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A tale of two cities

A trip to Cambodia, featuring a forgotten medieval empire and a bustling modern capital, will demonstrate exactly why this country is known as the 'Kingdom of Wonder'

Words Ryan Herman

More than one million Britons visited Thailand in 2016, but only a comparatively meagre 150,000 went to its neighbour Cambodia. The country dubbed the 'Kingdom of Wonder' is still a relative mystery for British tourists – but perhaps not for much longer. TripAdvisor users recently rated Siem Reap, in the north-west of the country, their number one destination in Asia.

The town's star attractions are the Hindu temples of Angkor. The former capital of the Khmer empire, Angkor was, it is said, the largest pre-industrial city in the world, with a peak population of up to a million in the 14th century. Abandoned for almost half a millennia, it became the forgotten wonder of the world until it was rediscovered by 19th-century French explorers.

Angkor now attracts millions of visitors annually, but such is its scale it never seems crowded. It's easy to go off on your own and explore the temples without seeing a soul and feel like you've just discovered a lost city. One recent visitor was then-First Lady Michelle Obama, who described it as "a technological marvel for its time". Indeed, the temples are an extraordinary feat of human engineering.

The best times to visit are either at dawn or sunset. If you choose the latter option, you should take in a boat trip along the moat that surrounds Angkor Wat. Enjoy a cocktail as you marvel at the magnificent sunset and ask yourself whether you really need to go back home anytime soon.

Enormous five-star hotels have sprung up around Siem Reap, largely to accommodate tourists from China and South Korea. But

biggest doesn't necessarily mean best. The mid-sized Raffles Grand Hotel D'Angkor is steeped in history. It first opened its doors in 1932, since when guests have included Somerset Maugham and Charles de Gaulle as well as the aforesaid Obama.

To step inside the hotel – a short drive from the airport and 8km from the temples – feels like a step back in time, from the timber cage lift to the overhead ceiling fans. The pool, the biggest in Cambodia, is inspired by the royal bathing pools at the temples. The hotel excels at getting the small details right.

Capital culture

Whereas Siem Reap offers a chance to explore Cambodia's glorious past, the country's capital of Phnom Penh is developing at a rapid pace. It's all hustle and bustle, even more so in November when it stages the Water Festival and more than one million people flock to the city. They line the banks of the Tonle Sap river as teams from around the country compete in dragon boat races, culminating in a spectacular fireworks display.

The nearest equivalent is the Notting Hill Carnival, though you'd be pushed to find a stall selling deep-fried tarantula on Ladbroke Grove. Should you decide to brave it, your best bet is the Romdeng restaurant. For those not tempted by spider, it has a red-ant stir-fry and some fantastic local curries – Cambodian cuisine is notably less spicy than that of its neighbours, Vietnam or Thailand.

Romdeng is part of the Tree Alliance group of restaurants staffed by young people who used to live on the streets. It's impossible to ignore the fact that

most people in Cambodia live in abject poverty. This is a country still living with the horrors inflicted by the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s that resulted in the deaths of around two million people, a quarter of its population.

Because it has shaped modern Cambodia in so many ways, you can't visit Phnom Penh without going to the Killing Fields memorial, which is built around the mass graves where thousands of Cambodians lie buried. Our guide, who lost many members of his own family at that time, explained that relatives are still being reunited to this day. It was, he said, his "grand mission to educate people for my brothers, my cousins, my parents and grandparents". You'll never forget the experience of visiting the memorial; which is the point – to make sure it never happens again.

The Raffles Hotel Le Royal is the only one in Phnom Penh to have remained intact from that period. Much like its sister in Siem Reap, Le Royal has played host to numerous heads of state. It even has a cocktail, *Femme Fatale*, named after Jackie Kennedy in its historic Elephant Bar.

Guides for both the Killing Fields and Temples of Angkor can be booked through About Asia, a non-profit travel agency that helps to fund education for 53,000 schoolchildren around the country. Founded by Londoner Andy Booth, it also offers bespoke trips for tourists, including anything from hot-air ballooning to lunch in the jungle.

Booth ditched his lucrative City job after a visit to Cambodia in 2002. That's the effect this country can have. The minute you leave, you'll be thinking about how soon you can return. **D**

Accommodation

A five-day itinerary in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh starts from £1,850pp, including private transfers, specialist expert guides, unique travel experiences and nights at Raffles Le Royal Phnom Penh / Grand Hotel D'Angkor. Excludes international flights.

aboutasiatravel.com

Getting There

Director flew from Heathrow with Malaysia Airlines to Phnom Penh via Kuala Lumpur. An economy-class return costs from £500.

malaysiaairlines.com

To see our trip gallery go to director.co.uk/cambodia

Clockwise from main picture: temples at Angkor Wat; fried tarantula; sign at the Khmer Rouge-era S21 detention centre; Elephant Bar at Hotel Le Royal; Phnom Penh's Water Festival; Cabana Suite at Grand Hotel D'Angkor; Hotel Le Royal exterior; inside the temple Taprohm at Angkor Wat

