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## Cambodian collage

25 years after the Khmer Rouge genocide and centuries since its golden age, Cambodia embraces tourists with luxury hotels in a safe environment / Pages F6-7

Travel



The ruins of Angkor Wat, the world's largest religious edifice, whisper of Khmer glories past.

AP PHOTO, 1996



A woman washes clothes at a shanty village, left, dwarfed by a new luxury hotel in Siem Reap.

NEWSDAY PHOTO / BRYN NELSON

# Catching up with Cambodia's past



**ON THE COVER:**  
The sandstone causeway leading to Cambodia's iconic monument, Angkor Wat.

One of the towers, left, of the elaborately carved Hindu temple Banteay Srei, which means "citadel of the women," in Cambodia

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NEWSDAY PHOTO / BRYN NELSON

BY BRYN NELSON  
STAFF WRITER

From the taxi, Phnom Penh gradually appears as an exotic collage of extremes: stately French colonial buildings in slow decay or careful repair, humble shanties, beautiful Buddhist temples, and traffic patterns that verge on anarchy. One driver of a motorbike, or moto, carries his wife and two small children behind him. Another brings a squealing pig to market. A third careens through the chaos to attract a tourist's attention: "Mister, you need a ride someplace?" he asks, grinning. My traveling companion and I have come to Cambodia to visit our friend Solana, whose job as a journalist in Phnom Penh provided a perfect excuse to see the temples of Angkor.



In Siem Reap, left, an artisan carves a statue of the Hindu god Shiva, and there is a depiction of Buddha, above.

NEWSDAY PHOTO / BRYN NELSON

But in a country where the glories of the distant past often clash with the horrors of more recent history, the enduring Khmer culture has left perhaps

the most indelible images of all. In my memory, the country appears as a slideshow of scenes, by turns hilarious, heart-rending, surreal and inspiring.

In the central courtyard of the architecturally stunning National Museum, we share lollipops with a trio of uniformed schoolboys and trade smiles with young Bud-

dhist monks in saffron orange robes. With its traditional Khmer flourishes, the reddish museum provides a striking home for a collection of statues retrieved from the ruined temples at Angkor. As we stroll from room to room, women offer us fragrant jasmine flowers as souvenirs and offerings for some of the many Buddhist and Hindu statues on display. The women beam and bow when we accept the flowers with a simple "Aw kohn." Thank you. At the Royal Palace complex, we marvel at the ornate pavilions and buildings, most painted yellow to represent Hinduism or white to symbolize Buddhism: a Cambodian marriage of religions.

Rising nearly 200 feet from the Throne Hall, an Angkor-inspired tower features a kingly face looking in each direction.

See CAMBODIA on F8

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## A side trip to Bangkok, the 'Venice of the East'

The Thai capital of Bangkok, often faulted for its ceaseless noise and jarring traffic, may not immediately conjure up images of a calm oasis. But the bustling city nevertheless offers an abundance of scenic and surprisingly restful havens. In our two days in Bangkok, we found that the best way to avoid stress is to travel by boat whenever possible. It helps that the "Venice of the East" is full of khlongs, or canals, and that the long boats of the Chao Phraya River Express offer a cheap, fast and reliable way to tour the city center. It also helped that we splurged and stayed in the famous Oriental Hotel, a

luxurious riverside retreat with an express boat stop directly behind it and a staff that has mastered the art of Thai hospitality. A hotel that features signature cocktails by the pool, a small army of traditionally attired attendants, a string quartet in its lobby and a butler on each floor may not fall within every traveler's budget (doubles start at \$330 per night, though Internet and seasonal specials can knock a fair bit off the price). But the hotel still merits at least a visit, whether to its cozy Bamboo Bar for a ginger cosmopolitan and live jazz or to the lavish riverside barbecue buffet, where we dished up delicious Thai favorites while lit-up

boats cruised the river. Wat Po, the biggest and oldest Buddhist temple complex within the city, offers another beautiful refuge and is readily accessible via the Chao Phraya River Express. Along with its colorful tile work and architectural flourishes, the wat is famous for its huge, gold-covered reclining Buddha with mother-of-pearl feet. The complex also houses the Wat Po Thai Traditional Massage School, where we each received a wonderful hour-long massage with a hot herb rub for about \$10. It was worth every penny. One of our few regrets was missing the Grand Palace complex and Wat Phra Kaew, also called the Temple of

the Emerald Buddha. Located along the river just north of Wat Po, the large complex is full of Thai history but closes at 3:30 p.m., as we discovered. It also enforces a strict dress code. Although I was disappointed to miss the Grand Palace, visiting the Jim Thompson House proved to be one of the most pleasant surprises. The museum is easily reached via an efficient public transportation system known as the BTS Skytrain, whose Surasak stop is again accessible from the river. The house actually is a group of traditional wooden Thai homes transformed into a compound of sorts for

the American silk trading baron and rumored spy, who disappeared in 1967. The homes are considered superb examples of Thai architecture, the garden is lovely, and the Southeast Asian furnishings are truly amazing. Although the outdoor cafe by a koi pond is especially popular, a less crowded upper bar offers a more comfortable vantage from which to survey one of the city's most tranquil gems. — BRYN NELSON

A view of the Chao Praya River in Bangkok from the Oriental Hotel in Thailand.



NEWSDAY PHOTO / BRYN NELSON

### IF YOU GO

Despite its past reputation, Cambodia is now a safe destination full of unquestionably poor but amazingly friendly and polite people. Although drinking the tap water is definitely not recommended, bottled water is cheap and ubiquitous, as are cans of juice, soda and beer. For more detailed information about the country, we relied heavily on Lonely Planet's Cambodia travel guide and studied it for weeks before our trip. I cannot recommend it strongly enough.

**What to bring:** A passport is required to enter the country, while tourist visas are distributed at the airports and most border crossings for about \$20. The riel is the official currency, but dollars are widely accepted, as are Thai baht in many places. Although children are often sent out to beg or sell trinkets for money, they seldom benefit directly. Bringing along a stash of balloons, beaded necklaces, and blow pops or other small gifts to distribute instead of money will quickly earn you a sea of smiling faces. Just make sure you have one for everyone, as you will likely draw a crowd.

**Getting there:** Although no U.S. carriers fly directly to Cambodia, Phnom Penh is only an hour's flight from Bangkok. The best bet is to fly to Bangkok (Delta and American Airlines both offer one-stop flights from JFK) and then book a next-day flight on THAI or Bangkok Airways (Bangkok Airways also flies to Siem Reap).

**Getting around:** The plentiful motos, or motorbikes, often double as taxis in most cities. A

more comfortable ride can be had in a remorque-moto (or tuk-tuk), a small carriage attached to the back of a moto. Taxicabs, while less common, are easily obtained at the airport or arranged at hotels. If you rent a car, a driver will always come with it. For travel between major cities such as Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, flying is probably the most reliable option, though the improving highways have reportedly made bus transportation bearable. For the more adventurous, the express boat between Phnom Penh to Siem Reap is an interesting and scenic — albeit sometimes unreliable — five-hour journey up the Tonle Sap River.

**Accommodations:** Cambodia's accommodations vary widely in price and comfort, from humble guesthouses charging less than \$10 a night for doubles to luxurious four- and five-star hotels costing several hundred. At about \$40 a night for a double (double occupancy), the Renakse Hotel in Phnom Penh offers an unbeatable location directly across from the Royal Palace. The charming, historic colonial building houses clean and comfortable rooms, and the wide porch offers a great spot for enjoying a simple breakfast while surveying the lush gardens. In Siem Reap, the Borann L'Auberge des Temples is a fantastic base from which to explore the temples of Angkor. For about \$44 a night (double occupancy), the inn's compound offers clean and comfortable rooms decorated with local handicrafts and set in two-story buildings grouped around a swimming pool, a beautiful garden and a small restaurant featuring delicious Khmer dishes. — BRYN NELSON

# Catching up with Cambodia

CAMBODIA from F6

After removing our shoes, we survey the hall's lovely interior amid a buzz of activity. An amiable guide later explains that the hall is being readied for a ceremony to rid it of evil prior to the Khmer New Year.

Within the same compound, the gorgeous Silver Pagoda houses some of the most valuable cultural relics in the country, including a 17th century emerald Buddha made of Baccarat crystal and another made of solid gold and encrusted with more than 9,000 diamonds. Our guide discreetly pulls up a corner of a rug to reveal another treasure in the 5,000 silver bricks that cover the floor and give the temple its name.

Later that afternoon, we glimpse a more unassuming aspect of Khmer culture at an out-of-the-way snack bar overlooking the Mekong River. The proprietors seem genuinely surprised to see Westerners but greet their new guests graciously and arrange for servers to bring a fresh coconut, cans of Angkor beer and tropical fruit juice, and a wonderful snack of ground beef, bean sprouts and lettuce wrapped in rice paper and served with a mild sauce.

A few children splash in the slowly moving water below, but otherwise, the river offers a serene backdrop for the thatched-roof pavilion, where we lie in hammocks and talk for what seems like hours.

We reluctantly head back as the sun begins to set, passing much larger restaurants decorated with strings of multicolored lights and advertised by huge cutouts of smiling Khmer people. Some have moving arms, beckoning would-be diners in the fading twilight.

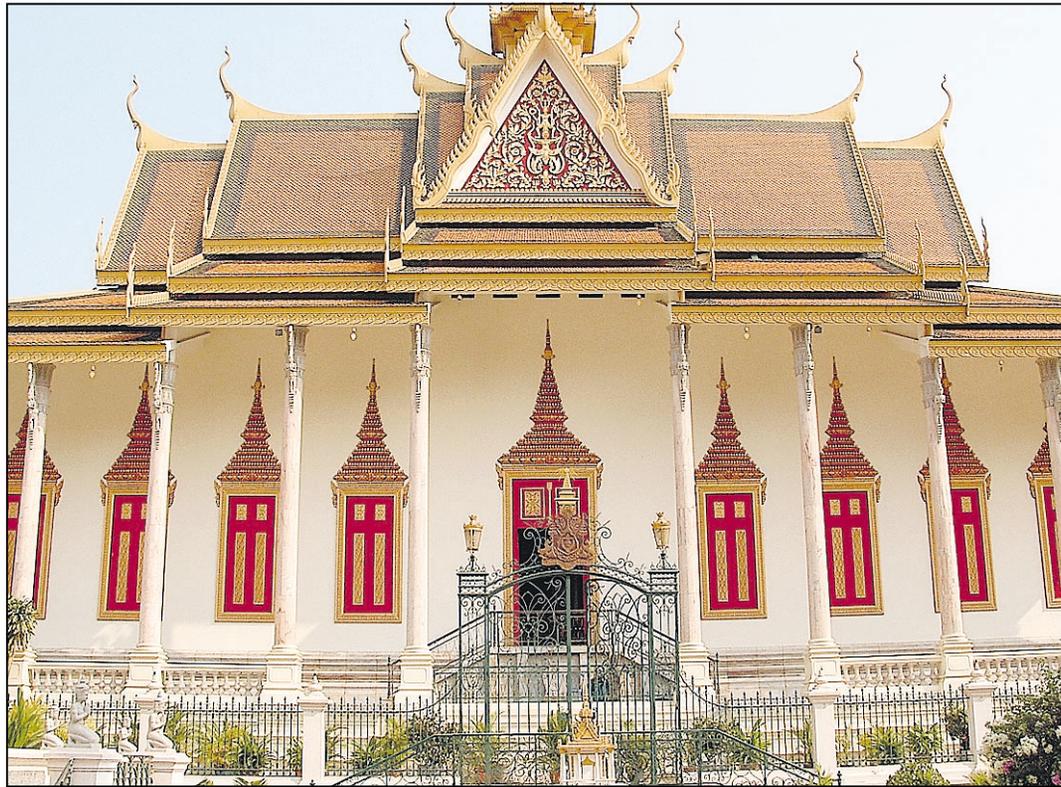
## Spicy, simple food

Compared to the food of Thailand, Cambodian cuisine tends to be less spicy and somewhat simpler but quite good. As a matter of necessity, most ingredients are acquired locally at markets like the one we stumble upon the next day.

Situated in an alley near the Tonle Sap River, the open-air market appears as a sea of colors and strange foods. Meat, fish, fruits and vegetables share space on bamboo mats, while vendors and buyers alike sport traditional head scarves.

A few blocks away, a town square is hosting an equally colorful Buddha Day celebration. In a small thatched-roof pavilion, some participants play the drums, a circle of bells, and what looks like a xylophone, while others make offerings of lotus flowers stuck in coconuts.

On the far side of the pavilion, vendors tend to stacks of cages filled with sparrows and myna birds. In broken English, one vendor explains that it's



NEWSDAY PHOTOS / BRYN NELSON



Two scenes in Phnom Penh: above, the Silver Pagoda at the Royal Palace complex; left, a woman wearing a traditional krama, or headscarf, weighs dried fish at an open market.

Our middle-aged guide betrays little emotion as he points out pits where men, women, and children were buried, and where bone shards and shreds of clothing remain. The impact is overwhelming. We sit more quietly on the ride back into the city, until our driver casually asks if we'd like to go shoot guns. We politely decline.

## Echoes of past glory

If Phnom Penh bears the most obvious scars of recent history, the city of Siem Reap 140 miles to the northwest offers the most evident reminders of past glories as the gateway to the Angkor temples.

Early the next morning, hours after bidding Solana a fond farewell, we embark upon a five-hour boat ride to Siem Reap up the Tonle Sap River, a lifeline between the country's political and tourist centers.

Siem Reap is where Cambodia has staked much of its future, where luxury hotels dwarf nearby shanties. Where cows lounge in the shade by the smaller Siem Reap River and the more daring local children jump into its depths from overhanging trees and bridges, while uniformed hostesses greet guests at expensive restaurants across the street. Where craftsmen carve beautiful stone statues in humble workshops on side streets, while sleek tourist shops line the main thoroughfares.

The magnet for the bustling

tourist industry here is a huge park featuring the temples of Angkor, most built by Khmer kings between the 9th and 14th centuries. Dozens of ruins dot the park and surrounding countryside, but among the most widely visited are the ruins at Ta Phrom, the Bayon, and of course, Angkor Wat. At the park's entrance early the next morning, we buy a three-day pass for \$40 (an extra passport photo comes in handy for this) and begin the last leg of the adventure.

The mysterious ruins of Ta Phrom are nearly deserted except for some parakeets and a few park workers. Kapok trees extend their roots like tendrils across the ruined stones, and it is difficult to say which has the more precarious position.

It won't always be like this. Other tourists will intrude, more stones will topple, felled by the relentless roots. But for now, the temple is frozen in time; we are its discoverers.

That sense of awe continues at the enormous Angkor Wat complex, whose square moat reflects the outer walls, and whose wide sandstone causeway leads proudly to the temple's majestic central towers.

Within the temple complex, an esplanade contains some of the most famous bas-relief carvings in all of Southeast Asia. At our request, a Cambodian couple tells us the Khmer names of the elephants and other animals in the carvings, giggling at our clumsy pronunciations.

Back at the temple's main entrance, we are surrounded by a cluster of smiling children that work with their families throughout the park. Some sell bottled water. Others hold up T-shirts, or statues. One small girl, maybe 5, holds a dragonfly between her forefinger and thumb.

"Mister?" she asks. "You buy my butterfly?"

## A lasting memory

I have one final image of Cambodia. We have hired a driver to take us to more distant temples, and we have already seen the exquisite sandstone Hindu temple known as Banteay Srei. We have watched Buddhist nuns rise in succession from roadside chairs, each one bowing, holding up a shiny alms bowl and hoping for donations to build a new temple.

We have explored the relatively remote jungle-consumed temple ruins at Beng Mealea, and blown up red balloons for the village children gathered by a tourist site cleared of landmines not so long ago.

We are on our way back to the city. Our driver Sen, whose baby boy died two months ago and whose wife's parents were killed by the Khmer Rouge, is teaching us how to say, "Hello, monkey!" in Khmer.

And we are all laughing.

auspicious to set a bird free while making a wish — for a donation of \$1. Two young boys by the river try their hand at it, but one of their freed captives falls to the ground with a thud, and the boys race to retrieve it.

To my relief, the myna bird I release soon soars out of sight.

In the afternoon, we visit a far more somber reminder of Cambodia's past. In nondescript adjoining fields about nine miles outside the city, the Khmer

Rouge killed an estimated 20,000 Cambodians here alone between 1975 and 1979, a fraction of the estimated 1.7 million who died during the three years, eight months and 21 days of brutal rule by the Khmer Rouge's infamous leader, Pol Pot. A quarter century later, the Killing Fields of Choeung Ek are dominated by a tall, handsome shrine that seems innocuous until we realize it is filled with about 8,000 human skulls.