

History

The good, the bad and the ugly is a simple way to sum up Cambodian history. Things were good in the early years, culminating in the vast Angkor empire, unrivalled in the region during four centuries of dominance. Then the bad set in, from the 13th century, as ascendant neighbours steadily chipped away at Cambodian territory. In the 20th century it turned downright ugly, as a brutal civil war culminated in the genocidal rule of the Khmer Rouge (1975–79), from which Cambodia is still recovering.

THE ORIGIN OF THE KHMERS

Cambodia came into being, so the legend says, through the union of a princess and a foreigner. The foreigner was an Indian Brahman named Kaundinya and the princess was the daughter of a dragon king who ruled over a watery land. One day, as Kaundinya sailed by, the princess paddled out in a boat to greet him. Kaundinya shot an arrow from his magic bow into her boat, causing the fearful princess to agree to marriage. In need of a dowry, her father drank up the waters of his land and presented them to Kaundinya to rule over. The new kingdom was named Kambuja.

Like many legends, this one is historically opaque, but it does say something about the cultural forces that brought Cambodia into existence, in particular its relationship with its great subcontinental neighbour, India. Cambodia's religious, royal and written traditions stemmed from India and began to coalesce as a cultural entity in their own right between the 1st and 5th centuries.

Very little is known about prehistoric Cambodia. Much of the southeast was a vast, shallow gulf that was progressively silted up by the mouths of the Mekong, leaving pancake-flat, mineral-rich land ideal for farming. Evidence of cave-dwellers has been found in the northwest of Cambodia. Carbon dating on ceramic pots found in the area shows that they were made around 4200 BC, but it is hard to say whether there is a direct relationship between these cave-dwelling pot makers and contemporary Khmers. Examinations of bones dating back to around 1500 BC, however, suggest that the people living in Cambodia at that time resembled the Cambodians of today. Early Chinese records report that the Cambodians were 'ugly' and 'dark' and went about naked. However, a healthy dose of scepticism is always required when reading the culturally chauvinistic reports of imperial China concerning its 'barbarian' neighbours.

For the full flavour of Cambodian history, from the humble beginnings in the prehistoric period through the glories of Angkor and right up to the present day, grab a copy of *The History of Cambodia* by David Chandler (1994).

TIMELINE

4200 BC

Cave dwellers capable of making pots inhabit caves around Laang Spean; archaeological evidence suggests the vessels these people were making were similar to those still made in Cambodia today.

AD 100

The process of Indianisation begins with the arrival of Indian traders and holy men: the religions, language and sculpture of India start to take root in Cambodia.

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The Chinese Wei emperor sends a mission to the countries of the Mekong region and is told that a barbarous but rich country called Funan exists in the Delta region.

THE EARLY CAMBODIAN KINGDOMS

Cambodian might didn't begin and end with Angkor. There were a number of powerful kingdoms present in this area before the 9th century.

From the 1st century, the Indianisation of Cambodia occurred through trading settlements that sprang up on the coastline of what is now southern Vietnam, but was then inhabited by the Khmers. These settlements were important ports of call for boats following the trading route from the Bay of Bengal to the southern provinces of China. The largest of these nascent kingdoms was known as Funan by the Chinese, and may have existed across an area between Ba Phnom (p279) in Prey Veng Province, a site only worth visiting for the archaeologically obsessed today, and Oc-Eo in Kien Giang Province in southern Vietnam. Funan would have been a contemporary of Champasak in southern Laos (then known as Kuruksetra) and other lesser fiefdoms in the region.

Funan is a Chinese name, and it may be a transliteration of the ancient Khmer word *bnam* (mountain). Although very little is known about Funan, much has been made of its importance as an early Southeast Asian centre of power.

It is most likely that between the 1st and 8th centuries, Cambodia was a collection of small states, each with its own elites that often strategically intermarried and often went to war with one another. Funan was no doubt one of these states, and as a major sea port would have been pivotal in the transmission of Indian culture into the interior of Cambodia.

The little that historians do know about Funan has mostly been gleaned from Chinese sources. These report that Funan-period Cambodia (1st to 6th centuries AD) embraced the worship of the Hindu deities Shiva and Vishnu and, at the same time, Buddhism. The *linga* (phallic totem) appears to have been the focus of ritual and an emblem of kingly might, a feature that was to evolve further in the Angkorian cult of the god-king. The people practised primitive irrigation, which enabled successful cultivation of rice, and traded raw commodities such as spices with China and India.

From the 6th century, Cambodia's population gradually concentrated along the Mekong and Tonlé Sap Rivers, where the majority remains today. The move may have been related to the development of wet-rice agriculture. From the 6th to 8th centuries it was likely that Cambodia was a collection of competing kingdoms, ruled by autocratic kings who legitimised their absolute rule through hierarchical caste concepts borrowed from India.

This era is generally referred to as the Chenla period. Again, like Funan, it is a Chinese term and there is little to support the idea that Chenla was a unified kingdom that held sway over all of Cambodia. Indeed, the Chinese themselves referred to 'water Chenla' and 'land Chenla'. Water Chenla was located around Angkor Borei and the temple mount of Phnom Da (p230), near the present-day provincial capital of Takeo, and land Chenla in the

Cambodia's Funan-period trading port of Oc-Eo, now located in Vietnam's Mekong Delta, was a major commercial crossroads between east and west, and archaeologists here have unearthed Roman coins and Chinese ceramics.

Founded by King Isanavarman I in the early 7th century, Sambor Prei Kuk was originally known as Isanapura and was the first major temple city to be constructed in Southeast Asia.

upper reaches of the Mekong River and east of Tonlé Sap Lake, around Sambor Prei Kuk (p272), an essential stop on a chronological jaunt through Cambodia's history.

THE RISE OF THE ANGKOR EMPIRE

Gradually the Cambodian region was becoming more cohesive. Before long the fractured kingdoms of Cambodia would merge to become the greatest empire in Southeast Asia.

A popular place of pilgrimage for Khmers today, the sacred mountain of Phnom Kulen (p177), to the northeast of Angkor, is home to an inscription that tells of Jayavarman II (r 802–50) proclaiming himself a 'universal monarch', or *devaraja* (god-king) in 802. It is believed that he may have resided in the Buddhist Shailendras' court in Java as a young man. Upon his return to Cambodia he instigated an uprising against Javanese control over the southern lands of Cambodia. Jayavarman II then set out to bring the country under his control through alliances and conquests, the first monarch to rule most of what we call Cambodia today.

Jayavarman II was the first of a long succession of kings who presided over the rise and fall of the greatest empire mainland Southeast Asia has ever seen, one that was to bequeath the stunning legacy of Angkor. The key to the meteoric rise of Angkor was a mastery of water and an elaborate hydraulic system that allowed the ancient Khmers to tame the elements. The first records of the massive irrigation works that supported the population of Angkor date to the reign of Indravarman I (r 877–89) who built the *baray* (reservoir) of Indratataka. His rule also marks the flourishing of Angkorian art, with the building of temples in the Roluos area, notably Bakong (p174).

By the turn of the 11th century the kingdom of Angkor was losing control of its territories. Suryavarman I (r 1002–49), a usurper, moved into the power vacuum and, like Jayavarman II two centuries before, reunified the kingdom through war and alliances, stretching the frontiers of the empire. A pattern was beginning to emerge, and is repeated throughout the Angkorian period: dislocation and turmoil, followed by reunification and further expansion under a powerful king. Architecturally, the most productive periods occurred after times of turmoil, indicating that newly incumbent monarchs felt the need to celebrate, even legitimise their rule with massive building projects.

By 1066 Angkor was again riven by conflict, becoming the focus of rival bids for power. It was not until the accession of Suryavarman II (r 1112–52) that the kingdom was again unified. Suryavarman II embarked on another phase of expansion, waging costly wars in Vietnam and the region of central Vietnam known as Champa. Suryavarman II is immortalised as the king who, in his devotion to the Hindu deity Vishnu, commissioned the majestic temple of Angkor Wat (p154). For an insight

India wasn't the only power to have a major cultural impact on Cambodia. The island of Java was also influential, colonising part of water Chenla in the 8th century.

The ancient Khmers were like the Romans of Southeast Asia, building a network of long highways across the region to connect their regional cities.

600

The first inscriptions are committed to stone in Cambodia in ancient Khmer, offering historians the first contemporary accounts of the pre-Angkorian period other than Chinese sources.

802

Jayavarman II proclaims independence from Java in a ceremony to anoint himself a *devaraja* (god-king) on the holy mountain of Phnom Kulen, marking the birth of the Khmer Empire of Angkor.

889

Yasovarman I moves the capital from the ancient city of Harihara (Roluos today) to the Angkor area, 16km to the northwest, and marks the location with three temple mountains.

924

Usurper king Jayavarman IV transfers the capital to Koh Ker and begins a mammoth building spree, but the lack of water sees the capital move back to Angkor just 20 years later.

1002

Suryavarman I comes to power and expands the extent of the kingdom by annexing the Buddhist kingdom of Louvo, known as Lopburi in modern-day Thailand, and increases trade links with the outside world.

1112

Suryavarman II commences the construction of Angkor Wat, the mother of all temples, dedicated to Vishnu and designed as his funerary temple.

into events in this epoch, see the bas-reliefs on the southwest corridor of Angkor Wat, which depict the reign of Suryavarman II.

Suryavarman II had brought Champa to heel and reduced it to vassal status, but the Chams struck back in 1177 with a naval expedition up the Mekong and into Tonlé Sap Lake. They took the city of Angkor by surprise and put King Dharanindravarman II to death. The following year a cousin of Suryavarman II rallied the Khmer troops and defeated the Chams in another naval battle. The new leader was crowned Jayavarman VII in 1181.

A devout follower of Mahayana Buddhism, Jayavarman VII (r 1181–1219) built the city of Angkor Thom (p159) and many other massive monuments. Indeed, many of the temples visited around Angkor today were constructed during Jayavarman VII's reign. However, Jayavarman VII is a figure of many contradictions. The bas-reliefs of the Bayon (p161) depict him presiding over battles of terrible ferocity, while statues of the king depict a meditative, otherworldly aspect. His programme of temple construction and other public works was carried out in great haste, no doubt bringing enormous hardship to the labourers who provided the muscle, and thus accelerating the decline of the empire. He was partly driven by a desire to legitimise his rule, as there may have been other contenders closer to the royal bloodline, and partly by the need to introduce a new religion to a population predominantly Hindu in faith. However, in many ways he was also Cambodia's first socialist leader, proclaiming the population equal, abolishing castes and embarking on a programme of school, hospital and road building.

For more on the Angkorian period, see p140.

DECLINE & FALL OF ANGKOR

Angkor was the epicentre of an incredible empire that held sway over much of the Mekong region, but like all empires, the sun was to eventually set.

A number of scholars have argued that decline was already on the horizon at the time Angkor Wat was built, when the Angkorian empire was at the height of its remarkable productivity. There are indications that the irrigation network was overworked and slowly starting to silt up due to the massive deforestation that had taken place in the heavily populated areas to the north and east of Angkor. Massive construction projects such as Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom no doubt put an enormous strain on the royal coffers and on thousands of slaves and common people who subsidised them in hard labour and taxes. Following the reign of Jayavarman VII, temple construction effectively ground to a halt, in large part because Jayavarman VII's public works quarried local sandstone into oblivion and had left the population exhausted.

Another challenge for the later kings was religious conflict and internecine rivalries. The state religion changed back and forth several times during the twilight years of the empire, and kings spent more time engaged

in iconoclasm, defacing the temples of their predecessors, than building monuments to their own achievements. From time to time this boiled over into civil war.

Angkor was losing control over the peripheries of its empire. At the same time, the Thais were ascendant, having migrated south from Yunnan to escape Kublai Khan and his Mongol hordes. The Thais, first from Sukothai, later Ayuthaya, grew in strength and made repeated incursions into Angkor before finally sacking the city in 1431 and making off with thousands of intellectuals, artisans and dancers from the royal court. During this period, perhaps drawn by the opportunities for sea trade with China and fearful of the increasingly bellicose Thais, the Khmer elite began to migrate to the Phnom Penh area. The capital shifted several times over the centuries but eventually settled in present day Phnom Penh.

From 1600 until the arrival of the French in 1863, Cambodia was ruled by a series of weak kings beset by dynastic rivalries. In the face of such intrigue, they sought the protection – granted, of course, at a price – of either Thailand or Vietnam. In the 17th century, the Nguyen lords of southern Vietnam came to the rescue of the Cambodian king in return for settlement rights in the Mekong Delta region. The Khmers still refer to this region as Kampuchea Krom (Lower Cambodia), even though it is well and truly populated by the Vietnamese today.

In the west, the Thais controlled the provinces of Battambang and Siem Reap from 1794 and held much influence over the Cambodian royal family. Indeed, one king was crowned in Bangkok and placed on the throne at Udong (p113) with the help of the Thai army. That Cambodia survived through the 18th century as a distinct entity is due to the preoccupations of its neighbours: while the Thais were expending their energy and resources in fighting the Burmese, the Vietnamese were wholly absorbed by internal strife. The pattern continued for more than two centuries, the carcass of Cambodia pulled back and forth between two powerful tigers.

THE FRENCH IN CAMBODIA

The era of yo-yoing between Thai and Vietnamese masters came to a close in 1864, when French gunboats intimidated King Norodom I (r 1860–1904) into signing a treaty of protectorate. Ironically, it really was a protectorate, as Cambodia was in danger of going the way of Champa and vanishing from the map. French control of Cambodia developed as a sideshow to their interests in Vietnam, uncannily similar to the American experience a century later, and initially involved little direct interference in Cambodia's affairs. The French presence also helped keep Norodom on the throne despite the ambitions of his rebellious half-brothers.

By the 1870s French officials in Cambodia began pressing for greater control over internal affairs. In 1884 Norodom was forced into signing a treaty

One of the definitive guides to Angkor is *A Guide to the Angkor Monuments* by Maurice Glaize, first published in the 1940s and now out of print. Download it free at www.theangkorguide.com.

Chinese emissary Chou Ta Kuan lived in Angkor for a year in 1296, and his observations have been republished as *The Customs of Cambodia* (2000), a fascinating insight into life during the height of the empire.

The commercial metropolis that is now Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) in Vietnam was, in 1600, a small Cambodian village called Prey Nokor.

1152

Suryavarman II is killed in a disastrous campaign against the Dai Viet (Vietnamese), provoking this rising northern neighbour and sparking centuries of conflict between the two countries.

1177

The Chams launch a surprise attack on Angkor by sailing up the Tonlé Sap, defeat the powerful Khmers and occupy the capital for four years.

1181

The Chams are vanquished as Jayavarman VII, the greatest king of Angkor and builder of Angkor Thom, takes the throne, changing the state religion to Mahayana Buddhism.

1219

Jayavarman VII dies in his 90s and the empire of Angkor slowly declines due to a choking irrigation network, religious conflict and the rise of powerful neighbours.

1253

The Mongols of Kublai Khan sack the Thai kingdom of Nanchao in Yunnan, sparking an exodus southwards which brought them into direct conflict with the weakening Khmer empire.

1296

Chinese emissary Chou Ta-kuan spends one year living at Angkor and publishes the *Memorials on the Customs of Cambodia*, the only contemporary account of life at the great Khmer capital.

that turned his country into a virtual colony, sparking a two-year rebellion that constituted the only major uprising in Cambodia until WWII. The rebellion only ended when the king was persuaded to call upon the rebel fighters to lay down their weapons in exchange for a return to the status quo.

During the following decades senior Cambodian officials opened the door to direct French control over the day-to-day administration of the country, as they saw certain advantages in acquiescing to French power. The French maintained Norodom's court in a splendour unseen since the heyday of Angkor, helping to enhance the symbolic position of the monarchy. In 1907 the French were able to pressure Thailand into returning the northwest provinces of Battambang, Siem Reap and Sisophon in return for concessions of Lao territory to the Thais. This meant Angkor came under Cambodian control for the first time in more than a century.

King Norodom I was succeeded by King Sisowath (r 1904–27), who was succeeded by King Monivong (r 1927–41). Upon King Monivong's death, the French governor general of Japanese-occupied Indochina, Admiral Jean Decoux, placed 19-year-old Prince Norodom Sihanouk on the Cambodian throne. The French authorities assumed young Sihanouk would prove pliable, but this proved to be a major miscalculation (see the boxed text, opposite).

During WWII, Japanese forces occupied much of Asia, and Cambodia was no exception. However, with many in France collaborating with the occupying Germans, the Japanese were happy to let their new French allies control affairs in Cambodia. The price was conceding to Thailand (a Japanese ally of sorts) much of Battambang and Siem Reap Provinces once again, areas that weren't returned until 1947. However, with the fall of Paris in 1944 and French policy in disarray, the Japanese were forced to take direct control of the territory by early 1945. After WWII, the French returned, making Cambodia an autonomous state within the French Union, but retaining de facto control. The immediate postwar years were marked by strife among the country's various political factions, a situation made more unstable by the Franco-Viet Minh War then raging in Vietnam and Laos, which spilled over into Cambodia. The Vietnamese, as they were also to do 20 years later in the war against Lon Nol and the Americans, trained and fought with bands of Khmer Issarak (Free Khmer) against the French authorities.

THE SIHANOUK YEARS

The post-independence period was one of peace and great prosperity, Cambodia's golden years, a time of creativity and optimism. Phnom Penh grew in size and stature, the temples of Angkor were the leading tourist destination in Southeast Asia and Sihanouk played host to a succession of influential leaders from across the globe. However, dark clouds were circling, as the American war in Vietnam became a black hole, sucking in neighbouring countries.

The French did very little to encourage education in Cambodia, and by the end of WWII, after 70 years of colonial rule, there were no universities and only one high school in the whole country.

Cambodia's turbulent past is uncovered in a series of articles, oral histories and photos in an excellent website called 'Beauty and Darkness: Cambodia, the Odyssey of the Khmer People'. Find it at www.mekong.net/Cambodia.

SIHANOUK: THE LAST OF THE GOD-KINGS

Norodom Sihanouk has been a towering presence in the topsy-turvy world of Cambodian politics. A larger-than-life character of many enthusiasms and shifting political positions, his amatory exploits dominated his early life. Later he became the prince who stage-managed the close of French colonialism, led Cambodia during its golden years, was imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge and, from privileged exile, finally returned triumphant as king. He is many things to many people, a political chameleon, but whatever else he may be, he has proved himself a survivor.

Sihanouk, born in 1922, was not an obvious contender for the throne, as he was from the Norodom branch of the royal family. He was crowned in 1941, at just 19, with his education incomplete. In 1955 Sihanouk abdicated and turned his attention to politics, his party winning every seat in parliament that year. By the mid-1960s Sihanouk had been calling the shots in Cambodia for a decade. During this period, after innumerable love affairs, he finally settled on Monique Izzi, the daughter of a Franco-Italian father and a Cambodian mother, as his consort.

The conventional wisdom was that 'Sihanouk is Cambodia', his leadership the key to national success. However, as the country was inexorably drawn into the American War in Vietnam and government troops battled with a leftist insurgency in the countryside, Sihanouk increasingly was seen as a liability. With the economy in tatters, his obsessive involvement in the Cambodian film industry (p55) and his public announcements proclaiming Cambodia 'an oasis of peace' suggested a man who had not only abdicated from the throne but also from reality.

On 18 March 1970 the National Assembly voted to remove Sihanouk from office. Sihanouk went into exile in Beijing and joined the communists. Following the Khmer Rouge victory on 17 April 1975, Sihanouk returned to Cambodia as head of the new state of Democratic Kampuchea. He resigned after less than a year and was confined to the Royal Palace as a prisoner of the Khmer Rouge. He remained there until early 1979 when, on the eve of the Vietnamese invasion, he was flown back to Beijing. It was to be more than a decade before Sihanouk finally returned to Cambodia.

Sihanouk never quite gave up wanting to be everything for Cambodia: international statesman, general, president, film director, man of the people. On 24 September 1993, after 38 years in politics, he settled once more for the role of king. His second stint as king was a frustrating time; reigning rather than ruling, he had to take a back seat to the politicians. He pulled Cambodia through a political impasse on several occasions, but eventually enough was enough and he abdicated on 7 October 2004. Many reasons for his abdication were cited (old age, failing health), but most observers agree it was a calculated political decision to ensure the future of the monarchy, as the politicians were stalling on choosing a successor. His son King Sihamoni ascended the throne and Cambodia came through another crisis. However, Sihanouk's place in history is assured, the last in a long line of Angkor's god-kings.

In late 1952 King Sihanouk dissolved the fledgling parliament, declared martial law and embarked on his 'royal crusade': his travelling campaign to drum up international support for his country's independence. Independence was proclaimed on 9 November 1953 and recognised by the

1353

1431

1594

1618

1772

1834

Lao prince Chao Fa Ngum ends his exile at Angkor and is sponsored by his Khmer father-in-law on an expedition to conquer the new Thai kingdoms, declaring himself leader of Lan Xang (land of a million elephants).

The expansionist Thais sack Angkor definitively, carting off most of the royal court to Ayuthaya, including nobles, priests, dancers and artisans.

The temporary Cambodian capital of Lovek falls when, according to legend, the Siamese fire a cannon of silver coins into the capital's bamboo defences. The soldiers cut down the protective bamboo to retrieve the silver, leaving the city exposed.

The Cambodian capital moves to Udong for prolonged periods, a pair of strategic hills located about 40km west of Phnom Penh.

Cambodia is caught between the powerful Vietnamese and Siamese, and the latter burn Phnom Penh to the ground, another chapter in the story of inflamed tensions that persists today.

The Vietnamese take control of much of Cambodia during the reign of Emperor Minh Mang and begin a slow revolution to 'teach the barbarians their customs'.

Geneva Conference of May 1954, which ended French control of Indochina. In 1955, Sihanouk abdicated, afraid of being marginalised amid the pomp of royal ceremony. The 'royal crusader' became 'citizen Sihanouk'. He vowed never again to return to the throne. Meanwhile his father became king. It was a masterstroke that offered Sihanouk both royal authority and supreme political power. His newly established party, Sangkum Reastr Niyum (People's Socialist Community), won every seat in parliament in the September 1955 elections and Sihanouk was to dominate Cambodian politics for the next 15 years.

Although he feared the Vietnamese communists, Sihanouk considered South Vietnam and Thailand, both allies of the mistrusted USA, the greatest threats to Cambodia's security, even survival. In an attempt to fend off these many dangers, he declared Cambodia neutral and refused to accept further US aid, which had accounted for a substantial chunk of the country's military budget. He also nationalised many industries, including the rice trade. In 1965 Sihanouk, convinced that the USA had been plotting against him and his family, broke diplomatic relations with Washington and veered towards the North Vietnamese and China. In addition, he agreed to let the communists use Cambodian territory in their battle against South Vietnam and the USA. Sihanouk was taking sides, a dangerous position in a volatile region.

These moves and his socialist economic policies alienated conservative elements in Cambodian society, including the army brass and the urban elite. At the same time, left-wing Cambodians, many of them educated abroad, deeply resented his domestic policies, which stifled political debate. Compounding Sihanouk's problems was the fact that all classes were fed up with the pervasive corruption in government ranks, some of it uncomfortably close to the royal family. Although most peasants revered Sihanouk as a semidivine figure, in 1967 a rural-based rebellion broke out in Samlot, Battambang, leading him to conclude that the greatest threat to his regime came from the left. Bowing to pressure from the army, he implemented a policy of harsh repression against left-wingers.

By 1969 the conflict between the army and leftist rebels had become more serious, as the Vietnamese sought sanctuary deeper in Cambodia. Sihanouk's political position had also decidedly deteriorated – due in no small part to his obsession with film-making, which was leading him to neglect affairs of state. In March 1970, while Sihanouk was on a trip to France, General Lon Nol and Prince Sisowath Sirik Matak, Sihanouk's cousin, deposed him as chief of state, apparently with tacit US consent. Sihanouk took up residence in Beijing, where he set up a government-in-exile in alliance with an indigenous Cambodian revolutionary movement that Sihanouk had nicknamed the Khmer Rouge. This was a definitive moment in contemporary Cambodian history, as the Khmer Rouge exploited its partnership with Sihanouk to draw new recruits into their small organisation. Talk to many

former Khmer Rouge fighters and they all say that they 'went to the hills' (a euphemism for joining the Khmer Rouge) to fight for their king and knew nothing of Mao or Marxism.

DESCENT INTO CIVIL WAR

The lines were drawn for a bloody era of civil war. Sihanouk was condemned to death *in absentia*, an excessive move on the part of the new government that effectively ruled out any hint of compromise for the next five years. Lon Nol gave communist Vietnamese forces an ultimatum to withdraw their forces within one week, which amounted to a virtual declaration of war, as no Vietnamese fighters wanted to return to the homeland to face the Americans.

On 30 April 1970, US and South Vietnamese forces invaded Cambodia in an effort to flush out thousands of Viet Cong and North Vietnamese troops who were using Cambodian bases in their war to overthrow the South Vietnamese government. As a result of the invasion, the Vietnamese communists withdrew deeper into Cambodia, further destabilising the Lon Nol government. Cambodia's tiny army never stood a chance and within the space of a few months, Vietnamese forces and their Khmer Rouge allies overran almost half the country. The ultimate humiliation came in July 1970 when the Vietnamese occupied the temples of Angkor.

In 1969 the USA had begun a secret programme of bombing suspected communist base camps in Cambodia. For the next four years, until bombing was halted by the US Congress in August 1973, huge areas of the eastern half of the country were carpet-bombed by US B-52s, killing what is believed to be many thousands of civilians and turning hundreds of thousands more into refugees. Undoubtedly, the bombing campaign helped the Khmer Rouge in their recruitment drive, as more and more peasants were losing family members to the aerial assaults. While the final, heaviest bombing in the first half of 1973 may have saved Phnom Penh from a premature fall, its ferocity also helped to harden the attitude of many Khmer Rouge cadres and may have contributed to the later brutality that characterised their rule.

Savage fighting engulfed the country, bringing misery to millions of Cambodians; many fled rural areas for the relative safety of Phnom Penh and provincial capitals. Between 1970 and 1975 several hundred thousand people died in the fighting. During these years the Khmer Rouge came to play a dominant role in trying to overthrow the Lon Nol regime, strengthened by the support of the Vietnamese, although the Khmer Rouge leadership would vehemently deny this from 1975 onwards.

The leadership of the Khmer Rouge, including Paris-educated Pol Pot and Ieng Sary, had fled into the countryside in the 1960s to escape the summary justice then being meted out to suspected leftists by Sihanouk's security forces. They consolidated control over the movement and began to move

In Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* a renegade colonel, played by Marlon Brando, goes AWOL in Cambodia. Martin Sheen plays a young soldier sent to bring him back, and the ensuing encounter makes for one of the most powerful indictments of war ever made.

Lon Nol's military press attaché was known for his colourful, even imaginative media briefings that painted a rosy picture of the increasingly desperate situation on the ground. With a name like Major Am Rong, few could take him seriously.

Pol Pot travelled up the Ho Chi Minh Trail to visit Beijing in 1966 at the height of the Cultural Revolution there. He was obviously inspired by what he saw, as the Khmer Rouge went even further than the Red Guards in severing links with the past.

During the 1960s Cambodia was an oasis of peace while wars raged in neighbouring Vietnam and Laos. By 1970, that had all changed. For the full story, read *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia* by William Shawcross (1979).

1864

The French force King Norodom I into signing a treaty of protectorate, which prevents Cambodia being wiped off the map and thus begins 90 years of French rule.

1885

Rebellion against French rule in Cambodia breaks out in response to a new treaty giving the French administrators wide-ranging powers. The treaty is signed under the watch of French gunboats in the Mekong River.

1907

French authorities successfully negotiate the return of the northwest provinces of Siem Reap, Battambang and Preah Vihear, which have been under Thai control since 1794.

1942

Japanese forces occupy Cambodia, leaving the administration in the hands of Vichy France officials, but fan the flames of independence as the war draws to a close.

1947

The provinces of Battambang, Siem Reap and Sisophon, seized by the Thais during the Japanese occupation, are returned to Cambodia.

1953

Sihanouk's royal crusade for independence succeeds and Cambodia goes it alone without the French on 9 November, ushering in a new era of optimism.

During the US bombing campaign, more bombs were dropped on Cambodia than were used by all sides during WWII and some historians believe as many as 250,000 Cambodians perished as a direct result.

Francois Bizot was twice caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. First he was kidnapped by the Khmer Rouge, and later (in 1975) he was held by the Khmer Rouge in the French embassy. Read his harrowing story in *The Gate* (2003).

The Killing Fields (1985) is the definitive film on the Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia. It tells the story of American journalist Sidney Schanberg and his Cambodian assistant Dith Pran during and after the war.

against opponents before they took Phnom Penh. Many of the Vietnamese-trained Cambodian communists who had been based in Hanoi since the 1954 Geneva Accords returned down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to join their 'allies' in the Khmer Rouge in 1973. Many were dead by 1975, executed on orders of the anti-Vietnamese Pol Pot faction. Likewise, many moderate Sihanouk supporters who had joined the Khmer Rouge as a show of loyalty to their fallen leader rather than a show of ideology to the radicals were victims of purges before the regime took power. This set a precedent for internal purges and mass executions that were to eventually bring the downfall of the Khmer Rouge.

It didn't take long for the Lon Nol government to become very unpopular as a result of unprecedented greed and corruption in its ranks. As the USA bankrolled the war, government and military personnel found lucrative means to make a fortune, such as inventing 'phantom soldiers' and pocketing their pay, or selling weapons to the enemy. Lon Nol was widely perceived as an ineffectual leader, obsessed by superstition, fortune tellers and mystical crusades. This perception increased with his stroke in March 1971 and for the next four years his grip on reality seemed to weaken as his brother Lon Non's power grew.

Despite massive US military and economic aid, Lon Nol never succeeded in gaining the initiative against the Khmer Rouge. Large parts of the countryside fell to the rebels and many provincial capitals were cut off from Phnom Penh. Lon Nol fled the country in early April 1975, leaving Sirik Matak in charge, who refused evacuation to the end. 'I cannot alas leave in such a cowardly fashion... I have committed only one mistake, that of believing in you, the Americans' were the words Sirik Matak poignantly penned to US ambassador John Gunther Dean. On 17 April 1975 – two weeks before the fall of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City) – Phnom Penh surrendered to the Khmer Rouge.

THE KHMER ROUGE REVOLUTION

Upon taking Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge implemented one of the most radical and brutal restructurings of a society ever attempted; its goal was a pure revolution, untainted by those that had gone before, to transform Cambodia into a peasant-dominated agrarian cooperative. Within days of coming to power the entire population of Phnom Penh and provincial towns, including the sick, elderly and infirm, was forced to march into the countryside and work as slaves for 12 to 15 hours a day. Disobedience of any sort often brought immediate execution. The advent of Khmer Rouge rule was proclaimed Year Zero. Currency was abolished and postal services were halted. The country cut itself off from the outside world.

In the eyes of Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge was not a unified movement, but a series of factions that needed to be cleansed. This process had already begun with attacks on Vietnamese-trained Khmer Rouge and Sihanouk's supporters, but Pol Pot's initial fury upon seizing power was directed against

BLOOD BROTHER NO 1

Pol Pot, Brother No 1 in the Khmer Rouge regime, is a name that sends shivers down the spines of Cambodians and foreigners alike. It is Pol Pot who is most associated with the bloody madness of the regime he led between 1975 and 1979, and his policies heaped misery, suffering and death on millions of Cambodians.

Pol Pot was born Saloth Sar in a small village near Kompong Thom in 1925. As a young man he won a scholarship to study in Paris, and it is here that he is believed to have developed his radical Marxist thought, later to transform into the politics of extreme Maoism.

In 1963 Sihanouk's repressive policies sent Saloth Sar and comrades fleeing to the jungles of Ratanakiri. It was from this moment that he began to call himself Pol Pot. Once the Khmer Rouge was allied with Sihanouk, following his overthrow by Lon Nol in 1970 and subsequent exile in Beijing, its support soared and the faces of the leadership became familiar. However, Pol Pot remained a shadowy figure, leaving public duties to Khieu Samphan and Ieng Sary.

When the Khmer Rouge marched into Phnom Penh on 17 April 1975, few people could have anticipated the hell that was to follow. Pol Pot and his clique were the architects of one of the most radical and brutal revolutions in the history of mankind. 1975 was Year Zero and Cambodia was on a self-destructive course to sever all ties with the past.

Pol Pot was not to emerge as the public face of the revolution until the end of 1976, after returning from a trip to his mentors in Beijing. He granted almost no interviews to foreign media and was seen only on propaganda movies produced by government TV. Such was his aura and reputation that by the last year of the regime a cult of personality was developing around him and stone busts were produced.

When the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia on 25 December 1978, Pol Pot and his supporters fled into the jungle near the Thai border, from where they spent the next decade launching attacks on government positions in Cambodia.

Pol Pot spent much of the 1980s living in Thailand and was able to rebuild his shattered forces and once again threaten Cambodia. His enigma increased as the international media speculated as to the real fate of Pol Pot. His demise was reported so often that when he finally passed away, many Cambodians refused to believe it until they had seen his body on TV or in newspapers. Even then, many were sceptical and rumours continue to circulate about exactly how he met his end. He died on 15 April 1998.

For more on the life and times of Pol Pot, pick up one of the excellent biographies written about him: *Brother Number One* by David Chandler or *Pol Pot: The History of a Nightmare* by Phillip Short.

the former regime. All of the senior government and military figures who had been associated with Lon Nol were executed within days of the takeover. Then the centre shifted its attention to the outer regions, which had been separated into geographic zones. The loyalist Southwestern Zone forces under the control of one-legged general Ta Mok were sent into region after region to purify the population, and thousands perished.

1955

1962

1963

1964

1969

1970

King Sihanouk abdicates from the throne to enter a career in politics; he founds the Sangkum Reastr Niyum (People's Socialist Community) party and wins the election with ease.

The International Court rules in favour of Cambodia in the long-running dispute over the dramatic mountain temple of Preah Vihear, perched on the Dangrek Mountains.

Pol Pot and Ieng Sary flee from Phnom Penh to the jungles of Ratanakiri to launch a guerrilla war against Sihanouk's government with training from the Vietnamese.

Following the US-sponsored coup against President Diem in South Vietnam in 1963, Sihanouk veers to the left, breaking diplomatic ties with the USA and nationalising the rice trade, antagonising the ethnic Chinese business community.

US President Nixon authorises the secret bombing of Cambodia, which starts with the carpet bombing of border zones, but eventually spreads to the whole country, continuing until 1973 and killing as many as 250,000 Cambodians.

Sihanouk throws in his lot with the Khmer Rouge after being overthrown by military commander Lon Nol and his cousin Prince Sirik Matak, and sentenced to death *in absentia*, marking the start of a five-year civil war.

For a fuller understanding of the methodical machine that was the Khmer Rouge's interrogation and torture centre of S-21, read the classic but chilling *Voices from S-21* by David Chandler (1999).

To the End of Hell: One Woman's Struggle to Survive Cambodia's Khmer Rouge is the incredible memoir of Denise Affonco, one of the only foreigners to live through the Khmer Rouge revolution due to her marriage to a senior intellectual in the movement.

Only a handful of foreigners were allowed to visit Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge period of Democratic Kampuchea. US journalist Elizabeth Becker was one who travelled there in late 1978; her book *When the War Was Over* (1986) tells her story.

The cleansing reached grotesque heights in the final and bloodiest purge against the powerful and independent Eastern Zone. Generally considered more moderate than other Khmer Rouge factions, the Eastern Zone was ideologically, as well as geographically, closer to Vietnam. The Pol Pot faction consolidated the rest of the country before moving against the east from 1977 onwards. Hundreds of leaders were executed before open rebellion broke out, sparking a civil war in the east. Many Eastern Zone leaders fled to Vietnam, forming the nucleus of the government installed by the Vietnamese in January 1979. The people were defenceless and distrusted – ‘Cambodian bodies with Vietnamese minds’ or ‘duck’s arses with chicken’s heads’ – and were deported to the northwest with new, blue *kramas* (scarves). Had it not been for the Vietnamese invasion, all would have perished, as the blue *krama* was a secret party sign indicating an eastern enemy of the revolution.

It is still not known exactly how many Cambodians died at the hands of the Khmer Rouge during the three years, eight months and 20 days of their rule. The Vietnamese claimed three million deaths, while foreign experts long considered the number closer to one million. Yale University researchers undertaking ongoing investigations estimated that the figure was close to two million.

Hundreds of thousands of people were executed by the Khmer Rouge leadership, while hundreds of thousands more died of famine and disease. Meals consisted of little more than watery rice porridge twice a day, meant to sustain men, women and children through a back-breaking day in the fields. Disease stalked the work camps, malaria and dysentery striking down whole families; death was a relief for many from the horrors of life. Some zones were better than others, some leaders fairer than others, but life for the majority was one of unending misery and suffering in this ‘prison without walls’.

As the centre eliminated more and more moderates, Angkar (the organisation) became the only family people needed and those who did not agree were sought out and destroyed. The Khmer Rouge detached the Cambodian people from all they held dear: their families, their food, their fields and their faith. Even the peasants who had supported the revolution could no longer blindly follow such madness. Nobody cared for the Khmer Rouge by 1978, but nobody had an ounce of strength to do anything about it...except the Vietnamese.

ENTER THE VIETNAMESE

Relations between Cambodia and Vietnam have historically been tense, as the Vietnamese have slowly but steadily expanded southwards, encroaching on Cambodian territory. Despite the fact the two communist parties had fought together as brothers-in-arms, old tensions soon came to the fore.

From 1976 to 1978, the Khmer Rouge instigated a series of border clashes with Vietnam, and claimed the Mekong Delta, once part of the Khmer empire.

THE POLITICS OF DISASTER RELIEF

The Cambodian famine became a new front in the Cold War, as Washington and Moscow jostled for influence from afar. As hundreds of thousands of Cambodians fled to Thailand, a massive international famine relief effort, sponsored by the UN, was launched. The international community wanted to deliver aid across a land bridge at Poipet, while the new Vietnamese-backed Phnom Penh government wanted all supplies to come through the capital via Kompong Som (Sihanoukville) or the Mekong River. Both sides had their reasons – the new government did not want aid to fall into the hands of its Khmer Rouge enemies, while the international community didn't believe the new government had the infrastructure to distribute the aid – and both were right.

Some agencies distributed aid the slow way through Phnom Penh, and others set up camps in Thailand. The camps became a magnet for half of Cambodia, as many Khmers still feared the return of the Khmer Rouge or were seeking a new life overseas. The Thai military convinced the international community to distribute all aid through their channels and used this as a cloak to rebuild the shattered Khmer Rouge forces as an effective resistance against the Vietnamese. Thailand demanded that, as a condition for allowing international food aid for Cambodia to pass through its territory, food had to be supplied to the Khmer Rouge forces encamped in the Thai border region as well. Along with weaponry supplied by China, this international assistance was essential in enabling the Khmer Rouge to rebuild its military strength and fight on for another two decades.

Incursions into Vietnamese border provinces left hundreds of Vietnamese civilians dead. On 25 December 1978 Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia, toppling the Pol Pot government two weeks later. As Vietnamese tanks neared Phnom Penh, the Khmer Rouge fled westward with as many civilians as it could seize, taking refuge in the jungles and mountains along the Thai border. The Vietnamese installed a new government led by several former Khmer Rouge officers, including current Prime Minister Hun Sen, who had defected to Vietnam in 1977. The Khmer Rouge's patrons, the Chinese communists, launched a massive reprisal raid across Vietnam's northernmost border in early 1979 in an attempt to buy their allies time. It failed, and after 17 days the Chinese withdrew, their fingers badly burnt by their Vietnamese enemies. The Vietnamese then staged a show trial in which Pol Pot and Ieng Sary were condemned to death for their genocidal acts.

A traumatised population took to the road in search of surviving family members. Millions had been uprooted and had to walk hundreds of kilometres across the country. Rice stocks were destroyed, the harvest left to wither and little rice planted, sowing the seeds for a widespread famine in 1979 and 1980.

As the conflict in Cambodia raged, Sihanouk agreed, under pressure from China, to head a military and political front opposed to the Phnom Penh

During much of the 1980s, the second-largest concentration of Cambodians outside of Phnom Penh was in the Khao I Dang refugee camp on the Thai border.

1971

Lon Nol, leader of the Khmer Republic, launches the Chenla offensive against Vietnamese communists and their Khmer Rouge allies in Cambodia, but it turns out to be a disaster. He also suffers a stroke, but struggles on as leader until 1975.

1973

Sihanouk and his wife Monique travel down the Ho Chi Minh Trail to visit his Khmer Rouge allies at the holy mountain of Phnom Kulen near Angkor, a propaganda victory for Pol Pot.

1975

The Khmer Rouge march into Phnom Penh on 17 April and turn the clocks back to Year Zero, evacuating the capital and turning the whole nation into a prison without walls.

1977

The Pol Pot faction of the Khmer Rouge launch their bloodiest purge against the Eastern Zone of the country, sparking a civil war along the banks of the Mekong and drawing the Vietnamese into the battle.

1979

Vietnamese forces liberate Cambodia from Khmer Rouge rule on 7 January 1979, just two weeks after launching the invasion, and install a friendly regime in Phnom Penh.

1980

Cambodia is gripped by a terrible famine, as the dislocation of the previous few years means that no rice has been planted or harvested, and worldwide Save Kampuchea appeals are launched.

government. The Sihanouk-led resistance coalition brought together – on paper, at least – Funcinpec (the French acronym for the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful and Cooperative Cambodia), which comprised a royalist group loyal to Sihanouk; the Khmer People’s National Liberation Front, a noncommunist grouping formed by former prime minister Son Sann; and the Khmer Rouge, officially known as the Party of Democratic Kampuchea and by far the most powerful of the three. The heinous crimes of the Khmer Rouge were swept aside to ensure a compromise that suited the great powers.

During the mid-1980s the British government dispatched the Special Air Service (SAS) to a Malaysian jungle camp to train guerrilla fighters in land mine-laying techniques. Although officially assisting the smaller factions, it is certain the Khmer Rouge benefited from this experience. It then used these new-found skills to intimidate and terrorise the Cambodian people. The USA gave more than US\$15 million a year in aid to the noncommunist factions of the Khmer Rouge-dominated coalition.

For much of the 1980s Cambodia remained closed to the Western world, save for the presence of some humanitarian aid groups. Government policy was effectively under the control of the Vietnamese, so Cambodia found itself very much in the Eastern-bloc camp. The economy was in tatters for much of this period, as Cambodia, like Vietnam, suffered from the effects of a US-sponsored embargo.

In 1984 the Vietnamese overran all the major rebel camps inside Cambodia, forcing the Khmer Rouge and its allies to retreat into Thailand. From this time the Khmer Rouge and its allies engaged in guerrilla warfare aimed at demoralising their opponents. Tactics used by the Khmer Rouge included shelling government-controlled garrison towns, planting thousands of mines in rural areas, attacking road transport, blowing up bridges, kidnapping village chiefs and targeting civilians. The Khmer Rouge also forced thousands of men, women and children living in the refugee camps it controlled to work as porters, ferrying ammunition and other supplies into Cambodia across heavily mined sections of the border. The Vietnamese for their part laid the world’s longest minefield, known as K-5 and stretching from the Gulf of Thailand to the Lao border, in an attempt to seal out the guerrillas. They also sent Cambodians into the forests to cut down trees on remote sections of road to prevent ambushes. Thousands died of disease and from injuries sustained from land mines. The Khmer Rouge was no longer in power, but for many the 1980s was almost as tough as the 1970s, one long struggle to survive.

THE UN COMES TO TOWN

As the Cold War came to a close, peace began to break out all over the globe, and Cambodia was not immune to the new spirit of reconciliation. In September 1989 Vietnam, its economy in tatters and eager to end its

Between four and six million land mines dot the Cambodian countryside. Lifetime rehabilitation of the country’s estimated 40,000 victims costs US\$120 million.

Journalist Henry Kamm spent many years filing reports from Cambodia and his book *Cambodia: Report from a Stricken Land* is a fascinating insight into recent events.

Learn more about politics and life in Cambodia during the 1980s; pick up *Cambodia After the Khmer Rouge* by Evan Gottesman, which sheds new light on a little-known period.

THE NAME GAME

Cambodia has changed its name so many times over the last few decades that there are understandable grounds for confusion. To the Cambodians, their country is Kampuchea. The name is derived from the word Kambuja, meaning ‘those born of Kambu’, the mythical founder of the country. It dates back as far as the 10th century. The Portuguese ‘Camboxa’ and the French ‘Cambodge’, from which the English name ‘Cambodia’ is derived, are adaptations of ‘Kambuja’.

Since gaining independence in 1953, the country has been known in English by various names before coming full circle:

- The Kingdom of Cambodia
- The Khmer Republic (under Lon Nol, who reigned from 1970 to 1975)
- Democratic Kampuchea (under the Khmer Rouge, which controlled the country from 1975 to 1979)
- The People’s Republic of Kampuchea (under the Vietnamese-backed government from 1979 to 1989)
- The State of Cambodia (from mid-1989)
- The Kingdom of Cambodia (from May 1993)

It was the Khmer Rouge that insisted the outside world use the name Kampuchea. Changing the country’s official English name back to Cambodia was intended as a symbolic move to distance the present government in Phnom Penh from the bitter connotations of the name Kampuchea, which Westerners associate with the murderous Khmer Rouge regime.

international isolation, announced the withdrawal of all of its troops from Cambodia. With the Vietnamese gone, the opposition coalition, still dominated by the Khmer Rouge, launched a series of offensives, forcing the now-vulnerable government to the negotiating table.

Diplomatic efforts to end the civil war began to bear fruit in September 1990, when a peace plan was accepted by both the Phnom Penh government and the three factions of the resistance coalition. According to the plan, the Supreme National Council (SNC), a coalition of all factions, would be formed under the presidency of Sihanouk. Meanwhile the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (Untac) would supervise the administration of the country for two years with the goal of free and fair elections.

Untac undoubtedly achieved some successes, but for all of these, it is the failures that were to cost Cambodia dearly in the ‘democratic’ era. Untac was successful in pushing through many international human-rights covenants; it opened the door to a significant number of nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) who have helped build civil society; and, most importantly, on 25 May 1993, elections were held with an 89.6% turnout.

Western powers, including the US and UK, ensured the Khmer Rouge retained its seat at the UN general assembly in New York until 1991, a scenario that saw those responsible for the genocide representing their victims on the international stage.

1982

Sihanouk is pressured to join forces with the Khmer Rouge as head of the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), a new military front against the Vietnamese-backed government in Phnom Penh.

1984

The Vietnamese embark on a major offensive in the west of Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge and its allies are forced to retreat to refugee camps and bases inside Thailand.

1985

There is a changing of the guard at the top and Hun Sen becomes Prime Minister of Cambodia, a title he still holds today with the Cambodian People’s Party.

1989

As the effects of President Gorbachev’s perestroika (restructuring) begin to impact on communist allies, Vietnam feels the pinch and announces the withdrawal of its forces from Cambodia.

1991

The Paris Peace Accords are signed, in which all parties, including the Khmer Rouge, agree to participate in free and fair elections supervised by the UN.

1993

The pro-Sihanouk Royalist party Funcinpec under the leadership of Prince Ranariddh wins the popular vote, but the CPP threaten secession in the east to muscle their way into government.

However, the results were far from decisive. Funcinpec, led by Prince Norodom Ranariddh, took 58 seats in the National Assembly, while the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), which represented the previous communist government, took 51 seats. The CPP had lost the election, but senior leaders threatened a secession of the eastern provinces of the country. As a result, Cambodia ended up with two prime ministers: Norodom Ranariddh as first prime minister, and Hun Sen as second prime minister.

Even today, Untac is heralded as one of the UN's success stories. The other perspective is that it was an ill-conceived and poorly executed peace because so many of the powers involved in brokering the deal had their own agendas to advance. To many Cambodians, it must have seemed a cruel joke that the Khmer Rouge was allowed to play a part in the process.

The UN's disarmament programme took weapons away from rural militias who for so long provided the backbone of the government's provincial defence network against the Khmer Rouge. This left communities throughout the country vulnerable to attack, while the Khmer Rouge used the veil of legitimacy conferred upon it by the peace process to re-establish a guerrilla network throughout Cambodia. By 1994, when it was finally outlawed by the government, the Khmer Rouge was probably a greater threat to the stability of Cambodia than at any time since 1979.

Untac's main goals had been to 'restore and maintain peace' and 'promote national reconciliation' and in the short term it achieved neither. It did oversee free and fair elections, but these were later annulled by the actions of Cambodia's politicians. Little was done during the UN period to try to dismantle the communist apparatus of state set up by the CPP, a well-oiled machine that continues to ensure that former communists control the civil service, judiciary, army and police today.

THE SLOW BIRTH OF PEACE

When the Vietnamese toppled the Pol Pot government in 1979, the Khmer Rouge disappeared into the jungle. The guerrillas eventually boycotted the 1993 elections and later rejected peace talks aimed at creating a ceasefire. The defection of some 2000 troops from the Khmer Rouge army in the months after the elections offered some hope that the long-running insurrection would fizzle out. However, government-sponsored amnesty programmes initially turned out to be ill-conceived: the policy of reconscripting Khmer Rouge troops and forcing them to fight their former comrades provided little incentive to desert.

In 1994 the Khmer Rouge resorted to a new tactic of targeting tourists, with horrendous results for a number of foreigners in Cambodia. During 1994 three people were taken from a taxi on the road to Sihanoukville and subsequently shot. A few months later another three foreigners were

seized from a train bound for Sihanoukville and in the ransom drama that followed they were executed as the army closed in.

The government changed course during the mid-1990s, opting for more carrot and less stick in a bid to end the war. The breakthrough came in 1996 when Ieng Sary, Brother No 3 in the Khmer Rouge hierarchy and foreign minister during its rule, was denounced by Pol Pot for corruption. He subsequently led a mass defection of fighters and their dependants from the Pailin area, and this effectively sealed the fate of the remaining Khmer Rouge. Pailin, rich in gems and timber, had long been the economic crutch which kept the Khmer Rouge hobbling along. The severing of this income, coupled with the fact that government forces now had only one front on which to concentrate their resources, suggested the days of civil war were numbered.

By 1997 cracks were appearing in the coalition and the fledgling democracy once again found itself under siege. But it was the Khmer Rouge that again grabbed the headlines. Pol Pot ordered the execution of Son Sen, defence minister during the Khmer Rouge regime, and many of his family members. This provoked a putsch within the Khmer Rouge leadership, and the one-legged hardline general Ta Mok seized control, putting Pol Pot on 'trial'. Rumours flew about Phnom Penh that Pol Pot would be brought there to face international justice, but events dramatically shifted back to the capital.

A lengthy courting period ensued in which both Funcinpec and the CPP attempted to win the trust of the remaining Khmer Rouge hard-liners in northern Cambodia. Ranariddh was close to forging a deal with the jungle fighters and was keen to get it sewn up before Cambodia's accession to Asean, as nothing would provide a better entry fanfare than the ending of Cambodia's long civil war. He was outflanked and subsequently outgunned by Second Prime Minister Hun Sen. On 5 July 1997 fighting again erupted on the streets of Phnom Penh as troops loyal to the CPP clashed with those loyal to Funcinpec. The heaviest exchanges were around the airport and key government buildings, but before long the dust had settled and the CPP once again controlled Cambodia. The strongman had finally flexed his muscles and there was no doubt as to which party was running the show.

Following the coup, the remnants of Funcinpec forces on the Thai border around O Smach formed an alliance with the last of the Khmer Rouge under Ta Mok's control. The fighting may have ended, but the deaths did not stop there: several prominent Funcinpec politicians and military leaders were victims of extrajudicial executions, and even today no-one has been brought to justice for these crimes. Many of Funcinpec's leading politicians fled abroad, while the senior generals led the resistance struggle on the ground.

As 1998 began, the CPP announced an all-out offensive against its enemies in the north. By April it was closing in on the Khmer Rouge strongholds of Anlong Veng and Preah Vihear, and amid this heavy fighting Pol Pot evaded justice by dying a sorry death on 15 April in the Khmer Rouge's captivity. The

Some critics contend that the UN presence kick-started Cambodia's HIV/Aids epidemic, with well-paid overseas soldiers boosting the prostitution industry.

The Documentation Center of Cambodia is an organisation established to document the crimes of the Khmer Rouge as a record for future generations. Its excellent website is a mine of information about Cambodia's darkest hour. Take your time to visit www.dccam.org.

On 31 March 1997 a grenade was thrown into a group of Sam Rainsy supporters demonstrating outside the National Assembly. Sam Rainsy blamed Hun Sen and the CPP for the attack and even the FBI got involved in the investigation.

To stay on top of recent events in Cambodia, including all the highs and lows of the last decade, check out the Phnom Penh Post website at www.phnompenhpost.com or consider investing in its archived CD-ROM.

For the latest on political gossip in Cambodia, visit <http://ki-media.blogspot.com>.

1994

The Khmer Rouge target foreign tourists in Cambodia, kidnapping and killing groups travelling by taxi and train to the south coast, reinforcing Cambodia's overseas image as a dangerous country.

1995

Prince Norodom Sirivudh is arrested and exiled for allegedly plotting to kill Prime Minister Hun Sen, removing another potential rival from the scene.

1997

Second Prime Minister Hun Sen overthrows First Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh in a military coup, referred to as 'the events of 1997' in Cambodia.

1998

Pol Pot passes away on 15 April 1998 as Anlong Veng falls to government forces, and many observers ponder whether the timing is coincidental.

1999

Cambodia finally joins Asean after a two-year delay, taking its place among the family of Southeast Asian nations, welcoming the country back to the world stage.

2002

Cambodia holds its first ever local elections at commune level, a tentative step in dismantling the old communist system of control and bringing grass-roots democracy to the country.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Since the glory days of the Angkor empire of old, the Cambodian people have been on the losing side of many a historical battle, their country all too often a minnow amid the circling sharks. Popular attitudes have been shaped by this history, and the relationship between Cambodia and its neighbours Thailand and Vietnam is marked by a cocktail of fear, admiration and animosity.

Cambodian attitudes towards the Thais and Vietnamese are complex. The Thais aren't always popular, as some Cambodians feel the Thais fail to acknowledge their cultural debt to Cambodia, still teach that Angkor belongs to Thailand in schools and generally look down on their poorer neighbour. Cambodian attitudes towards the Vietnamese are more ambivalent. There is a certain level of mistrust, as many feel the Vietnamese are out to colonise their country. (Many Khmers still call the lost Mekong Delta 'Kampuchea Krom' or 'Lower Cambodia'.) However, it is balanced with a grudging respect for their 'liberation' from the Khmer Rouge in 1979 (see p36). But when liberation became occupation in the 1980s, the relationship soon soured once more.

At first glance, Cambodia appears to be a nation of shiny, happy people, but look deeper and it is a country of contradictions. Light and dark, rich and poor, love and hate, life and death – all are visible on a journey through the kingdom. Most telling of all is the nation's glorious past set against its tragic present.

Angkor is everywhere: on the flag, the national beer, hotels and guesthouses, cigarettes – anything and everything. It's a symbol of nationhood and of fierce pride; Cambodians built Angkor Wat and it doesn't come bigger than that.

Jayavarman VII, Angkor's greatest king, is nearly as omnipresent as his temples. The man that vanquished the occupying Chams and took the empire to its greatest glories is a national hero.

Contrast this with the abyss into which the nation was sucked during the years of the Khmer Rouge. Pol Pot is a dirty word in Cambodia due to the death and suffering he inflicted on the country. Whenever you hear his name, it will be connected with stories of endless personal tragedy, of dead brothers, mothers and babies, from which most Cambodians have never had the chance to recover. No-one has yet tasted justice, the whys and hows remain unanswered and the older generation must live with the shadow of this trauma.

If Jayavarman VII and Angkor are loved and Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge despised, then the mercurial Sihanouk, the last of the god-kings who has ultimately shown his human side, is somewhere inbetween. Many Cambodians love him as the 'father of the nation', but to others he is the man who failed the nation by his association with the Khmer Rouge. In many ways, his contradictions match those of contemporary Cambodia. Understand Sihanouk and what he has had to survive and you will understand much of Cambodia.

LIFESTYLE

For many older Cambodians, life is centred on family, faith and food, a timeless existence that has stayed the same for centuries. Family is more than the nuclear family we now know in the West; it's the extended family of third cousins and obscure aunts – as long as there is a bloodline, there is a bond. Families stick together, solve problems collectively, listen to the wisdom of the elders and pool resources. The extended family comes together during times of trouble or times of joy, celebrating festivals and successes, mourning deaths and disappointments. Whether the Cambodian house is big or small, there will be a lot of people living inside.

The Cambodian and Lao people share a close bond, as Fa Ngum, the founder of the original Lao kingdom of Lan Xang (Land of a Million Elephants), was sponsored by the kings of Angkor.

Jayavarman VII was a Mahayana Buddhist and directed his faith towards improving the lot of his people, with the construction of hospitals, universities, roads and shelters.

For more on the incredible life and times of Norodom Sihanouk, read the biography by Milton Osborne, *Prince of Light, Prince of Darkness* (1994).

For the majority of the population still living in the countryside, these constants carry on as they have: several generations sharing the same roof, the same rice and the same religion. But during the dark decades of the 1970s and 1980s, this routine was ripped apart by war and ideology, as the peasants were dragged from all they held dear to fight a bloody civil war and later forced into slavery. Angkar, the Khmer Rouge organisation, took over as the moral and social beacon in the lives of the people. Families were forced apart, children turned against parents, brother against sister. The bond of trust was broken and is only slowly being rebuilt today.

Faith is another rock in the lives of many older Cambodians, and Buddhism has helped them to rebuild their lives after the Khmer Rouge. Most Cambodian houses contain a small shrine to pray for luck, and come Buddha Day the wats are thronging with the faithful.

Food is more important to Cambodians than to most, as they have tasted what it is like to be without. Famine stalked the country in the late 1970s and, even today, malnutrition and food shortages are common during times of drought. For country folk (still the majority of the Cambodian population), their life is their fields. Farmers are attached to their land, their very survival dependent on it, and the harvest cycle dictates the rhythm of rural life.

For the young generation, brought up in a postconflict, postcommunist period of relative freedom, it's a different story – arguably thanks to their steady diet of MTV and steamy soaps. Cambodia is experiencing its very own '60s swing, as the younger generation stands up for a different lifestyle than the one their parents had to swallow. This creates plenty of feisty friction in the cities, as rebellious teens dress as they like, date who they want and hit the town until all hours. But few actually live on their own; they still come home to ma and pa at the end of the day (and the arguments start again).

Cambodia is a country undergoing rapid change, but for now the traditionalists are just about holding their own, although the onslaught of karaoke is proving hard to resist. Cambodia is set for major demographic changes in the next couple of decades. Currently, just 20% of the population lives in urban areas, which contrasts starkly with the country's more-developed neighbours, such as Malaysia and Thailand. Increasing numbers of young people are likely to migrate to the cities in search of opportunity, changing forever the face of contemporary Cambodian society. However, for now, Cambodian society remains much more traditional than in Thailand and Vietnam, and visitors need to keep this in mind.

Greetings

Cambodians traditionally greet each other with the *sompiah*, which involves pressing the hands together in prayer and bowing, similar to the *wai* in Thailand. The higher the hands and the lower the bow the more respect is conveyed – important to remember when meeting officials or the elderly. In recent times this custom has been partially replaced by the handshake but, although men tend to shake hands with each other, women usually use the traditional greeting with both men and women. It is considered acceptable (or perhaps excusable) for foreigners to shake hands with Cambodians of both sexes.

Dress

Both men and women often wear cotton or silk sarongs, especially at home. Most urban Khmer men dress in trousers and these days many urban women dress in Western-style clothing.

On formal occasions, such as religious festivals and family celebrations, women often wear a *hol* (a type of shirt) during the day. At night they change

Some 80% of the Cambodian population still live in the countryside, a huge number compared with its more-developed Asian neighbours. Expect urban migration to take off in the next decade.

Even the destructive Khmer Rouge paid homage to the mighty Angkor Wat on its flag, with three towers of the temple in yellow, set against a blood-red background.

into single-colour silk dresses called *phamuong*, which are decorated along the hems. If the celebration is a wedding, the colours of such garments are dictated by the day of the week on which the wedding falls. The women of Cambodia are generally modest in their dress, although this is fast changing in the bigger towns and cities.

Travellers crossing the border from liberal Thai islands such as Ko Pha Ngran or Ko Chang should remember they have crossed back in time as far as traditions are concerned, and that wandering around the temples of Angkor bare-chested (men) or scantily clad (women) will not be appreciated.

ECONOMY

Badly traumatised by decades of conflict, Cambodia's economy was long a gecko amid the neighbouring dragons. This finally looks set to change, as the economy has been liberalised and investors are circling to take advantage of the new opportunities. Asian investors are flocking to Phnom Penh, led by the South Koreans who are inking deals for skyscrapers all over the low-rise city. Westerners are starting to realise that they are on to something and investment funds and venture capitalists are sniffing around. It's a far cry from the days of civil war, genocide and famine. However, it's a fairly exclusive boom limited to foreign investors, wealthy Cambodians and a small number of city dwellers. To ensure a stable future, the government needs to expand the opportunities to the people of the countryside.

Before the civil war, rubber was the leading industry and it's bouncing back with new plantations. Other plantation industries taking off include palm oil and paper pulp. Virgin forest is being cut down on the pretext of replanting, but the ecosystem never recovers.

The garment sector is important to the economy, with factories ringing the Cambodian capital. Cambodia is trying to carve a niche for itself as an ethical producer, with good labour relations and air-conditioned factories. It's no picnic in the factories, but the alternative is often the rice fields or the shadowy fringes of the entertainment industry, which is often a one-way ticket into prostitution. When it comes to the garment industry's future, it remains to be seen if profit or purpose will triumph in the international marketplace.

Tourism is a big deal in Cambodia with more than two million visitors arriving in 2007, a doubling of numbers in just three years. Thousands of jobs are being created every year and this is proving a great way to integrate the huge number of young people into the economy. Wages are low by regional standards, but tips can add up to a princely sum that might support an extended family.

Foreign aid was long the mainstay of the Cambodian economy, supporting half the government's budget, and NGOs have done a lot to force important sociopolitical issues onto the agenda. However, with multibillion dollar investments stacking up, it looks like their days in the sun could be numbered, and the government may no longer be influenced by their lobbying.

For many Cambodians, economy is too grand a word, for their life is about subsistence survival. Subject to the vagaries of burning sun and drowning rains, the best they can hope for is a stable crop and the chance to sell a little at the end of the season.

Corruption remains a way of life in Cambodia. It is a major element of the Cambodian economy and exists to some extent at all levels of government. Sometimes it is overt, but increasingly it is covert, with private companies often securing very favourable business deals on the basis of their connections. It seems everything can be bought, including ancient temples, national parks and even genocide sites.

Cambodia's economy is now among the fastest growing in the world, recently hitting the magic 10%-a-year target.

TOP 10 TIPS TO EARN THE RESPECT OF THE LOCALS

Take your time to learn a little about the local culture in Cambodia. Not only will this ensure that you don't inadvertently cause offence or, worse, spark an international incident, but it will also ingratiate you to your hosts. Here are a few top tips to help you go native.

Dress Code

Respect local dress standards, particularly at religious sites. Covering the upper arms and upper legs is appropriate, although some monks will be too polite to enforce this. Always remove your shoes before entering a temple, as well as any hat or head covering. Nude sunbathing is considered *totally* inappropriate, even on beaches.

Making a Contribution

Since most temples are maintained from the donations received, remember to make a contribution when visiting a temple. When visiting a Khmer home, a small token of gratitude in the form of a gift is always appreciated.

Meet & Greet

Learn the Cambodian greeting, the *sompiah* (see p45), and use it when introducing yourself to new friends. When beckoning someone over, always wave towards yourself with the palm down, as palm up with fingers raised can be suggestive, even offensive.

A Woman's Touch

Monks are not supposed to touch or be touched by women. If a woman wants to hand something to a monk, the object should be placed within reach of the monk or on the monk's 'receiving cloth'.

Keep your Cool

No matter how high your blood pressure rises, do not raise your voice or show signs of aggression. This will lead to a 'loss of face' and cause embarrassment to the locals, ensuring the situation gets worse rather than better.

It's on the Cards

Exchanging business cards is an important part of even the smallest transaction or business contact in Cambodia. Get some printed before you arrive and hand them out like confetti. Always present them with two hands.

Deadly Chopsticks

Leaving a pair of chopsticks sitting vertically in a rice bowl looks very much like the incense sticks that are burned for the dead. This is a powerful sign and is not appreciated anywhere in Asia.

Mean Feet

Cambodians like to keep a clean house and it's usual to remove shoes when entering somebody's home. It's rude to point the bottom of your feet towards other people. Never, ever point your feet towards anything sacred, such as an image of Buddha.

Hats Off to Them

As a form of respect to elderly or other esteemed people, such as monks, take off your hat and bow your head politely when addressing them. Never pat or touch an adult on the head – in Asia, the head is the symbolic highest point.

Toothpicks

While digging out those stubborn morsels from between your teeth, it is polite to use one hand to perform the extraction and the other hand to cover your mouth so others can't see you do it.

POPULATION

Cambodia's first census in decades, carried out in 1998, put the country's population at nearly 11.5 million. With a rapid growth rate of 2.4% a year, the population now stands at more than 15 million and is predicted to reach 20 million before 2020.

Phnom Penh is the largest city, with a population of almost two million. Other major population centres include the boom towns of Siem Reap, Sihanoukville, Battambang and Poipet. The most populous province is Kompong Cham, where more than 10% of Cambodians live.

The much-discussed imbalance of men to women due to years of conflict is not as serious as it was in 1980, but it is still significant: there are about 94 males to every 100 females, up from 86.1 to 100 in 1980. There is, however, a marked imbalance in age groups: around 50% of the population is under the age of 16.

MULTICULTURALISM

Ethnic Khmers

According to official statistics, around 96% of the people who live in Cambodia are ethnic Khmers, making the country the most homogeneous in Southeast Asia. In reality, anywhere between 10% and 20% of the population is of Cham, Chinese or Vietnamese origin.

The Khmers have inhabited Cambodia since the beginning of recorded history (around the 2nd century), many centuries before Thais and Vietnamese migrated to the region. Over the centuries, the Khmers have mixed with other groups residing in Cambodia, including Javanese and Malays (8th century), Thais (10th to 15th centuries), Vietnamese (from the early 17th century) and Chinese (since the 18th century).

Ethnic Vietnamese

Vietnamese are one of the largest non-Khmer ethnic groups in Cambodia. According to government figures, Cambodia is host to around 100,000 Vietnamese. Unofficial observers claim that the real figure may be somewhere between half a million and two million. They play a big part in the fishing

KHMER KROM

The Khmer Krom people of southern Vietnam are ethnic Khmers separated from Cambodia by historical deals and Vietnamese encroachment on what was once Cambodian territory. Nobody is sure just how many of them there are and estimates vary from one million to seven million, depending on who is doing the counting.

The history of Vietnamese expansion into Khmer territory has long been a staple of Khmer textbooks. King Chey Chetha II of Cambodia, in keeping with the wishes of his Vietnamese queen, first allowed Vietnamese to settle in the Cambodian town of Prey Nokor in 1620. It was obviously the thin edge of the wedge – Prey Nokor is now better known as Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon).

Representatives of the Khmer Krom claim that although they dress as Vietnamese and carry Vietnamese identity cards, they remain culturally Khmer. Vietnamese attempts to quash the Khmer Krom language have, for the most part, failed. Even assimilation through intermarriage has failed to take place on a large scale.

Many Khmer Krom would like to see Cambodia act as a mediator in the quest for greater autonomy and ethnic representation in Vietnam. The Cambodian government, for its part, needs to look at the vast numbers of illegal Vietnamese inside its borders, as well as reports of Vietnamese encroachments on the eastern borders of Cambodia. However, the Cambodian government takes a very softly softly approach towards its more powerful neighbour, perhaps borne of the historic ties between the two political dynasties.

Among Cambodia's 24 provinces, Kandal has the densest population with more than 300 people per square kilometre; Mondulkiri has the sparsest population with just two people per square kilometre.

and construction industries in Cambodia. However, there is still a great deal of distrust between the Cambodians and the Vietnamese, even among those who have been living in Cambodia for generations.

Ethnic Chinese

The government claims that there are around 50,000 ethnic Chinese in Cambodia. Informed observers say there are more likely to be as many as half a million to one million in urban areas. Many Chinese Cambodians have lived in Cambodia for generations and have adopted the Khmer culture, language and identity. Until 1975, ethnic Chinese controlled the economic life of Cambodia. In recent years the group has re-emerged as a powerful economic force, mainly due to increased investment by overseas Chinese.

Ethnic Cham

Cambodia's Cham Muslims (known locally as the Khmer Islam) officially number around 200,000. Unofficial counts put the figure higher at around 400,000. The Chams live in villages on the banks of the Mekong and Tonlé Sap Rivers, mostly in Kompong Cham, Kompong Speu and Kompong Chhnang Provinces. They suffered vicious persecution between 1975 and 1979, when a large part of their community was exterminated. Many Cham mosques that were destroyed under the Khmer Rouge have been rebuilt.

Ethno-Linguistic Minorities

Cambodia's diverse Khmer Leu (Upper Khmer) or *chunchiet* (minorities), who live in the country's mountainous regions, probably number between 60,000 and 70,000.

The majority of these groups live in the northeast of Cambodia, in the provinces of Ratanakiri, Monduliri, Stung Treng and Kratie. The largest group is the Tompuon (many other spellings are used), who number around 15,000. Other groups include the Pnong, Kreung, Kavet, Brau and Jari.

The hill tribes of Cambodia have long been isolated from mainstream Khmer society, and there is little in the way of mutual understanding. They practise shifting cultivation, rarely staying in one place for long. Finding a new location for a village requires a village elder to mediate with the spirit world. Very few of the minorities wear the sort of colourful traditional costumes found in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.

MEDIA

Cambodia's media scene looks to be in good shape on paper, with freedom of the press enshrined in the constitution, but the everyday reality is a different story. Opposition parties have far less access to the media than the dominant Cambodian People's Party (CPP), with many more pro-government newspapers and radio and TV stations. Corruption exists in the local journalism ranks, and it's not unheard of for money to change hands in return for stories benefiting businessmen and politicians. Journalists working for pro-opposition media have to exercise a certain amount of self-censorship in the interests of self-preservation, as there have been several cases of politically motivated or revenge killings.

Khmer TV is mostly in the hands of the CPP, including state-run TVK and private channels like Bayon, but even the 'independent' channels like CTN aren't that independent when you look into who is behind them.

Most urban Cambodians look to cable TV news channels like the BBC and CNN for their news, or tune their radios in to BBC World Service or Voice of America.

Lowland Khmers are being encouraged to migrate to Cambodia's northeast where there is plenty of available land. But this is home to the country's minority peoples who have no concept of property rights or land ownership; this may see their culture marginalised in coming years.

RELIGION

Hinduism

Hinduism flourished alongside Buddhism from the 1st century AD until the 14th century. During the pre-Angkorian period, Hinduism was represented by the worship of Harihara (Shiva and Vishnu embodied in a single deity). During the time of Angkor, Shiva was the deity most in favour with the royal family, although in the 12th century he was superseded by Vishnu. Today some elements of Hinduism are still incorporated into important ceremonies involving birth, marriage and death.

Buddhism

Buddhism came to Cambodia with Hinduism, but only became the official religion from the 13th and 14th centuries. Most Cambodians today practise Theravada Buddhism. Between 1975 and 1979 the majority of Cambodia's Buddhist monks were murdered by the Khmer Rouge and nearly all of the country's wats (more than 3000) were damaged or destroyed. In the late 1980s, Buddhism once again became the state religion and today young monks are a common sight throughout the country. Many wats have been rebuilt or rehabilitated in the past decade and money-raising drives for this work can be seen on roadsides across the country.

The ultimate goal of Theravada Buddhism is nirvana – 'extinction' of all desire and suffering to reach the final stage of reincarnation. By feeding monks, giving donations to temples and performing regular worship at the local wat, Buddhists hope to improve their lot, acquiring enough merit to reduce their number of rebirths.

Every Buddhist male is expected to become a monk for a short period in his life, optimally between the time he finishes school and starts a career or marries. Men or boys under 20 years of age may enter the Sangha as novices. Nowadays men may spend as little as one week or 15 days to accrue merit as monks.

Animism

Both Hinduism and Buddhism were gradually absorbed from beyond the borders of Cambodia, fusing with the animist beliefs already present among the Khmers before Indianisation. Local beliefs didn't disappear, but were incorporated into the new religions to form something uniquely Cambodian. The concept of Neak Ta has its foundations in animist beliefs regarding sacred soil and the sacred spirit around us. Neak Ta can be viewed as a Mother Earth concept, an energy force uniting a community with its earth and water. It can be represented in many forms, from stone or wood to termite hills – anything that symbolises both a link between the people and the fertility of their land.

The purest form of animism is practised among the Khmer Leu (see p49). Some have converted to Buddhism, but the majority continue to worship spirits of the earth and skies and the spirits of their forefathers.

Islam

Cambodia's Muslims are descendants of Chams who migrated from what is now central Vietnam after the final defeat of the kingdom of Champa by the Vietnamese in 1471. Like their Buddhist neighbours, the Cham Muslims call the faithful to prayer by banging a drum, rather than with the call of the muezzin, as in most Muslim lands.

Buddhism in Cambodia draws heavily on its predecessors, incorporating many cultural traditions from Hinduism for ceremonies such as birth, marriage and death; as well as genies and spirits, such as Neak Ta, which link back to a pre-Indian animist past.

Christianity

Christianity made limited headway into Cambodia compared with neighbouring Vietnam. There were a number of churches in Cambodia before the war, but many of these were systematically destroyed by the Khmer Rouge, including Notre Dame Cathedral in Phnom Penh. Christianity made a comeback of sorts throughout the refugee camps on the Thai border in the 1980s, as a number of food-for-faith-type charities set up shop dispensing Jesus with every meal. Many Cambodians changed their public faith for survival, before converting back to Buddhism on their departure from the camps.

WOMEN IN CAMBODIA

The position of women in Cambodia is in a state of transition, as the old generation yields to the new generation, the conservative to the challenging. Traditionally the woman's role has been in the home. While this trend continues among the older generation, there are signs that women of the younger generation won't be limited in the same way.

While something like 20% of women head the household, and in many families women are the sole breadwinners, men have a monopoly on the most important positions of power at a governmental level and have a dominant social role at a domestic level.

Cambodian political and religious policies do not directly discriminate against women, but females are rarely afforded the same opportunities as males. In the 1990s, laws were passed on abortion, domestic violence and human trafficking; these have improved the legal position of women but have had little effect on the bigger picture.

As young children, females are treated fairly equally, but as they get older their access to education has traditionally become more restricted. This is particularly so in rural areas, where girls are not allowed to live and study in wats.

Many women set up simple businesses in their towns or villages, but it is not an easy path should they want to progress further. Women currently make up just 10.9% of legislators in parliament, even though they make up 56% of the voters. Only 15% of administrative and management positions and 35% of professional positions are held by women nationally. It remains a man's world in the sociopolitical jungle that is Cambodia.

Other issues of concern for women in Cambodia are domestic violence, prostitution and the spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Domestic violence is quite widespread but, because of fear and shame, it's not known exactly how serious a problem it is. There is a high incidence of child prostitution and illegal trafficking of prostitutes in Cambodia. See the boxed text, p82, for more on the scourge of child prostitution in Cambodia.

Cambodia has the highest rate of HIV infection in the whole of Southeast Asia. Many families in Cambodia have ended up infected due to the actions of an errant husband. However, infection rates are starting to come under control thanks to the impact of powerful public awareness programmes.

ARTS

The Khmer Rouge assault on the arts was a terrible blow to Cambodian culture. Indeed, for a number of years the common consensus among Khmers was that their culture had been irrevocably lost. The Khmer Rouge not only did away with living bearers of Khmer culture, it also destroyed cultural artefacts, statues, musical instruments, books and anything else that served as a reminder of a past it was trying to efface. The temples of Angkor were spared as a symbol of Khmer glory and empire, but little else survived. Despite

Friends of Khmer Culture is dedicated to supporting Khmer arts and cultural organisations. Its website is www.khmerculture.net.

this, Cambodia is witnessing a resurgence of traditional arts and a growing interest in experimentation in modern arts and cross-cultural fusion.

Dance

More than any of the other traditional arts, Cambodia's royal ballet is a tangible link with the glory of Angkor. Its traditions stretch long into the past, when the art of the *apsara* (nymph) resounded to the glory of the divine king. Early in his reign, King Sihanouk released the traditional harem of royal *apsara* that went with the crown.

Dance fared particularly badly during the Pol Pot years. Very few dancers and teachers survived. In 1981, with a handful of teachers, the University of Fine Arts was reopened and the training of dance students resumed.

Much of Cambodian royal dance resembles that of India and Thailand (the same stylised hand movements, the same sequined, lamé costumes and the same opulent stupalike headwear), as the Thais learnt their techniques from the Khmers after sacking Angkor in the 15th century. Where royal dance was traditionally an all-female affair (with the exception of the role of the monkey), there are now more male dancers featured.

Music

The bas-reliefs on some of the monuments in the Angkor region depict musicians and *apsara* holding instruments similar to the traditional Khmer instruments of today, demonstrating that Cambodia has a long musical tradition all its own.

Customarily, music was an accompaniment to a ritual or performance that had religious significance. Musicologists have identified six types of Cambodian musical ensemble, each used in different settings. The most traditional of these is the *areak ka*, an ensemble that performs at weddings. The instruments of the *areak ka* include a *tro khmae* (three-stringed fiddle), a *khsae muoy* (singled-stringed bowed instrument) and *skor areak* (drums), among others.

Much of Cambodia's golden-era music from the pre-war period was lost during the Pol Pot period. The Khmer Rouge targeted famous singers and the great Sin Sisamuth and female diva Ros Sereysothea, Cambodia's most famous songwriters and performers, both disappeared in the early days of the regime.

After the war, many Khmers settled in the USA, where a lively Khmer pop industry developed. Influenced by US music and later exported back to Cambodia, it has been enormously popular.

A new generation of overseas Khmers growing up with influences from the West is producing its own sound. Cambodian Americans are now returning to the homeland, raised on a diet of rap, and lots of new artists are breaking through such as the ClapYaHandz collective started by Sok 'Cream' Visal.

There's also a burgeoning pop industry, many of whose famous stars perform at the huge restaurants located across the Japanese Bridge in Phnom Penh. It is easy to join in the fun by visiting one of the innumerable karaoke bars around the country. Preap Sovath is the Robbie Williams of Cambodia and if you flick through the Cambodian channels for more than five minutes, chances are he will be performing. Soun Chantha is one of the more popular young female singers with a big voice, but it's a chaneling industry and new stars are waiting in the wings.

Dengue Fever is the ultimate fusion band, rapidly gaining a name for itself beyond the USA and Cambodia. Cambodian singer Chhom Nimol fronts five American prog-rockers who dabble in psychedelic sounds.

The famous Hindu epic the *Ramayana* is known as the *Reamker* in Cambodia; Reyum Publishing has issued a beautifully illustrated book telling the story: *The Reamker* (1999).

Cambodia's great musical tradition was almost lost during the Khmer Rouge years, but the Cambodian Master Performers Program is dedicated to reviving the country's musical tradition. Visit its website at www.cambodianmasters.org.

One of the greatest '70s legends to seek out is Nuon Sarath, the Jimi Hendrix of Cambodia with his screaming vocals and wah-wah pedals. His most famous song, *Chi Cyclo*, is an absolute classic.

One form of music unique to Cambodia is *chapaye*, a sort of Cambodian blues sung to the accompaniment of a two-stringed wooden instrument similar in sound to a bass guitar without the amplifier. There are few old masters such as Prak Chouen left alive, but *chapaye* is still often shown on late-night Cambodian TV before transmission ends.

Literature

Cambodia's literary tradition is limited and very much tied in with Buddhism or myth and legend. Sanskrit, and later Pali, came to Cambodia with Hinduism and Buddhism and much of Cambodia's religious scripture exists only in these ancient languages. Legend has been used to expound the core Cambodian values of family and faith, as well as obedience to authority.

Architecture

Khmer architecture reached its peak during the Angkorian era (9th to 14th centuries). Some of the finest examples of architecture from this period are Angkor Wat and the structures of Angkor Thom. See p148 for more information on the architectural styles of the Angkorian era.

Today, most rural Cambodian houses are built on high wood pilings (if the family can afford it) and have thatch roofs, walls made of palm mats and floors of woven bamboo strips resting on bamboo joists. The shady space underneath is used for storage and for people to relax at midday. Wealthier families have houses with wooden walls and tiled roofs, but the basic design remains the same.

The French left their mark in Cambodia in the form of some handsome villas and government buildings built in neoclassical style – Romanesque pillars and all. Some of the best architectural examples are in Phnom Penh, but most of the provincial capitals have at least one or two examples of architecture from the colonial period.

Sculpture

Even in the pre-Angkorian era, the periods generally referred to as Funan and Chenla, the people of Cambodia were producing masterfully sensuous sculpture that was more than a mere copy of the Indian forms on which it was modelled. Some scholars maintain that the Cambodian forms are unrivalled even in India itself.

The earliest surviving Cambodian sculpture dates from the 6th century AD. Most of it depicts Vishnu with four or eight arms. A large eight-armed Vishnu from this period is displayed at the National Museum (p84) in Phnom Penh.

Also on display at the National Museum is a statue of Harihara from the end of the 7th century, a divinity who combines aspects of both Vishnu and Shiva, but looks more than a little Egyptian – a reminder that Indian sculpture drew from the Greeks who in turn learnt from the Pharaohs.

Innovations of the early Angkorian era include freestanding sculpture that dispenses with the stone aureole that in earlier works supported the multiple arms of Hindu deities. The faces assume an air of tranquillity, and the overall effect is less animated.

The Banteay Srei style of the late 10th century is commonly regarded as a high point in the evolution of Southeast Asian art. The National Museum has a splendid piece from this period: a sandstone statue of Shiva holding Uma, his wife, on his knee. The Baphuon style of the 11th century was inspired to a certain extent by the sculpture of Banteay Srei, producing some of the finest works to have survived today.

Cambodian architect Vann Molyvann helped shape modern Phnom Penh; some of his best-known buildings include the Olympic Stadium and the Chatomuk Theatre.

For details on the religious, cultural and social context of Angkorian-era sculpture, seek out a copy of *Sculpture of Angkor and Ancient Cambodia: Millennium of Glory* by Helen Jessup (1997).

Look for a copy of *ArtVenues*, a foldout publication promoting contemporary art galleries in Siem Reap, which includes a couple of suggested walking tours.

The statuary of the Angkor Wat period is felt to be conservative and stilted, lacking the grace of earlier work. The genius of this period manifests itself more clearly in the immense architecture and incredible bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat itself.

The final high point in Angkorian sculpture is the Bayon period from the end of the 12th century to the beginning of the 13th century. In the National Museum, look for the superb representation of Jayavarman VII, an image that simultaneously projects great power and sublime tranquillity.

Cambodian sculptors are rediscovering their skills now that there is a ready market among visitors for reproduction stone carvings of famous statues and busts from the time of Angkor.

Painting

There is a new contemporary art scene emerging in Cambodia, which is pushing the boundaries of traditional culture and form. Young artists are emerging unshackled by the baggage of the past to define a new future for Khmer painting. This has been given extra momentum by new galleries and art venues in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap that are promoting these artists to the wider world. Check out places like the Art Café, Java Café and Meta House (p108) in Phnom Penh or Damnak Alliance Café and the Arts Lounge in Hotel de la Paix (p130) in Siem Reap.

Leading lights on the art scene include Tuol Sleng survivor Vann Nath, spiritually inspired artist Chhim Sothy and challenging young Battambang artist Oeur Sokuntevy.

Handicrafts

With a tradition of craftsmanship that produced the temples of Angkor, it is hardly surprising to find that even today Khmers produce exquisitely carved silver, wood and stone. Many of the designs hark back to those of the Angkorian period and are tasteful objects of art. Pottery is also an industry with a long history in Cambodia, and there are many ancient kiln sites scattered throughout the country. Designs range from the extremely simple to much more intricate: drinking cups carved in the image of elephants, teapots carved in the image of birds, and jars carved in the image of gods.

Cinema

The film industry in Cambodia was given a new lease of life in 2000 with the release of *Pos Keng Kong* (The Giant Snake). A remake of a 1950s Cambodian classic, it tells the story of a powerful young girl born from a rural relationship between a woman and a snake king. It is an interesting love story, albeit with dodgy special effects, and achieved massive box-office success around the region.

The success of *Pos Keng Kong* has heralded a revival in the Cambodian film industry and local directors are now turning out up to a dozen films a year. However, most of these new films are vampire or ghost films and of dubious artistic value.

At least one overseas Cambodian director has had huge success in recent years: Rithy Panh's *People of the Rice Fields* was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1995. The film touches only fleetingly on the Khmer Rouge, depicting the lives of a family eking out an arduous existence in the rice fields. His other films include *One Night after the War* (1997), the story of a young Khmer kick boxer falling for a bar girl in Phnom Penh, and the award-winning *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003), a powerful documentary in which survivors from Tuol Sleng are brought back to confront their guards.

Reyum is an exhibition space in Phnom Penh established to promote Khmer arts and culture and has given support and encouragement to young artists and writers. Its website is at www.reyum.org.

Rithy Panh's 1996 film *Bophana* tells the true story of Hout Bophana, a beautiful young woman, and Ly Sitha, a regional Khmer Rouge leader, who fall in love and are executed for their 'crime'.

Check out the rockumentary on Cambodia's lost rock'n'roll from the 1960s at www.dontthinkiveforgotten.com

SIHANOUK & THE SILVER SCREEN

Between 1965 and 1969 Sihanouk wrote, directed and produced nine feature films, a figure that would put the average workaholic Hollywood director to shame. Sihanouk took the business of making films very seriously, and family and officials were called upon to do their bit: the minister of foreign affairs played the male lead in Sihanouk's first feature, *Apsara* (Heavenly Nymph; 1965), and his daughter Princess Bopha Devi the female lead. When, in the same movie, a show of military hardware was required, the air force was brought into action, as was the army's fleet of helicopters.

Sihanouk often took on the leading role himself. Notable performances saw him as a spirit of the forest and as a victorious general. Perhaps it was no surprise, given the king's apparent addiction to the world of celluloid dreams, that Cambodia should challenge Cannes with its Phnom Penh International Film Festival. The festival was held twice, in 1968 and 1969. Sihanouk won the grand prize on both occasions. He continued to make movies in later life and it is believed he has made around 30 films during his remarkable career. For more on the films of Sihanouk, visit the website www.norodomsihanouk.org.

The definitive film about Cambodia is *The Killing Fields* (1985), which tells the story of American journalist Sydney Schanberg and his Cambodian assistant Dith Pran. Most of the footage was actually shot in Thailand: it was filmed in 1984 when Cambodia was effectively closed to the West.

Quite a number of films have been shot in Cambodia in recent years, including *Tomb Raider* (2001), *City of Ghosts* (2002) and *Two Brothers* (2004), all worth seeking out for their beautiful Cambodian backdrops.

SPORT

The national sport of Cambodia is *pradal serey* or Cambodian kick boxing. It's similar to kick boxing in Thailand (don't make the mistake of calling it Thai boxing over here) and there are regular weekend bouts on TV5 and CTN. It is also possible to go to the TV arenas and watch the fights live.

Football is another national obsession, although the Cambodian team is a real minnow, even by Asian standards. Many Cambodians follow the Premier League in England religiously and regularly bet on games.

Pétanque, or *boules*, the French game, is also very popular here and the Cambodian team has won several medals in regional games.

The first major international feature film to be shot in Cambodia was *Lord Jim* (1964), starring Peter O'Toole.

Cambodia is one of the leading lights in disabled volleyball and came third in the world championships, held in Phnom Penh in 2007.

Environment

THE LAND

Cambodia, as we know it today, is the result of a classic historical squeeze. As the Vietnamese moved south into the Mekong Delta and the Thais pushed west towards Angkor, Cambodia's territory – which, in Angkorian times, stretched from southern Burma to Saigon and north into Laos – shrank. Only the arrival of the French prevented Cambodia from going the way of the Chams, who became a people without a state. In that sense, French rule was a protectorate that protected.

Modern-day Cambodia covers 181,035 sq km, making it a little more than half the size of Vietnam (about the same size as the US state of Washington, or England and Wales combined). The country is a bit wider (about 580km east–west) than it is tall (about 450km north–south). To the west and north-west it borders Thailand, to the northeast Laos, to the east and southeast Vietnam, and to its south is the Gulf of Thailand.

Cambodia's two dominant geographical features are the mighty Mekong River and the vast lake, Tonlé Sap – see opposite for more on this natural miracle. The Mekong, an incredible 5km wide in places, rises in Tibet and flows for almost 500km through Cambodia before continuing, via southern Vietnam, to the South China Sea.

At Phnom Penh the Mekong splits into three channels: Tonlé Sap River, which connects with Tonlé Sap Lake; the Upper River (called simply the Mekong or, in Vietnamese, Tien Giang) and the Lower River (Tonlé Bassac, or Hau Giang in Vietnamese). The rich sediment deposited during the Mekong's annual wet-season flooding has made central Cambodia incredibly fertile. This low-lying alluvial plain is where the vast majority of Cambodians live, fishing and farming in time with the rhythms of the monsoon.

In Cambodia's southwest quadrant, much of the landmass is covered by forested mountains up to 1764m high. These are the Cardamom Mountains (Chhor Phnom Kravanh), which cover parts of Koh Kong, Battambang, Pursat and Krong Pailin Provinces and include the wildlife sanctuaries of Peam Krasaop (p187) and Phnom Samkos (p239), the Central Cardamoms Protected Forest (p189 and p238), the Southern Cardamoms Protected Forest (p189) and Botum Sakor National Park (p190). Southeast of the Cardamoms, the Elephant Mountains (Chhor Phnom Damrei) cover parts of the provinces of Kompong Speu, Koh Kong and Kampot – where you'll find Kirirom National Park (p116) and Bokor National Park (p219).

The mountains end just north of Cambodia's 435km coastline, a big draw for visitors on the lookout for isolated tropical beaches. There are islands aplenty off the coast of Sihanoukville (p193), Kep (p224) and the Koh Kong Conservation Corridor (p186).

Along Cambodia's northern border with Thailand, the plains collide with a striking sandstone escarpment more than 300km long and up to 550m high: the Dangrek Mountains (Chhor Phnom Dangrek). One of the best places to get a sense of this area is Prasat Preah Vihear (p268).

In the northeastern corner of the country, the plains give way to the Eastern Highlands, a remote region of densely forested mountains and high plateaus that extends east into Vietnam's Central Highlands and north into Laos. The wild provinces of Ratanakiri (p291) and Mondulakiri (p298) provide a home to many minority peoples and are taking off as traveller hot-spots.

Cambodia's highest mountain is Phnom Aural in Pursat Province. At just 1764m it isn't one of the world's great climbs but for those ticking off peaks across the planet it can be climbed in two days. Sadly, much of the surrounding area is being logged into oblivion.

Tonlé Sap expands to five times its size and 70 times its volume each year during the wet season and provides a huge percentage of Cambodians' protein intake, 70% of which comes from fish.

In the mid-1960s Cambodia was reckoned to have around 90% of its original forest cover intact. Estimates today vary but it's likely that only about 30% remains.

TONLÉ SAP: THE HEARTBEAT OF CAMBODIA

Tonlé Sap, the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia, is an incredible natural phenomenon that provides fish and irrigation water for half the population of Cambodia.

The lake is linked to the Mekong at Phnom Penh by a 100km-long channel that's also known as Tonlé Sap (*tonlé* meaning 'river'). From mid-May to early October (the wet season), the level of the Mekong rises rapidly, backing up Tonlé Sap River and causing it to flow northwest into Tonlé Sap Lake. During this period, the lake swells from 2500 sq km to 13,000 sq km or more, its maximum depth increasing from about 2.2m to more than 10m. Around the start of October, as the water level of the Mekong begins to fall, the Tonlé Sap River reverses its flow, draining the waters of the lake back into the Mekong.

This extraordinary process makes Tonlé Sap one of the world's richest sources of freshwater fish, as flooded forest makes for fertile spawning grounds. Experts believe that fish migrations from the lake help to restock fisheries as far north as China. The fishing industry supports about one million people in Cambodia and an individual fisher's catch on the great lake can average 100kg to 200kg per day in the dry season.

This unique ecosystem has helped to earn Tonlé Sap protected biosphere status – but this may not be enough to protect it from the twin threats of upstream dams and rampant deforestation. The dams – including Sambor Dam near Kratie and Si Phan Done in southern Laos – hold uncertain consequences for the flow patterns of the Mekong and the migratory patterns of fish. Illegal logging loosens topsoil in upland Cambodia and silt is carried down the country's rivers into the lake. The shallowest areas may in time begin to silt up, bringing disastrous consequences not only for Cambodia but also neighbouring Vietnam. Hopefully, action will be taken to protect this unique natural wonder from further harm, but with the Cambodian population growing by 300,000 a year, the task is not going to be easy.

For more information about Tonlé Sap and its unique ecosystem, visit the exhibition about the lake (p124) and the Gecko Environment Centre (p139), both in Siem Reap.

WILDLIFE

Despite Cambodia's tragic history, its forest ecosystems were in excellent shape until the 1990s and, compared with its neighbours, are still relatively intact. The years of war and suffering took their toll on some species, but others thrived in the remote jungles of the southwest and northeast. Ironically, peace brought increased threats, with the logging industry flattening habitat and the illicit trade in wildlife discovering Cambodia's abundance of exotic meats, skins, tusks and bones. Years of inaccessibility mean scientists are only just beginning to research and catalogue the country's plant and animal life. When it comes to the distribution of large mammals, Cambodia has four well-defined biodiversity regions:

- Southwest – the Cardamom Mountains and Koh Kong Province
- Northern plains – centred on Preah Vihear Province
- Northeast – Ratanakiri Province and Virachay National Park
- Eastern plains – centred on Mondulakiri Province

Animals

Cambodia has a weird and wonderful selection of animals. It's estimated that 212 species of mammal live in the country, but most are extremely hard to get a look at in the wild. The easiest way to see a healthy selection is to visit the Phnom Tamao Wildlife Sanctuary (p115) near Phnom Penh, which provides a home for rescued animals and includes all the major species.

Cambodia's larger animals include tigers, elephants, bears, leopards and wild cows. Some of the biggest characters, however, are the smaller creatures, including the binturong (nicknamed the bear cat), the pileated gibbon (the world's largest population lives in the Cardamoms) and the lazy

The *khting vor* (spiral-horned ox), so rare that no-one had ever seen a live specimen, was considered critically endangered until DNA analysis of its distinctive horns showed that the creature had never existed – the 'horns' belonged to ordinary cows and buffalos!

loris, which hangs out in trees all day. The country also has a great variety of butterflies.

The lion, although a familiar sight in statue form around Angkor, has never been seen here.

A whopping 720 bird species find Cambodia a congenial home, thanks in large part to its year-round water resources, first and foremost the marshes around the Tonlé Sap. Relatively common birds include ducks, rails, cranes, herons, egrets, cormorants, pelicans, storks and parakeets, with migratory shorebirds such as waders, plovers and terns around the south coast estuaries. Serious twitchers should consider a visit to Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary (p138); Ang Trapeng Thmor Reserve (p139), home to the extremely rare Sarus crane, depicted on the bas-reliefs at Angkor; the Tmatboey Ibis Project (p267), where the critically endangered giant ibis, Cambodia's national bird, can be seen; and – for the truly adventurous – the Chhep Vulture Feeding Station (p267). For details on bird-watching in Cambodia, check out the Siem Reap-based Sam Veasna Center for Wildlife Conservation (www.samveasna.org).

Cambodia is home to about 240 species of reptile. Four types of snake are especially dangerous: the cobra, king cobra, banded krait and Russell's viper.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Tragically it's getting mighty close to checkout time for a number of species in Cambodia.

The kouprey (wild ox), declared Cambodia's national animal by King Sihanouk back in the 1960s, and the Wroughton's free-tailed bat, previously thought to exist in only one part of India but recently discovered in Preah Vihear Province, are the only Cambodian mammals on the Globally Threatened: Critical list, the last stop before extinction.

Other animals under serious threat in Cambodia include the Asian elephant, tiger, banteng (wild ox), gaur, Asian golden cat, Asiatic wild dog, black gibbon, clouded leopard, fishing cat, marbled cat, sun bear, wild water buffalo, pangolin (p189), giant ibis and, in the wild, the dragonfish (Asian arowana) and Siamese crocodile (p190).

Cambodia has some of the last remaining freshwater Irrawaddy dolphins (*trey pisaut* in Khmer), instantly identifiable thanks to their bulging forehead and short beak. There may be as few as 75 left, inhabiting stretches of the Mekong between Kratie and the Lao border, and viewing them at Kampi (p288) is a popular activity. More Irrawaddy dolphins inhabit the saline estuaries and mangrove swamps of Koh Kong Province and can be viewed around Peam Krasaop Wildlife Sanctuary (p187) and Ream National Park (p213).

NGOS ON THE ENVIRONMENTAL FRONT LINE

The following environmental groups – staffed in Cambodia mainly by Khmers – are playing leading roles in protecting Cambodia's wildlife:

- Conservation International (www.conservation.org)
- Flora & Fauna International (www.fauna-flora.org)
- Maddox Jolie-Pitt Foundation (www.mjpasia.org)
- Wildlife Alliance (formerly WildAid; www.wildlifealliance.org)
- Wildlife Conservation Society (www.wcs.org)
- WWF (www.worldwildlife.org)

Researchers estimate that about 50 to 100 elephants live in Mondulkiri Province and a similar number live in the Cardamom Mountains, including Botum Sakor National Park.

Snake bites may well be responsible for more amputations in Cambodia than land mines. Many villagers go to the medicine man for treatment and end up with infection or gangrene.

For a close encounter with tigers at the temples of Angkor, watch Jean-Jacques Annaud's 2004 film *Two Brothers*, the story of two orphan tiger cubs during the colonial period in Cambodia.

TIGER, TIGER, BURNING OUT?

In the mid-1990s, somewhere between 100 and 200 Cambodian tigers were being killed every year, their carcasses bringing huge sums around Asia (especially China) because of their supposed powers of potency (mainly sexual). By 1998 annual incidents of tiger poaching had dropped to 85 and in 2005 just two tigers were killed. Sadly, it's more likely that these estimates reflect a crash in tiger numbers rather than increased community awareness or more effective law enforcement.

Experts fear there may be only 50 of the big cats left in the wild in Cambodia. Numbers are so low that, despite repeated efforts, camera traps set by researchers in recent years have failed to photograph a single tiger, though footprints and other signs of the felines' presence have been recorded. As far as anyone can tell, the surviving tigers live in very low densities in very remote areas, making it difficult for both poachers and scientists to find them – and hard for environmentalists to protect them.

A significant poaching threat comes from police and military units stationed in remote jungle locations. Often, unit commanders supply weapons and ammunitions to poaching gangs in return for a cut of the profits. On the brighter side, some hunters are now being employed as rangers, making it easier to educate other hunters about the terrible ecological impact of 'wildlife crimes'.

At present, tigers are known to inhabit two areas: the central part of the Cardamom Mountains and Mondulkiri Province. In addition, they are thought to be present in small numbers in Virachey National Park (p297), Kulen Promtep Wildlife Sanctuary (p267), Preah Vihear Protected Forest (p268), western Oddar Meanchey Province and perhaps even in Bokor National Park (p219).

For insights, stories and links about tigers in Cambodia and what's being done to protect them, visit the website of the Cat Action Treasury at www.felidae.org.

The Mekong giant catfish, which can weigh up to 300kg, is critically endangered due to habitat loss and overfishing.

For more information on endangered species, check out the website of the World Conservation Union, www.iucnredlist.org.

Plants

No-one knows how many plant species live in Cambodia because no comprehensive survey has ever been conducted but it's estimated that the country is home to 15,000 species (including 2300 vascular plants), at least a third of them endemic.

In the southwest, rainforests grow to heights of 50m or more on the rainy southern slopes of the mountains, with montane (pine) forests in cooler climes above 800m and mangrove forests fringing the coast. In the northern mountains there are broadleaf evergreen forests with trees soaring 30m above the thick undergrowth of vines, bamboos, palms and assorted woody and herbaceous ground plants. The northern plains support dry dipterocarp forests while around the Tonlé Sap there are flooded forests (seasonally inundated). The Eastern Highlands are covered with grassland and deciduous forests. Forested upland areas support many varieties of orchid.

The symbol of Cambodia is the sugar palm tree, whose fronds are used to make roofs and walls for houses and whose fruit is used to produce medicine, wine and vinegar. Sugar palms grow taller over the years but the barkless trunk doesn't get any thicker – thereby retaining shrapnel marks from every battle that has ever raged around them. Sugar palms have been known to survive for many years after being shot clean through the trunk.

NATIONAL PARKS

In the late 1960s Cambodia had six national parks, together covering 22,000 sq km (around 12% of the country). The long civil war effectively

Cambodia became the first Southeast Asian country to establish a national park when it created a protected area in 1925 to preserve the forests around the temples of Angkor.

CAMBODIA'S MOST IMPORTANT NATIONAL PARKS

Park	Size	Features	Activities	Best Time to Visit
Bokor (p219)	1581 sq km	ghost town, views, waterfalls, orange lichen	trekking, biking, wildlife-watching, hopefully not golf	Dec-May
Botum Sakor National Park (p190)	1834 sq km	mangroves, beaches, monkeys, dolphins, elephants	boat rides, swimming, hiking	Dec-May
Kirirom (p116)	350 sq km	waterfalls, vistas, pine forests	hiking, wildlife-watching	Nov-Jun
Ream (p213)	150 sq km	beaches, islands, mangroves, dolphins, monkeys	boating, swimming, hiking, wildlife-watching	Dec-May
Virachay (p297)	3325 sq km	unexplored jungle, waterfalls	trekking, adventure, wildlife-watching	Dec-Apr

destroyed this system and it wasn't reintroduced until 1993, when a royal decree designated 23 areas as national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, protected landscapes and multiple-use areas. Several more protected forests were recently added to the list, bringing the area of protected land in Cambodia to over 43,000 sq km, or around 25% of the country.

This is fantastic news in principle, but in practice the authorities don't have the resources, or sometimes the will, to actually protect these areas in any way other than drawing a line on a map. The government has enough trouble finding funds to pay the rangers who patrol the most popular parks, let alone to recruit staff for the remote sanctuaries, though in recent years a number of international NGOs have been helping to train and fund teams of enforcement rangers (see p58).

Among the new protected areas, the Mondulkiri Protected Forest (p303), at 4294 sq km, is now the largest protected area in Cambodia and is contiguous with Yok Don National Park in Vietnam. The Central Cardamoms Protected Forest (see p189 and p238), at 4013 sq km, borders the Phnom Samkos Wildlife Sanctuary (p239) to the west and the Phnom Aural Wildlife Sanctuary to the east, creating almost 10,000 sq km of theoretically protected land. The noncontiguous Southern Cardamoms Protected Forest (1443 sq km; p189) is along the Koh Kong Conservation Corridor (p186), whose ecotourism potential is as vast as its jungles are impenetrable.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Logging

The biggest threat to Cambodia's globally important ecosystems is logging, both for timber and to clear land for plantations. During the Vietnamese occupation, troops stripped away swaths of forest to prevent Khmer Rouge ambushes along highways. The devastation increased in the 1990s, when the shift to a capitalist market economy led to an asset-stripping bonanza by well-connected businessmen working hand-in-glove with corrupt members of government.

International demand for timber is huge, and as neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Vietnam began to enforce much tougher logging regulations, foreign logging companies flocked to Cambodia. At the height of the country's logging epidemic (at the end of 1997), just under 70,000 sq km of the country's land area – about 35% of its total surface area – had been allocated as concessions, amounting to almost

all of Cambodia's forest land except national parks and protected areas. However, even in these supposed havens, illegal logging continued.

The Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF) has been the driving force behind much of the recent logging in Cambodia; the RCAF has assisted in legal logging concessions, but it has also logged illegally elsewhere. The proceeds from these operations go into the army's grey (undeclared) budget, although its nominal budget already takes up a huge chunk of the government's cash.

In the short term, deforestation is contributing to worsening floods along the Mekong, but the long-term implications of logging are mind-boggling. Without trees to cloak the hills, the rains will inevitably carry away large amounts of topsoil during future monsoons and in time this will have a serious effect on Tonlé Sap. Will the shallow waters recede as a result of slow siltation, creating a situation similar to that marking the fall of the Angkorian empire? Combined with overfishing and pollution, these problems may lead to the eventual destruction of the lake – a catastrophe of apocalyptic proportions for future generations.

Since about 2002 things have been looking up (there was no further to look down). Under pressure from donors and international institutions – and the kick-ass environmental watchdog Global Witness (www.globalwitness.org) – all logging contracts were effectively frozen pending further negotiations with the government. Industrial-scale logging ceased and the huge trucks thundering up and down the country's dirt highways disappeared. However, small-scale illegal logging continued, including cutting for charcoal production and burning off for settlement, all of which continue to reduce Cambodia's forest cover.

The latest threat to Cambodia's forests comes from 'economic concessions' granted to establish plantations of cash crops such as rubber, mango, cashew and jackfruit, or agro-forestry groves of acacia and eucalyptus to supply wood chips for the paper industry. There are legal limits – land grants for plantations cannot be larger than 100 sq km (yes, that's 10km by 10km!) – but even this generous limit is often flouted. Worse still, there have been cases where concessionaires chop down all the trees to prepare the ground – and then fail to plant anything at all, the 'plantation' being merely a convenient fiction to facilitate clear-cutting.

According to the 'Conservation of Tropical Forests and Biological Diversity in Cambodia', *US Foreign Assistance Act 118/119 Analysis* (April 2005): 'Management of [Cambodia's] rich natural resources, especially forests and the Tonlé Sap Lake, is hampered by corruption, extreme inequality of access rights, insufficient or nonexistent right of tenure, a weak civil society, ethnic divisions and growing population pressures.'

Pollution

Cambodia has a pollution problem, but it is not of the same nature as the carbon monoxide crises in neighbouring capitals such as Bangkok and Jakarta. In fact, Phnom Penh is the only city in Cambodia that suffers from air pollution. The country does, however, suffer the ill-effects of an extremely primitive sanitation system in urban areas, and nonexistent sanitary facilities in rural areas – only a tiny percentage of the population have access to proper facilities. These conditions breed and spread disease; epidemics of diarrhoea are not uncommon and it is the number-one killer of young children in Cambodia.

Detritus of all sorts, especially plastic bags and bottles, can be seen in distressing quantities on beaches, around waterfalls, along roads and carping towns, villages and hamlets all over the country.

Back in the early 1990s, Cambodia had such extensive forest cover compared with its neighbours that some environmentalists were calling for the whole country to be made a protected area.

In September 2005, three enforcement rangers working to prevent illegal hunting and logging in the Cardamom Mountains were murdered in two separate incidents, apparently by poachers.

Banned in Cambodia, the damning report *Cambodia's Family Trees* (www.globalwitness.org/pages/en/cambodia.html), by the UK-based environmental watchdog Global Witness, lays out all the details about illegal logging in Cambodia.

DOING YOUR BIT!

Every visitor to Cambodia can make at least a small contribution to the country's ecological sustainability.

- Cambodia's wild animals are under considerable threat from domestic 'bush meat' consumption and the illegal international trade in animal products. It may be 'exotic' to try wild meat such as bat, deer and shark fin – or to buy products made from endangered plants and animals – but doing so will indicate that you condone such practices and, more importantly, add to demand and encourage more hunting.
- Forest products such as rattan, orchids and medicinal herbs are under threat as the majority are collected from the country's dwindling forests. However, some of these products can be harvested sustainably or cultivated, so if you buy them from reputable sources (such as an ecotourism project), local people have the opportunity to earn additional income while protecting natural areas from exploitation and degradation.
- When snorkelling, diving or simply boating, be careful not to touch live coral or to anchor boats on it as this hinders its growth. And don't buy coral souvenirs.
- Many Cambodians remain unaware of the implications of littering. Recently, though, pilot clean-up projects have been launched in places such as Koh Ker and Kirirom National Park. Raise awareness of this issue by setting an example: dispose of all your litter responsibly.

Mekong Be Dammed

With a meandering length of around 4200km, the Mekong is the longest river in Southeast Asia. In terms of fish biodiversity it is second only to the Amazon. Some 50 million people depend on the Mekong for their livelihoods but with regional energy needs spiralling ever upwards, it is very tempting for a poor country like Cambodia – and its none-too-wealthy neighbours – to dam rivers to generate hydroelectric power.

Overseeing development plans for the river is the Mekong River Commission (MRC; www.mrcmekong.org), formed by the UNDP and comprising Cambodia, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, an organisation that, ostensibly, is committed to sustainable development. But the greatest threat may come from dams being built in China.

Scientists worry about how dams will affect fish migration – some environmentalists claim that they might halve the fish population of the Mekong and perhaps even Tonlé Sap. But perhaps of most concern is the potential impact of dams on the annual monsoon flooding of the Mekong, which deposits nutrient-rich silt across vast tracts of land used for agriculture. Even a drop of just 1m in wet-season water levels would result in around 2000 sq km less flood area around Tonlé Sap, with potentially disastrous consequences for Cambodia's farmers.

Food & Drink

It's no secret that the dining tables of Thailand and Vietnam are home to some of the finest food in the world, so it should come as no surprise to discover that Cambodian cuisine is also rather special. Unlike the culinary colossuses that are its neighbours, the cuisine of Cambodia is not that well known in international circles, but all that looks set to change. Just as Angkor has put Cambodia on the tourist map, so too *amoc* (baked fish with coconut, lemongrass and chilli in banana leaf) could put the country on the culinary map of the world.

Cambodia has a great variety of national dishes, some similar to the cuisine of neighbouring Thailand and Laos, others closer to Chinese and Vietnamese cooking, but all come with that unique Cambodian twist, be it the odd herb here or the odd spice there. The overall impression is that Khmer cooking is similar to Thai cooking but with fewer spices.

Freshwater fish forms a huge part of the Cambodian diet thanks to the natural phenomenon that is Tonlé Sap Lake, and they come in every shape and size from the giant Mekong catfish to teeny, tiny whitebait, which are great beer snacks when deep-fried. The French left their mark too, with baguettes becoming the national bread and Cambodian cooks showing a healthy reverence for tender meats.

Cambodia is a crossroads in Asia, the meeting point of the great civilisations of India and China, and just as its culture has drawn on both, so too has its cuisine. Whether it's spring rolls or curry that take your fancy, you will find them both in Cambodian cooking. Add to this a world of dips and sauces to complement the cooking and a culinary journey through Cambodia becomes as rich a feast as any in Asia.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Cambodia's lush fields provide the rice and its abundant waterways the fish that is fermented into *prahoc* (fermented fish paste), which together form the backbone of Khmer cuisine. Built around these are the flavours that give the cuisine its kick: the secret roots, the welcome herbs and the aromatic tubers. Together they give the salads, snacks, soups and stews a unique aroma and taste that smacks of Cambodia. Whatever they are preparing, a Khmer cook will demand freshness and a healthy balance of flavours and textures.

Rice is the principal staple, enshrined in the Khmer word for eating or to eat, *nam bai* – literally 'eat rice'. Many a Cambodian, particularly drivers, will run out of steam if they run out of rice. It doesn't matter that the same carbohydrates are available in other foods, it is rice and rice alone that counts. Battambang Province (p240) is Cambodia's rice bowl and produces the country's finest yield.

For the taste of Cambodia in a bowl, try the local *kyteow*, a rice-noodle soup that will keep you going all day. This full and balanced meal will cost you just 2000r in markets and about US\$1 in local restaurants. No noodles? Then try the *bobor* (rice porridge), a national institution, for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and best sampled with some fresh fish and a splash of ginger.

A Cambodian meal almost always includes a *samlor* (traditional soup), which will appear at the same time as the other courses. *Samlor machou banle* (hot and sour fish soup with pineapple and a splash of spices) is popular. Other popular soups include *samlor chapek* (ginger-flavoured pork soup), *samlor machou bawng kawng* (prawn soup similar to the popular Thai *tom yam*) and *samlor ktis* (fish soup with coconut and pineapple).

For the scoop on countryside cooking in Cambodia, pick up *From Spiders to Waterlilies*, a cookbook produced by Romdeng restaurant (p102) in Phnom Penh.

Longteine De Monteiro runs several Cambodian restaurants on the east coast of the USA and she has put together her favourite traditional Khmer recipes at www.elephantwalk.com.

Friends (p102) is one of the best-known restaurants in Phnom Penh, turning out a fine array of tapas, shakes and specials to help street children in the capital. Its cookbook *The Best of Friends* is a visual feast showcasing its best recipes.

TRAVEL YOUR TASTEBUDS

No matter what part of the world you come from, if you travel much in Cambodia, you are going to encounter food that is unusual, strange, maybe even immoral, or just plain weird. The fiercely omnivorous Cambodians find nothing strange in eating insects, algae, offal or fish bladders. They will dine on a duck foetus, brew up some brains or snack on some spiders. They will peel live frogs to grill on a barbecue or down the wine infused with cobra to increase their virility.

To the Khmers there is nothing 'strange' about anything that will sustain the body. To them a food is either wholesome or it isn't; it's nutritious or it isn't; it tastes good or it doesn't. And that's all they worry about. They'll try anything once, even a burger.

Much of the fish eaten in Cambodia is freshwater, from the Tonlé Sap lake or the Mekong River. *Trey ahng* (grilled fish) is a Cambodian speciality (*ahng* means 'grilled' and can be applied to many dishes). Traditionally, the fish is eaten as pieces wrapped in lettuce or spinach leaves and then dipped into *teuk Trey*, a fish sauce that is a close relative of Vietnam's *nuoc mam*, but with the addition of ground peanuts.

Cambodian salad dishes are also popular and delicious, although quite different from the Western idea of a cold salad. *Phlea sait kow* is a beef and vegetable salad, flavoured with coriander, mint and lemon grass. These three herbs find their way into many Cambodian dishes.

Desserts can be sampled cheaply at night markets around the country. One sweet snack to look out for is the ice-cream sandwich. No kidding – it's popular with the kids and involves putting a slab of homemade ice cream in a piece of sponge or bread. It actually doesn't taste too bad.

Cambodia is blessed with many tropical fruits and sampling these is an integral part of a visit to the country. All the common fruits can be found in abundance, including *chek* (bananas), *menoa* (pineapples) and *duong* (coconuts). Among the larger fruit, *khnau* (jackfruit) is very common, often weighing more than 20kg. Beneath the green skin are bright yellow segments with a distinctive taste and rubbery texture. The *tourain* (durian) usually needs no introduction, as you can smell it from a mile off. The exterior is green with sharp spines while inside is a milky, soft interior regarded by the Chinese as an aphrodisiac. It stinks, although some maintain it is an acquired taste – best acquired with a nose peg.

The fruits most popular with visitors include the *mongkut* (mangosteen) and *sao mao* (rambutan). The small mangosteen has a purple skin that contains white segments with a divine flavour. Queen Victoria is said to have offered a reward to anyone able to transport an edible mangosteen back to England. Similarly popular is the rambutan, the interior like a lychee, but the exterior covered in soft red and green spines.

Best of all, although common throughout the world, are the *svay* (mangoes). The Cambodian mango season is from March to May. Other varieties of mango are available year round, but it's the hot-season ones that are a taste sensation.

DRINKS

Cambodia has a lively local drinking culture, and the heat and humidity will ensure that you hunt out anything on offer to quench your thirst. Coffee, tea, beer, wine, soft drinks, fresh fruit juices or some of the more exotic 'firewaters' are all widely available. Tea is the national drink, but these days it is just as likely to be beer in the glass.

The closest thing Cambodia has to a national dish is *amoc* (baked fish wrapped in banana leaf with coconut, lemon grass and chilli). Sometimes it arrives more like a soup, served in the shell of a young coconut.

Teuk Trey (fish sauce), one of the most popular condiments in Cambodian cooking, cannot be taken on international flights in line with regulations on carrying strong-smelling or corrosive substances.

For the inside story on Cambodian cooking, including the secrets of the royal recipes, seek out a copy of *The Cuisine of Cambodia* by Nusara Thaitawat (2000), which includes stunning photography throughout.

Beer

It's never a challenge to find a beer in Cambodia and even the most remote village usually has a stall selling a few cans. Angkor is the national beer, produced in vast quantities in a big brewery down in Sihanoukville. It is a decent brew and costs around US\$1.50 to US\$3 for a 660ml bottle in most restaurants and bars. Draft Angkor is available for US\$1 or less in Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville.

A beer brand from neighbouring Laos, Beer Lao, is very drinkable and is also one of the cheapest ales you can get. Tiger Beer is produced locally and is a popular draft in the capital. Most Khmer restaurants have a bevy of 'beer girls', each promoting a particular beer brand. They are always friendly and will leave you alone if you prefer not to drink. Brands represented include Angkor, Heineken, Tiger, San Miguel, Stella Artois, Carlsberg, Fosters and Becks. Cans of beer sell for around US\$1 in local restaurants.

A word of caution for beer seekers in Cambodia. While the country is awash with good brews, there is a shortage of refrigeration in the countryside. Go native. Learn how to say '*Som teuk koh*' ('Ice, please'). That's right, drink your beer on the rocks!

Wine & Spirits

Local wine in Cambodia generally means rice wine; it is popular with the minority peoples of the northeast. Some rice wines are fermented for months and are super strong, while other brews are fresher and taste more like a demented cocktail. Either way, if you are invited to join a session in a minority village, it's rude to decline. Other local wines include light sugar palm wine and ginger wine.

In Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, foreign wines and spirits are sold in supermarkets at bargain prices, given how far they have to travel. Wines from Europe and Australia start at about US\$4, while the famous names of the spirit world cost between US\$4 and US\$10! Yes, a bottle of Stolý vodka is just US\$4.

Most of the locally produced spirits are best avoided, although some expats contend that Sra Special, a local whisky-like concoction, is not bad. At around US\$1 a bottle, it's a cheap route to oblivion. There has also been a surge in the popularity of 'muscle wines' (something like Red Bull meets absinthe) with enticing pictures of strongmen on the labels and names like Hercules, Commando Bear and Brace of Loma. They contain enough unknown substances to contravene the Geneva Chemical Weapons Convention and should only be approached with caution.

Tea & Coffee

Chinese-style *tai* (tea) is a bit of a national institution, and in most Khmer and Chinese restaurants a pot will automatically appear for no extra charge as soon as you sit down. *Kaa fey* (coffee) is sold in most restaurants. It is either black or *café au lait* – served with dollops of condensed milk, which makes it very sweet.

Water & Soft Drinks

Drinking tap water *must* be avoided, especially in the provinces, as it is rarely purified and may lead to stomach complications (p350). Locally produced mineral water starts at 500r per bottle at shops and stalls, though some locals and expats alike doubt the purity of the cheapest stuff. Those with a weak constitution might want to opt for one of the better brands, such as Evian.

When Cambodian men propose a toast, they usually stipulate what percentage of the glass must be downed. If they are feeling generous, it might be just *ha-sip pea-roi* (50%), but more often than not it is *moi roi pea-roi* (100%).

The local brew for country folk is sugar palm wine, distilled daily direct from the trees and fairly potent after it has settled. Sold in bamboo containers off the back of bicycles, it's tasty and cheap, although only for those with a cast-iron stomach.

Although tap water should be avoided, it is generally OK to have ice in your drinks. Throughout Cambodia, *teuk koh* (ice) is produced with treated water at local ice factories, a legacy of the French.

All the well-known soft drinks are available in Cambodia. Bottled drinks are about 1000r, while canned drinks cost about 2000r and more again in restaurants or bars.

Fruit Shakes

Teuk kalohk are popular throughout Cambodia. They are a little like fruit smoothies and are a great way to wash down a meal. Stalls are set up around local night markets some time before dark and the drinks cost around 2000r. Watch out for how much sugar goes in if you don't like sweet drinks, and pass on the offer of an egg if you don't want it super frothy.

CELEBRATIONS

Cambodians enjoy celebrating, be it a wedding, a festival or a football match. For a festival, the family coffers are broken open and no matter how much they hold, it is deemed insufficient. The money is splurged on those treats that the family may not be able to afford at other times, such as duck, shrimp or crab. Guests are welcomed and will be seated at large round tables, then the food is paraded out course after course. Everyone eats until they can eat no more and drinks beyond their limit. Glasses are raised and toasts are led, everyone downs-in-one. The secret of standing straight come the end of the night is making sure you have plenty of ice in your beer.

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Whatever your taste, some eatery in Cambodia is sure to help out, be it the humble peddler with her yoke, a market stall, a local diner or a slick restaurant.

It is easy to sample inexpensive Khmer cuisine throughout the country, mostly at local markets and cheap restaurants. For more refined Khmer dining, the best restaurants are in Phnom Penh (p96) and Siem Reap (p131), where there is also the choice of excellent Thai, Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, French and Mediterranean cooking. Chinese, and to a lesser extent Vietnamese, food is available in towns across the country due to the large urban populations of both of these ethnic groups.

There are few Western fast-food chains in Phnom Penh as yet, but there are a few local copycats. The most successful has been Lucky Burger, with lots of branches in the capital.

There are often no set hours for places to eat but, as a general rule of thumb, street stalls are open from very early in the morning till early evening, while some stalls specialise in the night shift. Most restaurants are open all day, while some of the fancier places are only open for lunch (usually 11am to 2.30pm) and dinner (usually 5pm to 10pm).

Quick Eats

Because so much of life is lived outside the home, street food is an important part of everyday Cambodian life. Like many Southeast Asian people, Cambodians are inveterate snackers. They can be found at impromptu stalls at any time of the day or night, delving into a range of unidentified frying objects. Drop into the markets for an even greater range of dishes and the chance of a comfortable seat. It's cheap, cheerful and a cool way to get up close and personal with Khmer cuisine. Some of the new shopping malls, such as Sorya Shopping Centre (p97) in Phnom Penh, have food courts where it is possible to sample the street food in hygienic air-conditioned comfort.

Traditionally, Cambodians used to eat with their hands like many in India, but in more recent years this has given way to the fork and spoon like in Thailand or Laos, and the chopsticks, an import that came with the large Chinese population in Phnom Penh.

The best food blog on Cambodia can be found at www.phnomenon.com, which covers Khmer food, surfing the streets and the up-and-coming dining scene. Originally authored by Phil Lees, it remains to be seen if someone will take up the gauntlet in his absence.

TOP 10 RESTAURANTS HELPING CAMBODIA

There are lots of NGOs attempting to assist Cambodia as it walks the road to recovery. Some of these have established restaurants and eateries to raise funds and give young disadvantaged Cambodians some experience in the hospitality sector.

- **Epic Arts Café** (p217) – a lively little café assisting the deaf community and promoting arts for the disabled
- **Friends** (p102) – a superb tapas restaurant with delicious shakes and sharp cocktails, helping street children into the restaurant industry
- **French Eats Café** (p244) – a cosy place that helps children from families affected by HIV/AIDS
- **Gelato Italiano** (p211) – a modern, Italian-style gelateria staffed by students from Sihanouville's Don Bosco Hotel School
- **Les Jardins des Delice** (p131) – part of the Paul Dubrule Hotel School, offering Sofitel-standard cuisine at affordable prices
- **Joe-to-Go** (p131) – offering coffee with a kick before sunrise at Angkor to help fight child trafficking and sex tourism
- **Le Lotus Blanc** (p102) – an excellent French restaurant that helps raise funds and provide training for children from the Stung Meanchey dump area
- **Mekong Blue** (p291) – a relaxing café that is part of a silk cooperative seeking to assist disadvantaged and vulnerable women
- **Romdeng** (p102) – the place for traditional Khmer country cooking, including deep-fried tarantula; part of the Friends family
- **Starfish Bakery & Café** (p210) – a homely café in town offering delectable cakes and shakes, with all proceeds going to community projects

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Few Cambodians understand the concept of strict vegetarianism and many will say something is vegetarian to please the customer when in fact it is not. If you are not a strict vegetarian and can deal with fish sauces and the like, you should have few problems ordering meals, and those who eat fish can sample Khmer cooking at its best. In the major tourist centres, many of the international restaurants feature vegetarian meals, although these are not budget options. Cheaper vegetarian meals are usually available at guesthouses. In Khmer and Chinese restaurants, stir-fried vegetable dishes are readily available, as are vegetarian fried rice dishes, but it is unlikely these 'vegetarian' dishes have been cooked in separate woks from other fish- and meat-based dishes. Indian restaurants in the popular tourist centres can cook up genuine vegetarian food, as they usually understand the vegetarian principle better than the *prahoc*-loving Khmers.

EATING WITH KIDS

Family is at the heart of life in Cambodia, so it is hardly surprising to find family-oriented restaurants throughout the country. Most local restaurants will welcome children with open arms, particularly foreign kiddies, as staff don't get a chance to see them up close that often. Sometimes the welcome will be too much, with pinches and pats coming left, right and centre, but such is the way in Cambodia.

Ironically, it is often the upmarket Western restaurants where the reception may be terse if the children are playing up, as some stiff expats seem to have forgotten that they started out life that small. That said, there are plenty of excellent, child-friendly cafés and restaurants in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap

Before becoming a member of the WTO, copyright protection was almost unknown in Cambodia and that spawned a host of copycat fast-food restaurants including KFC (Khmer Fried Chicken?), Pizza Hot and Burger Queen, all now sadly closed.

serving dishes from home. There are rarely children's menus in any places, but with food so affordable, there is little room to quibble.

Most of the snacks children are accustomed to back home are available in Cambodia...and so much more. It is a great country for fruit, and the sweetness of mangosteens or the weirdness of dragon fruit or rambutan is a sure way to get them interested. Playing 'rambutan eyes' with the empty peels is a guaranteed laugh.

There is sometimes monosodium glutamate (MSG) in local Cambodian food. If your child has problems digesting it or you prefer to avoid it, it is better to stick to restaurants with an English-language menu that are used to dealing with tourists.

For more information on travelling with children in Cambodia, see p308.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Enter the Cambodian kitchen and you will learn that fine food comes from simplicity. Essentials consist of a strong flame, clean water, basic cutting utensils, a mortar and pestle, and a well-blackened pot or two.

Cambodians eat three meals a day. Breakfast is either *kyteow* or *bobor*. Baguettes are available at any time of day or night, and go down well with a cup of coffee.

Lunch starts early, around 11am. Traditionally lunch is taken with the family, but in towns and cities many workers now eat at local restaurants or markets.

Dinner is the time for family bonding. Dishes are arranged around the central rice bowl and diners each have a small eating bowl. The procedure is uncomplicated: spoon some rice into your bowl, and lay 'something else' on top of it.

When ordering multiple courses from a restaurant menu don't worry – don't even think – about the proper succession of courses. All dishes are placed in the centre of the table as soon as they are ready. Diners then help themselves to whatever appeals to them, regardless of who ordered what.

Table Etiquette

Sit at the table with your bowl on a small plate, chopsticks or fork and spoon at the ready. Some Cambodians prefer chopsticks, some prefer fork and spoon, but both are usually available. Each place setting will include a small bowl usually located at the top right-hand side for the dipping sauces.

When serving yourself from the central bowls, use the communal serving spoon so as not to dip your chopsticks or spoon into the food. To begin eat-

Both Phnom Penh and Siem Reap have child-friendly eateries. Check out Le Jardin (p103) or The Living Room (p104) in Phnom Penh or The Singing Tree (p131) in Siem Reap and sit back and relax. Some of the fast-food places in the capital also have children's adventure playgrounds.

DOS & DON'TS

- Do wait for your host to sit first
- Don't turn down food placed in your bowl by your host
- Do learn to use chopsticks
- Don't leave chopsticks in a V-shape in the bowl, a symbol of death
- Do tip about 5% to 10% in restaurants, as wages are low
- Don't tip if there is already a service charge on the bill
- Do drink every time someone offers a toast
- Don't pass out face down on the table if the toasting goes on all night

ing, just pick up your bowl with the left hand, bring it close to your mouth, and spoon in the rice and food.

It is polite for the host to offer more food than the guests can eat, and it is polite for the guests not to eat everything in sight.

COOKING COURSES

If you are really taken with Cambodian cuisine, it is possible to learn some tricks of the trade by signing up for a cooking course. It's a great way to introduce your Cambodia experience to your friends; no-one wants to sit through the slideshow of photos, but offer them a mouthwatering meal and they will all come running!

There are courses available in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambang and Sihanoukville, and more are popping up all the time. In Phnom Penh, Frizz Restaurant offers courses (p88), as do some of the hotels. In Siem Reap, Le Tigre de Papier (p125) offers daily courses in conjunction with the Sala Bai Training School, plus more and more hotels are getting into the game. In Battambang, the Smokin' Pot (p241) is a cracking little kitchen restaurant offering a cheap introduction to the secrets of Cambodian cooking.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Useful Phrases

Where is a ...?

... <i>neuv ai naa?</i>	នៅឯណា?
restaurant	
<i>resturawn, phowjanijayhtnaan</i>	រេស្តូរ៉ង់, ភោជនីយដ្ឋាន
cheap restaurant	
<i>haang baay, resturawn thaok</i>	ហាងបាយ, រេស្តូរ៉ង់ថោក
food stall	
<i>kuhnlaing loak m'howp</i>	កន្លែងលក់ម្ហូប
market	
<i>psar</i>	ផ្សារ

Do you have a menu in English?

mien menui jea piasaa awnglay te? មានម៉ឺនុយជាភាសាខ្មែរទេ?

I'm vegetarian. (I can't eat meat.)

kh'nyohm tawm sait ខ្ញុំមិនសាច់

Can I get this without the meat?

sohm kohm dak sait សូមកុំដាក់សាច់

I'm allergic to (peanuts).

kohm dak (sandaik dei) កុំដាក់ (សណ្តែកដី)

What's the speciality here?

tii nih mien m'howp ei piseh te? ទីនេះមានម្ហូបអីពិសេសទេ?

Not too spicy, please.

sohm kohm twae huhl pek សូមកុំធ្វើបីរពេក

This is delicious.

nih ch'ngain nah អាទេនៈឆ្ងាញ់ណាស់

The bill, please.

sohm kuht lui សូមគិតលុយ

Can you please bring me ...?

<i>sohm yohk ... mao</i>	សូមយក...មក
a fork	
<i>sawm</i>	សម
a knife	
<i>kambuht</i>	កាំបិត

Most Cambodian meals are cooked in a large wok, known locally as *chhnang khteak*.

a plate

jaan

ចាន

a spoon

slaapria

ស្លាបព្រា

Food Glossary

BREAKFAST

bread

nohm paang

នំប៉័ង

butter

bæ

ប៊ីរ

fried eggs

pohng moan jien

ពងមាន់ចៀន

rice porridge

bobor

បបរ

vegetable noodle soup

kyteow dak buhn lai

តុយទាវដាក់បន្លែ

LUNCH & DINNER

beef

sait kow

សាច់គោ

chicken

sait moan

សាច់មាន់

crab

k'daam

ក្តាម

curry

karii

ការី

eel

ahntohng

អន្លង់

fish

trey

ត្រី

fried

jien, chaa

ចៀន, ឆា

frog

kawng kaip

កង្កែប

grilled

ahng

អាំង

lobster

bawng kawng

បង្កង

noodles

mii (egg), kyteow (rice)

មី, តុយទាវ

pork

sait j'ruuk

សាច់ជ្រូក

rice

bai

បាយ

shrimp

bawngkia

បង្កា

snail

kh'jawng

ខ្យង

soup

sup

ស៊ុប

spring rolls

naim (fresh), chaa yaw (fried)

ណែម, ឆាយី

squid

meuk

មីក

steamed

jamhoi

ចំហុយ

vegetables

buhn lai

បន្លែ

FRUITS

apple

phla i powm

ផ្លែប៉ោម

banana

chek

ចេក

coconut

duong

ដូង

custard apple

tiep

ទៀប

dragon fruit

phlai srakaa neak

ផ្លែស្រកាភាត

durian

tourain

តួរេន

grapes

tompeang baai juu

ទំពាំងបាយជូរ

guava

trawbaik

ត្រៃបែក

jackfruit

khnau

ខ្នុរ

lemon

krow-it ch'maa

ត្រៃចន្ទារ

longan

mien

មៀន

lychee

phlai kuulain

ផ្លែតូលេន

mandarin

krow-it khwait

ត្រៃចន្ទិចិ

mango

svay

ស្វាយ

mangosteen

mongkut

មង្កុត

orange

krow-it pow saat

ត្រៃចពោធិសាត់

papaya

l'howng

ល្ងង

pineapple

menoa

ម្នាស់

pomelo

krow-it th'lohng

ត្រៃចថ្លង

rambutan

sao mao

សាវម៉ាវ

starfruit

speu

ស៊ី

watermelon

euv luhk

ខ្ញីឡឹក

CONDIMENTS

chilli

m'teh

ម្រេស

fish sauce

teuk Trey

ទឹកត្រី

garlic

kh'tuhm saw

ទឹកមស

ginger

kh'nyei

ទឹកកក

ice

teuk koh

ទឹកកក

lemon grass

sluhk kray

ស្លឹកត្រៃ

pepper

m'rait

ម្រេច

salt

uhmbuhl

អំបិល

soy sauce

teuk sii iw

ទឹកស៊ីអ៊ីវ

sugar

skaw

ស្ករស

DRINKS

banana shake

teuk kralohk

ទឹកក្រឡុកចេក

beer

bii-ye

បៀរ

black coffee

kaa fey kh'mav

កាហ្វេខ្មៅ

coffee

kaa fey

កាហ្វេ

iced coffee

kaa fey teuk koh

កាហ្វេទឹកកក

lemon juice

teuk krow-it ch'maa

ទឹកត្រៃចន្ទារ

mixed fruit shake

teuk kralohk chek

ទឹកក្រឡុកផ្លែឈើ

orange juice

teuk krow-it pow sat

ទឹកត្រៃចពោធិសាត់

tea

tai

តៃ

tea with milk

tai teuk dawh kow

តៃទឹកដោះគោ

white coffee

kaa fey ohlay (ie café au lait)

កាហ្វេអូលេ

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