

Phnom Penh

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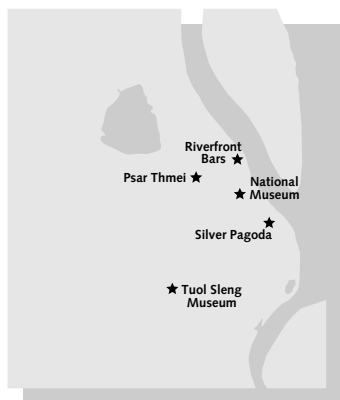
Phnom Penh: the name can't help but conjure up an image of the exotic. The glimmering spires of the Royal Palace, the fluttering saffron of the monks' robes and the luscious location on the banks of the mighty Mekong – this is one of Asia's oft-overlooked gems. But it's also a city on the rise, as a new wave of investors move in, perhaps forever changing the character, and skyline, of this classic capital. Phnom Penh sits at the crossroads of Asia's past and present: it's a city of extremes of poverty and excess, of charm and chaos, a city that never fails to captivate.

Phnom Penh can be an assault on the senses. Motorbikes whiz through the laneways without a thought for pedestrians; stalls and 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. This is not just another metropolis, an identikit image of a modern capital, it is an older Asia that many dreamed of when first imagining their adventures overseas.

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. Delve into the ancient past at the National Museum or struggle to make sense of the recent trauma at Tuol Sleng Museum. Browse the city's markets for a bargain or linger in the beautiful boutiques that are putting Phnom Penh on the style map. Street-surf local stalls for a snack or enjoy the refined surrounds of a designer restaurant. Whatever your flavour, no matter your taste, it's all here in Phnom Penh.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Be dazzled by the 5000 silver floor tiles of the **Silver Pagoda** (p92), part of the Royal Palace
- Discover the world's finest collection of Khmer sculpture at the stunning **National Museum** (p93)
- Check out the huge dome of **Psar Thmei** (p119), the art-deco masterpiece that is Phnom Penh's central market
- Delve into the dark side of Cambodian history with a visit to **Tuol Sleng Museum** (p94), essential to understanding the pain of the past
- Experience Phnom Penh's legendary nightlife with a happy-hour cocktail, a local meal and a crawl through the city's **lively bars** (p114)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 023

■ POPULATION: 2 MILLION

■ AREA: 290 SQ KM

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).

The story gives no hint as to why, in the 1430s, Angkor was abandoned and Phnom Penh chosen as the site of the new Cambodian capital. The move has been much lamented as evidence of cultural decline and the fall of an empire, but it made a good deal of practical sense. Angkor was poorly situated for trade and subject to attacks from the Siamese (Thai) kingdom of Ayuthaya. 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. The Tonlé Sap River provided access to the rich fishing grounds of Tonlé Sap Lake.

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, Vietnamese incursions into Khmer territory had robbed the city of access to sea lanes, and Chinese merchants driven south by the Manchu (Qing) dynasty began to monopolise trade. The landlocked and increasingly isolated kingdom became a buffer between ascendant Thais and Vietnamese. In 1772, the Thais burnt Phnom Penh to the ground. Although the city was rebuilt, Phnom Penh was buffeted by the rival intrigues of the Thai and Vietnamese courts, until the French took over in 1863. Its population is thought not to have risen much above 25,000 during this period.

The French protectorate in Cambodia gave Phnom Penh the layout we know today. The city was divided into districts or *quartiers*: the French administrators and European traders inhabited the area north of Wat Phnom between Monivong Blvd and the Tonlé Sap River; the Chinese merchants occupied the riverfront area south of Wat Phnom to the Royal Palace and west as far as Norodom Blvd; and the Cambodians and Vietnamese lived around and to the south of the palace. 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.

The city grew fast in the post-independence peacetime years of Sihanouk's rule. By the time he was overthrown in 1970, the population of Phnom Penh 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. Different factions of the Khmer Rouge were responsible for evacuating different zones of the city; civilians to the east of Norodom Blvd were sent east, those south of the palace to the south, and so on. Whole families were split up on those first fateful days of 'liberation' and, for many thousands of Cambodians, their experience of the Khmer Rouge rule depended on which area of the city they had been in that day.

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, and it was not until the government dispensed with its communist baggage at the end of the decade that Phnom Penh began to develop. 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. Well-connected residents were only too happy to help foreigners part with their money through high rents and hefty price-hikes. Businesses followed hot on the heels of Untac and commercial buildings began to spring up.

Phnom Penh has really begun to change in the last decade, 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 up. Phnom Penh is finally on