

Welcome to Cambodia

Ascend to the realm of the gods, Angkor Wat. Descend into hell at Tuol Sleng prison. With a history both inspiring and depressing, Cambodia delivers an intoxicating present.

An Empire of Temples

Contemporary Cambodia is the successor state to the mighty Khmer empire, which, during the Angkorian period, ruled much of what is now Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. The remains of this empire can be seen at the fabled temples of Angkor, monuments unrivalled in scale and grandeur in Southeast Asia. The traveller's first glimpse of Angkor Wat, the ultimate expression of Khmer genius, is sublime and is matched by only a few select spots on earth, such as Machu Picchu and Petra.

Upcountry Adventures

Siem Reap and Phnom Penh may be the heavyweights, but to some extent they are a bubble, a world away from the Cambodia of the countryside. This is the place to experience the rhythm of rural life and timeless landscapes of dazzling rice paddies and swaying sugar palms. The South Coast is fringed by tropical islands, with just a handful of beach huts in sight. Inland from the coast lie the Cardamom Mountains, part of a vast tropical wilderness that provides a home to elusive wildlife and is the gateway to emerging ecotourism adventures. The mighty Mekong River cuts through the country and is home to some of the region's last remaining freshwater dol-

phins. The northeast is a world unto itself, its wild and mountainous landscapes a home for Cambodia's ethnic minorities and an abundance of natural attractions.

The Comeback Capital

Just as Angkor is more than its wat, so too is Cambodia more than its temples. The chaotic yet charismatic capital of Phnom Penh is a hub of political intrigue, economic vitality and intellectual debate. All too often overlooked by hit-and-run tourists ticking off Angkor on a regional tour, the revitalised city is finally earning plaudits in its own right thanks to a gorgeous riverside location, a cultural renaissance and a wining and dining scene to rival anywhere in the region.

The Cambodian Spirit

Despite having the eighth wonder of the world in its backyard, Cambodia's real treasure is its people. The Khmers have been to hell and back, struggling through years of bloodshed, poverty and political instability. Thanks to an unbreakable spirit and infectious optimism, they have prevailed with their smiles intact. No visitor comes away without a measure of admiration and affection for the inhabitants of this enigmatic kingdom.



Why I Love Cambodia

By Nick Ray, Author

Where to start? I first came through Cambodia as a young backpacker in 1995 and the intoxicating history captured my attention. However, the people were the most memorable part of that first trip, their smiles infectious. Angkor is spectacular and special and continues to reward, no matter how many times you visit. The coastline is beautiful and blissfully undeveloped compared with some of the region. And it remains a frontier for motorbike rides from the Cardamoms in the southwest to Mondulkiri and Ratanakiri in the northeast. Even as it evolves, Cambodia remains a real adventure.

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Above: Produce seller, near Siem Reap