

The Best of Cambodia & Laos

The countries of Cambodia and Laos immediately conjure up many images: ancient temples in the mist; colorfully dressed ethnic hill tribes working terraced rice paddies up steep hillsides; weathered colonial charm; remote river journeys with breathtaking sunsets; religious ceremonies reflecting centuries of cultural complexity; and busy markets, fantastic food, and natural riches. Robustly emerging from an era of conflict, these two countries once again offer those who visit all these things and more.

1 FAVORITE CAMBODIA EXPERIENCES

- **Contemplating the Bayon:** The Bayon in Angkor Thom is simply one of the most enigmatic and remarkable buildings in the world. Huge faces of a god-king stare out lazily from the rocky walls. You contemplate them and they contemplate you as they have millions before you. This is a truly mystical place. See p. 116.
 - **Dancing the Ramvong:** The Khmers' traditional dance involves walking around slowly in a circle while making delicate shapes with their hands. If you pass by a wedding or a celebration of any sort, or indeed go to a local disco or dance hall, you will see this dance. You will almost certainly be dragged over to join them. If you find yourself in a rural village, you may see old women doing the dance with no accompaniment at all, as the other villagers hoot with laughter. Join in—it's great fun. See p. 24.
 - **Enjoying Fresh Coffee and Baguettes by the Tonle Sap:** Although imperialism may not be a good thing, the French occupation of Indochina left the region with a legacy of great breakfasts. In Phnom Penh, the riverfront of Sisowath Quay is the busy place to be seen.
- It is a wonderful venue to enjoy this Gallic legacy while watching the world go by. Head to any other waterfront throughout Laos or Cambodia and the experience will be equally fulfilling.
- **Haggling in the Market:** Psar Toul Tom Pong (p. 87) and many other markets in Cambodia are busy, congested, and packed with everything you can imagine. Actually purchasing something requires the negotiating skills of a UN diplomat. Not too forceful, not too reticent, one has to strike exactly the right balance between bonhomie and confidence in order to secure the right price. If your vendor is grinning from ear to ear as you leave, then you have definitely lost the contest. No matter. If you got it right, you will have enjoyed the experience and be smiling too.
 - **Dolphin Spotting on the Mekong:** Up the Mekong in Kratie resides the very rare freshwater Irrawaddy dolphins. They are incredibly shy creatures (this might be partly due to the locals' past method of catching fish with live grenades). Traumatized as they justifiably may be, they do break the surface of the water every now and then, often in pairs, and there is something very

rewarding about sitting in a boat as the water gently laps the hull scanning the waters for a sighting of these elusive creatures. So grab a couple of baguettes and pâté sandwiches, hire a boat with a boatman, stock the vessel with your favorite tittle, and head about 10km (6¼ miles) upstream for your aquatic rendezvous. See p. 148.

- **Savoring Kep Crab in Kampot Pepper:** The very faded but formerly grand royal seaside resort of Kep produces some of the most spectacularly delicious seafood in Asia. Coincidentally the nearby town of Kampot produces some of the finest pepper in the world, a product that is exported around the globe. Like the work of a culinary Lennon and McCartney, this geographical accident results in the serving of sublime seafood all along the waterfront. People travel far to sample the Kep crab in Kampot pepper at the source. Once you have tried it you will know why.
- **Biking the Cardamoms:** In 2008, the road between Koh Kong on the Thai border and Srey Ambal on the main road between Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh was completed. It passes through

the Cardamom Mountains and is a great road if you like motorcycling. Lots of gentle bends, very little traffic, scenic river crossings, and panoramic scenery. You could equally enjoy it in a jeep or a car.

- **Boating up the Sangker River After the Rains:** The journey from Siem Reap to Battambang can be done by water. It takes you across the Tonle Sap, the heart of the Khmer, and then down the narrow Sangker River. As you chug slowly up the narrow waterway you will be an intimate witness to Cambodian rural life along its bank, with friendly kids waving. See p. 134.
- **Taking in an Apsara Dance Show:** One of the most exquisite forms of dance in the world, the slow, deliberate movements of Khmer classical dance are a wonder to behold. It's elegance incarnate.
- **Taking a Spin Through the Rice Paddies Around Battambang:** Acquire professional two-wheeled transportation and head out from Battambang to the countryside. A real taste of rural Cambodia and village life awaits.

2 FAVORITE LAOS EXPERIENCES

- **Riding a Slow Boat Down the Mekong:** Traveling from Huay Xai in the north of Laos on the Thai border to Luang Prabang by slow boat takes 2 days, with a stopover for the night in Pakbeng. It's a great and relaxing way to see the dramatic scenery of northern Laos. Depending on the quality of your shipmates (because you can't change them once you have boarded), it can also be quite social. See p. 199.
- **Gibbon Spotting in Bokeo:** In northern Laos, the indigenous gibbon has been under threat from slash-and-burn agriculture and deforestation. Now it is protected within the Bokeo Nature

Reserve, 123,000 hectares (303,810 acres) of mixed-deciduous forest in a mountainous terrain ranging from 500 to 1,500m (1,640–4,920 ft.) in elevation. Under expert direction you are allowed to hide out and observe these fascinating creatures going about their business in their natural habitat. See p. 290.

- **Driving Rte. 13:** This route between Vang Vieng and Luang Prabang is one of Asia's most spectacular roads. Only 10 years ago, driving it solo was complicated by a problem of armed bandits. Those days are long gone and whether by motorcycle, jeep, or car it is one of

the world's most rewarding journeys. Amazing limestone mountains, interesting villages, and a road surface that is no longer a bone-jarring nightmare all contribute to a blissful road trip.

- **Tubing down the Nam Song River in Vang Vieng:** This silly but fun activity has become a bit of a trademark selling point in Vang Vieng. Backpackers consider it a rite of passage. Basically, you're driven a few miles upriver (all guest-houses provide the necessary transport) and then float back to town on the inflated inner tube of a tractor tire. There are little shops along the way selling food and beer. Some people get so hooked on this experience that they do it day after day, wallowing in a lazy, aquatic existence. See p. 250.
- **Traveling on the Nam Ou:** The Nam Ou River is different in character to the Mekong—narrower, steeper on each side, and more intimate. A journey by boat, heading either north or south yields some of the most spectacular scenery in Asia.
- **Riding an Elephant in Luang Prabang:** Laos is called the “Land of a Million Elephants and the Parasol.” Going for a ride on just one of these magnificent and symbolic beasts is a pleasure not to be missed. See p. 282.
- **Climbing to Wat Phou:** This Angkorian Khmer temple is built on the side of a mountain, so the climb may be sweaty, but the views are spectacular and the sense of history is palpable. See p. 315.

3 BEST SMALL TOWNS & VILLAGES

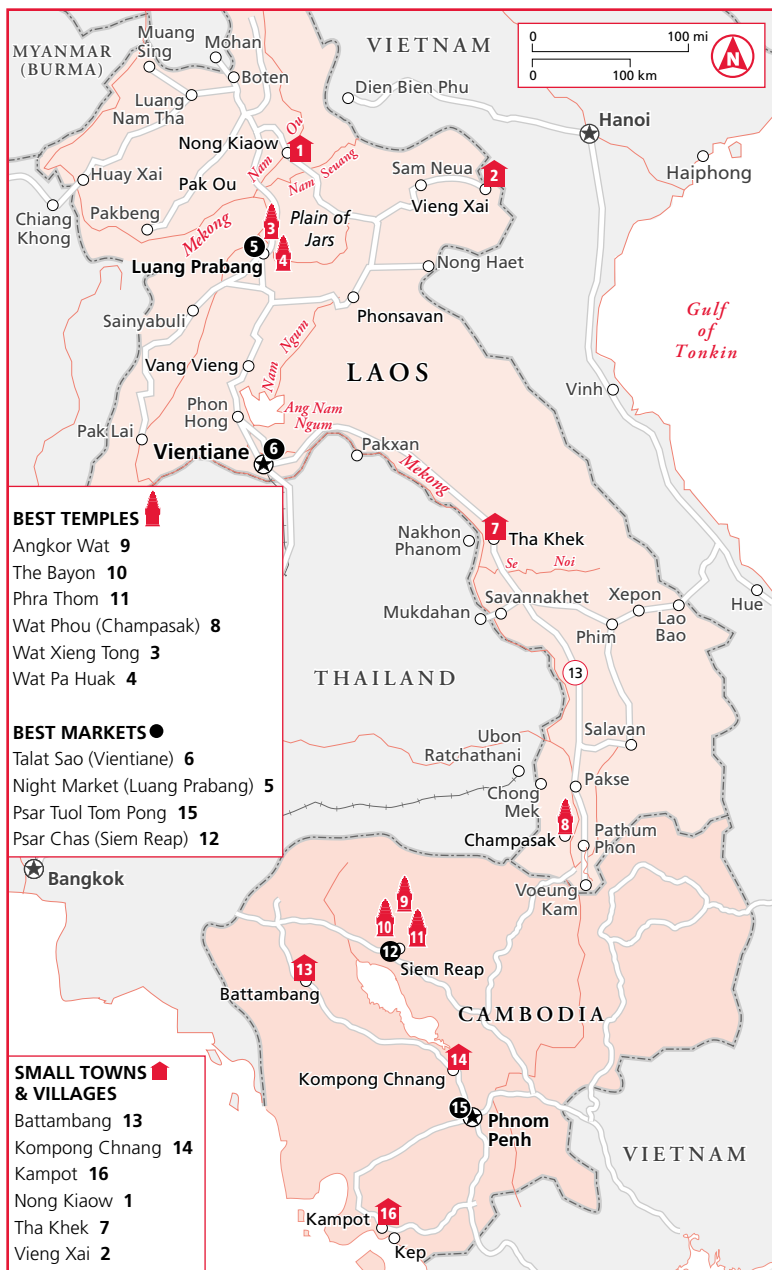
- **Battambang:** This is actually Cambodia's second city, but you wouldn't know it by the tranquil pace of life. While Phnom Penh is eaten by traffic and Siem Reap is defined by the pressures of mass tourism, Battambang thrives on its own terms. It is an affluent town, the center of the “rice bowl” of Cambodia. While it is increasing in popularity, it is still a wonderful place to feel the real Cambodia. See p. 133.
- **Kompong Chhnang:** This beautiful little town on the main road between Battambang and Phnom Penh retains a sleepy colonial grandeur. It is also a bustling fishing town peopled by ethnic Vietnamese. It is a fine lunch stop, or even an overnight if you want to break up the long journey. If you do stop for the night, get up before dawn and head to the riverfront, which buzzes with activity at a very early hour. It's a great site for shutterbugs. See p. 145.
- **Kampot:** For a laid-back stint of restful hammock swinging, you can't beat Kampot. This little riverine gem has it all when considering doing absolutely nothing. If you want to splash out a tiny bit, book a bungalow at Les Manguiers, one of Asia's most blissful venues. See p. 167.
- **Tha Khek:** Part of a series of towns strung out along the Mekong through Laos, Tha Khek has been recently restored. It's now a lovely place to contemplate the might of the Mekong to your front and the splendor of the Khammouane Mountains to your back. See p. 302.
- **Nong Kiao:** This small town boasts one of the most beautiful settings in Asia. It is surrounded by towering limestone mountains fronting fantastic river views. See p. 286.
- **Vieng Xai:** Once the headquarters of the Pathet Lao, this stunningly scenic area is tinged with sadness. Although Communist victory was planned and executed from here, it was also a place where many internees of the previous regime perished through neglect. See p. 294.

4 BEST LUXURY ACCOMMODATIONS

- **Raffles Hotel Le Royal, Phnom Penh** (☎ 023/981-888; www.raffles.com): Oozing colonial charm, Le Royal is a taste of prewar Indochina at its most authentic. It offers relaxed luxury in elegant Art Deco surroundings. See p. 64.
- **Amansara Resort, Siem Reap** (☎ 063/760-333; www.amanresorts.com): Aman junkies fly around the world just to stay at these transcendent resorts, and it is easy to see why. Prices are stratospheric, but you get what you pay for: The tranquillity and service are unparalleled. The brand-new **Amantaka** resort in Luang Prabang, set to open as this guide went to press, promises more of the same. See p. 97.
- **Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor, Siem Reap** (☎ 063/963-888; www.raffles.com): As a base from which to explore the splendors of Angkor, the Grand Hotel d'Angkor is unrivaled for its languid tranquillity complemented by excellent customer service. See p. 99.
- **Victoria Angkor Hotel, Siem Reap** (☎ 063/760-428; www.victoriahotels-asia.com): This classy hotel has every modern convenience, and seamlessly merges the practical with the elegant. See p. 100.
- **Settha Palace Hotel, Vientiane** (☎ 021/217-581; www.setthapalace.com): This gem of a hotel is unique in every way with an unruffled, leafy calm that makes it one of the finest hotels in all of Southeast Asia. It is beautifully eccentric. See p. 214.
- **La Residence Phou Vao, Luang Prabang** (☎ 071/212-530; www.residencephouvao.com): Set on a hill overlooking Luang Prabang, this splendid offering could best be described as a palace. The majesty of the views is matched only by the luxury from which you survey them. See p. 259.
- **Mekong Riverview Hotel, Luang Prabang** (☎ 071/254-900; www.mekongriverview.com): Stylish but cozy, the Mekong River View is a new hotel situated near the beautiful Wat Xieng Thong. It is the perfect place from which to make excursions to the nearby architectural glories of Luang Prabang while enjoying the peace of the Mekong. See p. 260.

5 BEST MODERATELY PRICED ACCOMMODATIONS

- **Villa Lanka Hotel, Phnom Penh** (☎ 023/726-771; www.villalangka.com): Intimate and leafy, Villa Lanka is a haven at the heart of this busiest of cities—a place to recharge your batteries by the pool. It is also a great choice if you have kids in tow. See p. 69.
- **Golden Banana, Siem Reap** (☎ 012/855-366; www.golden-banana.com): The gay-friendly, everyone's-welcome Golden Banana is a favorite among Frommer's staffers. The friendly, relaxed vibe is contagious, and the beautiful pool and rooms come at a very affordable price. See p. 102.
- **Viroth's Hotel, Siem Reap** (☎ 063/761-720; www.viroth-hotel.com): This boutique affair is an airy and modern alternative to the predominantly retro style of many hotels in Siem Reap. See p. 103.
- **Le Manguiers, Kampot** (☎ 012/330-050): A unique and blissful hideaway, the property resembles a small village



- with a series of beautiful bungalows fronted by rice paddies. The stunning beauty of the location and its restful ambience make Les Manguiers a legend among expats in Cambodia. See p. 170.
- **Inter City Hotel, Vientiane** (☎ 021/242-843): Wacky, weird, and wonderful, the Intercity combines an excellent riverside location with some of the oddest decor in Southeast Asia. It's a place where dotty eccentricity oozes from the woodwork. See p. 218.
 - **The Elephant Crossing Hotel, Vang Vieng** (☎ 023/511-232; www.theelephantcrossinghotel.com). Away from

the buzz of the backpacker center of Vang Vieng, the Elephant Crossing has a fantastic riverside location with wonderful views of the nearby limestone mountains. It is artfully furnished and the staff is charming. See p. 244.

- **Inthira Champanakone Hotel, Champasak** (☎ 031/214-059; www.inthira.com): The Inthira is a cozy and sparkling renovation of an old French villa that fits in perfectly with its sleepy surroundings. See p. 315.

6 BEST ECOFRIENDLY HOTELS & NATURE RETREATS

- **Terres Rouges Lodge, Banlung** (☎ 075/974-051; www.ratanakirilodge.com): Luxurious but rustic, Terres Rouges makes a great base from which to explore the wilds. See p. 149.
- **Treetop Eco-Lodge, Banlung** (☎ 012/490-333): Another choice spot in Banlung, these quiet bungalows are run by friendly people. See p. 149.
- **Nature Lodge, Mondulhiri** (☎ 012/230-272; www.naturelodgecambodia.com): The Israeli/Khmer ownership at the Nature Lodge has created a casual haven reflecting the beauty of the surroundings. See p. 151.
- **Rainbow Lodge, Koh Kong** (☎ 012/160-2585; www.rainbowlodgecambodia.com): Tricky to reach but worth the trek, the Rainbow Lodge is right in the heart of the Cardamoms. Come here to experience this region of natural beauty. See p. 166.
- **Lotus Villa Hotel, Luang Prabang** (☎ 071/255-050; www.lotusvillalaos.com): Luang Prabang is a UNESCO-protected World Heritage Site. At Lotus Villa they have been environmentally

conscious with a series of well-thought-out measures to keep their carbon footprint low. See p. 262.

- **The Quay, Phnom Penh** (☎ 023/992-284; www.thequayhotel.com): An environmentally friendly hotel in hazy and chaotic Phnom Penh? Believe it. This riverside gem strives to be Cambodia's first carbon-neutral hotel, accomplished through a combination of environmental initiatives and purchasing offsets—and it has a great mod setting to boot. See p. 64.
- **Khoun and Khone Guest House, Luang Prabang** (☎ 020/770-7665; www.khounandkhone.horrorbit.com): A cheerful rural retreat, Khoun and Khone offers a taste of countryside living a few miles outside of Luang Prabang. Half guesthouse and half working farm, it is a perfect place from which to explore the beauty of the area. See p. 264.
- **The Gibbon Experience, Bokeo** (☎ 084/212-021; www.gibbonx.org): Head deep into the forest, and live in the treetops. This is close to nature as you can get without actually being a gibbon. See p. 290.

7 BEST TEMPLES & WATS

- **Angkor Wat** (Siem Reap): Angkor Wat is the largest religious building in the world and is a highlight of any trip to Cambodia, or indeed the whole of Southeast Asia. It is deservedly considered one of the greatest man-made wonders. See p. 113.
 - **The Bayon** (Siem Reap): Eerie and majestic, these huge carved faces of an ethereal god-king survey the world. There is nothing else quite like clamoring through it, surrounded by stone faces and bas-reliefs. See p. 116.
 - **Ta Prohm** (Siem Reap): Ta Prohm remains a perennial favorite for many visitors to Angkor. It is largely reclaimed by the jungle, as marauding roots of trees intertwine with stonework and sculptures. It was deliberately left as it was found by the French and gives an
- awesome sense of place and history. See p. 121.
- **Wat Phou** (Champasak): One of a series of Khmer temple sites across Thailand and Laos, Wat Phou was built high up on a hill and is imbued with atmosphere. See p. 315.
 - **Wat Xieng Thong** (Luang Prabang): This is the most beautiful temple in a town that is full of them. Wat Xieng Thong is the quintessential example of the Lao temple style and is simply exquisite. See p. 278.
 - **Wat Pa Huak** (Luang Prabang): A gorgeous, crumbling temple near the center of Luang Prabang, Wat Pa Huak contains some fascinating murals portraying historical scenes from long ago. See p. 277.

8 BEST RESTAURANTS

- **Frizz** (Phnom Penh) (☎ 012/524-801; www.frizz-restaurant.com): Frizz is one of the best places to sample Khmer cooking and also learn about the details of its preparation. See p. 75.
- **Khmer Surin** (Phnom Penh) (☎ 023/993-163): Head to this old standby for excellent Thai and Khmer food in traditional surroundings. See p. 78.
- **Angkor Palm** (Siem Reap) (☎ 063/761-436; www.angkorpalm.com): This is one of the best Khmer restaurants in Siem Reap—great care is put into preparing the food and it shows. See p. 109.
- **Pomme d'Amour** (Battambang) (☎ 012/415-513): The “Apple of Love” serves excellent French food in some distinctly odd, flamboyant surroundings. It’s a lot of fun. See p. 141.
- **Amphone** (Vientiane) (☎ 021/212-489): At Amphone, local dishes from Vientiane are artfully prepared. If you’re looking for a Lao culinary adventure, this is it. See p. 222.
- **The Cote d’Azur Pizzeria** (Vientiane) (☎ 021/217-252): This excellent restaurant is deceptively called a pizzeria. It is, more accurately, a riverfront restaurant serving the finest French provincial cuisine. See p. 224.
- **La Cave des Chateaux** (Luang Prabang) (☎ 071/212-100): La Cave des Chateaux is effortlessly elegant. It has a lovely setting overlooking the Mekong River, with superb traditional French food. See p. 266.
- **The Tamarind Café** (Luang Prabang) (☎ 020/777-0484): Come here for light breakfasts and lunches, and a range of Lao delicacies. They’ve just begun offering cooking classes, too. See p. 269.

- **Vieng Kheam Khong** (Luang Prabang) (☎ 071/212-726): This is one of a number of great riverside restaurants in this most beautiful of cities. Try the Luang Prabang sausage. See p. 269.
- **The Dao Savanh** (Savannakhet) (☎ 041/260-888): Housed in a

converted villa in the crumbling remnants of the old French quarter, the beautiful architecture complements the excellence of the food. See p. 300.

9 BEST MARKETS

- **Psar Toul Tom Poung** (Phnom Penh): Known as the Russian market, this is the place to buy everything from ornate carved Angkorian heads to DVDs, shoes, and car parts. See p. 87.
- **Psar Chas** (Siem Reap): The focus of Siem Reap this market does a roaring trade in souvenirs. There's plenty on offer, but be prepared to haggle. See p. 128.
- **Talat Sao** (Vientiane): At this market in Lao you can find whatever you need, including practical necessities, gifts, and souvenirs. See p. 236.
- **Night Market** (Luang Prabang): Fabric, handicrafts, jewelry, and more, this market starts at 6pm in the center of town and is a pleasant place to wander as well as shop. See p. 283.