

Phnom Penh awakens

Glorious Khmer buildings, an edgy lifestyle scene, coupled with the leisurely vibe of a bygone era, have put the Cambodian capital back on the traveller's destination radar. WORDS BY LARA DUNSTON

Phnom Penh has often been overlooked by travellers making a beeline for Siem Reap's Angkor ruins. Not any more. Laid-back and easy to get around, the city has stepped out of the shadows with much to offer – from hip home-grown fashion and art, buzzy markets and a lively waterfront, to beautiful Khmer and colonial architecture.



A LIME CAFÉ

Kick-start your meander around Phnom Penh with coffee, pastries and breads with homemade seasonal preserves using fresh, local ingredients at the Lime Café (#79F) in designer-chic Lebiz Hotel. The beautiful books on art, architecture and interiors in the lobby's multimedia library are there for browsing, while the still pond keeps things cool and calm. Worth a look is the mural on the wall by Cambodian-New Zealander graffiti artist Peap Tarr.



B CENTRAL MARKET

You can easily spend a few good hours in Phnom Penh's bustling Central Market. Its distinctive art deco dome-shaped structure dates back to 1937. The outer stalls sell fresh fruit and vegetables, seafood and meat, fermented pastes and sausages,



and cooked food, while inside you'll find jewellery, clothing and homeware – along with luggage you can buy for a steal to cart back your souvenirs.

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C ROMDENG

Traverse Street 63, walk towards Street 174, and lunch on the patio or courtyard of a lovely restored French-colonial villa with vibrant art on the walls. A hospitality training school for rescued street kids, run by NGO Friends-International – SilkAir's charity partner – Romdeng (#74) serves superb Cambodian cuisine whipped up by youths in training. If you're feeling adventurous, try the spicy fried tarantulas.



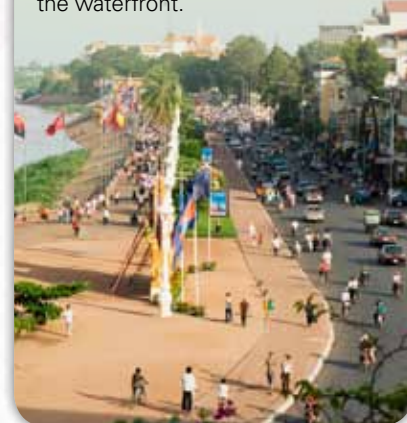
E ROYAL PALACE

Sitting between streets 184 and 240 along Sisowath Quay is the Royal Palace, with its grand Silver Pagoda and Temple of the Emerald Buddha. Built in 1866, it is one of Phnom Penh's most splendid architectural achievements. Be awed by the magnificent 17th-century Emerald Buddha statue. Made of crystal and solid gold, it weighs 90 kg and is adorned with more than 9,000 diamonds.



F SISOWATH QUAY

Head to Sisowath Quay, the city's lively waterfront promenade. Wander beside the Tonlé Sap, Southeast Asia's largest freshwater lake that flows from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh, where it meets the Mekong River. Catch outdoor "dancercise" classes, street-food vendors, and locals simply sitting on benches savouring the blue skies and sunshine. Drop by Orange River (#367), located at the Foreign Correspondents' Club (FCC), and pick up some clothes and accessories made from Khmer silk. Then head to FCC's rooftop bar for a sundowner overlooking the waterfront.



SilkAir flies twice daily between Singapore and Phnom Penh.

D STREET 178



Aptly dubbed "Art Street", this area is dotted with art galleries selling paintings of Buddhas and Apsara dancers, along with stylish shops. Near the handsome National Museum (corner Street 13) – a red traditional Khmer building dating to the 1920s – you'll discover boho-chic clothes at fair-trade boutique Spicy Green Mango (#4a) and couture-type fashion at Cambodian-French designer Romyda Keth's Ambre (#37).

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