



# Phnom Penh

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## Best Places to Eat

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- ➔ Van's Restaurant (p63)
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## Best Places to Stay

- ➔ Raffles Hotel Le Royal (p51)
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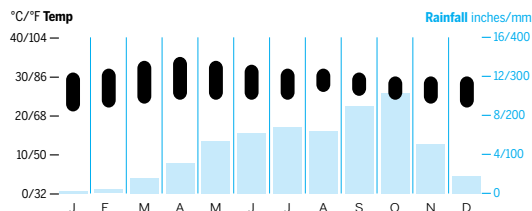
## Why Go?

Phnom Penh (ភ្នំពេញ): the name can't help but conjure up an image of the exotic. The glimmering spires of the Royal Palace, the fluttering saffron of the monks' robes and the luscious location on the banks of the mighty Mekong – this is the Asia many dreamed of when first imagining their adventures overseas.

Cambodia's capital can be an assault on the senses. Motorbikes whiz through laneways without a thought for pedestrians; markets exude pungent scents; and all the while the sounds of life, of commerce, of survival, reverberate through the streets. But this is all part of the attraction.

Once the 'Pearl of Asia', Phnom Penh's shine was tarnished by the impact of war and revolution. But the city has since risen from the ashes to take its place among the hip capitals of the region, with an alluring cafe culture, bustling bars and a world-class food scene.

## When to Go Phnom Penh



**Jan–Feb** The holiday crush is over and pleasant northeasterly breezes massage the riverfront.

**Sep–Oct** Heavy rains provide relief from searing sun; many hotels offer steep low-season discounts.

**Oct–Nov** Bon Om Tuk, or Water Festival, is one giant street party (when it's not suspended!).

## History

Legend has it that the city of Phnom Penh was founded when an old woman named Penh found four Buddha images that had come to rest on the banks of the Mekong River. She housed them on a nearby hill, and the town that grew up here came to be known as Phnom Penh (Hill of Penh).

In the 1430s, Angkor was abandoned and Phnom Penh chosen as the site of the new Cambodian capital. Angkor was poorly situated for trade and subject to attacks from the Siamese (Thai) kingdom of Ayutthaya. Phnom Penh commanded a more central position in the Khmer territories and was perfectly located for riverine trade with Laos and China, via the Mekong Delta.

By the mid-16th century, trade had turned Phnom Penh into a regional power. Indonesian and Chinese traders were drawn to the city in large numbers. A century later, however, the landlocked and increasingly isolated kingdom had become a little more than a buffer between ascendant Thais and Vietnamese, until the French took over in 1863.

The French protectorate in Cambodia gave Phnom Penh the layout we know today. They divided the city into districts or *quartiers* – the French and European traders inhabited the area north of Wat Phnom between Monivong Blvd and Tonlé Sap River. By the time the French departed in 1953, they had left many important landmarks, including the Royal Palace, National Museum, Psar Thmei (Central Market) and many impressive government ministries.

Phnom Penh grew quickly in the post-independence peacetime years of Norodom Sihanouk's rule. By the time he was overthrown in 1970, the population of the city was approximately 500,000. As the Vietnam War spread into Cambodian territory, the city's population swelled with refugees and reached nearly three million in early 1975. The Khmer Rouge took the city on 17 April 1975 and, as part of its radical revolution, immediately forced the entire population into the countryside. Whole families were split up on those first fateful days of 'liberation'.

During the time of Democratic Kampuchea, many tens of thousands of former Phnom Penhois – including the vast majority of the capital's educated residents – were killed. The population of Phnom Penh during the Khmer Rouge regime was never more than about 50,000, a figure made up of

senior party members, factory workers and trusted military leaders.

Repopulation of the city began when the Vietnamese arrived in 1979, although at first it was strictly controlled by the new government. During much of the 1980s, cows were more common than cars on the streets of the capital. The 1990s were boom years for some: along with the arrival of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (Untac) came US\$2 billion (much of it in salaries for expats).

Phnom Penh has really begun to change in the last 15 years, with roads being repaired, sewage pipes laid, parks inaugurated and riverbanks reclaimed. Business is booming in many parts of the city, with skyscrapers under development, investors rubbing their hands with the sort of glee once reserved for Bangkok or Hanoi, and swanky new restaurants opening. Phnom Penh is back, and bigger changes are set to come.

## Sights

Phnom Penh is a relatively small city and easy to navigate as it is laid out in a numbered grid. The most important cultural sights can be visited on foot and are located near the riverfront in the most beautiful part of the city. Most other sights are also fairly central – just a short *remork-moto* ride from the riverfront.

### ★ Royal Palace

PALACE

(ព្រះវិហារព្រះកែវមរកត្ត; Map p36; Sotheas Blvd; admission incl camera/video 25,000r, guide per hr US\$10; ☉ 8-11am & 2-5pm) With its classic Khmer roofs and ornate gilding, the Royal Palace dominates the diminutive skyline of Phnom Penh. It is a striking structure near the riverfront, bearing a remarkable likeness to its counterpart in Bangkok.

Being the official residence of King Sihanouk, parts of the massive palace compound are closed to the public. Visitors are only allowed to visit the throne hall and a clutch of buildings surrounding it. Adjacent to the palace, the Silver Pagoda complex is also open to the public.

Visitors need to wear shorts that reach to the knee, and T-shirts or blouses that reach to the elbow; otherwise they will have to rent an appropriate covering. The palace gets very busy on Sundays when countryside Khmers come to pay their respects, but this can be a fun way to experience the place, thronging with locals.