

LAND OF PLENTY

Lara Dunston ventures beyond Cambodia's tourist hotspots of Angkor Wat and Siem Reap to Battambang, the country's 'rice bowl' where the busy streets are lined with hawkers and eateries offering plenty of choices from sunrise until after dark.



Clockwise (from far left): boys ride home from school; handmade noodles at Lan Chov Khorko Miteanh; fish amok at Antique House; a family work their rice fields; monks wait for lunch in the leafy grounds of a pagoda; legendary Australian chef David Thompson, adviser to new restaurant Jaan Bai.



global flavours.

From my first glimpse of Cambodia’s gritty riverside city of Battambang I was enchanted. After an interminable bus ride from sprawling Bangkok with its gleaming skyscrapers and gridlocked traffic, sleepy Battambang’s mural-clad pagodas, glittering gold *chedi* (temples) and Chinese shophouses charmed the pants off me. Home to some of Cambodia’s best-preserved French colonial architecture, the compact old quarter quickly lured me out for a late afternoon stroll to see the sun cast its golden light on the pretty buildings, their paint peeling, balconies crumbling and shutters hanging from hinges. In the riverside parks at sunset, mandarin-robed monks strolled beneath umbrellas, old men in berets played Chinese checkers and local women did aerobics and danced the Madison. But it was the food stalls that dotted the riverside selling hot corn on the cob, steamed buns and sweet coconuts that captivated me.

Known as Cambodia’s ‘rice bowl’, the agriculturally rich area of Battambang is renowned for producing the country’s finest produce. Locals boast that the area reaps the best rice, juiciest oranges, richest coconuts and sweetest bananas and pineapples. The wet season sees much of the farmland submerged beneath monsoonal rainwater. But after harvest at the start of the dry season, attention turns to the fertile riverbanks not long ago under water, where farmers plant countless sorts of greens and vegetables used in the *samlors* (soups and light stews) loved by locals for their sour, pungent and bitter flavours.

While the seedlings are growing, fishermen take to the coffee-coloured Sanker River to cast nets to catch freshwater fish swimming from the massive Tonle Sap Lake – Southeast Asia’s largest – along with river prawns, crabs, eels and sea snakes, which will be smoked on the riverbank and stored for the next monsoon. Stroll **Phsar Nath**, the old market in the historic centre, or **Phsar Boeung Chhoeuk** and you’ll see vendors selling Battambang’s beautiful produce – mountains of pineapples and coconuts, colourful mats covered with vegetables, fish flapping in buckets of water and baskets filled to the brim with vibrant chillies, red onions and fragrant local favourites: lemongrass, kaffir lime, galangal, turmeric and ginger.

OFF TO A GOOD START

You have no choice but to begin your day in the darkness in Battambang. Without earplugs, expect to be woken well before dawn by the melodic hum of monks chanting at the pagodas

or by a wedding party that starts around 4.30am with the lyrical tinkling of a Cambodian xylophone followed by a beautiful blues-style of folk filled with sorrow that sounds more suitable for a funeral. Still, it’s more pleasing than the mid-morning disco sounds that will later welcome guests. Thankfully, dawn is the best time to depart for a tuk tuk ride.

Early mornings are when the country roads and village lanes of Battambang come alive. Farmers set out on ox-carts for the rice fields and fishermen for the riverbanks. Vendors set up their roadside stands, while locals slurp breakfast soups at ramshackle stalls. Kids ride bicycles to distant schools, grown-ups whiz into Battambang on beaten-up old motorbikes. Everyone is generous with waves and smiles so prepare to be greeted with constant shouts of “hello!”.

MEETING THE PRODUCERS

In Battambang’s surrounding villages, artisan producers still make things by hand as generations of their ancestors have always done. Most hotels can arrange a tuk tuk driver, however, nobody knows Battambang province like English-speaking Mr Ol, booked through **Bambu Hotel** (see Where to Stay, p 132). Mr Ol has driven my husband and I down every country lane, village track and

riverside trail that seemed far too narrow to trundle along, spontaneously stopping off to chat to everyone from a family barbecuing rice-field rats to women harvesting a garlicky green called *snoar*.

Mr Kim Nou, the hospitable owner of boutique hotel **Maisons Wat Kor** (see Where to Stay, p 132) organises an excellent tuk tuk tour, stopping at a variety of traditional cottage industries run from family homes and humble workshops. During one long day we visit families producing incense from the wood of the kapok tree; clay stoves, made from recycled metals and mud, baked in a kiln; and rice noodles, produced by a complicated process starting with the grinding of rice into powder, continuing with heavy duty mixing and kneading, and the extrusion of noodles by the only machine on site, before finishing with the boiling and cooling of the noodles, ready to be collected by vendors.

At a village well-regarded for its rice paper, we met a rosy-cheeked woman who makes 1,200 pieces a day with the help of her daughter, which she then sells for just over \$1 for 100. At another village, Mr Mao, who has been making rice



Clockwise: locals cross a suspension bridge over the Sanker River; a girl helps her mother make rice paper; drivers walk their rickshaws through the pagoda grounds; a French colonial-era shophouse; bowls of pork noodle broth called *kuy teav*.



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Clockwise (from far left): smoke from an evening takeaway stall outside Phsar Nath; spices used to make rice wine; an incense maker; a family pull up on their bike to buy dinner from a hawker; son vac, fish paste grilled in banana leaves; a mural of legendary Cambodian singers who died during the Pol Pot regime; nom krouk, fried rice and coconut cake.

wine for over 20 years showed us the tray of heady spices, including star anise, chilli and garlic that he ferments with rice and yeast to produce the potent spirit he sells for \$1 a litre. A dollar is also the going rate for the specialty of Samrongkung village, *kralan*, a sweet snack of sticky rice, fresh grated coconut, sugar and black eyed peas stuffed into pieces of bamboo and grilled over an open fire.

STREET FOOD

Mornings may be the best time for experiencing Battambang's villages and countryside, but evenings are when you need to get a taste of the city centre. If you don't see plumes of smoke rising in the darkness from **Phsar Nath** market soon after dusk, let your nose guide you to the pans of simmering soups and stews, and salted fish and meats barbecuing over smouldering coals. The road that skirts the perimeter of the market is the site of Battambang's only traffic jam. Each day, for a few hours after sunset, locals flock there on motorbikes, bicycles, tuk tuks and cars to purchase the pre-cooked dishes that are the city's favourite form of take-away.

The best vendors are the busiest, including a very focused woman called Roth who has run her stall here for a decade, specialising in homemade *samlors* (soups), including *samlor*

machou, a tangy soup made with green papaya, spicy basil and smoked fish; *samlor machou youn*, sweet and sour soup with pineapple, tomato, watermelon, and tamarind; *sgnor*, a clear chicken broth fragrant with lemongrass and kaffir lime; and *samlor trayong chek*, made with banana blossom and tamarind. Her other specialties are *char kroeung*, a dry curry-like dish made with chicken, duck or catfish and *prahok chamhuy*, steamed *prahok* (fermented fish paste), with pork and eggs.

The adjoining stall specialises in all things grilled – frogs, fish cakes, chicken wings, pork ribs, quails, sweet Cambodian sausages and whole chickens – glistening from a marinade of *kroeung*, oil and red chilli. Large grey goby fish and smaller catfish, both caught from the river, are blanketed in salt and continually turned on the barbecue. Only for the culinary adventurous is *khnob*, barbecued *prahok* (fermented fish paste) with mushroom and tamarind wrapped in banana leaf.

Nearby, petite Mao Vanna, who for 20 years has been selling only three specialties from her small stools, serves up trays topped with *amok trey*, a mousse-like fish curry steamed in banana leaf that is Cambodia's national dish; *char kdao*, a *kroeung*-based duck dish with hot basil; and *char kgney*, a light chicken and ginger stir-fry.

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AUTHENTIC FLAVOURS

You'll be hard pressed to find authentic dishes that don't include fermented fish paste or the chilli marinade *kroeung*. They're acquired tastes for foreign palates, especially the fermented fish paste, *prahok*, that locals liken to smelly French cheese. Eaten as a paste with minced pork to create tasty dips and diluted for soup and curry dishes, *prahok* offends most Western palates, which is why tourist restaurants tend to leave it out, ensuring you rarely get to try Cambodian cuisine as it's intended to taste. Much more palatable to Westerners is *kroeung*, a herbal paste ground from fresh lemongrass, galangal, kaffir lime, turmeric, garlic, eschalot and dried red chillies, that forms the basis of the most delicious Cambodian soups, curries and stews.

Our culinary guide, Kim Nou, provided some of our most authentic Cambodian food experiences. Starting at a riverside restaurant called **Mlob Chan**, which translates to 'in the shade of the nutmeg tree', we swung in hammocks in a rickety alfresco bamboo pavilion overlooking the Sanker River, while we waited for the feast he'd arranged – there is no menu and guests simply request their favourite dishes, which are served on a colourful mat on the bamboo 'floor'. The food is simple, fresh and flavourful.

Later that evening we continued to feast on local favourites at **Antique House**, a splendid century-old Khmer timber house in Wat Kor Village, which you can visit during the day for a private tour by the distinguished owner Madame Ming. Her long-term cook, Ming Pok, spent the day preparing our elaborate meal. There was a sublime sweet and sour *samlor majou kti manao*s or pineapple chicken soup that was like a light chicken curry. A tangy lemony dip called *tek kroeung*, which we ate with miniature crunchy clusters of flowers called *sdaow*, was like nothing we'd ever tried before. Yet the highlight was the finest rendition of a dish every tourist to Cambodia eats – fish amok, prepared to a secret family recipe.

WHERE TO STAY

You'll find the best hotels near the riverbank and in tranquil villages just a ten-minute tuk tuk ride to the centre. Not far from the river, **Bambu Hotel** (from \$70 per night, including taxes; bambuhotel.com) has large rooms in a colonial-inspired villa as well as Khmer-style rooms in timber buildings, separated by an enticing swimming pool.

In tropical gardens in peaceful riverside Wat Kor village, **Maisons Wat Kor** (from \$89 per night, including taxes; maisonswatkor.com) has spacious rooms in traditional Khmer timber buildings with wooden decks looking onto a lotus pond and alluring pool.

Nearby, set amidst emerald rice paddies, **Battambang Resort** (from \$61 per night, including taxes; battambangresort.com) boasts modern minimalist rooms and has a poolside restaurant. All hotels arrange excellent tuk tuk tours, while Battambang Resort also offers breezy riverside bike rides and a fishing boat cruise to absorb life on the water.

Late one afternoon, in high heels and a floppy hat, Phary, the owner of **Battambang Resort** (see Where to Stay) took us on a snack tour that she offers to guests along a dusty riverside road dotted with stalls and rustic eateries. We began at a wooden stall where owner Sal makes *nom krourk*, fried rice and coconut cakes, in a mould over a charcoal fire, which she serves with a syrup of palm sugar and fish sauce. At a bamboo shack precariously perched over the river, we ate *son vac*, fish paste grilled in banana leaves, which we wrapped in lettuce with basil, cold noodles, saw-tooth coriander and a tangy sauce. We followed it with *pong tia koun* or boiled baby duck eggs, which we scooped out after first drinking the warm aromatic juices from the shell that we'd created by adding salt, pepper and lime juice.

At **Ponleu Preh Chung**, where Mrs Vat Ongn has been crafting a repertoire of desserts for over 20 years, we had our first taste of the heavenly *banh ja'neuk*, glutinous rice balls stuffed with mung bean paste, drowned in coconut milk and tapioca, and sprinkled with sesame seeds. The dish is nicknamed 'killing husband' for its tendency to get caught in the throats of drunk spouses.

But the highlight was our final stop, where Mr Pra Dina piled raw beef skewers that had been marinating in a plastic tub of *kroeung* onto a row of barbecues. As we watched him fan smoke over the coals, dozens of locals began arriving on motorbikes to join us in our patient wait.

For an authentic breakfast, Phary also offers a cycle tour to a soup stall where Mr Lee Mun and Mrs Te Lieng have been making Battambang's

quintessential breakfast, a pork noodle broth called *kuy teav*, since 1995. Try the soup with pork slices or do as the locals do and opt for pork offal, including intestines and lung.

TOP TABLES

When you're done with eating on the streets, sleek new **Jaan Bai** (Street 2), which translates to 'rice bowl', offers pan-Asian sharing plates prepared with organic, seasonal produce, along



Clockwise (from top left): Mr Pra Dina's famous marinated beef skewers; food stall at Psar Boeung Chhoeuk market; the kitchen team takes a break at Jaan Bai, a training restaurant backed by Australians Chef David Thompson and restaurateur John Fink; David Thompson's fiery Jungle Curry at Jaan Bai; a local woman sells seedlings from the back of her bike.



with a pumping soundtrack and potent cocktails. Set in a stylishly refurbished shophouse clad in murals by local artists, you'll enjoy Cambodian specialties including Kampot pepper crab from the south, while a fiery Thai jungle curry comes courtesy of Chef David Thompson of **Nahm Bangkok**, who, along with Australian restaurateur John Fink, is an advisor to the restaurant that trains local chefs.

More Cambodian favourites (and Western comfort food) are on the menu at colonial-inspired **Russey Restaurant** (Street 203) at Bambu Hotel, from stir-fried peppery beef *lok lak*, to a hearty *samlor kako*, a Cambodian vegetable soup made with *kroeung* and *prahok*. The signature dish, beef Battambang, is a richer, more sophisticated version of *sach ko ang jakak* (grilled *kroeung* beef and pork skewers) that is served at weddings.

Some of Battambang's most elegant dishes are served at beautiful **Maisons Wat Kor** (Street 800) boutique hotel, where owner Kim Nou directs the kitchen to develop refined renditions of Cambodian dishes that are packed with flavour. Tasting menus change daily and tables must be booked ahead. Hope that the fried frangipani appetisers are on the menu.

Deliciously simple dumpling and soup joint **Lan Chov Khorko Miteanh** (145 Street 2), known to expats as 'Noodle Guy', is the spot to hit for hand-pulled noodles and handmade dumplings, cooked to order at the front of the no-frills eatery.

COFFEE & COCKTAILS

Kickstart your day with a creamy Cambodian cappuccino at rustic **Kinyei Cafe** (Street 1½), where the rich combination of palm sugar, pineapple syrup and coconut milk earned the lovely Sakana Long the title of 2013 national barista champion. You'll also find faultless coffee at **Jaan Bai** (Street 2), as you'd expect from a Melbourne-managed enterprise – along with

icy beer on tap and Battambang's best cocktails. Sundowners should be savoured on the riverside at the atmospheric **Balcony Bar** (Street 1) in a big traditional timber house about halfway to Wat Kor village, or in town on the waterfront at bohemian **Cafe Eden** (85 Street 1), where the upstairs balcony offers brilliant people-watching. If you're in town on weekends, make a beeline

for **Lotus Bar** (Street 2½) where Battambang's expats will be sipping something while listening to live music.

GETTING THERE

Battambang is around 2.5 hours by private car or 4 hours by public bus from Siem Reap. Although it's possible to visit independently, Asian-based Backyard Travel (backyardtravel.com) offer a three-day private tour to Battambang covering some of the activities above, including transfers, accommodation and some meals for \$485 per person for two people. **d.**

“Jaan Bai, backed by David Thompson, offers pan-Asian sharing plates.”

Clockwise (from far left): elegant renditions of Cambodian specialties at Maisons Wat Kor; a family fishing on the Sanker River; a bartender at Lotus Bar; a monk at Ek Phnom temple; local kids in the back of a tuk tuk; Bambu Hotel; a detail from Battambang's Chinese temple.