

ON REFLECTION

*From shrines to skyscrapers: **DUNCAN MADDEN** explores how fast-paced change is tempering memories of Cambodia's tumultuous past*

SEEING MY FIRST Cambodian sunrise on a breakfast cruise along the mighty Mekong river opens my eyes to the change taking hold in the former Khmer Empire.

To the east, multi-coloured wooden riverboats huddle together, moored to the muddy bank in a chaotic tangle of ropes and knots, their canoe-narrow hulls bobbing hypnotically in the fast-moving current. Aboard, families fish, tend nets and cook over smoky fires, accustomed to a lifetime of constant motion beneath their bare feet. Framing the scene, a carpet of dusty greens – rice paddies fed by irrigation channels – reaches for the horizon and beyond.

Facing this timeless hinterland, Phnom Penh rises ponderously from the western bank. It's a familiar view in fast-modernising Southeast Asia – shrines and temples scattered amid cranes that claw the skyline, busily spewing forth taller and shinier buildings catering to the growing influx of western business. It feels defiant and challenging yet full of hope and possibility for the future, a city and people keen to turn their back on a turbulent, tragic past.

On dry land I make a beeline for what is usually the most honest microcosm of city life – the main market. Early-to-rise tourists and locals rub shoulders in close proximity, the former haggling with stern-faced stallholders for a few riels off Nike counterfeits, the latter brisk in their daily routine plucking lush fruits, unidentifiable fish and questionable meats from abundant, fly-covered displays.

Appetite piqued, lunch serves up a surprise. Founded by the charity Friends International and run by former street kids, Romdeng restaurant is famed for its near-forgotten Khmer recipes. While I nibble on creamy silkworms and stir-fried red tree ants, huge toothy river fish and tamarind-infused soups, our waiter appears. Covered plate in hand he reveals the local speciality as a sizeable live tarantula, "Delicious served crispy with lime and kempot black pepper". I'm tempted, but the whimper of disgust from my dining companions persuades me to take a rain check.

Early next morning I watch the city wake through the dust-etched windows of a ►



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► minibus as we jostle down Street 371.

Children play naked at the feet of their fathers, prostate in plastic chairs with T-shirts rolled up to expose prodigious bellies. Huge cockerels stand proud but tethered to rickety corrugated walls shielding chaotic building sites from view. But the normality of this everyday life already feels at odds with our destination.

In 1975, Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge seized power and implemented the Democratic Kampuchea regime. Modelled on Maoist China during the Great Leap Forward, it based itself on 11th-century agricultural foundations and discarded most things western. The Khmer Rouge killed around two million people, with Choeung Ek and the prison at Tuol Sleng the most infamous scenes of massacre.

I walked the killing fields alone numbed by the audio guide's descriptions of unimaginable horrors, mass graves interrupting the landscape where the rags of victims still emerge from the ground 40 years on. A local man held a crowd spellbound as he recounted his family's story and expressed his concerns that modern Cambodia forgets too easily the reign of Pol Pot. It's a hard thing to imagine and his words equally difficult to forget.

That afternoon I took a bike tour, keen to get some fresh air and a new perspective. Grasshopper Adventures takes small groups to unusual places all by the power of the pedal. So for the second time in as many days I cross the Mekong, this time to its islands and the rural communities that live there seemingly frozen in time under the shadow of Phnom

Penh's industrial loom only a few miles away.

We cycle potted dirt tracks, stopping to greet farmers hand-tilling fields fertile with fruit, vegetables and rice. As we wheel through villages children pour out of buildings to scream hello and demand high fives. I watch an elderly lady creep to her knees in deference to an orange-robed monk shading himself under a matching umbrella, a sea of tangerine-hued benevolence. It feels a world away from my morning experience.

Muddied and exhausted, I returned to my base at [Raffles Le Royal](#), Phnom Penh's grande dame hotel, for an evening swim. The hotel is a sanctuary of calm, rich in its own history. I wash away the day and imagine those who've floated here before me – Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Onassis lend undoubted glamour, but for me the journalists Sydney Schanberg and Jon Swain command the most intrigue, based here as they kept the world informed about Cambodia's civil war.

The next morning, we take the short, spectacular flight to Siem Reap, my view for most of it filled by the freshwater mass of Tonlé Sap lake where floating villages support networks of vibrant communities. My eye's already on the horizon though, alive to the wonders awaiting us at Angkor.

Rediscovered in 1859 by intrepid French explorer Henri Mahout, the Angkor temples were built between the ninth and 13th centuries by the god-kings of the Khmer Empire. I join a small excursion to some lesser-known temples – a wise move I realise as we drove past the vast throbbing crowds at famed Angkor Wat. We instead head for the temple ruins of Ta Nei where our only companions were a chain-smoking security guard and several million cicadas providing a deafening soundtrack to our solo exploration.

At the imposing Victory Gate of Angkor Thom, the entrance to the Khmer Empire's most enduring capital city, we climb and stroll the eight-metre-high laterite city wall to the ominously named Death Gate. To one side, a huge moat was once patrolled by man-eating crocs as a deterrent to any would-be invaders. At Jayavarman's state temple of Bayon we take shelter from a downpour under ancient archways where thousand-year-old stone faces stare down on us, impassive and timeless.

My final day, and I find myself on the back of a classic cream Vespa racing through Siem Reap's rush hour. My driver effortlessly reads the impossible traffic to weave deftly between makeshift motorised carts piled high with all manner of paraphernalia and soon we arrive at the oldest pagoda in Siem Reap.

I'm here for a Buddhist blessing where an orange-clad monk puts aside cigarette and Coke can to bestow luck on my travels and mutter charms of I'm unsure what. Oddly reassured, I wander down the temple steps to

the shores of the West Baray reservoir. In front of me a local man stands topless in waist-deep water casting a line into the mirrored surface in search of finger fish to feed his family – behind him a jumbo jet climbs into the sky packed full of tourists returning home. ■

TRAVEL DETAILS

Duncan travelled with Cox & Kings ([COXANDKINGS.CO.UK](#), 020 3642 0861) which offers a nine-day/seven-night tailor-made package to Cambodia from £2,395 per person (twin share). The price includes international flights with Thai Airways, private airport transfers, Angkor Wat excursions, domestic flights and breakfast daily. Accommodation includes three nights at the [Raffles Le Royale](#) in Phnom Penh, and four nights in the equally splendid [Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor](#), Siem Reap. Duncan cycled with Grasshopper Adventures ([GRASSHOPPERADVENTURES.COM](#)), toured Angkor with About Asia ([ABOUTASIATRAVEL.COM](#)) and got blessed with Vespa Adventures ([VESPADVENTURES.COM](#)).

VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY: Get away from the crowds by traversing Cambodia's countryside on two wheels. Not only will you avoid hoards of selfie stick-wielding tourists, but you'll get to explore places that otherwise aren't always accessible.





CALM AND COLLECTED:
The Bayon temple, Angkor Thom, is located in a serene setting, offering calmer surrounds than the tourist-luring Angkor Wat. The 13th century structure stands in stark contrast to the shiny new developments rapidly springing up in other parts of the country.