



Northwestern Cambodia

POP 3.75 MILLION / AREA 71,157 SQ KM

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Best Places to Eat & Drink

- » Riverside Balcony Bar (p218)
- » Gecko Café (p217)
- » Fresh Eats Café (p217)
- » Community Villa (p210)
- » Isanborei Community Restaurant (p240)

Best Places to Stay

- » Bambu Hotel (p216)
- » Sambor Village Hotel (p238)
- » Chhaya Hotel & Apartments (p216)
- » Banteay Chhmar Homestay (p229)
- » Bamboo Guesthouse (p223)

Why Go?

Offering both highway accessibility and outback adventure, northwestern Cambodia stretches from the Cardamom Mountains to the Dangrek Mountains. In the centre lies the unique Tonlé Sap lake (p320).

Battambang draws visitors with its classic colonial architecture and a host of sights beyond the town. Kompong Thom is also popular as a gateway to the pre-Angkorian temples of Sambor Prei Kuk.

Northwestern Cambodia offers some of the country's most inspired temples including spectacular Prasat Preah Vihear, and Banteay Chhmar, currently under consideration for Unesco World Heritage Site status.

The Cardamom Mountains, in the far southwest, are home to pristine jungle and rare wildlife, while the forests and marshes of Preah Vihear and Kompong Thom Provinces provide an ideal habitat for endangered birds such as the giant ibis.

When to Go

The dry 'cool' months of November to February are the ideal time to explore the northwest. The June to October wet season needn't be a washout if you're sticking to major destinations such as Battambang, but it's hard work exploring the remote temples of Preah Vihear Province in these conditions.

Anyone planning the scenic boat ride from Siem Reap to Battambang should consider a wet-season visit, as it will be a smoother run. During the dry season, water levels drop. Four hours becomes eight hours or more.

① Getting There & Away

Northwestern Cambodia shares several international border crossings with Thailand. The most popular is the Poipet–Aranya Prathet (p348), 48km west of Sisophon and 153km west of Siem Reap. Psar Pruhm–Ban Pakard (p349), 22km west of Pailin and 102km southwest of Battambang is another option in the west of Cambodia. There are a couple of remote and seldom used northern borders, including the Choam–Choam Sa Ngam (p349) border, 16km north of Anlong Veng and 134km north of Siem Reap; and the O Smach–Chong Jom (p349) border, a punishing 120km north of Kratie.

Within Cambodia, the obvious gateways to the region are Siem Reap and Phnom Penh. In the dry season, the fabled forest trail from Koh Kong Province, on the Gulf of Thailand, north through the Cardamoms to Pursat is not quite as daunting it was a few years back. The jungle track linking Thala Boravit (across the Mekong from Stung Treng; see p257) with Tbeng Meanchey is being upgraded to a road as we write.

① Getting Around

South of the lake, NH5 connects Phnom Penh with Kompong Chhnang, Kompong Luong, Pursat, Battambang, Sisophon and the Poipet–Aranya Prathet border crossing to Thailand. North of the lake, NH6 links Phnom Penh with Kompong Thom, Siem Reap and Sisophon.

Doing a loop north of Angkor along Cambodia's northern border with Thailand – from Sisophon (on NH5 and NH6) to Banteay Chhm, Samraong, Anlong Veng, Sra Em (near Prasat Preah Vihear), Tbeng Meanchey and Kompong Thom (on NH6), or vice versa – is getting easier by the year, though it's still a challenge in the wet, when the trip could be dubbed 'the Churning of the Ocean of Mud'. This route passes minefields and goes through areas so remote they're still being homesteaded. The lingering border tensions with Thailand in the northwestern region have spurred some major improvements in roads and transport connections in this area.

A memorable, if slow, boat service links Siem Reap with Battambang.

KOMPONG CHHNANG PROVINCE

Kompong Chhnang Province (ក្រុងកំពង់ឆ្នាំង) is a relatively wealthy province thanks to its proximity to the capital and its fishing and agricultural industries, supported by abundant water resources.

Kompong Chhnang

កំពង់ឆ្នាំង

026 / POP 45,000

Kompong Chhnang (Clay Pot Port) is a tale of two cities: the sleepy centre dating back to the colonial area, arrayed around a huge park, and the bustling dockside on the Tonlé Sap River. Nearby sights include two floating villages, a hamlet famous for its distinctive pottery and some drop-dead gorgeous countryside, typically Cambodian in its union of verdant rice fields and towering sugar palms.

👁 Sights & Activities

FLOATING VILLAGES

A short sail from Kompong Chhnang's waterfront, on the Tonlé Sap River, leads to a couple of colourful floating villages: **Phoum Kandal**, which has neighbourhoods to the east and northwest; and **Chong Kos**, beyond Phoum Kandal. Much less commercial than Kompong Luong (p211), they have all the amenities of a mainland village – houses, machine-tool shops, vegetable vendors, a mosque, a petrol station – except that almost everything floats. Many of the residents are ethnic Vietnamese.

To get a waterborne look at the floating villages, you can take a **boat trip** (2012 878331; foreigner/Khmer US\$2.50/1.50, minimum 10 people) from the Tourism Port. Chartering an entire vessel is US\$20 per hour.

A cheaper, quieter and more ecological option, available about 300m to the northwest, is to get around like the floating villagers do on a **wooden boat** (per hr US\$5) of the sort that's rowed standing up.

For a discount river cruise, you can hop on a **passenger ferry** (1000r, 30 minutes, departures at 8.30am, 11am, 1.30pm and 4pm) to Kompong Lang District, about 6km away on the other side of the Tonlé Sap River. The vessels dock 100m northwest of the Tourism Port.

Also across the Tonlé Sap River are several rather dilapidated brick-built **temples** dating from the Chenla period, including **Prasat Srei**.

ONDONG ROSSEY & PHNOM SANTUK

The quiet village of **Ondong Rossey**, where the area's famous red pottery is made under every house, is a delightful 7km ride west of town through serene rice fields dotted with sugar palms, many with bamboo ladders