem Reap would be the pride and Kratie the joy.

Kratie

☎ 072 / pop 82,950

Kratie town wraps around the river to the east and sits under the most dramatic of skies. In the midday heat it burns like a furnace and an escape to the shady villages is required. Once evening comes, the sun melts like hot rubies with streaks of red oozing across the sky.

There's not much to do in town, but there's plenty beyond.

INFORMATION

There's a tourist office but your guesthouse is just as informative. Telephone calls can be made at kiosks around the market and internet is available at the You Hong Guest House.

Aceda Bank (☎ 971707) Offers money transfers.

SLEEPING

You Hong Guest House (☎ 957003; 91 Ph 8; r US\$2-5) This guesthouse caters for every need with a bar, restaurant, internet café and good, honest travel advice. The rooms are spotless and the energy is young and vibrant.

Sen Sok Guest House (☎ 012-732185; saratheam@yahoo.com; r US\$3-12; 🏠) A little bit out of the way, this laid-back guesthouse offers a quiet and clean alternative to the riverfront lodgings. There is no hot water, but it's a nice spot to be away from the tourists.

Santepheap Hotel (☎ 971537; r US\$5-20; 🏠) The reliable Santepheap offers smart, comfortable

accommodation, with the front-facing rooms providing a good view of the rather inert riverfront action.

Wat Roka Kandal (☎ 971729; r US\$8-15; 🏠) A series of wooden stilt constructions makes up these utterly charming rustic capsules of romance with en suite bathrooms, traditional furnishings, hot water and some with air-con.

Also recommended:

Odum Sambath Hotel (☎ 012-965944; 439 Riverside St; r US\$4-15; 🏠) Massive rooms with a huge terrace for watching those red sunsets.

Heng Heng II Hotel (☎ 971405; hengheng2hotel@yahoo.com; r US\$5-18; 🏠) A longtime favourite among budget travellers. Decent rooms with all amenities.

EATING & DRINKING

Odum Sambath Hotel (mains 3000-15,000; 🍴) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Basic Khmer and Asiatic food is served in a heavy wood and marble setting. Mostly catering to Khmers but the staff are delighted for the chance to interact with foreigners.

Red Sun Falling (mains 5000-10,000; 🍴) breakfast, lunch & dinner, dosed 2-5.30pm & Sun) Run by the town's local larrikin with screaming antics such as high-spirited streaking, this is a congenial restaurant, bar and bookstore of twinkling lights and great Western/Khmer food.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

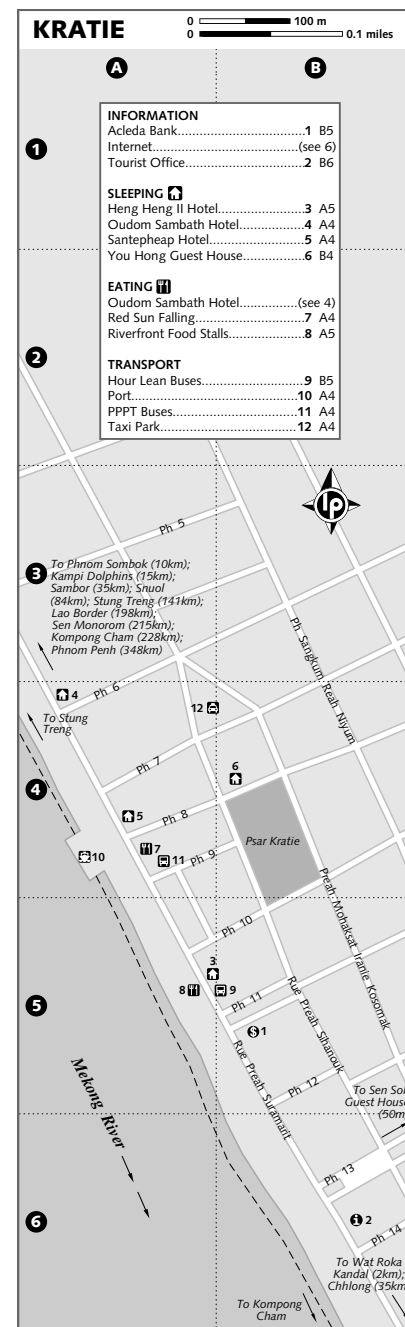
From Phnom Penh, buses leave from Psar Thmei at 7.30am (18,000r, six to seven hours). Share taxis are faster, though much more cramped (25,000r, five hours). Heading back the other way, Hour Lean buses depart from the riverfront, opposite Red Sun Falling.

From Kompong Cham, you have the option of bus, which departs at 10.30am (17,000r, three hours) or boat, which departs at 7.30am (US\$7, three to four hours, July to December).

Heading to Sen Monorom, a bus leaves from outside the Heng Heng II Hotel at 9.45am (US\$8, eight hours including the stopover in Snuol). Coming back, however, this journey is cut by half.

GETTING AROUND

Guesthouses can arrange motorcycles for US\$5 a day. Motodups, who are often knowledgeable guides, will charge around US\$6 to US\$10, depending on how far you go.



DOLPHINS ENDANGERED

The Irrawaddy dolphin (*Orcaella brevirostris*, called *trey pisaut* in Cambodia, *pqa khaa* in Laos) is one of the Mekong River's most fascinating creatures, and one of its most endangered. It is an endangered species throughout Asia, with shrinking numbers found in isolated pockets in Bangladesh and Myanmar (Burma). From the thousands that populated the Mekong and its tributaries in Cambodia and southern Laos as recently as the 1970s, there are now estimated to be fewer than 100 left. The surviving few live primarily along a 190km stretch of the Mekong between the Lao border and the Cambodian town of Kratie.

The dark blue to grey cetaceans grow to 2.75m long and are recognisable by their bulging foreheads and small dorsal fins. They are unusually adaptable and can live in fresh or salt water, though they are seldom seen in the sea. The only other known populations are thought to be equally, if not more, at risk of extinction.

Among the Lao and Khmer, Irrawaddy dolphins are traditionally considered reincarnated humans and there are many stories of dolphins having saved the lives of fishermen or villagers who have fallen into the river or been attacked by crocodiles. These cultural beliefs mean neither the Lao nor the Khmer intentionally capture dolphins for food or sport.

Ironically, however, this unusual respect might also have contributed to their current predicament. In an attempt to crush these beliefs and to extract oil for their war machinery, the Khmer Rouge reportedly shot thousands of the dolphins in Tonlé Sap, a large lake in northern Cambodia, during their 1970s reign of terror. These days fishermen don't actively target the dolphins, but gill netting, grenade and dynamite fishing in Cambodia have inevitably taken their toll. Gill netting remains a constant threat – as dolphins need to surface and breathe every two to three minutes, they will usually drown before the fisherman even knows they are there.

In Laos, dolphins have been seen as far north as Sekong in recent years, but you're most likely to see them in the deep-water conservation zones 10m to 60m deep that have been established near the border, south of Don Khon. In Cambodia, they inhabit stretches of the Mekong River north of Kratie and it's possible to see them at Kampi, about 15km north of Kratie, on the road to Stung Treng. Locals say the best time of year to see the dolphins is at the height of the dry season.

Education and conservation programmes continue, particularly in Cambodia, to save the dolphins. However, their survival is far from guaranteed. For more on this rare creature, visit the Mekong Dolphin Conservation Project (MDCP) website at www.mekongdolphin.org.

Around Kratie O KAMPI

The freshwater Irrawaddy dolphins are an endangered species of noseless dolphins (see the boxed text, above, for more information). Called *pisaut* by locals, the dolphins can be spotted from Kampi (admission US\$2), located half an hour (15km) from town. Sharing a boat will cost US\$3 per person. The dolphins appear at any time of the day, but viewing them at dawn or sunset is the most magical.

PHNOM SOMBOK

Fifteen minutes out of town on the road to Kampi sits the tranquil meditation centre at Phnom Sombok. Divided into three levels, it houses meditative huts and lodgings for the monks. Locals come here to ask for blessings.

SAMBOR

Sambor is an active wat complex 35km from Kratie. Tucked in the back are a monastery school and a 19th-century wooden pagoda. Dominating the front is the largest wat in Cambodia. It is known locally as Wat Moi Roi (100), due to the one-hundred-plus columns holding it up – making it the largest wat in Cambodia.

STUNG TRENG PROVINCE

Stung Treng is the overlooked middle child between two luminary siblings: Ratanakiri and Laos. Apart from having the most convenient gateway to Virachay National Park in Siam Pang, it has little else to stop travellers in their tracks on their way to the other two. Hopefully this will all change when people realise the advantages of having so many rivers run through the province and the activities that can be generated from this.

Stung Treng

☎ 074 / pop 25,725

Stung Treng is a relaxed riverside town that is a pleasant place to recuperate before heading off to Ratanakiri, Kratie or Laos.

INFORMATION

The tourist office is among the cluster of cabins making up the government buildings, but seems constantly uninhabited. Money changers, telephone kiosks and internet access can all be found around the bustling market.

Aceda Bank (☎ 973684) For money transfers.

SLEEPING & EATING

Richies Restaurant & Guest House (☎ 012-302017; r US\$2) In a rickety wooden house, the rooms are little more than shanties with mossie net-covered beds. The restaurant does a great breakfast and travel information is abundant.

Riverside Restaurant & Guest House (☎ 012-439454; taingpow@yahoo.com; r US\$3) The rooms are very basic with attached bathrooms that require squatting action. Good views can be had from the upstairs garden terrace and the restaurant serves a range of tasty Western and Asian food.

Hotel & Restaurant Sekong (☎ 973762; r US\$4-16; 🍷) This ranch-like hotel offers basic rooms at the bottom end and air-con and hot-water luxury at the top. The long-stretching veranda is a good spot to catch the evening breeze. The restaurant serves Western and Khmer food.

Stung Treng Guest House (☎ 973628; r US\$6-18; 🍷) Perhaps the best all-round accommodation in town. Sparkling rooms in the same

CROSSING INTO LAOS: DOM KRALOR TO VOEN KHAM

This is it now that the river crossing at Koh Chheuteal Thom has ground to a halt. Catch a minibus from the transport stop in Stung Treng to Dom Kralor then cross over to Voeng Kham in Laos' Champasak Province – expect border officials on both sides to ask for more money (US\$1 to US\$2) in 'stamp fees'. Laos visas are not available on arrival. From here taxis go north to Nakasong, or boats to Don Khone Island. See right for details on getting from Dom Kralor to other Cambodian cities. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see the boxed text, p333.

budget-hotel style adopted all over the country: bland but clean.

Kong Ratana Sambath Guest House (☎ 012-964483; r US\$7-17; 🍷) Almost identical to the Stung Treng, just a little smaller. The service is friendly and the welcome warm.

Ou Dynak Red Guest House (☎ 011-963676; r US\$7-25; 🍷) The rooms here are lovely and cool even before the air-con kicks in. A touch on the small side but with more character than its competitors.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

All transport leaves from the transport stop, riverfront near the Riverside Guest House.

Minibuses travel to and from the Laos border crossing at Dom Kralor (US\$10 to US\$15, two hours) along the now decent NH7.

Getting to Stung Treng from Phnom Penh, buses leave from Psar Thmei at 7am (42,000r, 10 hours).

An air-conditioned minivan travels to Ban Lung, Ratanakiri, every morning from around 7.30am. It collects guests from their hotels so make sure to ask yours to book a seat for you the night before (US\$7 to US\$8, four hours). To and from Kratie is 25,000r (three to four hours).

When the water levels are up (July to November) fast boats can be caught to Stung Treng from Kratie (US\$8, six hours) or Kompong Cham (US\$15, eight hours).

RATANAKIRI PROVINCE

One of the country's most exciting regions, Ratanakiri is a colourful hotchpotch of natural beauty and cultural diversity. A patchwork of jungle scrub, tribal huts and waterfalls, this is home to many of Cambodia's Chhanchiet communities. The Jarai, Tampuan and Kreung are the Khmer Loeu (Upper Khmer) people with their own languages, traditions and customs. Throw in elephants, hikes and the nation's largest national park, and you have an area tailor-made for adventure. The best time to visit is in the dry season (after the wet season's slodge-fest).

Ban Lung

☎ 075 / pop 18,700

No it's not always autumn in the region's capital; the leaves – like everything else – are just forever cloaked in a blanket of red dust. Nicknamed 'dey krahorm' (red earth) after its rust-coloured affliction, Ban Lung provides

a functional base for all of your Ratanakiri romps.

INFORMATION

Bring stacks of cash. The activities here aren't the cheapest and there are no banks in town or anywhere to cash travellers cheques. Cash can be changed at the jewellers in the market.

The post office is on the main road just down from the Tribal Hotel. It offers internet (per hour US\$4) and a telephone service but it is cheaper to call from the kiosks around the market.

Guests at Terre Rouges Lodge (right) can use its one computer in reception without charge, but you are sharing it with the receptionist so long emails to Auntie May about what the elephant did next will not be appreciated.

There is a tourist office just for looks; no-one ever seems to be there.

ACTIVITIES

There are no sights or activities in town, but a few quick arrangements will soon have you exploring in the surrounding areas.

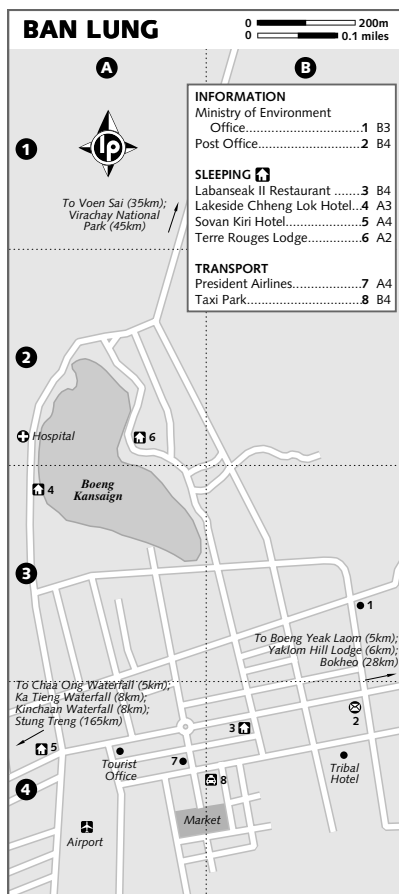
If you are unable to make it down to Sen Monorom where the elephant excursions are superior, you can leap onto one here for an **elephant ride**. Guesthouses and hotels will organise them for US\$10 an hour.

The jungle terrain and national park are ideal for interesting **treks**, but make it clear to guides before setting off exactly what it is you would like to see and experience. Bank on about US\$25 to US\$30 per person, less if there's a group. The Terre Rouges Lodge, Star Hotel and Yaklom Hill Lodge are the best places to organise such expeditions. For trekking through Yeak Laom and Virachay National Park, see opposite and p236 respectively.

SLEEPING & EATING

Star Hotel (☎ 012-958322; Village 5, Labanseak Commune; r US\$5-10) The rooms aren't the best or brightest but this is all made up for with brilliant service. The ever-efficient manager runs a tight ship and ensures guests are wanting for nothing. The hotel's restaurant is excellent.

Lakeside Chheng Lok Hotel (☎ 390063; lakeside-chhenglokhotel@yahoo.com; Village 6, Labanseak Commune; r US\$5-20; 🍴) Pristine rooms in the main building and gorgeous brick bungalows by Boeng Kansaigh out the back make this address one of the most appealing in Ratanakiri.



Sovan Kiri Hotel (☎ 974001; www.sovankiri_hotel.com; Ph 78; r US\$5-30; 🍴) Friendly service and enough driveway space to park every moto in town are the first things to greet you here. Solid wood furnishings in squeaky-clean rooms make up the rest of it.

Yaklom Hill Lodge (☎ 012-644240; www.yaklom.com; r US\$10-20) A luxuriant garden location and an indigenous stamp on style, the Yaklom consists of a hillside restaurant and wooden cottages with attached bathrooms and terraces. It aims to be ecofriendly and is 10 minutes (6km) east of town.

Terre Rouges Lodge (☎ 974051; www.ratanakiri-lodge.com; r US\$30-70; 🍴) Terre Rouges, not Khmer Rouges as sometimes mistakenly understood by a hard-of-hearing motodup, is a

sophisticated Chunchiet-style retreat set amid a tropical garden on Boeng Kansaigh.

Labanseak II Restaurant (☎ 974165; mains 4000r; 🍴 breakfast, lunch & dinner) This restaurant has private garden bungalows frequented by well-heeled Khmers, and the everything-is-fried menu contains very tasty Khmer dishes. Besides the restaurants at the Lakeside Chheng Lok and Star Hotels, this is another good option in town. It also has an impressive list of Johnnie Walker labels – the beverage of status in this country.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Most people come to Ratanakiri from Stung Treng. There are no buses but a private mini-van service operates the bumpy route (US\$8, four hours). It picks you up from your guesthouse or hotel. Let them know the night before to secure your seat.

President Airlines (☎ 106-839696; reservations@presidentairlines.com) flies out of Ban Lung on Mondays and Wednesdays (US\$100 one way to Phnom Penh). Alternatively, you can catch a bus from the transport stop near the market (US\$15, 11 to 12 hours, once daily) or a share taxi (US\$20, 10 to 11 hours).

To Sen Monorom, a mission of a moto ride down the horrendous goat track to Koh Nhek for five hours should only be tackled by the most experienced of riders. Cars can forget about it, as there is no room for the extra two wheels. From Koh Nhek another two hours of travelling is required, this time on a much-improved road to finally reach Sen Monorom.

GETTING AROUND

Single moto trips around town cost 1000r, double that at night. Hiring a motodup for the day starts at US\$7 for the nearby sites and climbs the further you go.

Motorbikes can be hired through guesthouses for US\$8 to US\$10 a day. Jeeps can be hired from the taxi stand near the market for US\$50 a day.

Bicycles cost US\$1 a day from guesthouses.

Around Ban Lung BOENG YEAK LAOM

Through the clearing of a dark green forest is the bright blue water of this **volcanic lake** (admission US\$1), 5km east of Ban Lung. This picnic, fishing and swimming spot is where Khmers come to plunge into the 50m depths fully clothed – jeans and all. There is a small Cul-

tural Centre housing Tampoun (a Chunchiet minority) artefacts. Donations are required to enter. It also rents out rubber tubes to float around in. For an interesting insight into the community, contact **Yeak Laom Community Based Eco Tourism** (☎ 012-981226), which can organise English-speaking tours.

Motos to the lake cost US\$2 return.

WATERFALLS

Chaa Ong (admission 2000r) is the largest of Ratanakiri's waterfalls, dropping some 30m into a rich jungle gorge. Behind the cascade is a rocky ledge that is perfect for some behind-the-falls action. Nearby, the **Ka Tieng** (admission free) has some swinging vines and the **Kinchaan** (admission 2000r) is small but picturesque. A little further out is the **Tuk Chhrou Bram-pul** (admission 2000r); 35km southeast of Ban Lung, it has seven platforms of falling water.

VOEN SAI pop 3000

On the banks of the Tonlé San, Voen Sai is a bustling little village of Chinese, Lao and Kreung minorities. This is a good place to buy authentic Chunchiet handicrafts for half the price sold in Ban Lung. On the other side of the river is the wealthy Chinese settlement that sits alongside the Lao village. Small ferries can take you across for 1000r return.

To get here on your own, the road from Ban Lung is in poor shape and can take around two to three hours of dusty driving, the distance is approximately 35km but feels much longer. See Chunchiet Villages, below, for tour details.

CHUNCHIET CEMETERIES

From Voen Sai, you can catch a boat (US\$15 per boat, one hour) to the Tampoun cemetery at **Kachon** (admission US\$1), where amid the jungle foliage, chiselled effigies stand guard over the graves of the deceased. Carved elephant trunks, whittled from wood, are placed to signal the end of mourning, while off in the distance, the call of hunters can be heard, whooping beasts into confusion and ultimately into traps. A slightly primal experience in a very sacred spot.

CHUNCHIET VILLAGES

There are many hill tribes occupying the regions of Ratanakiri that can be visited for a glimpse into the Chunchiet way of life.

Ethnically they are impossible to tell apart from the Khmer Krom (Lower Khmers), especially now that they have traded in their colourful costumes and bright beads for current Khmer dress.

When travelling to the villages, it is best to arrange an accompanying tour guide as the Chunchiet people are rather shy of outsiders. As with polite custom when visiting someone's home, take gifts of pencils or books for the little ones and tobacco or biodegradable goods for the adults. Don't give money; instead trade these gifts with those who want payment for photographs. Avoid plastic-wrapped gifts as they do not have the means to dispose of them in an environmentally friendly way.

Most hotels in Ban Lung will arrange tours for around US\$60 per car and usually incorporate visits to the Lao and Chinese villages on the banks of the river.

VIRACHAY NATIONAL PARK

Stretching out in all directions to Laos, Vietnam and Stung Treng, this is the largest protected area in the country with a large diversity of plants and wildlife. For some serious trekking, contact the **Ministry of Environment office** (☎ 974176; virachey@camintel.com) in Ban Lung.

Some of the treks on offer:

Kalang Chhoy A three-day combination excursion, this is one of the easier-going treks.

O'Lapeung Kayaking and Trek A four-day adventure into the forest, over the Ho Chi Minh Trail and down the river in kayaks.

Phnom Veal Thom Wilderness Trek A challenging seven-day affair over mountains and through forests. This is recommended as the best option for seeing wildlife.

LUMPHAT WILDLIFE SANCTUARY

Spanning 250,000 hectares, this sanctuary is home to elephants and an array of bird species including redheaded vultures. It is 35km southwest of Ban Lung.

MONDULKIRI PROVINCE

Monduliri is another Cambodian dimension. With not a rice paddy or palm tree in sight, the landscape is a seductive mix of tawny hills and windswept valleys that fade beguilingly into forests of jade green and waterfalls. Sparsely populated, the main inhabitants are the Pnong, an ethnic minority that constitute more than half of the population.

Nights are a little cooler here, so there is no need for air-con, but the thin-skinned among us may need to wear more than just mosquito repellent to bed.

Sen Monorom

☎ 073 / pop 7700

Where the hills stop rolling and come to rest, Sen Monorom sits, a quaint and peaceful town. The buildings, mostly picturesque timber cabins, are spread out with plenty of space to breathe. Your own breathing benefits from the freshness that a high altitude and a surprising pine tree plantation provide, a delightful contrast to the dust-clogged nasal activity of norm.

INFORMATION

There are no banks in town. Everything from food to transport is slightly more expensive here than in the rest of the country, so make sure your wallet's loaded with dollars and riel before you come. Telephone calls can be made from mobile phones around the town.

Arun Reas II Hill Lodge (per hr US\$4) Internet access.

Tourist office On the main road to Phnom Penh, is a valuable source of information and can organise tours, treks and local Pnong guides.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

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

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

Six kilometres northwest of Sen Monorom, from the observation deck of **Phnom Bai Chau** (Raw Rice Mountain), is a jaw-dropping view of the enchanted forest. From here it looks as though you are seeing a vast sea of tree tops, hence the locals have named it Samot Cheur (Ocean of Trees).

Elephant Treks

With many of the waterfalls and forests being inaccessible to vehicles, these heavy-hoofed animals are the most effective form of transport. The tourist office and guesthouses can arrange a trek and most quote US\$30 for one elephant a day. An elephant sits two people, but those who are long of leg may want to

splurge and have one to themselves. Overnight sleepovers in the forest can be arranged, just double the price. Take a cushion!

SLEEPING & EATING

Angkor Meas Guest House (☎ 011-696828; Street 69; r US\$5-7) Grand rooms with good paint jobs; a small detail but let's face it – yellow-stained walls with cracking paint just don't cut it. The upstairs rooms have more character with wooden panelling and a common veranda to enjoy the evening breeze.

Arun Reah II Hill Lodge and Restaurant (☎ 012-999191; r US\$5-10; ☑) Popular with travellers due to its peaceful valley location and great views, this lodge also offers a great range of services including free bicycles, moto hire and internet.

Long Vibol Guest House and Restaurant (☎ 012-944647; r US\$5-15) Rooms climb up the small, gently sloping hill of a large garden locale. A lively mix of international and Khmer guests creates a constant buzz, all ably managed by English-speaking staff who are helpful and knowledgeable about the area.

Pech Kiri Guest House (☎ 012-932102; r US\$5-15) If you miss out on the newer spacious bungalows, the older rooms can be rather cramped. The garden surrounds are abundant with blossoms and the restaurant turns out decent Khmer and European dishes.

Sum Dy Guest House (☎ 012-828533; Ospean Village; r US\$5-18) The rise and dips of the rolling hills set a picturesque backdrop for this guesthouse. The charming timber huts are clean and cosy and when the spot is bathed in a hazy light of dusk, your breath will be taken away.

our pick Nature Lodge Café (☎ 012-230272; naturelodge@gmail.com; mains US\$1-3; ☺ breakfast, lunch & dinner) With an atmosphere as cool and chilled as the hilltop air, this unique café occupies a picturesque setting in the midst of nature. Serving an eclectic menu ranging from Israeli salad to *phat thai* (Thai dish of stir-fried noodles), it also offers a herbal sauna for weary travel bones, and will soon embark on a worthy collaboration with the International Cooperation Cambodia (ICC) to sell a funky line of local handicrafts.

Middle of Somewhere Bar (☎ 012-1613833; jackhighwood@yahoo.com; ☺ 3pm-late) The only bar in town, it serves beer from as little as US\$0.50. Fairy lights twinkling through the back door will lure you into the yard where a delightful beer garden has been set up.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Phnom Penh, share taxis depart from the southwest corner of Psar Thmei (70,000r, nine hours).

There is a bus from Sen Monorom to Stung Treng, via Kratie and with a changeover at Snuol that leaves at 7am (50,000r, eight to nine hours). Get your ticket the night before, as it fills up very quickly. It leaves from opposite Pech Kiri Guest House.

From Kratie, the bus officially leaves at 9.45am from outside the Heng Heng II Guesthouse (US\$8, eight hours). Change at Snuol.

GETTING AROUND

Single motodup trips across town cost 2000r to 4000r. To hire a motodup for the day, count on US\$7 to US\$10.

Motorbikes can be hired from the guesthouses around town for US\$5 to US\$10 a day. Jeeps cost US\$40 to US\$50 a day, depending on the season and how far you want to go.

Around Sen Monorom

Forty-three kilometres out of town on an unforgiving road, the impressive two-tiered **Bou Sra Waterfall** drops from a dramatic height of 23m from the bottom tier and 10m from the top.

Monorom Falls, also known as Sihanouk Waterfall in honour of the king, is only 5km away from the town centre. It has a swimming pool at the bottom of the 10m drop.

Koh Nhek

For years, only the daring few have managed a Sen Monorom and Ratanakiri back-to-back visit overland. Grand tales of harsh roads, an unforgiving jungle, and the back-breaking battle between nature, humans and motorbike have circulated to earn this route legendary status.

In the centre of these epics is the far-flung town of Koh Nhek, a small village that marks the nearly halfway there point. If you have made it here, then a few locals about town are gracious enough to offer a place to crash and some food for a small fee of 10,000r to 20,000r. Head to the local bar-restaurant and ask around there.

From Sen Monorom, the road has been sealed to cut the travel time to a glorious two to three hours. From there on, the story has not changed and the sandy goat track remains. Count on another four to five hours before reaching Ban Lung in Ratanakiri.

SOUTH COAST

The south coast of Cambodia is an alluring mix of seaside fun and undiscovered nature: clear blue waters, castaway islands and rousing colonial towns. With a growing number of tourists each year, the coastal cities are developing fast, but despite this there is still a great expanse of the less explored and adventure travellers will be just as rewarded as the beach bum in a deckchair.

SIHANOUKVILLE & AROUND

☎ 034

Sandy beaches and a happening bar scene could sum up Sihanoukville (population 170,500) in a sentence, but many more would be required to delve into its nuances. As Cambodia's premier beachside town, many are vying for a stake in its development. The privately owned land has a big military factor, and establishments that set themselves up one day can be muscled off without notice shortly after. But seaside politics aside, the town has come a long way since the fishing village it once was to become a coastal star attraction.

Orientation

Curving around the Gulf of Thailand, Sihanoukville's coast is broken up into four main beaches: Victory, Sokha, Occheuteal and Otres. The city is a boring mass of streets and traffic and has none of the charm of its seaside edge.

Information

Internet access can be found in many of the guesthouses around the beach and in the city. The average rate is 4000r an hour. Telephone calls can be made at booths all over town as well as at the internet cafés and guesthouses.

Acleda Bank (☎ 933723) Representing Western Union for money transfers.

Canadia Bank (☎ 933490; 197 Ph Ekareach) Cash advances and Visa/MasterCard ATM.

Tourist office (Ph Sopheakmongkol; ☎ 9am-6pm) Perhaps the best in the country. Lots of handouts, excellent English spoken, and the staff actually show up to work.

Union Commercial Bank (☎ 933833; cnr Ph Ekareach & Ph Sopheakmongkol) Does cash advances with Visa and changes travellers cheques.

Vietnamese consulate (Ph Ekareach) Turns out the speediest Vietnamese visas (one month US\$35); a couple of hours is all you'll have to wait at the most.

Dangers & Annoyances

There has been one high-profile case of rape on the beach, so solo women should take caution. Some of the lads at certain guesthouses can also be a little too amorous but will normally back off with a stern warning.

Theft is common on the beach if valuables are left lying about, and motorcycles have been known to be pinched, so be sure to lock up.

Sights & Activities BEACHES

The sandy beaches of Sihanoukville are generally throbbing with tourists, but it still remains very chilled. **Sokha** beach has been privatised and thus only guests can access it, but there is a tiny tip that is open to the public and it makes for a nice getaway from the crowds. **Occheuteal** is the most popular, with a high concentration of bungalow bars and restaurants set up on the sand. Its western end is the appropriately named **Serendipity** beach, a fun, happy and relaxed section, lacking in sand but full of easy-going beach babes and bums. **Victory** beach is the traditional backpacker hang-out, but there is not much of a beach to speak of. And finally **Otres** beach is looking to be the new hot spot as the Occheuteal residents are rumoured to be getting the heave-ho by a private hotel company with ambitious plans for a luxury hotel.

ISLANDS

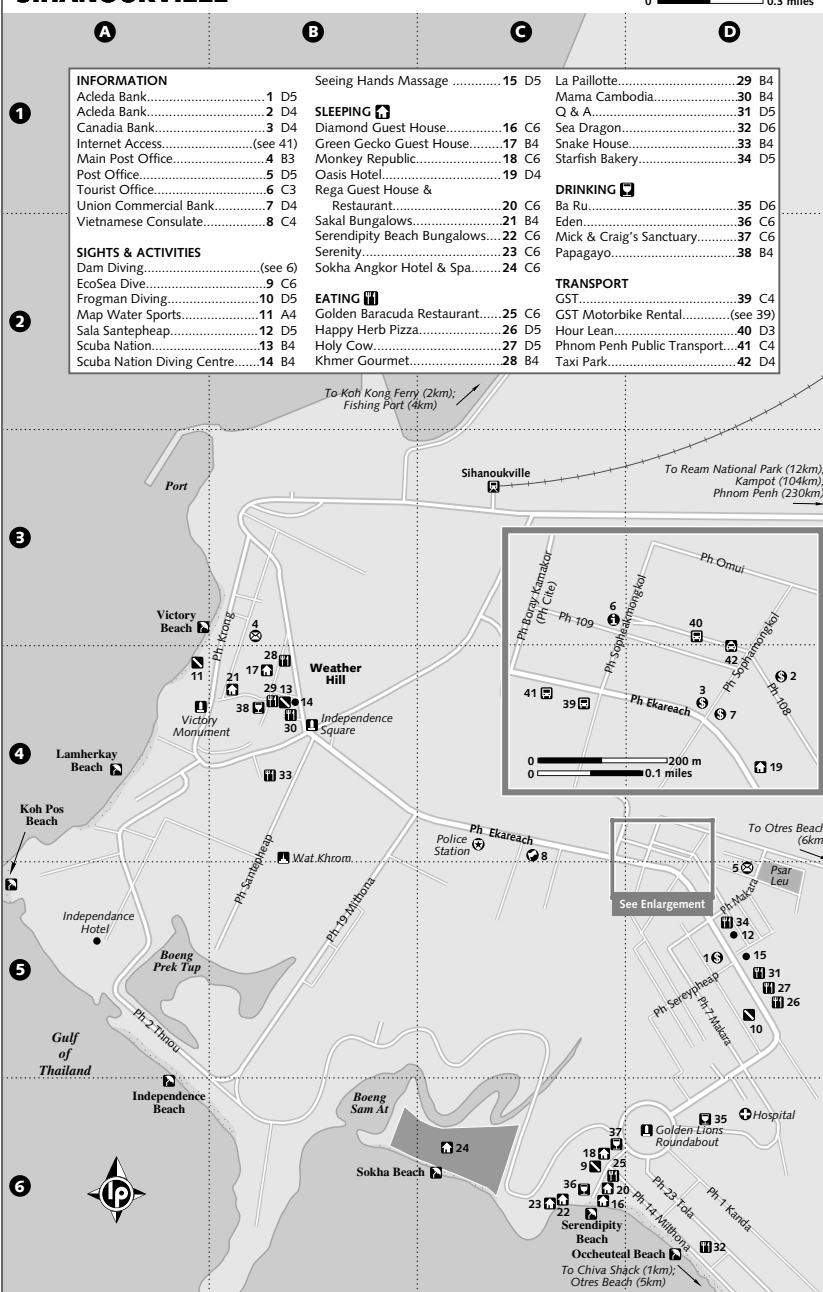
There are quite a few islands dotting the gulf within day-trip distance of Sihanoukville.

For snorkelling, **Koh Ta Kiev** and **Koh Khtea** are the best. **Bamboo Island** (Koh Russei), **Koh Ru** and **Koh Rung** all have basic accommodation, with boat trips out there encompassing spots of snorkelling along the way. (Though those who have just arrived from Thailand will be disappointed.)

Bamboo Island is surrounded by clear waters and the **bungalows** (rUS\$8-10) are sweet with shared bathrooms and breezy terraces. There is also a large restaurant. A boat out here costs US\$8 return.

Koh Ru has **bungalows** (rUS\$10) on the beach plus its own restaurant and bar. It's more secluded than Bamboo Island and costs US\$10 for a return boat trip.

SIHANOUKVILLE



Koh Rung has the nicest beaches and the most intact reefs. A boat out here costs about US\$19 and takes 2½ hours.

REAM NATIONAL PARK

Situated 13km east of Sihanoukville, Ream National Park is a great place to view Cambodia's wildlife. The sandy beaches, mangrove forests, monkeys and dolphins make it a favourite among locals.

A moto to the park's headquarters should cost US\$2. From here, guided walking tours with rangers can be arranged from US\$5. Boat tours around the park cost around US\$20 for a boat holding four people.

DIVING

Although Cambodia's diving isn't as spectacular as its Asian neighbours, dynamite fishing having blown the coral to smithereens, there are still some nice spots to explore. The companies below are reputable and offer PADI courses.

Dam Diving (☎ 934220; www.divingandmore.com; Ph Sopheapmongkol)

EcoSea Dive (☎ 012-654104; www.EcoSea.com)

Frogman (☎ 012-586183; frogman-khmer@hotmail.fr; Ph Ekareach)

Scuba Nation (☎ 012-604680; www.divecambodia.com)

BOATING & FISHING

With so much water around, these two activities were bound to feature.

Map Water Sports (☎ 011-696076; Victory Beach)

Takes people out on boat and fishing tours and also offers jet-skiing and water-skiing.

Otres Nautica (☎ 092-230065; otres.nautica@yahoo.com)

A sailing club that operates from Otres beach, it has Hobie Wave catamarans, kayaks and sailing boats.

MASSAGE

Sala Santepheap (☎ 012-952011; donations accepted)

Run by the Starfish Project, a grassroots organisation that organises housing and small business assistance and provides all salaries, rent and transport so that staff can hang onto 100% of the donations.

Seeing Hands Massage (Ph Ekareach; per hr US\$4) The beachside branch of the excellent massage by the blind.

Sleeping

WEATHER HILL STATION

Green Gecko Guest House (☎ 012-560944; r US\$2-12;

☎ ☎) A friendly hotel with great customer service. The rooms are clean and well maintained, though lacking in decorative flair.

Sakal Bungalows (☎ 012-806155; r US\$6-10; ☎)

Like being lost in the hinterlands, these very atmospheric bungalows almost disappear into the lush garden. A very chilled-out place.

SERENDIPITY BEACH

Diamond Guest House (☎ 016-948929; r US\$7-10; ☎)

Tucked behind Serendipity beach, this family-run guesthouse is quiet, safe and very relaxed. The rooms are spotless and the staff impressively helpful.

Rega Guest House & Restaurant (☎ 012-1758610; www.rega-guesthouse.com; r US\$8-16; ☎) This congenial guesthouse contains some charming bungalows placed around a pretty courtyard. The restaurant upstairs is topnotch thanks to its elegant French manager and the large open space is perfect for catching the breeze.

our pick Serendipity Beach Bungalows (☎ 016-513599; r US\$5-30) These bungalows are like honeymoon hideaways snuggling into the hillside, with fantastic views. Each bungalow has an ocean-facing terrace; there is no air-con because the sea breeze that soars to its lofty location is refreshing enough.

Serenity (☎ 011-696009; edenserenity@yahoo.com; r US\$5-30) Next door to the Serendipity, Serenity has adopted its name wholeheartedly and is a sanctuary of calm and tranquillity. The upmarket bungalows are seriously sweet and the views are superb.

TOWN

Monkey Republic (☎ 012-490290; monkeyrepublic-cambodia@yahoo.co.uk; r US\$7) The epitome of what all seaside accommodation should be: cool,

friendly, laid-back and with plenty of banana trees. Basic bungalows are sweet and simple and the lofty chill-out zone with swinging hammocks is a brilliant touch.

Oasis Hotel (☎ 933 487; Ph Ekareach; r US\$15; ☎)

Cavernous rooms big enough for a Snookville soiree fill this hotel, where their marble tiles provide a cool respite from the baking heat. Absolutely spotless and professionally managed, the Oasis earns itself the title of 'Best all-rounder'.

SOKHA BEACH

Sokha Angkor Hotel & Spa (☎ 935999; Ph 2 Thnou; r US\$160-180, ste US\$220-1000; ☎ ☎) This five-star hotel delivers everything you'd expect, including a private beach to call your own, hand-combed by staff daily to ensure it is paradise perfect.

Eating

WEATHER HILL STATION

Mama Cambodia (☎ 012-221468; mains US\$2-3; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) 'Mama' is a middle-aged woman with a talent in the kitchen that could make you discard your own. Unlike the bizarre beauty queens laminated into her menus, her traditional Khmer meals are authentic and tasty.

Khmer Gourmet (☎ 012-1799450; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Saviours of the sweet tooth, fresh pies, cakes and cookies line the display cabinet of this café, but its *pièce de résistance* is the coffee machine, a proper one, that makes the noise and everything!

Snake House (☎ 012-673805; Ph Soviet; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) If Tarzan decided to throw in crocodile wrestling to become a restaurateur, then this is what the place would look like. Creatures from the jungle squawk and slither all around the tables while you chow down on hearty servings of European and Russian food.

La Pailotte (☎ 012-633247; mains US\$6-14; ☎ lunch & dinner, closed 2-5.30pm) This fine-dining restaurant is a little out of place in the backpacker-Bronx of Sihanoukville, maybe that's why it hides behind a passageway of bamboo in a delightful garden courtyard. It has a great international menu. Try the Balmain bugs in coconut milk and ginger; they're as delectable as they sound.

OCCHUTEAL BEACH

Sea Dragon (☎ 016-595252; mains US\$2-5; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This large airy restaurant does tasty Western food, but it's the delicious Khmer that you'd come for.

SERENDIPITY BEACH

Golden Baracuda Restaurant (mains 3000r-US\$5.50; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A barbecue seafood place that grills up fresh catches from the owner's boat expeditions. Great food, easy-going atmosphere.

TOWN

Q & A (☎ 012-342720; 95 Ph Ekareach; mains US\$1.95-2.75; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) A library, secondhand bookshop and restaurant in one. You can tuck into a meal and a book simultaneously. It serves light Western dishes.

our pick Holy Cow (☎ 012-478510; Ph Ekareach; mains US\$2-6; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Holy cow, this place is great! A fusion of Asian and West-

ern décor and food, the restaurant and bar is overflowing with ambience. The dining and chill-out areas are divided into two levels, each compelling guests to just float about and relax. It also has a tiny boutique stocking M'lop Tapang products. Profits from M'lop Tapang provide street children with nutrition, counselling, education and medical care.

Happy Herb Pizza (☎ 012-632198; 81 Ph Ekareach; mains US\$3-12; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) This little Italian restaurant serves pasta and pizzas that can make you happy with a few of its additional 'garnishes' from the kitchen.

Starfish Bakery (☎ 012-9522011; ☎ breakfast & lunch) Freshly baked goods made to order are served in this open-air café. It also does boxed lunches that are perfect for those snorkelling trips out to the islands.

Drinking

Eden (☎ 933585; Serendipity Beach; ☎ 7am-late) The large rocks jutting from the beach in front of this bar are not ideal for swimming but absolutely perfect for setting the mood. Flickering candle light and breaking waves crashing over the stones make for a very atmospheric venue.

Chiva Shack (☎ 012-360911; Occheuteal Beach; ☎ 24hr) Full-moon parties, fire throwers, happy pizzas and some delicious cocktails right on the beach keep the punters flowing into this place.

Ba Ru (☎ 012-388860; Golden Lion; ☎ 8am-late) You can knock them back at this unpretentious bar and perhaps take part in its charity crab races or quiz nights while you're at it. Money raised goes to community organisations based in Sihanoukville.

Mick & Craig's Sanctuary (☎ 012-727740; Golden Lion; ☎ 7am-late) If you get peckish while hanging about the Monkey Republic, just pop next door into this place; as well as having a fully stocked bar, it does excellent food in a more sophisticated setting.

Papagayo (☎ 012-1928656; Weather Hill Station; ☎ 8am-late) Don't bother coming here before lunchtime, everyone is still recovering from the night before. This airy bar opens officially at 8am, but doesn't get kicking until very late at night.

Getting There & Away

For information on the southern border crossing into Thailand see the boxed text, p249. See p249 for fast-boat services to and from Sihanoukville.

Several bus companies run to the capital (15,000r, three hours), leaving from the transport station near the market. Tickets can be purchased via guesthouses or at the Hour Lean bus office. To Kampot a share taxi costs 12,000r for a two-hour journey. Charter cars cost between US\$18 to US\$20. Motorbikes can be hired from most guesthouses and even some restaurants for US\$5 a day. Great for exploring nearby Kampot or Kep.

Cramped taxis head to Phnom Penh (10,000r, four hours) and Kampot (8000r, two hours) from the new taxi park in front of the market, but the buses are the better option.

Getting Around

Bicycles can be hired from most guesthouses for US\$1 to US\$2 a day.

Motos charge 2000r for quick trips around town and 4000r from town to the beaches. From the dock to the beach it's normally US\$2.

KAMPOT PROVINCE

An intermingling landscape of oceans and rapids, mountains and caves has proved to be a winning combination for Kampot; there's something for everyone. The Kampot pepper used in fine dining comes from here – the name might have given it away – and the plantations are abundant throughout the south.

Kampot

☎ 033 / pop 34,650

Despite a recent expansion, Kampot has maintained an air of unhurried ease. With the Teuk Chhou River hugging its side and verdant vegetation encircling it, it makes the ideal base in which to unwind after the hi-jinx on Bokor Hill (p244).

INFORMATION

Internet places can be found near the central roundabout for cheap access and at the Bokor Mountain Lodge (opposite). There is a tourist office, but comprehensive information is more readily available from guesthouses.

Aceda Bank (☎ 932880) Represents Western Union for money transfers.

Canadia Bank (☎ 932392) Cash advances and travellers cheques.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Zero by way of sights, but there are voluntary activities you can become involved in; a couple of these include volunteer teaching or arts

and craft days with the kids. Contact **Epic Arts** (epicarts@camintel.com), the Little Garden Bar or Bodhi Villa to get stuck in.

The very worthy – for them and you – **Seeing Hands Massage** (massage US\$4) has a branch near the river and at Bokor Mountain Lodge (opposite).

SLEEPING

ourpick Bodhi Villa (☎ 012-419140; bodhivilla@mac.com; Ph Teuk Chhou; r US\$3-10) Laid-back and friendly, this happy hideaway is tucked behind a luxuriant overgrown garden on the banks of the river. The location provides a good base for the water sports on offer: water-skiing and boat cruising, and some very romantic floating bungalows.

Blissful Guest House (☎ 012-513024; blissfulguesthouse@yahoo.com; r US\$4-5) A great place to unwind and relax. The bar-restaurant-shop is a casual meeting place of good food and beverage while the sweet bungalows are humble little hide-aways in which to get a quiet night's rest.

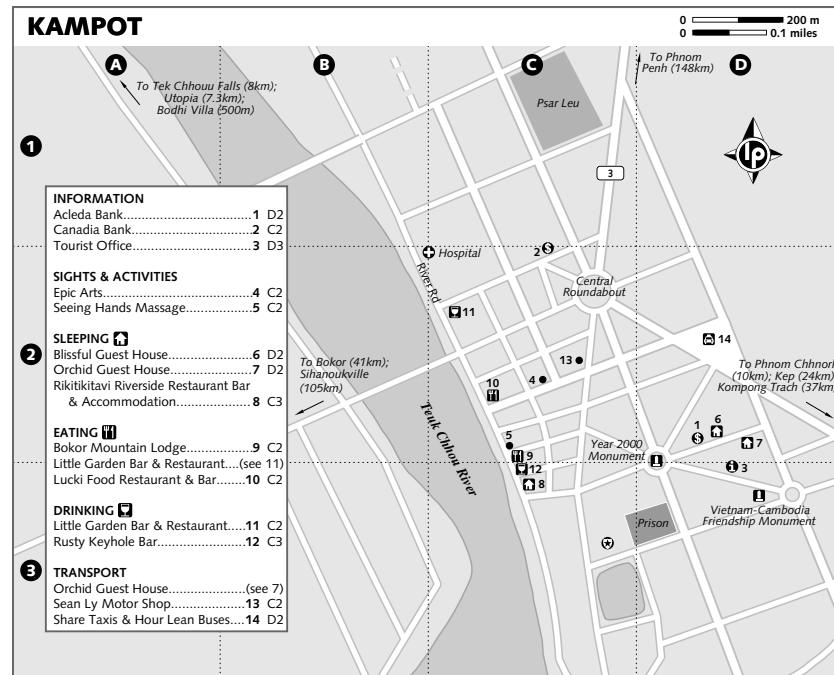
Orchid Guest House (☎ 932634; orchidguesthousekmpot@yahoo.com; r US\$4-15; 🌺) A beautiful choice of lodging set in a manicured garden full of (you guessed it): orchids. The more expensive rooms come with hot water and air-con, but the cheapies are still tastefully decorated and spotless.

Utopia (r US\$8-10) Like an enormous bird house, surrounded by an emerald forest and unrivalled views, Utopia is a true haven, off Teuk Chhou Rd. The tall stilts dig deep into the silted river bed and it comes complete with floating pontoons. Ambitious plans to upscale are ahead with prices reaching into the top end, but for now travellers can enjoy paradise for a bargain.

Rikitikitavi Riverside Restaurant Bar & Accommodation (☎ 012-235102; rikitikitavi@asia.com; r US\$25-40; 🍷) Kampot's poshest residence is a model of stylish refinement. With elegant touches of Khmer décor and a breezy river-bank setting, it has everything for the traveller who wants a little extra, including a great restaurant.

EATING & DRINKING

Little Garden Bar & Guest House (☎ 012-256901; www.littlegardenbar.com; mains 4000-28,000r; 🍷) breakfast, lunch & dinner) The garden may be little but their hearts are big. Supporting and launching community-based projects including a volunteer teaching programme and a drop-in centre for orphans, the staff here do more



than just serve up international dishes and cocktails. Has rooms (US\$10) also.

Lucki Food Restaurant & Bar (☎ 012-806105; luckifood@yahoo.com; cnr Riverside Rd & Old Market; mains US\$2.50-4; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The restaurant is a fuss-free shell, but the food is anything but standard. Authentic Sri Lankan and Indian dishes are delectable and come with a free drink or snack. The boxed meals are a good idea to take up to Bokor.

Bokor Mountain Lodge (☎ 932314; www.bokorlodge.com; mains US\$4-9.50; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner; 🏠) Kiwi owned with an easy-going ambience, this all-in-one establishment boasts a meaty menu including hearty steaks and pies. The drinks selection is wide and varied and includes some Australian wines.

Rusty Keyhole Bar (☎ 012-679607; mains 5000-20,000r; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A sporty bar with the action screened live, you can come here for happy hour (5pm to 7pm) and enjoy one of the chunky hamburgers.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Phnom Penh, share taxis leave from Psar Dang Kor (US\$2 to US\$3 for a cramped back seat, two hours).

Share taxis leave Sihanoukville from the taxi park in front of the market when they are full (US\$3 back space, US\$6 front, 2½ hours).

To Kep, a single moto trip costs about US\$4 (day trip US\$6). Tuk-tuks charge US\$7 to US\$8.

GETTING AROUND

Around town, single moto trips should cost 1000r. To the nearby caves or zoo, bank on about US\$6 to US\$8 a day. Beware of some moto drivers who try to charge double, triple or whatever they can get away with.

Motorcycles can be hired from **Sean Ly Motorcycle Shop** (☎ 012-944687). Bikes range from small (US\$3) to larger trail bikes (US\$5). For advice on tracks and riding, contact the manager at the **Orchid Guest House** (☎ 932634; orchidguesthousekmpot@yahoo.com), who used to be a dirt-bike racer and has the trophies to prove it.

Around Kampot TEK CHHOU FALLS

A set of rapids a short ride from town, this is a pleasant place to cool off and is very popular

with locals. A moto here and back will cost US\$2.

CAVES

There are three main caves for exploring around Kampot, each one involving a scenic ride through villages and rice paddies. The caves are located about 8km east of Kampot town.

Phnom Sorsia is a winding formation which, once clambered round to the top, provides great views over the countryside.

Phnom Chhnork contains a brick temple inside the cave. It dates back to the 7th century and has bats clinging to the walls, probably because regular fruit offerings are placed inside it by pilgrims. It is almost completely dark in here so bring a torch.

Rung Damrey Sor (White Elephant Cave) is a large cave with a stalactite formation that is supposed to resemble an elephant.

Bokor National Park

This **national park** (admission US\$5) came to prominence in the 1920s when the king would ride his elephant up the mountain and survey his kingdom below. Today the national park is wild and untamed. From the entrance at the foot of the mountain the vehicles climb slowly up. The road is in atrocious condition and those sitting in the back of pick-ups must hang tight and duck fast. Bamboo, trees and flying bugs all take a swing at heads.

The once-stable bridge that led to the **Popokvil Falls** has collapsed entirely. Therefore, a little bit of trekking is required to reach them. From the broken bridge it is about an hour's walk. In the wet season, the falls are an impressive gush down a two-tier drop with a very long platform connecting them. In the dry season there is still enough water for a light shower and the platform becomes a nice paddling pool.

Bokor Hill

The enigmatic and spooky hill is a prairie of wildflowers, howling winds and abandoned buildings.

In the mid-1920s the French created a lavish resort consisting of a hotel, casino, water tower, post office, ranger station and Catholic church. Now all that remains are large shells of what used to be; paneless windows, half doors clinging by creaky hinges and scratched-in graffiti. A real ghost town. The French aban-

doned their resort during Cambodia's surge for independence in the 1940s.

It was abandoned once more in the 1970s when Lon Nol left it to the Khmer Rouge. The Khmer Rouge, appreciating the strategic vantage point it offered, remained, fighting it out with the Vietnamese in the latter part of the decade when they invaded. Bullet holes can be seen pierced through the exterior of the Bokor Hotel and the Catholic church where the two sides battled for months, each shooting at the other from across the fields.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Many of the guesthouses in Kampot can arrange day trips or overnight stays. A day trip should set you back US\$6. Transport is usually a pick-up with an English-speaking guide included.

Experienced bikers can attempt the challenging journey with a guide. A day trip normally costs US\$10 to US\$12. Overnighters can stay in the ranger station where there are bunk beds for US\$5. Guides will charge around US\$20 to accompany you and you are expected to pay for their sleeping arrangements.

Although it may be boiling hot when you set off, the mountain receives a lot of rain, even in the dry season, so pack a mac if you don't want to get wet, and a towel if you don't want to stay wet.

Kep

☎ 036 / pop 4200

Kep (*kape*) is a seaside town still harbouring the remnants of civil war. Though the ocean washes peacefully over the curving beach, the ruinous buildings tell a different story. In the late 1960s, this was the ritzy playground to King Sihanouk and friends, but a decade on glamour turned into gore with the Khmer Rouge taking hold with devastating effects. In the late 1970s, the warring parties took it in turn to obliterate the town, the Khmer Rouge doing most of the legwork before the Vietnamese, in their campaign of 'liberation', pushed them aside to finish the job, looting and dismantling whatever was left.

The Kep of today has put that behind it and is slowly becoming the alluring destination it once was. Smart guesthouses with a character of their own have popped up to provide travellers with a calmer alternative to Sihanoukville.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

There is not much to do but chill out in Kep, but it is a good launching pad for the nearby Koh Tonsay and Koh Pos islands. **Koh Tonsay**, meaning 'rabbit island', is supposed to resemble the furry long-toothed animals – which it kind of does, from far away, if you squint and eat happy pizza.

The island is surrounded on all sides by good beaches. There are seven bungalows available for crashing. All are very basic with just a mattress (per night US\$5). There is also a restaurant to save you from spearing your own meal.

Meaning 'snake island', **Koh Pos** has white beaches and good coral for snorkelling.

Boats leave from the tourist office, located near the showers on Kep beach. You must also buy the tickets from here: US\$15 return to Koh Tonsay or US\$25 to incorporate Koh Pos and another small nearby island, Koh Svay.

SLEEPING & EATING

All the lodgings listed have on-site restaurants open to the public, otherwise some of the freshest seafood in the country can be had in the shacks along the waterfront.

ourpick Veranda Natural Resort (☎ 012-888619; www.veranda-resort.com; Mountain Hillside Rd; r US\$18-60; 🍷) A maze of tree-top bungalows connected by wooden boardwalks, this stunning resort has an alluring mix of modern luxury combined with the feeling of being immersed with nature.

Beach House (☎ 012-240090; www.TheBeachHouseKep.com; f US\$30-45; 🍷 🍷) A family-orientated hotel that is ideal for large groups, with spacious family-sized rooms. It has a pool and the ocean is straight across the road.

Knai Bang Chatt (☎ 012-349742; www.knaibangchatt.com; r US\$350, villas US\$750-2200; 🍷) Serious style comes in the form of four modern villas on this private resort. The once-dilapidated ruins have been transformed into a vision of chic architecture and design. The infinity pool, the breathtaking views and the 'wait on hand and foot' staff all reek of luxury and exclusivity. Book well in advance.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Most people come to Kep from Kampot as it is an easy 24km away. Catch a moto from Kampot for US\$4 or do it in a day trip for US\$6.

Onwards to Takeo via Kompong Trach, charter taxis can be hired for US\$20. Add a little more if you plan to spend some time exploring the Kompong Trach caves (below). Or charter a car, also for US\$20.

Kompong Trach

Kompong Trach is an uneventful town between Kep and Phnom Penh and Kep and Takeo. The only reason to stop here is to visit the **Cave of a Thousand Rice Fields**.

This is a difficult-to-reach sight that requires the aid of a guide. From the top of Phnom Kompong Trach, locally known as **Phnom Baikh** (Breaking Mountain) – because every so often a piece breaks off – there is an old ladder that descends into the cave and ultimately to the formations, so named because they resemble the terraced rice paddies of Asia.

Also in Phnom Baikh are a series of caves that lead from the modern Wat Kirisan. Following them around you will come across another shrine and then be led through the hill to the other side, where **Phnom Sor** (White Mountain) and a small lake can be seen.

Children on their breaks from school wait to play guides; they speak good-enough English and are very nimble – so keep up! They ask for small donations.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Kep a chartered car can take you to Phnom Penh or Takeo with a stopover in Kompong Trach for around US\$20, depending on how long they have to wait.

Bikers can take the NH31 from the south or the scenic NH3.

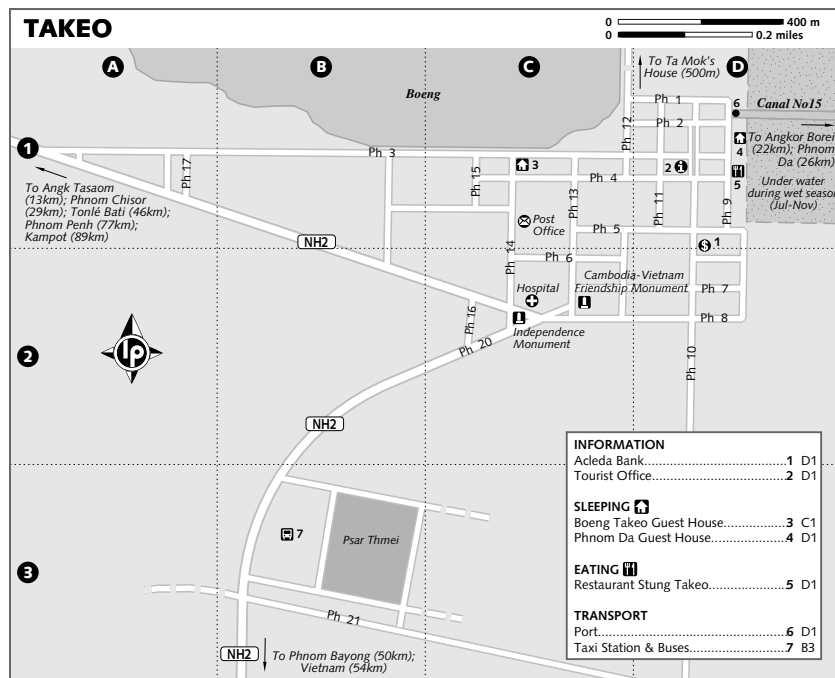
TAKEO PROVINCE

Takeo (*ta-kow*) is a district of many lakes and artificial canals dating all the way back to the Funan empire, or the 'Cradle of Khmer Civilization'. An attractive, sleepy province of swimming buffaloes and more lily pads than a frog could ever dream of, it is also home to some archaeological treasures: Tonlé Bati, Phnom Chisor, Phnom Da and Angkor Borei.

Takeo

☎ 032 / pop 40,950

Apart from the huge **Boeng Takeo** lake and the still handsome colonial buildings, there is not much to see, and as most of the province's sights can be seen in a day trip from the capital, there's no real reason to stay here.



There are the usual market money changers, though nowhere to cash travellers cheques. See **Acleda Bank** (☎ 931246) for money transfers. Most likely you won't catch anyone at the **tourist office** (🕒 7am-5pm) until after 2pm.

For sleeping, **Phnom Da Guest House** (☎ 016-957639; Village 1, Roka Commune; r US\$5-10; 🏠) is unimaginatively decorated, but has spotless rooms run by an eccentric Khmer family. What **Boeng Takeo Guest House** (☎ 931306; Ph 3-4, Doun Keo District; r US\$5-10; 🏠) lacks in atmosphere it gains in views; the enormous lake, smothered by water lilies, is directly opposite and always magnificent no matter the season.

At **Stung Takeo Restaurant** (☎ 016-957897; Ph 9; mains 3000-6000r; 🍽️ breakfast, lunch & dinner) the drinks are warm, but hey so are the smiles. Perennially popular and built on stilts to survive annual floods, this is the best place to pack in a Cambodian meal while watching lakeside life move slowly by.

Takeo is relatively close to Phnom Penh on the good NH2. Buses leave from Psar Thmei in Phnom Penh and take two hours (5500r). Share taxis are about US\$2 for a squishy seat.

Travellers heading to Kampot need to take a moto to Angkor Tasaom and then jump in a share taxi southbound.

Around Takeo ANGKOR BOREI & PHNOM DA

Thirty scenic minutes by boat in the wet season from Takeo city is the riverside town of Angkor Borei; the once walled-in capital of the pre-Angkorian Chenla civilisation. Artefacts from this period and the Funan era are showcased at the town's small **Chenla museum** (admission \$1). Further on, the laterite temple of Phnom Da can be seen perched atop a hill overlooking the often-flooded rice fields that stretch for miles beyond.

KOH KONG PROVINCE

Koh Kong, the untamed province bordering Thailand, is like a rough-cut jewel shimmering in the country's southwest. Wonderful and lustroously wild, the Cardamom Mountains loom over pristine forests on one side, while on the other Robinson Crusoe islands float off the coast like a turtle's back.

CROSSING INTO VIETNAM: PHNOM DEN TO TINH BIEN

This seldom-used crossing is useful if you are already down south. From Takeo catch a share taxi to travel the 60km to Phnom Den (around US\$2). Once there just walk across the border to Tinh Bien. From there motos and taxis can take you to Chau Doc where you can continue straight on to HCMC. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see the boxed text, p424.

Krong Koh Kong

☎ 035 / pop 30,975

Krong Koh Kong is linked to Thailand by a super bridge. Most people zoom over it and out of the city before getting to know that it is a laid-back town full of friendly locals. Casinos dominate the border line and are popular with gambling Thais. The town itself provides a carefree base from which to explore the wilds of Koh Kong.

INFORMATION

Despite what some scammers may tell you at the border, dollars and riel are as readily accepted as baht. Cash can be changed easily at the market. Phone calls can be made from kiosks about town and internet is available at Otto's guesthouse (p248). There is a tourist office near the boat dock but your guesthouse will be more informative.

Acleda Bank (☎ 936693) Representing Western Union for transfers; does not cash travellers cheques.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Waterfalls

There are some great waterfalls in the region. Sometimes they are completely isolated so you have them entirely to yourself. The most impressive are Kbal Chhay Prek Koh waterfall and the Tatai Waterfalls.

Kbal Chhay Prek Koh, or the Kbal Chhay Kor Poi, as it is sometimes called, is a set of falls that runs over a series of boulders. Situated up a river estuary, this is the most popular with visitors and is only 15 minutes from town.

Tatai Waterfalls is the most spectacular. Surrounded on each side by thick jungle, the water runs off smooth rocks, plunging into a series of pools, some as small as a Jacuzzi and others large enough to do laps.

A moto out here will cost around 400B, the journey taking about an hour. Even if you have your own wheels, you will need a guide as it is difficult to find with no signposts.

Koh Kong Krau

Koh Kong's coast is littered with islands; nearly all of them are completely deserted. The largest is Koh Kong Krau (meaning 'Outside Koh Kong'), a heart-stopping boat ride over turquoise waters and you arrive like the soul survivor of a shipwreck. Kilometres of sandy beaches, fringed with coconut palms and a gently surging ocean, it has the melancholy feeling of a forgotten paradise. For now, it is an exquisitely isolated place to come for a picnic and a swim or to sling your hammock and camp, but there is talk of development on the island and soon the seclusion will be shattered. Enjoy it while you can.

To get here, charter a boat from the jetty (12,000B, one hour). You can incorporate other little islands and a trip through the mangroves along the way.

Mangroves

Around the islands of Koh Kapi and Koh Kong Krau, dense mangroves protrude from the water in long thick lines, forming spectacular corridors of gnarled trees and watery trails that are perfect for boat expeditions. The mangrove forests are nesting sites for hundreds of bird species, crabs and molluscs.

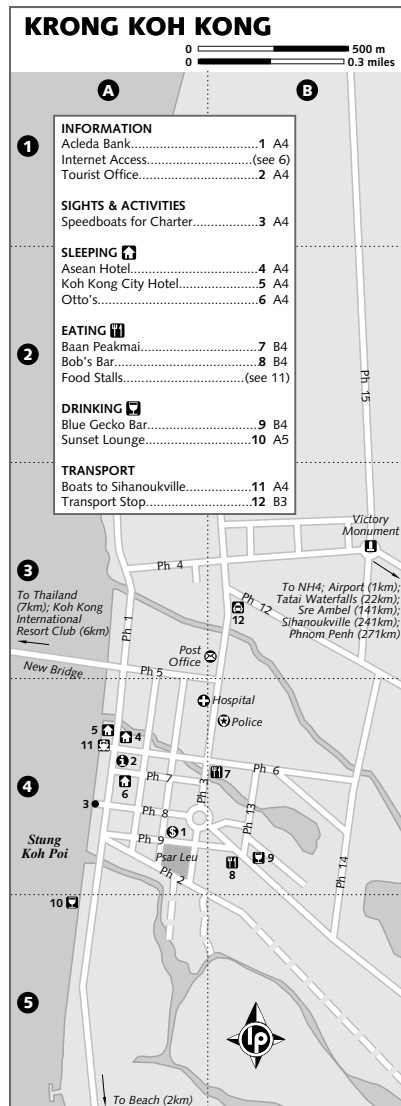
For a thrilling ride through the mangroves, charter a boat from the jetty. A trip out here and back should cost US\$20.

SLEEPING

Asean Hotel (☎ 936667; www.aseanhotel.vze.com; r US\$10-20; 🏠) Unfortunately, views of the river have been blocked from the front rooms by the new Koh Kong City Hotel, but those at the back look out to the stunning palm-fringed lily pond, so ask for one of those. All rooms

RUN OUT OF CASH?

There are no ATMs in Koh Kong, but an agreement with border control and the big casinos allows quick crossings, sans visa, for withdrawals from the Thailand-side cash machines, probably arranged so that Thai gamblers need not worry about running out of money to lose.



are of a great standard, and the staff here are exemplary.

Otto's (☎ 936163; r 100-150B; 🏠) The award for most adorable accommodation goes to Otto's. Like staying in the cubby house that dad built, the rooms are set in a raised traditional house and surrounded by palm trees. Bathroom is shared unless you pitch in a

MONEY, MONEY, MONEY

There is a money-changing racket operating in Krong Koh Kong, whereby your moto driver will take you to their trusted money-changer, who then short-changes you by around 30% to 40%. The moto driver will normally distract you with conversation while the money is being counted and then whip you away before you realise. They then split profits between them.

little more, and there is a good restaurant attached.

Koh Kong City Hotel (☎ 012-901902; kkct hotel@netkhmer.com; r US\$15-30; 🏠) Having pinched the views from the Asean, it seems they may have nicked the designer too; the hotels look identical. The big difference is that the Koh Kong City Hotel's Thai and Khmer restaurant sits on stilts above the river and the Asean's doesn't.

Koh Kong International Resort Club (☎ 016-700970; www.kohkonginter.com; r US\$25-100; 🏠) A sprawling tropical resort and casino, catering to mostly Thai gamblers, it also owns Koh Kong Safari World, an entertainment complex featuring performing orang-utans, crocodiles and dolphins. Not everyone's cup of tea.

EATING & DRINKING

Sunset Lounge (☎ 012-1724909; 🕒 24hr) A striking bar that creeps all the way out into the river, drinks here can be enjoyed literally above water. The views are undeniably stunning and this is the best place to come for frank and funny travel advice.

Blue Gecko Bar (☎ 016-388075; mains 40-220B; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A laid-back, Aussie-run bar, the Blue Gecko serves Western comfort food and also offers some basic lodgings for 150B a room. You can shoot some pool here, too.

Baan Peakmai (☎ 011-788711; mains 60-350B; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) A nice bit of greenery surrounds this wooden pavilion restaurant. It's Thai, but dishes out some American-style fillings also.

Bob's Bar (☎ 016-326455; mains 70-170B; 🍳 breakfast, lunch & dinner) An easy-going hang-out, Bob's has a foreign menu featuring all-day breakfast, a well-stocked bar and a pool table.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Between Phnom Penh and Koh Kong (six to eight hours) is a dusty bounce-fest with occasional moments of pure paved magic. Prepare for a long and arduous journey encompassing four ferry crossings and some breathtaking scenery of rich jungles and dipping valleys. Bridges across the river crossings are being built and should have been completed by the end of 2007 or start of 2008. This should cut travel time considerably.

The most experienced of riders can attempt the challenging route through the Cardamom Mountains from either Pailin or Veal Veng. An untamed region of remote jungle, the route involves steep inclines, thick jungle, bamboo groves and horrendous ox tracks: dirt-bike enthusiasts will love it.

Share taxis to Koh Kong, normally banged-up minivans, leave Phnom Penh's Psar Dang Kor in the mornings. Afternoon rides will be harder to find due to the distance involved. A cramped seat will cost US\$5 or you can charter a whole taxi for around US\$20 to US\$25. Heading the other way (Koh Kong to Phnom Penh), minibuses leave from the taxi stand north of the creek on Ph 3, just before you reach Ph 12.

The most popular way out of Koh Kong is the fast boat to Sihanoukville. Tickets are US\$15 and the journey is a hair-raising, stomach-lurching four hours. Unless you want your valuables saturated in salt water, have the handlers place them inside instead of piled on the roof. Boats leave daily from the dock at 8am.

GETTING AROUND

The fact that Koh Kong is large and vast should be taken into consideration when bartering for transport prices. Chartering a

CROSSING INTO THAILAND: CHAM YEAM TO HAT LEK

From Krong Koh Kong, you need to cross the toll bridge (11B for a bike; 44B for a car) to reach Cham Yeam (10 minutes). Take a moto (80B to 100B including toll) or charter a taxi (200B including toll). Once there walk across the border to Hat Lek where there are minibuses and pick-ups waiting on the other side for easy transfers on to Trat or Ko Chang. For information on crossing this border in the other direction, see the boxed text, p158.

moto for a whole day of sightseeing, taking in the waterfalls, beaches and city should set you back US\$15.

Chartered boats can take you to the islands and costs US\$30 to US\$40 depending on the size of the boat and how long you wish to spend there.

Your guesthouse can usually organise a bicycle for you to rent (US\$2 to US\$3 a day).

CAMBODIA DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation in rural areas is limited to guesthouses and the further you go the less likely it is you'll have the luxuries of hot or running water or 24-hour electricity.

Guesthouses range from US\$2 with shared bathrooms to US\$15. Hotels are plentiful and great deals can be had at the midrange and budget places. You will often get attached bathroom, hot water, TV and air-con from as little as US\$10.

All rooms reviewed in this chapter have attached bathrooms unless stated otherwise.

ACTIVITIES

Tourism is definitely finding its feet in Cambodia and there is now a wide range of activities. Diving and snorkelling are available off the south coast of Sihanoukville and Kep, with boat trips offered anywhere there is a river.

Dirt biking is very popular; novices can hook up with dirt-bike tour groups such as **Hidden Cambodia Dirt Bike Tours** (www.hiddenCambodia.com).

Elephant treks are a novel way to see the eastern provinces of Monduliri and Ratanakiri.

BOOKS

Lonely Planet's *Cambodia* is packed with information for extended travel in the country, with wider coverage to help get you off the beaten track. See also the boxed text, p251.

BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices, which are open from Monday to Saturday, theoretically begin the working day at 7.30am, break for a siesta from 11.30am to 2pm, and end the day at 5pm. However, it is a safe bet that few people will be around early in the morning or after 4pm, as their real income is earned elsewhere.

PRACTICALITIES

- The usual voltage is 220V, 50 cycles, but power surges and power cuts are common, particularly in the provinces. Electrical sockets are usually two-prong, flat or round pin.
- Most guesthouses and hotels have cheap laundry services, but check they have a dryer if the weather is bad. There are laundry shops in every town.
- Newspapers to read are *Cambodia Daily* and *Phnom Penh Post*. Magazines include *Bayon Pearnik* and *Cambodia Scene*.
- BBC World Service broadcasts on 100MHz FM. Cambodian radio and TV stations are mainly government-controlled and specialise in karaoke videos and soap operas.
- Cambodians use the metric system for everything except precious metals and gems for which they prefer the Chinese system.

Banking hours vary slightly according to the bank, but most banks keep core hours of 8.30am to 3.30pm Monday to Friday, plus Saturday morning. Tourist attractions such as museums are normally open seven days a week.

Local restaurants are generally open from about 6.30am until 9pm and international restaurants until a little later. Many bars are open all day, but some open only for the night shift, especially if they don't serve food.

Local markets operate seven days a week and usually open and close with the sun, running from 6.30am to 5.30pm. Shops tend to open from about 7am until 7pm, sometimes later.

COURSES

Unfortunately, there aren't any real courses on offer for foreigners. However, travellers can learn the art of Khmer cooking in Battambang with Smokin' Pot (p218) and Siem Reap with ACCB's 'A Day in the Life of Tour' (p208).

CUSTOMS

If Cambodia has customs allowances, it is close-lipped about them. A 'reasonable amount' of duty-free items are allowed into the country. Like any other country, Cambodia does not allow travellers to import weapons, explosives or narcotics – some would say there are enough in the country already. It is illegal to take ancient stone sculptures from the Angkor period out of the country.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Mines, Mortars & Bombs

Never, ever touch any artillery shells or other war material. Cambodia is one of the most heavily mined countries in the world espe-

cially in the northern and western regions. Do not stray from well-marked paths under any circumstances.

Theft & Street Crime

Cambodia is now a generally safe place to travel in as long as you exercise common sense. Hold-ups are rare, though petty theft is still rampant in the major cities. Walking or riding alone late at night is strongly advised against, particularly for unaccompanied women.

Stash your cash and passport in a padlocked bag in your hotel room and only carry as much as you think is needed each day.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in Cambodia

The following embassies are found in Phnom Penh:

Australia & Canada (Map p194; ☎ 023-213470; 11 Ph 254)

China (Map pp190-1; ☎ 023-7209920; 156 Mao Tse Toung Blvd)

France (Map pp190-1; ☎ 023-430020; 1 Monivong Blvd)

Germany (Map p194; ☎ 023-216381; 76-78 Ph 214)

Indonesia (Map p194; ☎ 023-217934; 1 Ph 466)

Laos (Map pp190-1; ☎ 023-982632; 15-17 Mao Tse Toung Blvd)

Malaysia (Map p194; ☎ 023-216177; 5 Ph 242)

Myanmar (Map pp190-1; ☎ 023-223761; 181 Norodom Blvd)

Philippines (Map p194; ☎ 023-215145; 33 Ph 294)

Singapore (Map p194; ☎ 023-221875; 92 Norodom Blvd)

Thailand (Map pp190-1; ☎ 023-726306; 196 Norodom Blvd)

UK (Map pp190-1; ☎ 023-427124; 27 Ph 240)

USA (Map p194; ☎ 023-728000; 1 Ph 96)

Vietnam (Map pp190-1; ☎ 023-362531; 436 Monivong Blvd)

There's also a handy Vietnamese consulate in Sihanoukville (p238).

Cambodian Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Australia (☎ 02-6273 1259; 5 Canterbury Cres, Deakin, ACT 2600)

France (☎ 01 45 03 47 20; 4 rue Adolphe Yvon, 75116 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-48 63 79 01; Arnold Zwing Strasse, 1013189 Berlin)

Japan (☎ 03-5412 8521; 8-6-9 Akasaka, Minato-ku, Tokyo 1070052)

USA (☎ 202-726 7742; 4500 16th St NW, Washington, DC 20011)

For information on Cambodian visas, see p255.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Cambodians love a good knees-up and festivals are celebrated with fervour. Dates change according to the lunar calendar.

Chinese New Year Chinese and Khmers alike celebrate in January or early to mid-February with dragon dances, lit lanterns and feasts.

Chaul Chnam A three-day celebration of Khmer New Year, held in mid-April. People file into wats with offerings and prayers for luck and absolutions.

Visakha Puja Celebrated collectively as Buddha's birth, enlightenment and *parinibbana* (passing in nirvana), this festival falls in May or June on the eighth day of the fourth moon and is best observed at Angkor Wat, where you can see candle-lit processions of monks.

P'chum Ben Like a subdued 'Day of the Dead' festival as celebrated in Mexico. Respects and offerings are made at the wats in mid-September and early October.

Bon Om Tuk Celebrates the reversal of the Tonlé Sap river. Boat races take place in early November all over the country and the cities all resemble London's Oxford St during pre-Christmas sales.

FOOD & DRINK

With the Tonlé Sap lake producing tonnes of fish every year, it's not surprising that fish (along with rice) forms the foundations of Cambodia's distinctive and flavoursome diet.

The national dish, *amok*, is almost as synonymous with Cambodia as Angkor Wat. It is fish baked with coconut and lemongrass wrapped in banana leaves. Served piping hot, peeling back the leaves is like unwrapping a gift.

Prahoc is a fermented fish paste with a smell that could make fertiliser step up its game. The salty paste is used to flavour most dishes, with coconut and lemongrass making regular cameos. *Sait ko che-kuh* (barbecued beef skewers) are a favoured snack, a blend of beef infused with lemongrass, sugar and salt, grilled over hot flames and served with pickled salads of papaya and cucumber.

CAMBODIA IN WORDS

- *Angkor – Heart of an Asian Empire* (1993) The emphasis in this book is more on the discovery and restoration of the ruins of Angkor, but it is lavishly illustrated and dripping with interesting asides. It's a pocket-sized guide by Bruno Dagens.
- *First They Killed My Father* (2001) A personal memoir of a nation's suffering, in which Luong Ung covers the steady destruction of her family through execution and disease during the time of Democratic Kampuchea. One of best of many survivor accounts.
- *The Gate* (2003) Francois Bizot was kidnapped by the Khmer Rouge, interrogated by Comrade Duch and is believed to be the only foreigner to have survived this experience. Later he was holed up in the French embassy in April 1975 and became the negotiator between the foreigners inside and the Khmer Rouge outside. This is his harrowing story.
- *The History of Cambodia* (1994) For the fuller flavour of Cambodian history, from the humble beginnings in the prehistoric period through the glories of Angkor and up to the present day, read David Chandler's account.
- *When the War Was Over* (1986) Only a few foreigners were allowed to visit Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge period of Democratic Kampuchea. US journalist Elizabeth Becker travelled there in late 1978 and tells the story of her visit in the context of the Cambodian civil war.

The *samlor* (soup) is the cornerstone of nearly every meal. Khmers will either drown their rice with it as the main accompaniment or dribble it sparingly just to flavour. A delicious example is *ko-ko*, a thick broth of chunky cat fish, infused with lemongrass, spices, aubergine and pumpkin.

Try a hearty bowl of *nom banj-chuk*, super-fine rice noodles smothered in topping. *Nom banj-chuk curee* is especially wholesome when the noodles are covered by a curry of braised beef or chicken, potatoes, and crowned with a pile of shredded beans or cucumber.

The desserts are particularly divine and like everything else, rice based. The *krolan* is a bamboo flute packed with sticky rice that has been merged together with coconut and black-eyed beans and then set upon hot coals to bake.

Drinking is very popular with Khmers. Generally, rural folk drink palm wine, tapped from the sugar palms that dot the country's landscape. In the city the beers of choice are Angkor and Tiger. Mekong Whiskey is gaining popularity and making its way into shot glasses; it tastes like rice wine. Do not drink tap water or drinks containing ice made from tap water. Bottled water that has gone through a treatment process is the way to go at only 1000r a bottle. Better still, filter your own.

The *tukaluks* (fruit smoothies) are also great thirst quenchers. They are mixed with milk, sugar and sometimes a raw egg. You should also try *tuk-empeau* (sugar cane juice).

For more on dining in the Mekong region, see p86.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Cambodia is a very tolerant country when it comes to sexual orientation. The scene is slowly coming alive in the major cities. But do keep in mind that this is a conservative country and displays of affection are deemed offensive. **Utopia** (www.utopia-asia.com) features gay travel information and contacts.

HOLIDAYS

Everyone shuts down for public holidays, so plan ahead during these times. Holidays may be rolled over if they fall on a weekend, and some people take a day or two extra during major festivals.

International New Year's Day 1 January
Victory over the Genocide 7 January
International Women's Day 8 March

International Workers' Day 1 May
International Children's Day 1 June
Constitution Day 24 September
Paris Peace Accords 23 October
HM the King's Birthday 30 October to 1 November
Independence Day 9 November
International Human Rights Day 10 December

INSURANCE

Make sure your insurance policy covers emergency evacuation. Limited facilities may mean you have to be airlifted to Bangkok, which will result in hefty bills.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet access has spread throughout much of Cambodia. Charges range from 2000r per hour in major cities to US\$4 an hour in the smaller provincial capitals.

INTERNET RESOURCES

<http://andybrouwer.co.uk> A great gateway to all things Cambodian, it includes comprehensive links to other sites and regular Cambodian travel articles.

<http://angkor.com> When it comes to links, this site has them, spreading its cyber-tentacles into all sorts of interesting areas.

www.earthwalkers.no/kft.htm Fun online Khmer tutorial with helpful pictures and phonetics. A great introduction to the language.

www.lonelyplanet.com Summaries on travelling to Cambodia, the Thorn Tree bulletin board and travel news.

www.mrpumpy.net The definitive website for cyclists passing through Cambodia, it's written with candour and humour.

www.talesofasia.com Up-to-the-minute road conditions and other overland Cambodian travel information.

LEGAL MATTERS

All narcotics, including marijuana, are illegal in Cambodia. However, marijuana is traditionally used in food preparation so you may find it sprinkled across a pizza or two.

Paedophilia is a heinous crime and any serious suspicions should be reported immediately to ChildSafe (see opposite). Many Western countries have also enacted much-needed legislation to make offences committed overseas punishable at home.

MAPS

This guidebook has most of the maps you'll need, but if an additional map is required the best all-rounder is Gecko's *Cambodia Road Map* at 1:750,000 scale. In this book, the maps

indicate streets as 'Ph', abbreviated from the Khmer word for street *Phlauh*.

MONEY

Cambodia's currency is the riel, abbreviated here by a lower-case r written after the sum. The riel comes in notes with the following values: 50r, 100r, 200r, 500r, 1000r, 2000r, 5000r, 10,000r, 20,000r, 50,000r and 100,000r.

Throughout this chapter, each establishment's prices are in the currency quoted to the average punter. This is usually depicted in US dollars or in riel, but in the west of the region it is often in Thai baht. Currency exchange rates at the time this book went to press:

Country	Unit	Riel
Australia	A\$1	3152
Canada	C\$1	3453
China	Y1	520
euro zone	€1	5263
Japan	¥100	3352
Laos	10,000 kip	4194
New Zealand	NZ\$1	2992
Thailand	10B	1216
UK	UK£1	7984
USA	US\$1	4075
Vietnam	10,000d	2539

ATMs

There are now credit-card-compatible ATMs in most major cities (Visa and MasterCard only).

Bargaining

Bargaining is expected when shopping in markets, hiring vehicles and sometimes when taking a room. Hagglers will normally start at triple the price they expect you to pay in the end. So start your bargaining at a third of the initial quote and see how you go. See right for appropriate bargaining etiquette.

Cash

Come armed with loads of cash when travelling overland as there are no ATMs in the border cities. Dollars are accepted everywhere, so do not believe the border touts' claims that you have to change your cash into riel. There are no coins so riel is often used for small change, while dollars are used for larger amounts. The cities bordering Thailand will often quote in baht and therefore a triple currency system is used. Dollars, riel and baht can be changed in

nearly every city at the markets. Those with cash in another major currency can change it in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

Credit Cards

Cash advances on credit cards are now available in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Sihanoukville, Kampot, Battambang and Kompong Cham. ANZ Royal and Canadia Bank offer the best service with free MasterCard and Visa cash advances.

Travellers Cheques

Travellers cheques aren't much use in Cambodia. Outside the major cities it is difficult to change them. Most banks charge a commission of 2% to cash travellers cheques; you'll be given US dollars, not riel. Some hotels and travel agents will also cash travellers cheques after banking hours.

PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO

Film and processing are cheap in Cambodia. A roll of 36 exposures costs about US\$2. Processing charges are around US\$4 for 36 standard prints. Cheap slide film is widely available in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, but elsewhere it's hard to find. Many internet cafes in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambang and Sihanoukville will burn CDs from digital images using card readers or USB connections. The price is about US\$2.50 if you need a CD or US\$1.50 if you don't.

POST

Post office staff in Cambodia are notorious for pinching packages. Make sure that all of your items are franked before they disappear.

Don't send mail from the provinces, it is best to wait until you get to the big cities. Postcards cost 1500r to 2100r, and a 10g airmail letter 2000r to 2500r. International mail normally takes two to three weeks.

Phnom Penh's main post office has a poste restante service. Although it now checks identification, don't have anything valuable sent there. It costs 200r per item received.

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Cambodia continues to experience unprecedented growth in tourism and this inevitably brings the bad along with the good. Your goal is a simple one: minimise the negatives and maximise the positives. There are simple things like bringing a water filter or tablets

to treat tap water instead of buying bottled water, thus minimising the growing problem of plastic waste.

If you witness suspicious behaviour of tourists with Cambodian children, it's your duty to report it. Child exploitation and sexual abuse is now rightly taken very seriously here. Report any suspicions to the **ChildSafe Hotline** (☎ 012-296609). When booking into a hotel or jumping on transport, look out for the Child-Safe **logo** (ChildSafe; www.childsafe-cambodia.org). Each establishment or driver who shows this logo supports the end to child-sex tourism and has undergone child-protection training.

When bargaining for goods or transport, remember the aim is not to get the lowest possible price, but one that's acceptable to both you and the seller. Coming on too strong or arguing over a few hundred riel does nothing to foster Cambodians' positive feelings towards travellers.

Cambodia is an extremely poor country and begging is prevalent in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. Try not to become numb to the pleas as there's no social security network and no government support. Amputees may also find themselves stigmatised by mainstream society and unable to make ends meet any other way. If you do give, keep the denominations small, so expectations don't grow too big. Many amputees now sell books on the street and buying from them may encourage others to become more self-sufficient. Please don't give money to children as they rarely get to keep the money and it only propagates the problem – giving them some food is preferable.

Looting from Cambodia's ancient temples has been a huge problem. Don't contribute to this cultural rape by buying old stone carvings. Classy reproductions are available in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, complete with export certificates.

Finally, don't forget what the Cambodians have been through in the protracted years of war, genocide and famine. Support local Cambodian-owned businesses; if anyone deserves to profit from the new-found interest in this wonderful country, it's surely the long-suffering Khmers.

SHOPPING

The shopping here is centred on handicrafts and handmade goods: woven baskets, wood and stone carvings, silver, gems and paint-

ings are among the most popular items to bargain for.

A packed bag heading for home would not be complete without the *krama*, the chequered scarf of a thousand uses. Khmers wear these on every part of the body. They are hand woven to exceptional quality with the best coming from Kompong Cham and Takeo Provinces.

Check out the Shopping sections for Phnom Penh (p199) and Siem Reap (p207) for information on buying craft items produced by Cambodian mine victims and disabled and women's groups.

TELEPHONE & FAX

Private phone booths are found in every city and offer cheap local calls for about 300r a minute. They normally have the numbers 012, 092 or 063 written on them. The cheapest international calls are made on internet phones in cafés and cost 300r to 2000r. International calls (from US\$2 a minute) can be made from public phone-card booths, which are found in major cities. Their cards can generally be purchased at the local markets and the post office.

The cheapest fax services are also via the internet and cost around US\$1 to US\$2 per page for most destinations.

TOILETS

Apart from at road stops and in far-flung places, most toilets are of the Western variety, though some do indicate that you should not flush toilet paper by the telltale waste paper basket on the side; most of Cambodia's plumbing system just can't cope. It is advisable to carry a good stash of your own toilet paper with you at all times.

TOURIST INFORMATION

For the independent traveller, guesthouses, locals and other travellers are a much better source of information than the country's official tourist offices, many of which are either unstaffed or simply useless. Their opening hours are generally 7am to 11am and 2pm to 5pm.

TOURS

Now that ecotourism has begun to take off, there are many interesting community-based tours on offer in the various regions of the country.

The national parks usually have guided tours available, particularly at Bokor, Kirirom and Virachay.

For a grand tour of the country's highlights contact the brilliant **Hands Up Holidays** (www.handsupholidays.com). Promoting ethical holidays to Southeast Asia, it formulates adventure breaks that incorporate activities in AIDS orphanages and deaf and blind schools.

PEPY (Protect the Earth, Protect Yourself; ☎ 023-222804; www.pepyride.org) is a not-for-profit organisation that organises cycling tours to Cambodia's hotspots as well as some of the less explored destinations. Proceeds go towards the building of schools, developing literacy programmes and providing bikes for students who need better access to distant schools. They also run 'voluntours'; noncycling tours for travellers who want to muck in with community initiatives in rural areas.

TRAVELLERS WITH DISABILITIES

Cambodia is not designed for people with mobility impairments. There are very few buildings with elevators and most sidewalks and roads are riddled with potholes. The temples at Angkor Wat are normally accessed via steep steps or crumbling boulders. Transport wise, chartering is the way to go and is a fairly affordable option. Also affordable is hired help if you require it and Khmers are generally very helpful should you need a hand.

VISAS

Visas (US\$20) are available on arrival at Phnom Penh and Siem Reap airports and all land border crossings except at the Phnom Den-Tinh Bien Vietnam crossing (see the boxed text, p219, for information about scams.) The visa is a sticker, and it does not cost extra to get this or a stamp, despite what the border police tell you. If you're planning an extended stay, get a one-month business visa for US\$25.

Visa extensions are granted in Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville at the tourist and immigration offices. Tourist visas can be extended only once for a month (US\$48), whereas business visas can be extended ad infinitum. Extensions cost: one month US\$48; three months US\$78; six months US\$150; and one year US\$250. You'll need one passport photo for the extension and you have until three days after the expiry date to extend.

Overstayers are charged US\$5 per day at the point of exit.

Visa extensions cannot be granted outside of Cambodia, regardless of what touts tell you at the border.

VOLUNTEERING

Grass-roots organisations are the most appreciative of volunteers. Try the ones below.

Bodhi Villa In Kampot, volunteers can have a go at teaching English or arts to the kids. Contact Bodhi Villa (p242).

DMS Angkor Villa Guest House Arranges voluntary teaching at a community school. In Siem Reap (p205).

Lazy Gecko Café (Map p194; ☎ 012-1912935; 23B Ph 930) In Phnom Penh, contact this café to see how you can help with Jeannie's Orphanage.

Starfish Project (www.starfishcambodia.org) Encourages volunteers, helping to raise funds for local projects. In Sihanoukville.

Check out these websites, which also offer a range of opportunities:

www.volunteerabroad.com Has 53 programmes in Cambodia.

www.volunteerincambodia.org Organises voluntary teaching posts.

WOMEN TRAVELLERS

Women will generally find Cambodia quite a safe country to travel in, though solo females are advised to find a companion when heading to the more remote locations. If you do fall victim to a serious crime such as sexual assault, contact the Women's Rights office of **LICADHO** (☎ 023-330965; contact@licadho.org), where staff speak English and French and will be able to assist you. It has offices in all the major cities.

Khmer women dress fairly conservatively, and it's best to follow suit, particularly when visiting wats. In general, long-sleeved shirts and long trousers or skirts are preferred.

Tampons and sanitary napkins are widely available in major cities and provincial capitals, as is the contraceptive pill.

WORK

Job opportunities are limited. Normally, professional foreigners are recruited overseas. The easiest option is teaching English in Phnom Penh, as experience isn't a prerequisite at the smaller schools. Pay ranges from about US\$5 to US\$6 per hour (for the inexperienced) to about US\$15 to US\$20 per hour for those with a TEFL certificate teaching at the better schools.

TRANSPORT IN CAMBODIA

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Cambodia is connected by regular air services to its Southeast Asian neighbours. Prices are always subject to change so contact airline offices for fares.

Bangkok Airways (www.bangkokair.com) Phnom Penh (Map p194; ☎ 023-722545; 61 Ph 214); Siem Reap (Map pp210-11; ☎ 063-380191; NH6) Links Bangkok with both Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

China Southern Airlines (Map pp190-1; ☎ 023-424588; www.cs-air.com/en; 168 Ph Monireth A3)

Dragonair (Map pp190-1; ☎ 023-424300; www.dragonair.com; 168 Ph Monireth A4)

Jet Star Asia (www.jetstarasia.com) Phnom Penh (☎ 023-220909; 333B Ph Monivong); Siem Reap (Map pp210-11; ☎ 063-964388; Siem Reap Airport) Offers the cheapest daily flights between Bangkok and Phnom Penh.

Lao Airlines (www.laos-airlines.com) Phnom Penh (Map p194; ☎ 023-216563; 58c Sihanouk Blvd); Siem Reap (Map pp210-11; ☎ 063-963283; www.laos-airlines.com; NH6) Flights to Vientiane.

Malaysia Airlines (www.malaysia-airlines.com) Phnom Penh (Map p194; ☎ 023-218293; Diamond Hotel, 172 Monivong Blvd); Siem Reap (Map pp210-11; ☎ 063-964136; Siem Reap Airport) Daily flights connecting Phnom Penh and Kuala Lumpur.

President Airlines (Map p194; ☎ 023-210388; www.presidentairlines.com; 50 Norodom Blvd)

Siem Reap Airways (www.siemreapairways.com) Phnom Penh (Map p194; ☎ 023-720022; 65 Ph 214); Siem Reap (Map pp210-11; ☎ 063-380191; NH6)

SilkAir (Map pp190-1; ☎ 023-426808; www.silkair.com; 219B Himawari Hotel, 313 Sisowath Quay) Daily flights to Singapore from Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

Thai Airways (Map pp190-1; ☎ 023-214359; www.thairay.com; 294 Ph Mao Tse Tung) Links Bangkok with Phnom Penh.

Vietnam Airlines (www.vietnamairlines.com) Phnom Penh (Map p194; ☎ 023-363396; 41 Ph 214); Siem Reap (Map pp210-11; ☎ 063-964488; NH6) Links Phnom Penh with Vientiane, Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Its daily services also fly from Siem Reap to Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi.

Border Crossings

Cambodia shares border crossings with Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. For more details on border crossings in the region, see p99. There

are now as many as six border crossings with Thailand, but only two are popular with travellers. The 30-day Thai transit visas are available at all border crossings.

There are three border crossings with Vietnam. The crossing from Bavet to Moc Bai links Phnom Penh with Ho Chi Minh City. The Phnom Den to Tinh Bien crossing is not as popular. Vietnamese visas are not available at the border crossings.

There is one border crossing with Laos, from Dom Kralor to Voeng Kham, which connects Stung Treng and Si Phan Don. Lao visas are *not* available at this crossing.

OVERCHARGING

Unfortunately, overcharging for visas and nonexistent 'entry/exit fees' is rampant in Cambodia. These 'fees' can be anything from US\$1 to 200B. Ask for a receipt with the amount written on it and their name, then make an official complaint to the **Ministry of Tourism** (info@mot.gov.kh), which is trying to clamp down on this behaviour.

GETTING AROUND Boat

Boats are an interesting way to break up the monotonous road journeys.

The most popular options are the boats between Battambang and Siem Reap and Koh Kong and Sihanoukville. Both of these cost US\$15. There is also a boat service running up the Mekong from Kompong Cham to Kratie and in the wet season to Stung Treng.

For short crossings and cruises, a *tonnook* is usually the way to go. These are small motor-powered boats, often made of wood. A ride in one of these costs anywhere from 1000r a passenger to US\$15 a boat.

Bus

There are loads of buses travelling great distances with the improvement of roads in the country. Buses to nearly all destinations depart from Psar Thmei in Phnom Penh with reasonable prices. Buses to far-reaching destinations will normally drop off and pick up people along the way.

The biggest companies are Hour Lean and Phnom Penh Sorya Transport. See the individual destination sections for bus links, journey times and prices. Prices range from 4500r for a short trip to US\$15 for long hauls.

Car & Motorcycle

With the roads the way they are, self-drive is probably not the best idea. If you do go for this option, guesthouses and hotels can arrange hire cars for you. They cost anywhere from US\$20 to US\$100 depending on the make and the distance you wish to travel.

Dirt-bike enthusiasts will enjoy Cambodia's challenging roads. Motorcycles (100cc) can be hired for around US\$5 a day in the towns, 250cc bikes for around US\$7. The big cities have the better deals with some offering bikes for as little as US\$3 a day. Siem Reap does not allow foreigners to ride their own motorcycles.

Local Transport CYCLO & TUK-TUK

The cyclo (pedicab) is a rare sight these days, it has been replaced with the motorised version – the tuk-tuk. They are a relaxing way to get around the city, but perhaps too slow for venturing further. Cyclos cost the same as motos (tip generously as they work hard!) and whatever you pay for them, double it for a tuk-tuk.

MOTO

Motos or motodups (motorcycle plus driver) are the easiest way to travel short distances in Cambodia. A short trip around town usually costs 1000r, double at night. Longer journeys around a municipality cost about a dollar, but trips to other towns will need to be negotiated. It helps if you have a map, often motos don't know where they are going. Settle on a price before you leave to avoid an argument at the end. Chartering a moto for the day costs around US\$7 to US\$10, more if a greater distance is involved.

REMORQUE MOTO

These trailers pulled by motos are found in the provinces. They are normally wooden carts used for transporting villagers and their goods and are a fun way to get about. They cost the same as a moto.

SHARE TAXI, PICK-UP & MINIBUS

With so many roads in Cambodia still bathing in dust and decorated with potholes, it falls on the smaller vehicles to get you from one place to the next. Share taxis are fastest and usually take the form of a Toyota Camry sedan. There are four seats in this car, but it's considered an eight-passenger vehicle, so unless you are double-jointed (everywhere) or the size of a Hollywood starlet with an eating disorder, buy two spaces for a bearable journey. Minibuses are much the same; they appear to be world-record attempts to see how many people can squeeze into one vehicle.

Pick-ups are an initiation. You haven't travelled in Cambodia until you experience the white-knuckle ride in the back of a beat-up Nissan zooming through the countryside. You are usually required to pile in with half the community and all their possessions, until you loom high above the cabin. Drivers then nonchalantly fly over bumps, and swerve around ditches to reach their destination; not surprisingly, many who have experienced this form of transport claim to have found religion along the way.

Train

When it comes to trains, don't bother. At the time of writing, all official passenger services were suspended, because there were simply not enough train travellers. You can try hitching a ride with a cargo carrier, but their schedules are unreliable and the journeys impossibly slow.

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