

# THE WONDERS OF CAMBODIA

From the magnificent temples of Angkor Wat to the wilderness of the rainforest, then on to the regal splendour of Phnom Penh,

**Norah Casey** discovers the magic of Cambodia.

AFTER 20 YEARS OF TRAVEL WRITING I've come to appreciate the many facets that make a country beautiful. When I'm asked what's the one place I recommend visiting, I always say Cambodia. My first visit was back in 2010 and I was mesmerised by the people, so welcoming and gracious after everything they have endured.

This time I went back to Angkor Wat to revisit these magnificent temples, but we also ventured further afield, kayaking through the water villages on Asia's largest lake and travelling deep into the rainforest of Cambodia.

We spent our final days following the in footsteps of Jackie Kennedy in the regal splendour of Raffles in Phnom Penh, sipping tea in the classy Elephant Bar with the Royal

Princess Sita Norodom, the niece of the current King of Cambodia. It was quite the trip.

There are many things I love about Cambodia but the people are what won me over when I first visited, so proud of their Khmer heritage and culture. Art and craftsmanship is ever present and central to Cambodian life. And the food is quite unlike anywhere else in Asia with strong French influences and an emphasis on fresh vegetables and fruit served simply.

Our first stop was Siem Reap, a town

in north-western Cambodia, and the gateway to the incredible remains of the Khmer civilization. It was hardly recognisable from my last visit nine years ago. Like most other Cambodian towns and cities, the people of Siem Reap fled from the brutal Khmer Rouge to the countryside in 1975. Since Pol Pot's death in 1998, the tourism industry revitalised

slowly but with a huge surge over the past decade. The old colonial buildings, shopping and commercial districts are still at the heart of the town centre, but there's a distinct hipster vibe to a new generation of hotels, guesthouses, craft shops and restaurants around the Wat Bo and Psar Leu areas.

## WHAT TO SEE

Cambodia is home to over 4,000 temples

but the most revered are on the doorstep of Siem Reap. Angkor Wat is the largest religious monument in the world and considered to be one of the 'seven wonders'. But it was almost lost to future generations. In 1992 it became a World Heritage Site. At the time, illegal excavations, pillaging and even land mines threatened to destroy the site and it was added to the List of World Heritage in Danger sites. Restored and protected by UNESCO, this incredible temple complex was moved off the danger list in 2004. My guide for the day was Lors, born in a small village north of Siem Reap, an amiable expert





ANGKOR WAT

on the history of the Angkor temples (booked through Indochineex.com).

**Angkor Wat Temple:** The most significant and world famous temple in the park is Angkor Wat, the one the entire site is named for. The distinctive ancient stone façade appears on the nation's flag.

Teams of elephants and men built Angkor Wat in the 12th century for King Suryavarman II as a spiritual home for the Hindu god Vishnu.

If you are short on time, Angkor Wat should be top of the list. This magnificent temple is a treasure trove of art and incredibly intricate wall carvings depicting Hindu legends.

**The 'Tomb Raider' Temple:** The jungle had all but subsumed the beautiful temple of Ta Prohm when French archaeologists rediscovered Angkor Wat in the 20th century. During the restoration work of this ancient Buddhist monastery, the precarious co-dependency of the giant strangler fig tree roots and the loosened stones was maintained. The two survive in tandem, creating such a unique façade that it became world famous because of its appearance in the movie *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. But the lichen covered Ta Prohm is one of the most spiritual and atmospheric temples, full of shadows and light and a testament to how precarious and precious these ancient ruins are.

## WHAT TO DO

**Theam's House:** Set amongst tropical gardens, Theam's House is the home of Cambodian artist and designer Lim Muy Theam where his private collection and beautiful art, sculpture and lacquer work are created onsite. Having spent decades reviving the Cambodian art scene Theam now trains a team of protégé artisans' apprentices. See Theamshouse.com.

**The Floating Villages:** A real highlight of our stay was a boat trip on the Tonlé Sap lake, the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia with one of the world's most vibrant ecosystems. Even better, we had adventurer and conservationist Nick Butler as our



TA PROHM TEMPLE

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guide. Before long we were kayaking in the tranquil waters, gliding through the floating villages and flooded forests, while keeping a watchful eye for the many rare birds that thrive in this incredible vast inland sea. The ebb and flow of the Tonlé Sap means

the villagers have to move homes, shops, schools depending on the water level. As the sun set and the fishermen headed home we toasted the quiet splendor of the lake, a million light years away from the bustle of Siem Reap. Exploration and expert guides at Indochineex.com.

**Robam Apsara:** Part of the Khmer culture for more than 1,000 years, this classic Cambodian royal dance is mesmerising and well worth doing the 'tourist' thing of catching a performance. We went to Apsara Terrace at the Raffles Grand Hotel D'Angkor for the show and buffet. See Raffles.com.

**Markets:** Also known as Psah Chas, the Old Market is between Pub Street and the river and great for a daytime browse. Sivutha Street is

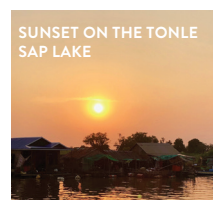
the main thoroughfare and home to Central Market and Angkor Night Market. The Made in Cambodia market opens nightly and as the name says, everything sold is made locally. One of the loveliest places to visit, especially if you want to take home something truly unique and authentic, is Artisans Angkor, home to traditional Khmer craftsmanship.

**Tuk-Tuks:** We went everywhere on foot or by tuk-tuk, still the quintessential way to get around. The good drivers know exactly where to stop to get the best views of the temples at sunset. It is worth befriending one and sticking with him for the entire visit, he will be the best tour guide and ensure you get home safely each night.

**Phare:** This Cambodian Circus is a social



THEAM'S HOUSE



SUNSET ON THE TONLE  
SAP LAKE

## FAR AND AWAY

entrepreneurship project that teaches young people dance and acrobatics providing them with a living wage and a career. We caught one of the nightly performances – White Gold is an incredible journey through theatre, dance and acrobatic feats.

See Pharecircus.org for tickets.

### WHERE TO STAY

The curious traveller craves novel experiences, adventurous stays in places with emotional engagement and an eco-extravagance which allows an immersion in beauty without damaging the planet. Making hotel experiences that reshape how we engage with borrowed spaces is the foundation for Bill Bensley's quest for hotel design innovation. My first encounter with a Bensley designed hotel was in 2009 when we checked into Hôtel de la Paix, an unbelievably cool oasis in Siem Reap (no longer there). This time I stayed in two very different, yet very distinctively Bensley-designed, retreats, both personally created and operated by the designer.

### Bensley Collection Shinta Mani Siem Reap:

In a quiet cul-de-sac in the French quarter by the river, three very different Shinta Mani hotels co-exist, tailored for different travellers. I stayed at the most exclusive of the three, in one of the 10 opulent Khmer inspired villas at the flagship Bensley-designed Shinta Mani Siem Reap. For a brief period of time I stepped into the pampered lifestyle of a luxurious villa resident with my own butler, the ever attentive Salas, a nine metre personal lap pool I could dive into from the bedroom, my own roof garden, an outdoor granite bath set in an atrium

tropical garden and a glass encased external shower room which piped in music from my personal playlist. The attention to detail in this tropical paradise was

exceptional from the gleaming black and white tiled floors to the handcrafted furnishings and local art. The well-stocked personal bar kept us hydrated over long lazy sun drenched afternoons and Salas was always on hand to serve lunch in the shade of the rooftop living room and breakfast in the morning sun by the pool. My own personal space at Villa No 2 was matched with equally dramatic surroundings with towering sculpted facades including the giant 'hands of meditation' and a mural of King Jayavarman. We didn't venture too far from our palatial home but on the first evening we

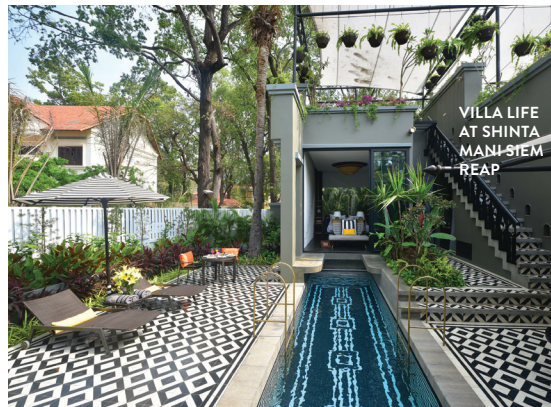
enjoyed a contemporary twist on some classic Cambodian dishes during a seven-course Khmer Tasting Menu at Shinta Mani's flagship Kroya restaurant.

**Bensley Collection Shinta Mani Wild:** Zip lining across the trees to the landing bar for a welcome drink has to be one of the most

exhilarating hotel arrivals I have ever encountered. Minutes later, I was stepping out of the harness and sipping the camp's signature tequila and pineapple cocktail, my heart hammering as loud as the

waterfall crashing beside the colonial tented lounge. It was an invigorating start to a three day adventure in the wilderness of Cambodia's rainforest. It took us many hours to get there, having flown from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh we drove for about four hours over increasingly rocky roads towards the Cardamom Mountains.

Set among the rosewood and teak trees this unique tented camp is another joint project between the creative genius of Bill Bensley and Cambodian hotelier Sokoun Chanpreda. This area, a refuge for elephants, clouded leopards, and sun bears is beleaguered by poachers so for Bensley this is as much a conservation







project as a luxurious retreat.

The camp has provided employment in this remote area, avails of locally grown produce and funds an essential anti-poaching organisation. A fantastic eco-team at Shinta Mani Wild made this visit all the more special. Of course a tented camp created by Bill Bensley was going to be pretty incredible but the real surprise was how sumptuous it was living under canvas in the wilderness.

There are just 15 luxuriously appointed tented rooms and outdoor spaces on 865 acres of land, designed as exclusive private retreats nestling in the trees and foliage alongside a cascading river. The eclectic design is full of surprises (a Singer sewing machine in my room!) with regal colonial touches, vintage ceiling fans, leather bound books, travel trunks and exterior walls adorned with contemporary art. The outside space is comfortably opulent with colourful soft furnishings, an outdoor cocktail bar with a well-stocked fridge and a glorious roll-top bathtub with river views. And even in this wilderness the WiFi is superb.

The sense of landing at a sumptuous tented camp is enhanced by the lack of hotel formalities, no reception, no check in or out, everything is included so no money changes hands during your stay. The culinary director Patricia Yeo prepared a fresh and flavoursome lunch of salads and cold soups, with traditional Cambodian dishes served at dinner.

From the zip line onwards, it was a rollercoaster of great adventures. We headed out one morning on mountain bikes with the Wildlife Alliance rangers (equipped with AK-47 rifles) and hiked for hours into the dense Tmor Rung forest to check for illegal poaching. Helping to spot the hidden hand-made traps of the poachers meant scrambling through the undergrowth and leaping from

boulder to boulder to cross the fast moving river. The reward was finding and helping to dismantle a trap that would have otherwise ensnared one of the forest's endangered species. By evening I was ready for the spa, escorted by one of the guides through the fading light to a tranquil treatment room among the trees. This eco-friendly spa uses natural heat healing, medicinal plants and herbs, and chemical-free tonics in keeping

with the sustainable ethos of the camp. A full body massage featured stretching and acupuncture pressure points. Sunshine, birdsong and the occasional gibbon call joined us for our final few hours in the stunning black steel swimming pool – designed like a gargantuan bath-tub.

Staying at one of the world's most exclusive luxury camps doesn't come cheap but for a once-in-a-lifetime experience it is certainly worth it. It is good to know that a

portion of the nightly rate goes to help fund education and development projects in Cambodian villages through the Shinta Mani Foundation. Book through [Bensleycollection.com](http://Bensleycollection.com)



“The outside space is comfortably opulent with colourful soft furnishings and an outdoor cocktail bar”



**Treeline Urban Resort:** Every now and then you come across a hotel that you really regret leaving, not for the plushness and pampering (although Treeline has all of that) but because the team are so incredibly welcoming and kind. By far the nicest general manager we encountered over the whole month in Asia was Joni Aker and because of her, Treeline became a place where we wished we had stayed longer. This is a newly opened eco-

## FAR AND AWAY



a natural open air gallery. Within a few minutes of arriving we were sipping drinks on the rooftop next to the infinity pool and chatting to Joni, a native New Zealander, about all of the incredible wonders we might try during our visit. On her expert advice and with her considerable help we got to see Phare Circus, met up with Nick Butler of Indochine Explorations to kayak through the water villages. He in turn organised Lors, our temple expert guide. Joni also connected me again with French Madagascar-born designer Eric Raisina who designed for Yves Saint Laurent and Christian Lacroix before setting up his own couture house in Siem Reap. All those years ago I visited his silk farm with my late husband Richard and bought a silk wrap in iridescent purple. Joni and I paid him a visit and I now have a stunning yellow and vivid orange to add to my collection (Ericraisina.com). She recommended local restaurants (and made the booking) made our hotel transfer effortless and was just an all-round excellent host. There is so much to commend Treeline for: the greenery, the well-appointed rooms, witty use of art and exceptional ambiance but the real asset of this hotel is Joni Aker and her team. We loved it and so will you. Book at [Treelinehotels.com](http://Treelinehotels.com).

**Raffles Hotel Le Royal Phnom Penh:** I have this great memory of sipping a Singapore Sling in the very bar where it was invented, a favourite haunt of Somerset Maugham and Rudyard Kipling, it was expensive but so worth it. The lavish colonial style Long Bar at the original Raffles in Singapore is the essence that pervades Raffles all over the world but particularly

so in Phnom Penh. So sipping the signature cocktail, Femme Fatale, created for Jackie Kennedy when she visited in 1967, was on the bucket list and it didn't disappoint.

This grand hotel opened in 1929 as The Royal with the best location in town and in the presence of King Sisowath Monivong. The royal connection continues to this day, in fact the hotel's ambassador is the King's niece, Princess Sita Norodom. French colonial influences, art deco touches and featured pieces by local artisans were a strong feature of the refurbishment and reopening in 1997 as Raffles Hotel Le Royal. Princess Sita maintains a low profile among the guests but over tea she explained that her grandfather King Sihanouk proudly supported The Royal and it was he

who invited the hotel's most famous guest, Jackie Kennedy to visit in 1967.

The history and heritage of Raffles is ever present with black and white portraits of celebrity guests and royal connections. Staying at Raffles feels a bit like being a revered guest at a lavish stately home. The original Landmark Rooms are

named after some of the hotel's famous guests, I stayed in the General de Gaulle suite and had a sneak peek at the more feminine Jackie Kennedy suite. These elegant rooms with balconies come with a butler, antique bureaux and an original claw bath and silk robes.

Our first night was spent savouring the contemporary French haute cuisine and traditional Khmer tasting menu prepared by executive chef Joel Wilkinson in the palatial Restaurant Le Royal at Raffles. The dishes are based on recipes from the Royal Palace kitchens, gifted to the hotel by the former King Norodom Sihanouk.

The stylish Elephant Bar is popular with local expats, especially at happy hour, and it was by far our favourite place to be for lunch, evening cocktails and after-dinner drinks. We strolled to the city's temple hill, Wat Phnom, from the hotel and took tuk-tuks to the bustling nightlife on the riverside just ten minutes away. But to be honest, we didn't venture too far from our beautiful residence. Book at [Raffles.com](http://Raffles.com). ●

