

Inspirational travel

Vietnam • Cambodia • Laos • Thailand

ABOUT CAMBODIA

1. ABOUT CAMBODIA

The name Cambodia is derived from the word Kambuja, meaning the sons of Kambu. According to the legend, Kambu, an ascetic, married a celestial nymph named Mera and founded the Kingdom of Chenla. The neighboring Funan Kingdom, the first Hindu State in Southeast Asia, gained the Kingdom of Chenla in the 6th century. This in effect was the precursor to the great Khmer Empire - the creators of the Angkor temple complex.

Angkor is comprised of many ceremonial structures built between the 9th and 13th centuries by the Khmer Empire that spanned a period of approximately 600 years. In 1431 it was abandoned and the capital moved to Phnom Penh. In the middle of the 19th century the French colonized the country, and it was not until 1953 that Cambodia achieved independence, when King Norodom Sihanouk proclaimed himself Head of State.

The 1970's saw the country's darkest period. In 1970 General Lon Nol successfully staged a "coup d'etat" and ousted the King. Then in 1975, following a bitter civil war, the fanatical Khmer Rouge led by the infamous Pol Pot deposed Lol Nol. For four terrible years the country reverted back to "Year Zero" as thousands of the country's intellectuals and over one million Cambodians died. In 1979 the regime was deposed. Today, thanks to the magnificent ruins at Angkor and the peoples' spirit, the country's future looks brighter than at any time before.

2. HIGHLIGHTS

It is quite popular to combine a trip to Cambodia with Vietnam, or encompass all of Indochina's highlights with Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. Although Angkor Wat is the most popular reason for visiting Cambodia, the country has much more to offer and can easily be enjoyed as a 'standalone' destination.

Siem Reap

Siem Reap is the gateway city to Angkor Wat. A minimum of two full days, preferably three, is recommended to visit the main ruins of the Angkor temple complex and surrounds. Based out of Siem Reap, you can easily spend longer relaxing in one of its many cool cafes, play a round of golf, or chill out by your resort's pool. Siem Reap has colonial and Chinese-style architecture in the Old French Quarter, and around the Old Market. You can also visit craft shops, silk farms, rice-paddy countryside, fishing villages and a bird sanctuary near the Tonle Sap Lake.

Phnom Penh

A day or two in Phnom Penh, located on the banks of the Mekong River, allows enough time to visit its museums to learn more about the country's past, as well as the infamous 'Killing Fields'. Phnom Penh has been the nation capital since the French colonized Cambodia. Once known as the 'Pearl of Asia' it is considered one of the loveliest of French-built cities in Indochina. Founded in 1434, the city is noted for its beautiful and historical architecture, such as the Royal Palace and grand boulevards. Phnom Penh can also be accessed from Vietnam's Mekong Delta by speedboat.

Battambang

If you have enough time, we suggest visiting Battambang, offering Angkorian cultural heritage, French colonial architecture, and a unique circus performance created by the French non government organization, 'Phare'. The town offers the perfect opportunity to observe the Cambodian rural way of life. Battambang is located approximately three to four hours drive by car from either Siem Reap or Phnom Penh.

Inspirational travel

Vietnam • Cambodia • Laos • Thailand

Kampong Thom

For travelers who wish to avoid flying between Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, we also recommend driving between the two and overnighing in Kampong Thom, on the banks of the Stung Sen River and is home to over 200 ancient Khmer temples.

Kampong Cham

This city has yet to be heavily touristed like Phnom Penh or Siem Reap. It carries with it plenty of colonial French charm, and has a genuine 'wild west' feel to it. Most travellers who do find themselves in Kampong Cham are in transit to elsewhere in the country, but those that choose to spend at least a couple of days in the provincial capital will enjoy the laid back atmosphere and quaint charm.

Most people in Kampong Cham are of course ethnic Khmer, but there is a sizeable Cham minority in the province's towns, including a disproportionately high number of Muslims and Christians.

Kep & Sihanoukville

Beach lovers can end their Cambodian experience with a couple of days in Kep. Once the top beach destination in Cambodia, it is now a quiet, laid back town compared to the more touristy beaches of Sihanoukville (although if you are a budget traveller and looking for more lively action you would prefer Sihanoukville). Kep is easy to reach from Phnom Penh (around a five to six hour drive). Kep is scenic in a rugged way, with a short stretch of sand surrounded by mangrove forests and rocky coastal areas. The best reason to visit is its seafood which is in plentiful and cheap supply. Tonsay (Rabbit) Island is also only a few miles from Kep and offers a quiet setting and a couple of white sand beaches perfect for snorkeling. You can also hike through the jungle of Bokor National Park to the top of Bokor Mountain, passing by a former King's abandoned villa along the way.

Banlung

Banlung, although a small town, is the capital of Ratanakiri Province in Eastern Cambodia. This part of the country is heavily forested, giving way to plantation agriculture (rubber, cashews and oil palms) and home to 12 different ethnic minority groups. Banlung is situated near several spectacular natural attractions, including waterfalls, lakes and natural parks, and has hill tribe villages. Activities include swimming and hiking at Yeak Lao Volcanic Lake, a 700,000 year old volcanic crater lake considered sacred by local tribal minorities.

Ref: <http://wikitravel.org/en/>

3. VISAS

A visa is required for most nationalities and is available upon arrival at both Phnom Penh and Siem Reap international airports, as well as at most international border crossing checkpoints in Cambodia (in particular with Vietnam and Thailand).

A passport with at least six month validity is necessary. A tourist visa costs US \$20, a business visa US \$25. Two passport photographs should be submitted with the visa application form. A tourist visa can be extended for one month at a time for up to three months. A business visa can be extended indefinitely.

For further information, please contact your nearest Cambodian Embassy.

Inspirational travel

Vietnam • Cambodia • Laos • Thailand

4. MAP



5. ARRIVALS

By Air: You will receive the following 3 forms to fill out on the airplane: visa application form, arrival/departure card and customs declaration. On the form you must identify the purpose of your visit: tourist or business. After landing, you will walk into the terminal, apply for the visa and go through the immigration.

There is an airport departure tax to pay for each international flight (25 US\$/pp). This tax is not included in the price of the flight ticket.

Overland: You will receive the following 3 forms to fill out at the border: visa application form, arrival/departure card and customs declaration. On the form you must identify the purpose of your visit: tourist or business. Be aware that the Visa fee might be higher than usual. Please also note that the increasing amount of tourists has also increased the number of scam buses and taxis; as such we recommend you to book a scheduled bus or private transfer through Buffalo Tours.

List of selected international checkpoints:

Vietnam: Bavet International Border Checkpoint; Connection from / to Ho Chi Minh City. You can also cross from Chau Doc in the Mekong Delta by speedboat, and Ha Thien.

Customers: info@buffalotours.com - Agents: agents@buffalotours.com

Website: www.buffalotours.com

Inspirational travel

Vietnam • Cambodia • Laos • Thailand

Laos: Dong Kralor International Border Checkpoint; Connection from / to Si Phan Don.

Thailand: Poi Pet International Border Checkpoint; Connection from / to Bangkok. You can also arrange a border crossing transfer from Trat if traveling to/from Koh Chang.

Most travelers going from Bangkok to Siem Reap or Battambang cross the border at Poi Pet International checkpoint. At Aranyaprathet you cross the border to Poi Pet. Please be aware that the visa fee at the border is charged in Thai Baht and costs 1000 Baht, which is more expensive than at the airport. The procedure takes about 30 minutes as you must go through different offices. There is no need to arrange visa formalities before crossing the border.

6. MONEY

The official Cambodian currency is known as the Riel. The Cambodian Riel has been relatively stable and the current exchange rate is approximately 4,100 Riel to US\$ 1. American dollars are widely accepted in Cambodia and even preferred in larger stores and supermarkets. However, the Riel is more practical and economical for smaller everyday items such as buying fruits and vegetables or paying taxi drivers.

Banks now change all major currencies with relatively little hassle. Tourists with traveler checks are advised to cash them at the bank. There are now ATMs with international access in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Sihanoukville, Kampot and Battambang. ANZ Royal Bank and Canada Bank ATMs both accept Cirrus, Plus, Maestro, Visa and MasterCard systems. SBC Bank ATMs accept Visa and MasterCard. All ATMs dispense US dollars.

Please note that the national currency is non-convertible abroad.

7. WHAT ABOUT TIPPING?

Tipping is a personal matter and therefore the amount depends on personal appreciation. For your convenience we've included a tipping guide below; please however note that these amounts are only suggestions, we encourage our passengers to reward guides based on their performance:

- Restaurant meals: the average amount is \$1.
- Tips for guides and drivers are completely at your discretion, but here are some guidelines: \$1.50 to \$3 per day per person for guides (depending on group size), \$1 per day per person for drivers.
- Bellboy/Housekeeping: the average amount is \$1.

8. CLIMATE

The best time to visit Cambodia is between November and February. The two monsoons in the country greatly affect the travel calendar. From November to February the cool, dry northeastern monsoon carries relatively little rain whereas the southwestern monsoon carries up to 80% of the country's rainfall between the months of May and October.

Maximum daily temperatures range from the high 20° C in January to more than 40° C in April. Daily minimum temperatures are usually no more than 15° C.

Please note that high season is October to March and low season is April to September.

9. SAFETY

Customers: info@buffalotours.com - Agents: agents@buffalotours.com

Website: www.buffalotours.com

Inspirational travel

Vietnam • Cambodia • Laos • Thailand

Traveling in Cambodia is generally very safe. Incidents of petty theft and bag snatching are more widespread in Phnom Penh. Elsewhere in the country these events are almost unheard of. Most hotels have either a safety deposit box at the reception desk or in the room, or both. Just to be on the safe side when traveling anywhere in the country you should exercise common sense. The other concern often voiced is that of unexploded landmines. It is advisable not to stray from paths in remote areas and have a local guide with you at such times. Please note that tap water is not drinkable.

10. CUISINE

Cambodian cuisine is closely related to that of its neighbors Thailand and Laos and, to a lesser extent, Vietnam. There are, however some local dishes too. The overall consensus is that Khmer cooking is similar to Thai cooking but with fewer spices.

A traditional Cambodian meal almost always includes a soup, or samla which is eaten at the same time as other courses. Samla machou banle is a popular fish soup with a sour flavor rather like the hot and sour dishes of neighboring Thailand. Other soups include samla chapek (ginger-flavoured pork soup), samla machou bangkang (prawn soup) and samla ktis (a fish soup with coconut and pineapple).

Cambodian 'salad' dishes are also popular and quite different from the western concept of a cold salad. Phlea sach ko is a beef and vegetable salad, flavored with coriander, mint leaves and lemon grass. These herbs find their ways into many Cambodian dishes. Like all other Buddhist countries, vegetarian food is readily available in most restaurants.

11. CLOTHING

Light thin layers of cotton clothing are the most appropriate for travelers. Long-sleeved shirts and pants are particularly appreciated for a number of reasons:

1. They provide good protection against mosquito bites;
2. They keep you warm during chilly November to February evenings;
3. They are necessary for temple and countryside village visits where the shoulders and legs should be covered to below the knee.

The Khmer are a tolerant population and may choose not to point out improper behavior to its foreign guests, but you should dress and act with the utmost respect when visiting Wats (pagodas) or other religious sites (including the temples of Angkor). This is all the more important given the vital role Buddhism has played in the lives of many Cambodians, especially in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge holocaust. Proper etiquette in pagodas is mostly a matter of common sense. Unlike Thailand, a woman may accept something from a monk, but she should be careful not to touch him.

A few other tips include:

- Don't wear shorts or tank tops;
- Remove your hat when entering the ground of the Wats;
- Remove your shoes before going into the vihara (sanctuary);
- If you sit down in front of the dais (the platform on which the Buddhas are placed), sit with your feet to the side rather than in the lotus position;

Inspirational travel

Vietnam • Cambodia • Laos • Thailand

- Never point your finger or the sole of your feet towards a person or a figure of the Buddha.

12. PEOPLE

The population of Cambodia is currently about 14 million inhabitants. About 90 to 95% of the people are Khmer ethnic. The remaining 5 to 10% include Chinese-Khmers, Khmer Islam or Chams, ethnic hill-tribe people, known as the Khmer Loeu, and Vietnamese. About 10% of the population lives in Phnom Penh, the capital, making Cambodia largely a country of rural dwellers, farmers and artisans.

13. LANGUAGE

The vast majority of Cambodians speaks Khmer, a language of the Mon-Khmer group. Its only close relative is the language of the Mon, a Burmese minority. Khmer is only distantly related to Thai and to some Indonesian languages, with some borrowed words from Vietnamese, Chinese, Pali, French and English. The script is related to Devanagari and looks a bit like Thai script at first glance. An increasing number of urban Cambodians speak English, especially young people, and some (mostly older) Cambodians can speak French. Though its grammar is quite straightforward, Khmer is a fairly difficult language for most English speakers to learn because of its pronunciation.

14. PUBLIC HOLIDAYS

During public holidays and festivals, banks, ministries and embassies close down, so plan ahead if visiting Cambodia during these times. These institutions also take holidays on Christmas Day, New Year's Day, the Day for Remembering the Victory over the Genocidal Regime on 7 January and Chinese New Year; so all in all they spend a fair number of days on holiday each year. Most Cambodian festivals take place according to the lunar calendar so the dates vary from year to year.

Chaul Chnam

Held in mid April, Chaul Chnam is a three-day celebration of the Khmer New Year: Khmers make offerings at Wats, clean out their homes and exchange gifts of new clothes. It is a lively time to visit as, like the Thais, Khmers go wild with water and talcum powder leaving a lot of bemused tourists looking like plaster cast figures! It is not the best time to visit the temples of Angkor as half of the population of the country turns up there and you will find yourself with no peace to explore the temples.

Chat Preah Nengkal

Held in early May this is the Royal Ploughing ceremony, a ritual agricultural festival led by the royal family. It takes place near the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh.

International Workers' Day - 1 May

P'chum Ben

Held in late September, it is a kind of all soul's day, when respects are paid to the dead through offerings made at the waters' edge.

His Majesty the King's Birthday - 30 October to 01 November

Bon Om Tuk

Usually held in late October or early November, this celebrates the reversal of the Tonle Sap River (with the onset of the dry season, water backed up in the Tonle Sap lake begins to empty into the

Inspirational travel

Vietnam • Cambodia • Laos • Thailand

Mekong, in the wet season the waters reverse). This is one of the most important festivals in the Khmer calendar and a wonderful time to be in Phnom Penh or Siem Reap, as boat races are held on the Tonle Sap River and the moat around Angkor Wat.

Independence Day - 9 November

Chinese Lunar New Year

The Chinese and Vietnamese inhabitants of Cambodia celebrate their New Year in late January or early to mid February for the Vietnamese (this is Tet). Because Chinese and Vietnamese run many businesses in Phnom Penh, commerce grinds to a halt around this time.

15. PHONE AND INTERNET

Post is now routed by air through Bangkok, which makes Cambodia a much more reliable place from which to send mail and parcels. Telephone connections with the outside world have also improved immensely, though they are not cheap.

- Number starting with 011, 012, 015, 017 or 018 are mobile phone numbers.
- There is a directory inquiries service in Cambodia called The Yellow Pages: www.yellowpages-cambodia.com
- International phone calls are easy to make with a phone card or from your hotel.
- Internet access is available in all major tourist places.

16. BUSINESS HOURS

Government offices, which are open from Monday to Saturday, theoretically begin the working day at 7 or 7:30am, breaking for a siesta from 11 or 11:30 to 2 or 2:30pm and ending the day at 5:30pm. It is safe to assume that few people will be around early in the morning or after 4pm. Banking hours tend to vary according to the bank, core hours are 8:30 to 4pm. There are an incredible number of public holidays and festivals that close down offices.