

WARMER GLORIES

With a slew of luxury hotel openings, Cambodia is back in the spotlight. But the country's past, tangled forests and haunting temples are just as fascinating as its bright future

WORDS: LIZZIE POOK



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ANGKOR WAT, RAFFLES HOTEL LE ROYAL PHNOM PENH, ELEPHANT BAR, ROYAL PALACE PHNOM PENH



summer too. Add to that Angelina Jolie’s Netflix film *First They Killed My Father*, which shone a light on the country’s dark years under the Khmer Rouge, and you have the makings of a must-visit destination.

My base in the capital city of Phnom Penh is the impressive Raffles Hotel Le Royal – a beautifully preserved heritage property (and the oldest hotel in the city). Built in the 1920s, it has had many incarnations, including as a makeshift Red Cross hospital during the Khmer Rouge regime.

Although not afraid to acknowledge its brush with dark history, Hotel Le Royal also welcomes all the trappings of luxury, too. The jasmine-filled, marble-floored lobby is strewn with dark mahogany furniture, swollen-bellied Buddha statues and intricate elephant sculptures (indeed the hotel’s beautifully ornate Elephant Bar is one of the best places in Cambodia for speciality gins). It soon becomes clear, however, that my very favourite thing to do here is swim in the tranquil pool at nightfall, under the watchful eyes of the many resident bats, who skim the water around me, picking off insects for their supper. ▶

Everything is pitch black in the big top. A group of men crouch close to the ground, the masks on the back of their heads wrought with grotesquely distended faces and eerie grins. Flashes of lightening illuminate the room as they slowly begin to rise, twisting their bodies into esoteric shapes, circling around us with grace and menace.

I am absolutely transfixed. I had travelled to Cambodia to explore its crumbling temples, bustling markets and the mighty Mekong River. But I’ve happened upon a hidden gem: Phare, a small Siem Reap-based circus troupe that is exploring the lasting effects of the Khmer Rouge regime (when an estimated three million educated Cambodians were slaughtered by dictator Pol Pot). There’s juggling, dance and unfeasible acts of balance. It’s just about the most emotionally powerful thing I’ve ever seen.

Cambodia is one of the past year’s most buzzed-about destinations. Not only are a parade of luxury hotels opening outposts in the country – including Rosewood in Phnom Penh, Six Senses on beachy Krabey Island and the Alila Villas Koh Russey on the south coast’s Koh Rong archipelago – but a new Emirates route into Phnom Penh launched in the





FROM TOP:
ELEPHANT BAR;
CHOEUNG EK

City living

Phnom Penh is a bustling hive of a city. While here, a trip to The Royal Palace is a must. Replete with ornate hedges, jade green lawns and gleaming gold tiles, it's also home to the Emerald Buddha Temple – seek out the impressive green Buddha inside, made with 2,086 pieces of diamond and pure gold – and the dazzling silver pagoda (so-called because its floor is covered with six tonnes of the sparkling stuff).

The heart of the city, however, lies in its memorials to those felled by the Khmer Rouge. Choeung Ek, some 11 miles outside of Phnom

Penh is one of almost 400 'killing fields' made by the Khmer Rouge during their rule. Here almost 9,000 men, women and children

were executed and thrown into mass graves.

It's a tough visit, but a hugely important one. Today, Choeung Ek is actually a leafy and tranquil place, filled with vibrant yellow butterflies and chattering birdsong. But the ghostly 17-tier stupa that rises above its fields – housing more than 5,000 skulls, bones and items of clothing of some of those killed here – is a stark, vital reminder of the country's harrowing past.

Carvings of thousands of celestial dancers cover Angkor Wat

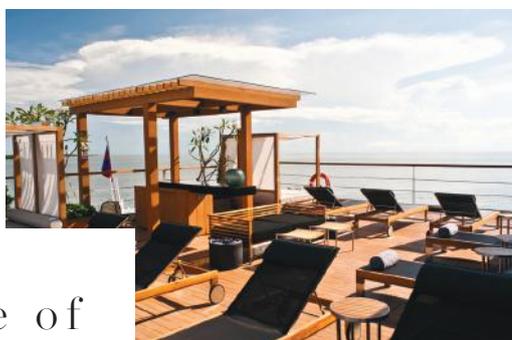


To temple

Siem Reap, a 50-minute flight from Phnom Penh, is hot. Very hot. When I arrive, temperatures are pushing 40 (it's thought to be so warm here because the stone from the many scattered temple complexes holds in the heat). But instead of cursing these vast radiators, I decide to explore them.

On approach, the gates of Angkor Thom (a huge-scale temple ruin dating back to the 12th century) look like something from *King Kong*; strangler figs sprawl across the rocky barriers and bullet holes riddle the huge soldier sculptures that flank the entrance (a reminder of civil war here). I spend the morning pottering around the stunning Bayon Temple, which houses carvings of more than 200 gigantic faces within its walls, and the

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:
JUNGLE TEMPLE; AQUA
MEKONG; BAYON TEMPLE



wonderfully unrestored Jungle Temple (Ta Prohm), best known for its role in Jolie's *Tomb Raider*. Covered in atmospheric tarantula cobwebs and parasitic trees, the entrance itself is a tangle of termite mounds, dark butterflies and creeping vines that look like pythons slithering across green-tinged sandstone.

The big action comes in the form of Angkor Wat, Cambodia's most photographed and recognisable landmark. Built between 1113 and 1132, the world's largest religious temple is encircled by a vast man-made moat which sparkles in the midday sun. Decorated with the carvings of thousands of celestial dancers, the three-level temple is often lit with a sunset glow that turns the stones and surrounding trees a vibrant gold. Strolling around its walls you'll discover expansive bas relief carvings, some 100 metres long, depicting Hindu mythology and historical wars: the bloody fights between demons and gods, and a teeming mass of elephants, chariots, horses and warriors.

Life on the river

There's still one thing left for me to explore in Cambodia: the wide murky forks of the Mekong River, which also runs through Thailand, China, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. The Aqua Expeditions cruise vessel is a modern ship of glass and mahogany. Suites have epic floor-to-ceiling

a taste of temple

Western & Oriental offers a 10-night Essential Cambodia trip plus a four-night cruise on the Aqua Mekong, from £5,534 per person, westernoriental.com; Raffles Phnom Penh, from approx. £135 per night, room only, raffles.com; three-night cruise, from \$3,855 (£2,860), full board, aquapexpeditions.com

windows, rainforest showers and huge king beds. There's even a plunge pool, outdoor cinema and the Mekong's only football table on board. I'm taking a three-day cruise that winds up the river from Phnom Penh and back, and I delight in waking up each morning among reed beds and floating villages.

Each day we disembark the ship for a bicycle excursion, cycling through local villages and happening upon weddings, funerals, card games

and family meals. We see marooned wooden ships, emerald rice fields, trees laden with mangos and skittish chickens with cartoonishly long legs. One day, we park up and kayak through tangles of water hyacinth past rows of houses on stilts, televisions blaring inside semi-aquatic houses. Each night we return to the boat for serpent head fish curries, red snapper, aromatic stir fries and moreish sticky rice.

On my last night on the Mekong, as the skiff motors into the setting sun, we become surrounded by gulls, dancing about us with silvery fish hanging from their beaks. Fishermen's boats flank us and farmers potter about on the banks. Life goes on as normal in Cambodia, and it's beautiful. ■