



A vendor on a motorbike delivers flowers.

Pictures: Gillian McLaren

A city with charm and soul

Gillian McLaren

WITH contemporary and traditional elements side by side, Phnom Penh is an intriguing city to visit in the Kingdom of Cambodia.

It straddles the confluence of three big working rivers, the Mekong, Bassac and Tonlé Sap.

Remnants of French architecture from the late 19th and early 20th century bear testimony to a time when the city was colonised and enthralled visitors with its tree-lined boulevards, impressive mansions and verdant parks.

During a tragic history that affected everyone in the country, Phnom Penh was emptied of its 2.5 million citizens in 1975 – many of them were murdered.

Buildings fell into ruin through warfare damage or neglect. Today, the riverside city is slowly being modernised with the building of several high-rises, new restaurants and bars, as well as a few department stores.

It retains the charms of its Cambodian heritage and is populated by 2 million people who warmly and enthusiastically welcome tourists.

Stroll down the streets of central Phnom Penh and you will see hundreds of motorbikes, carrying anything and everything from pigs, bunches of chickens and overflowing baskets of vegetables to a windscreen or three to four people.

Vendors have four-wheeled carts hitched to their motorbikes, or even bicycles, to carry mountains of plastic household goods or scores of inflated balloons. Some have customised food carts.

Traffic is slow and an ordered chaos prevails that is hard to discern, as motorbikes seem to overtake cars on either side and roar in front of vehicles from the labyrinth of side streets. Cyclos are person-powered and it is common to see a mother with several children being pedalled home after the school day.

A myriad tuk-tuks ferry locals and tourists alike and the

IF YOU GO

www.ABOUTAsiatravel.com
The Plantation Urban Resort. A colonial-style hotel, situated behind the Royal Palace in the historical centre of this vibrant city – www.theplantation.asia
Cathay Pacific flies from OR Tambo to Saigon via Hong Kong www.cathaypacific.com

drivers offer information and an option to be introduced to the underbelly of the city. While waiting for passengers, the drivers often lie in their tuk-tuk seats and fall asleep. People seem to sleep anywhere, which makes for amusing photographs.

As well as dilapidated French architecture, Chinese shop-houses are seen everywhere in Phnom Penh, with their occupants providing some kind of service or product on the ground floor and living in the top one or two floors.

Electric cables throughout the city are all above ground and so entangled and unruly that it redefines the idea of spaghetti junctions.

Although you can get around Phnom Penh on your own, I recommend the services of ABOUTAsia Travel, which will tailor safe tours for you to the major sites, with a well-informed, English-speaking guide who knows the best times to visit each place to avoid crowds of tourists and the quickest routes through the maze of alleyways.

Well-kept cyclos, motorbikes, tuk-tuks or air-conditioned cars are provided, with bottles of iced water and refreshing hand towels.

My favourite tour was Phnom Penh at night. I was picked up at the Plantation Urban Resort, where I was staying, and escorted by tuk-tuk to explore some of the sights of the capital and try Cambodian dishes at restaurants.

After a sunset cocktail at the Eclipse Sky Bar, where sophisticated residents hang out to savour

the panoramic view far over the city and watch the lights coming on, my entertaining guide and I enjoyed Cambodian food in a restaurant where I was the only foreigner.

To top off a delightful evening, we had ice cream and Cambodian coffee in a night spot on the river.

I declined the invitation to a nightclub, but have since heard that it is fabulous fun.

A swim in the Plantation Urban Resort's pool, by moonlight, was the perfect way to end the adventures of a balmy tropical night.

Although it is an emotional punch to the stomach, it is essential to visit the Killing Fields Memorial at Choueng Ek, which honours the lives of the millions who were tortured and killed in the genocide by the communist Pol Pot's regime.

Mass graves were found all over the country.

After the death of Pol Pot, Cambodia had a civil war that lasted 20 years. Every Cambodian you meet has stories of how they were affected, or how their parents and grandparents suffered from starvation, disease or watching executions.

The amazing thing is that I saw so little bitterness. The nation seems to have a collective acceptance and forgiveness.

The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum is housed in a former school, which was turned into an interrogation centre and prison by the Khmer Rouge.

This is not for the faint-hearted as photographs show some of the 17 000 people who were tortured, giving a human face to this barbaric period.

The Khmer Rouge documented their captives.

The country is at peace now, but the process of recovery has been slow and difficult, with many people living with challenging situations and some surviving on less than a dollar a day.

Tourists with desirable dollars are an essential part of helping to rebuild lives in a nation of kind, gentle souls.



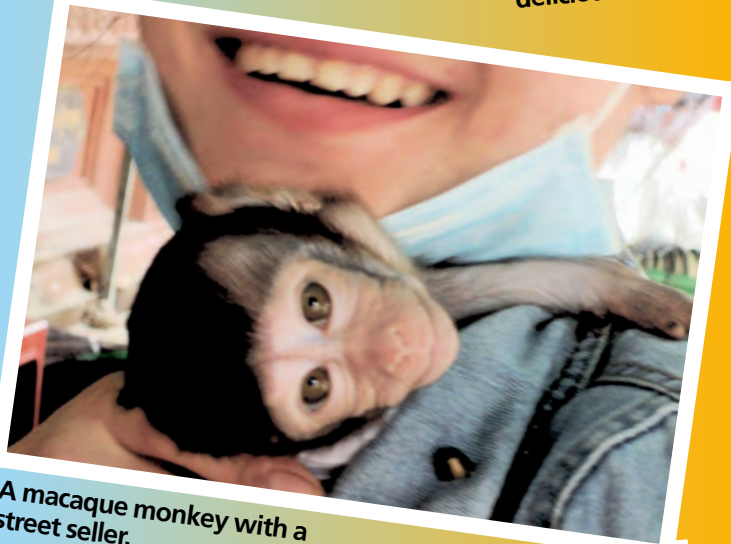
The city is rising from the ashes.



A Buddhist monk.



Traditional Amok Trey, a delicious fish dish.



A macaque monkey with a street seller.



A memorial at the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum.