

# ELLEtravel

Go to Angkor Wat before dawn  
to find it entirely, gloriously deserted



Siem Reap's new look and nightlife are increasingly sophisticated. There are £2.50 dinners and cheap cocktails if you want them, but there are also refined £14 Khmer tasting menus at Cuisine Wat Damnak, where French chef Joannès Rivière cooks wild chicken and calamari with shots of beer, and fish soup with wild sour leaf. I went one evening for dinner and booked again for the next night. Then there's the more rustic, but no less delicious, Khmer food at Sugar Palm – the chicken

satay, amok curry and aubergine and pork are the best in town, and cheap as chips. For offbeat, underground café society, go to the Art Deli, a gallery-cum-espreso bar whose cushions are emblazoned with 'Issy' and 'Yohji'. For carb-loading with a modern touch, there's Il Forno, a brand new brick and wood-fired oven joint, run by an Italian family, just around the corner from Miss Wong. The homemade pasta is as good as in Tuscany, and co-owner Giovanna is a great hostess, popping the Prosecco and getting gossip from the local people she's befriended. The new Siem Reap is cliquy, cool and visitor friendly: everything is within a few short blocks of the Old French Quarter, or little more than a five minute 80p-a-passenger tuk-tuk ride away.

On my last day in Cambodia, I took a quad bike ride out into the paddy fields. AboutAsia had introduced me to

*'Monks in robes ride in open-doored vans through CLOUDS of dust and the smoke of bonfires'*



Hervé, a former chef from Paris who married to a Khmer woman and settled here with his children

and his Quad Adventure Cambodia business. Much of his profit goes into the funding of a local orphanage. While the gloss of the FCC, the Old French Quarter bars, Raffles and the Amansara are the new face of the city, taking a quad bike into the country reminds you where you – as a comparably wealthy visitor – actually are. Children dash out of rural homes to wave, hoping that you're one of those tourists thoughtless enough to hurl teeth-ruining sweets their way while their parents plant rice in the fields. Monks in robes ride in open-doored transit vans through clouds of dust and the smoke of bonfires. At the side of a temple a band buses, each musician missing a limb from an encounter with one of the land mines that still litter the border. Even if it only had a tiny fraction of the temples that it does, Siem Reap would still be one of the most dramatic and moving places on earth. You absolutely have to see it, but don't shut your eyes to anything. ■

ELLE TRAVEL PLAN your next adventure with more ideas at ELLEUK.COM/TRAVEL

ELLEUK.COM 338



## WHERE TO SHOP

- ERIC RAISINA FCC**  
Angkor, Pokambor Avenue. Enq [ericraisina.com](http://ericraisina.com)  
Cambodia's king of couture-quality contemporary silk.
- TIGER LILY FCC** Angkor, Pokambor Avenue. Enq [tigerlilyph.com](http://tigerlilyph.com)  
Angkor jewellery and objects for the home.
- WANDERLUST FCC** Angkor, Pokambor Avenue. Enq [wanderlustambodia.com](http://wanderlustambodia.com)  
Stylish gifts and clothes.
- THEAM'S HOUSE** 25 Phum Veal, Khum Kokchak. Enq [theamshouse.com](http://theamshouse.com)  
Artist Lim Muy Theam designs a range of graphic and modern homeware.

## WHERE TO STAY

- RAFFLES GRAND HOTEL D'ANGKOR** 1 Vithei Charles de Gaulle. Enq [raffles.com](http://raffles.com). Doubles from £135, room only. The grand dame of hotels with bags of iconic colonial chic and an amazing pool.
- AMANSARA** Road to Angkor. Enq [amansara.com](http://amansara.com). Doubles from £551, half-board. The modernist luxe hotel is the place Angelina Jolie book-books when she's in town.
- HERITAGE SUITES HOTEL** Slokram Village. Enq [heritagesuiteshotel.com](http://heritagesuiteshotel.com). Doubles from £94, room only. Opulent and airy, with elegant contemporary touches.

## HOW TO GET THERE

AboutAsia offers four-night Siem Reap packages, including hotels, guided tours from £391, B&B, including transfers. Enq about [asiatravel.com](http://asiatravel.com). Singapore Airlines flies from London Heathrow to Siem Reap, via Singapore, from £911 return. Enq [singaporeair.com](http://singaporeair.com)



PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAMY, CORBIS, GETTY IMAGES, IFA, WANDERLUST, BOUTIQUE HOTEL, IFA

BAYON TEMPLE



RAFFLES GRAND HOTEL D'ANGKOR



HERITAGE SUITES HOTEL

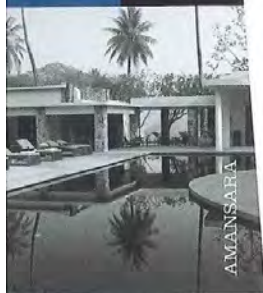
ANGKOR WAT



Words by MARK C O'FLAHERTY

# HOPE & ANGKOR

*It's home to Angkor Wat, the eighth wonder of the world, but once-sleepy SIEM REAP is now the buzzing fashion heart of Cambodia*



AMANSARA

There was something of the classic 1960s series *The Avengers* about my dawn arrival in Siem Reap. Two immaculately groomed Khmer gentlemen, wearing identical starched-white linen suits, greeted me at passport control and led me to a 1965 black Mercedes. I sat in the back, in air-conditioned silence, surrounded by meticulous, custom-upholstered white calico. Up front: a time-warp dashboard and my chauffeurs' matching gloss-black haircuts. It felt like one of those impossibly stylish and ever-so-civilised retro kidnap scenarios – bowler hats, brollies and high kicks in catsuits, all taking place somewhere exotic and a little surreal. Outside, in the blinding amber sunrise, Cambodia roused itself for another day – tuk-tuks and tourists swarming through the heat and dust.

There are a fair few 1960s-style references in Siem Reap, too, including, most prosaically, a hip new riverside arts centre and bar: 1961. Until the end of that decade, when what is now the Amansara hotel's in-house Mercedes was still being used by private royal appointment, Cambodia was enjoying a phenomenal boom. Art and culture flourished, Khmer youth flew out to study at the Parisian Sorbonne university and

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY, JILL SCHNEIDER, MARK C O'FLAHERTY

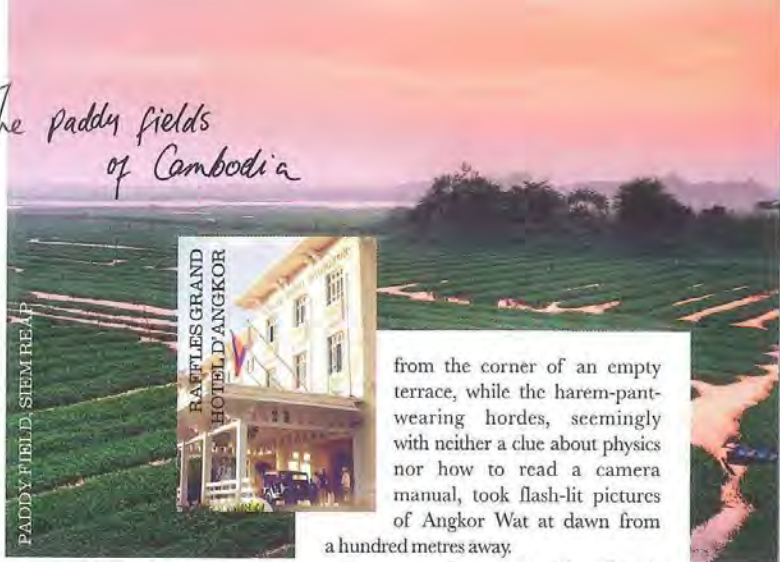


Jackie O and the Hollywood A-list flew in to tour the temples. As the team at 1961 put it on their flyers, to explain their name: 'It was Cambodia's golden age.' Then there was war, and – in the form of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime – worse. Now, despite all the poverty and corruption, there's more than a glimmer of optimism. Some might feel uneasy at the growth of luxury travel and a fashion and design scene in a city where children are sent to sell flowers to tourists in the night-markets. However the people running new businesses are sensitive to their environment, intent on aid and regeneration. Right now is a wonderful time to visit. And it will, I assure you, blow your mind.

First and foremost, I travelled to Siem Reap because – like every foreigner before me from the French colonials to Charlie Chaplin – I wanted to see Angkor Wat. This 12th-century wonder of the world is a life-changing experience for anyone who has been and a font of inspiration for artists and designers. When I lunched with John Rocha in Dublin last year, he spoke in hushed tones about his recent experience: 'I visited at 4am on a bicycle; the mist lifted and I felt humbled by the whole experience. It made me realise how we're all just passing through this life.'

I spent my first day at the temples with a guide from AboutAsia, owned by British ex-pat Andy Booth. While it's essentially a luxury tour operation, staffed by Siem Reap insiders, it was conceived to

## The paddy fields of Cambodia



from the corner of an empty terrace, while the harem-pant-wearing hordes, seemingly with neither a clue about physics nor how to read a camera manual, took flash-lit pictures of Angkor Wat at dawn from a hundred metres away.

I spent two days touring Siem Reap's temples and ruins with Cheab, who always knew the right entrance to take to avoid the crowds and always had an enlightening turn of phrase about Hinduism morphing into Buddhism. We

walked on the old city walls of Angkor Thom, with its vast stone gateways in the shape of the four faces of Buddha. We negotiated our way through overgrown tree roots and armies of Korean tourists at Ta Prohm, and clambered through the prism-like, cubist, charred-black

and weathered-white stone corridors of Bayon. Each twist and turn was a new, breathless, marvel.

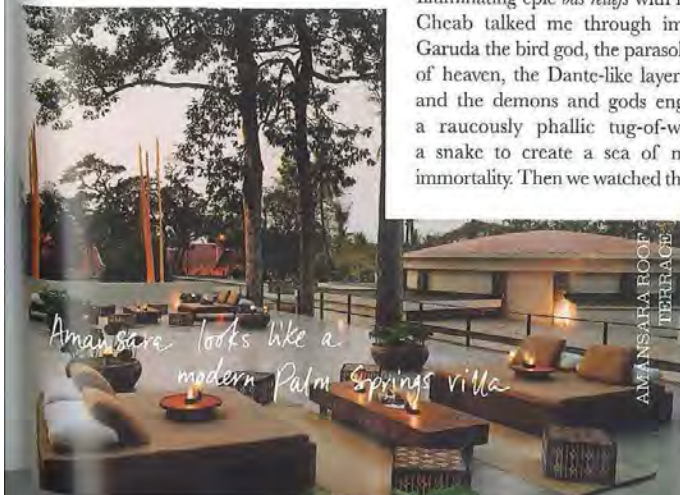
We put our touring on pause during peak sunshine hours, so that I could cool off with an afternoon nap by the pool at the Amansara. Built in 1962 as King Sihanouk's guest residence, it looks more like a modernist, concrete Palm

establish and bankroll its own local schools. All profits go into education projects, and AboutAsia run numerous volunteer programmes. This would be reason enough to support them, but they also have the best tour guides in the city.

Sokvann Cheab – an architecture student as well as an AboutAsia guide – collected me after a 4.30am croissant and coffee. While 2,000 tourists headed for Angkor Wat's main entrance in tuk-tuks, ready to

unfurl their blankets for sunrise in front of the ponds, we parked at the distant east gate and walked through the galleries and inner spaces of the temples by moonlight. It was entirely, gloriously, deserted. Illuminating epic *bas reliefs* with his torch, Cheab talked me through images of Garuda the bird god, the parasol parades of heaven, the Dante-like layers of hell and the demons and gods engaged in a raucously phallic tug-of-war with a snake to create a sea of milk and immortality. Then we watched the sunrise

*Right now is a  
WONDERFUL  
time to visit. And it  
will, I assure you,  
BLOW your mind?*





Springs villa, with a lawn decorated by fluttering, yellow silk flags. It's all a little bit Bauhaus, but with brightly coloured twists. The amplified, trance-inducing chants of monks from beyond the perimeter wall and the fiddle-like sounds of a *troh*-player – sitting cross-legged in the shade by the pool – looped around the sun loungers like a weird, deeply trippy, quite lovely David Holmes soundscape.

The next day I lunched and shopped at the Foreign Correspondents Club. The FCC, with its rows of glass-fronted boutiques, is the other main reason I travelled to Siem Reap, a city in the throes of a surprising high-style revolution. I'd moved hotels to nearby Raffles – the city's iconic, historic Grand Hotel d'Angkor, with its vast pool and plush four-postered cabana suites. Raffles' in-house 'ambassador', Dean Williams, has opened his own cocktail bar in the heart of the Old French Quarter: Miss Wong. Its theme is 1930s Shanghai and it's tucked away in the kind of narrow, neon-lit alleyway that might, you suspect, house a basement with a Mogwai for sale. It's become the Siem Reap style-crowd's night-time HQ. 'I've seen breakneck-speed development since moving here five years ago,' says Dean. 'Young Cambodians are breaking the

*'The amplified, trance-inducing CHANTS of monks looped around the sun loungers'*

mould. They've travelled, returned, and now wear real designer labels and want to eat and drink in the places to be seen. The city is bursting at the seams with artisans, artists, designers and galleries.'

One of those artists is Sasha Constable, who sculpts and paints, and curates exhibitions locally. (She's also the great-great-granddaughter of a certain other Constable.) Then there's New York fashion director Elizabeth Kiester who runs the boutique Wanderlust, working with local seamstresses to create frisky, pretty, appealing prints. A new branch has opened at the FCC, around the corner from the Tiger Lily jewellery and craft store. Tiger Lily is full of chic, classic Khmer objects, curated with an acutely contemporary eye. 'I love to source,' says owner Judie Wong. 'You should see what I've kept at home.'



*On the banks of the river, Siem Reap is a cluster of small villages*

TEL: 855 974 337



TONLE SAP FLOATING VILLAGE, SIEM REAP

'Now that we have stores facing one another, Judie and I now joke that we have the most exclusive corner of the FCC,' says Eric Raisina, the high-checkboned, gentlemanly poster-boy for Siem Reap fashion. A Madagascar Parisian emigré, he used to supply Yves Saint Laurent and Loulou de la Falaise with distinctively fringed silk. He has a store at the FCC and another at his studio, where he runs four looms and a sewing room. 'Everyone thought I was mad to move here from France,' he says, 'but it didn't seem strange to me at all.' Earlier this year, Raisina staged a huge fashion show at the Hotel de la Paix, the Bill Bensley-designed, Art Deco-style hotel that's shortly to transform into a Park Hyatt. Humidity and mosquitoes aside, it could have been Milan: crowds swarmed at the open bar by a fire pit like hipster locusts, and a man with a clipboard and earpiece ran around with all the urgency of a war correspondent. The show was a blaze of colour and a tapestry of fine detail. Raisina's clothes are couture-quality, bright and lush, although his black scarves have the gothic crow-like edge of Rick Owens. He's a huge talent. After the show, everyone decamped to Miss Wong and the nearby Laundry Bar, taking care to avoid the mercifully short Pub Street, with its Angelina Jolie cocktails and 'gap yah' moves on the dance-floor. ➤



PADDY FIELDS, SIEM REAP