

Clockwise from top left:
tending the rice paddies;
Buddhist monks at
Angkor Wat; traditional
green curry; touring by
tuk-tuk; an egg-topped
bean sprout dish; the
eco-friendly Jaya House
Riverpark; temple
reflections; Phum Baitang
'village'; the resort's pool;
Khmer-inspired gardens;
spring rolls in the hotel

SIEM REAP

Gateway to Cambodia's breathtaking Angkor ruins, this tropical hotspot is a delight, from its dynamic circus troupe to its diverse cuisine. Cillian O'Connor explores

Why go? Resplendent with coconut trees and colourful markets, the bustling resort town of Siem Reap is as much of a gem as the ancient sites that lie just to the north of it. While a visit to Angkor's Unesco-protected temples is obligatory, Siem Reap itself is where to find an exciting introduction to the vibrancy of Cambodian culture – never more so than in December, when the warm but not yet stifling temperatures see the city come alive.

What to do Set your alarm for the wee small hours, then take a tuk-tuk to the Angkor Archaeological Park to arrive in time for dawn. Joining other early risers to glimpse the sunrise over the temple complex Angkor Wat is an unmissable experience. From there, explore the surrounding ruins, which include the richly decorated Bayon and overgrown Ta Prohm temples (the latter a filming location for the 2001 movie *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*). Once 'temples out', head back to town making a pit stop at Angkor National Museum angkornationalmuseum.com where a vast collection of artefacts helps enrich one's understanding of the ancient city. Bodia Spa bodia-spa.com a stone's throw along the river, is the place to indulge in a well-earned reflexology foot massage (£18 for 1 hour). Come evening, soak up the atmosphere – and a cooling drink – on buzzy Pub Street, before hailing a tuk-tuk to the thrilling Phare Phare Circus pharecircus.org – a Cambodian circus show starring graduates of Phare Ponleu Selpak, a non-profit performing arts school. Take a late-night stroll through the bustling Angkor Night Market angkornightmarket.com to buy a snack and a Cambodian scarf, or *krama*, to take home (a snip at under £5).

Where to stay The city offers a wide-ranging array of hotels to check out. Sarai Resort and Spa 00 855 63 962 200, sarairesort.com boasts award-winning value just a stone's throw from the heart of Siem Reap. Each of the 48 Moroccan-style rooms have views of its ornately tiled pool. For style with a social conscience, book in at the glamorous Jaya House Riverpark 00 855 63 962 555, jayahouseriverparksiemreap.com which

is Cambodia's first plastic-free hotel and an homage to the country's 1960s Modernist movement, complete with solid silver-tiled swimming pool. Take a 15-minute drive into the Cambodian countryside to find Phum Baitang 00 855 63 961 111, zannierhotels.com – an upscale escape modelled on a traditional Khmer village: think thatched roof villas with shutters woven from banana leaves – or the tropical oasis Anantara Angkor 00 855 63 966 788, anantara.com which is also nearby. Though if you prefer unfettered luxury, Templantation 00 855 12 233 350, maads.asia is a tranquil 33-room retreat boasting cascading waterfalls, a sparkling lake-sized pool and a soothing spa.

Where to eat and drink Make the most of the month's glorious weather by dining alfresco at Mie Café miecafe-siemreap.com where chef Pola Siv's tasting menu is a deft combination of Khmer and Western cuisines. Highlights include pan-fried *chhlang* (catfish) crusted with fermented krill, tamarind and ginger. For an upscale take on a local staple, try Bugs Café bugs-cafe.e-monsite.com – a casual spot serving up small plates of freshly fried insects, from crunchy crickets to surprisingly moreish silkworms. If that's not to your taste, head instead to Malis malis-restaurant.com whose chef Luu Meng breathes new life into Cambodian dishes all but lost during the Khmer Rouge regime in the late 1970s. Enjoy a warming nightcap at nearby FCC Angkor fcccambodia.com where Kampot pepper-infused vodka is a must. Visitors shouldn't leave Siem Reap without trying fish *amok*, a softly sweet yellow curry studded with meaty chunks of locally-caught white fish. No-frills Father's Restaurant fathersrestaurant.com on the quieter end of Sok San Road serves up one of the finest.

Time running out? Make the hour-long trip to Kompong Khleang floating village, where guides take visitors on a boat tour to take in views of stilted houses and sample fragrant sticky rice (£26pp).

Trip tip Don't be afraid to haggle. From market hauls to tuk-tuk rides, aim to pay around 50 per cent of the initial asking price.

Travel information

Currency is the Cambodian riel (KHR), though the US dollar (USD) is widely accepted. Local time is 7 hours ahead of GMT. Flight time from the UK is around 15 hours.

Getting there

Cathay Pacific offers flights from Heathrow and Gatwick to Siem Reap International via Hong Kong. cathaypacific.com

Thai Airways flies from Heathrow via Bangkok. thaiairways.com

Resources

Tourism Cambodia has plenty of helpful information, from Khmer history to how to get around. tourismcambodia.org

Further reading

Angkor and the Khmer Civilization by Michael D Coe (Thames and Hudson, £12.95) is an informative yet accessible introduction to Angkor and its architectural achievements.

AVERAGE DAILY TEMPERATURES AND RAINFALL

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Min C	19	21	23	24	24	24	23	23	23	22	21	19
Max C	31	32	33	34	33	32	31	31	30	30	30	30
mm	0	0	1	2	5	6	7	7	9	8	3	0

