



Cambodia

POP 16 MILLION / 855

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Why Go?

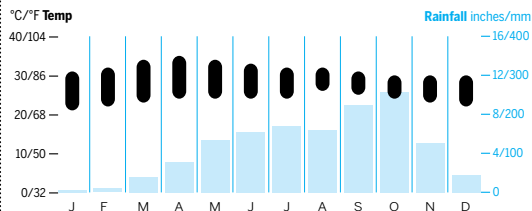
Ascend to the realm of the gods at Angkor Wat, a spectacular fusion of spirituality, symbolism and symmetry. Descend into the darkness of Tuol Sleng to witness the crimes of the Khmer Rouge. This is Cambodia, a country with a history both inspiring and depressing, a captivating destination that casts a spell on all those who visit.

Fringed by beautiful beaches and tropical islands, sustained by the mother waters of the Mekong River and cloaked in some of the region's few remaining emerald wildernesses, Cambodia is an adventure as much as a holiday. This is the warm heart of Southeast Asia, with everything the region has to offer packed into one bite-size chunk.

Despite the headline attractions, Cambodia's greatest treasure is its people. The Khmers have been to hell and back, but thanks to an unbreakable spirit and infectious optimism, they have prevailed with their smiles and spirits largely intact.

When to Go

Phnom Penh



Nov–Feb

The windy season brings relatively cool climes and is the best all-round time to visit.

Apr–May

Khmer New Year falls in mid-April and the mercury regularly hits 40°C.

Jul–Sep

Green season: rice paddies shimmer, and prices plummet.

PHNOM PENH

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 daydream about from afar.

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.

👁 Sights

★ Royal Palace

PALACE

(ព្រះបរមរាជវាំង; Map p192; Sothearos Blvd; admission incl camera 25,000r, guide per hour US\$10; ☉ 7.30-11am & 2-5pm) With its classic Khmer roofs and ornate gilding, the Royal Palace dominates the diminutive skyline of Phnom Penh. It's a striking structure near the riverfront, bearing a remarkable likeness to its counterpart in Bangkok. Being the official residence of King Sihamoni, parts of the massive palace compound are closed to the public. The adjacent Silver Pagoda is open to visitors.

Visitors are only allowed to visit the throne hall and a clutch of buildings surrounding it. They need to wear shorts that reach the knee, and T-shirts or blouses that reach to the elbow; otherwise they will have to rent appropriate covering. The palace gets very busy on Sundays, when countryside Khmers come to pay their respects, but being among crowds of locals can be a fun experience.

★ Silver Pagoda

BUDDHIST TEMPLE

(Map p192; Samdech Sothearos Blvd; incl in admission to Royal Palace; ☉ 7.30-11am & 2-5pm) Within the Royal Palace compound is the extravagant Silver Pagoda, also known as Wat Preah Keo or Temple of the Emerald Buddha. It is so named for its floor, which is covered with five tons of gleaming silver. You can sneak a peek at some of the 5000 tiles near the entrance, but most are covered to protect them.

The pagoda was originally constructed of wood in 1892 during the rule of King

Norodom, who was apparently inspired by Bangkok's Wat Phra Kaew, and was rebuilt in 1962. It was preserved by the Khmer Rouge to demonstrate to the outside world its concern for the conservation of Cambodia's cultural riches. Although more than half of the pagoda's contents were lost, stolen or destroyed in the turmoil that followed the Vietnamese invasion, what remains is spectacular. This is one of the few places in Cambodia where bejewelled objects embodying some of the brilliance and richness of Khmer civilisation can still be seen.

★ National Museum of Cambodia

MUSEUM

(សារមន្ទីរទីវង្គតិ; Map p184; www.cambodia-museum.info; cnr Sts 13 & 178; US\$5; ☉ 8am-5pm) Located just north of the Royal Palace, the National Museum of Cambodia is housed in a graceful terracotta structure of traditional design (built from 1917 to 1920), with an inviting courtyard garden. The museum is home to the world's finest collection of Khmer sculpture: a millennium's worth and more of masterful Khmer design.

Highlights include an imposing, eight-armed Vishnu statue from the 6th century found at Phnom Da, and a staring Harihara, combining the attributes of Shiva and Vishnu, from Prasat Andet in Kompong Thom Province. The Angkor collection includes several striking statues of Shiva from the 9th, 10th and 11th centuries; a giant pair of wrestling monkeys (Koh Ker, 10th century); a beautiful 12th-century stele (stone) from Oddar Meanchey Province inscribed with scenes from the life of Shiva; and the sublime statue of a seated Jayavarman VII (r 1181-1219), his head bowed slightly in a meditative pose (Angkor Thom, late 12th century).

Note that visitors are not allowed to photograph the collection, only the central courtyard. English-, French- and Japanese-speaking guides are available for tours (US\$6). A booklet, *The New Guide to the National Museum* (US\$10), is available at the front desk, while the smaller Khmer Art in Stone (US\$2) covers some signature pieces.

★ Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes

MUSEUM

(សារមន្ទីរប្រល័យពូជសាសន៍; Map p192; cnr Sts 113 & 350; US\$3, guide US\$6, audio tour US\$3; ☉ 7am-5.30pm) In 1975, Tuol Svay Prey High School was taken over by Pol Pot's security forces and turned into a prison known as Security Prison 21 (S-21); it soon became the largest centre of detention and torture in the