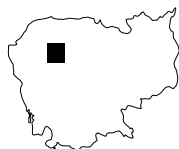


Siem Reap

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Back in the 1960s, Siem Reap (*see-em ree-ep*) was the place to be in Southeast Asia and saw a steady stream of the rich and famous. After three decades of slumber, it's well and truly back and one of the most popular destinations on the planet right now. The life-support system for the temples of Angkor, Cambodia's eighth wonder of the world, Siem Reap was always destined for great things, but few people saw them coming this thick and this fast. It has reinvented itself as the epicentre of the new Cambodia, with more guesthouses and hotels than temples, world-class wining and dining and sumptuous spas.

At its heart, Siem Reap is still a little charmer, with old French shop-houses, shady tree-lined boulevards and a slow-flowing river. But it is expanding at breakneck speed with new houses and apartments, hotels and resorts sprouting like mushrooms in the surrounding countryside. The tourist tide has arrived and locals are riding the wave. Not only is this great news for the long-suffering Khmers, but it has transformed the town into a pulsating place for visitors. Forget the naysayers who mutter into their beers about Siem Reap in the 'old days', now is the time to be here, although you may curse your luck when stuck behind a jam of tour buses on the way back from the temples.

Angkor is a place to be savoured, not rushed, and this is the base to plan your adventures. Still think three days at the temples is enough? Think again with Siem Reap on the doorstep.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Encounter some of the world's rarest large water birds at the sanctuary of **Prek Toal** (p138)
- Explore the flooded forest of **Kompong Phhluk** (p139), an incredible village of bamboo skyscrapers
- Discover the quiet temples of Angkor, hidden away in the modern pagodas of **Wat Athvea** and **Wat Preah Inkosei** (p123)
- Dive into **Bar Street** (p134), the drink capital of Siem Reap, and discover nearby restaurants and bars
- Learn the secrets of Khmer cuisine with a **cooking course** (p125), the perfect way to impress friends back home



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 063

■ POPULATION: 800,000

■ AREA: 10,299 SQ KM

HISTORY

The name Siem Reap means 'Siamese Defeated', hardly the most tactful name for a major city near Thailand. Imagine Birmingham with the name 'Germany Defeated'. The empire of Angkor once included much of modern-day Thailand, but there's a touch of irony about the name, given that Thailand ultimately defeated Cambodia and controlled Siem Reap and Angkor from 1794 to 1907.

Siem Reap was little more than a village when French explorers discovered Angkor in the 19th century. With the return of Angkor to Cambodian, or should that be French, control in 1907, Siem Reap began to grow, absorbing the first wave of tourists. The Grand Hotel d'Angkor opened its doors in 1929 and the temples of Angkor remained one of Asia's leading draws until the late 1960s, luring visitors including Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Kennedy. With the advent of war and the Khmer Rouge, Siem Reap entered a long slumber from which it only began to awake in the mid-1990s.

Tourism is the lifeblood of Siem Reap and without careful management it could become Siem Reapolinos, the not so Costa-del-Culture of Southeast Asia. However, there are promising signs that developers are learning from the mistakes that have blighted other regional hot spots, with restrictions on the height of hotels and bus sizes. Either way, Angkor is centre stage on the world travel map right now and there is no going back for its supply line, Siem Reap.

ORIENTATION

Siem Reap is still a small town at heart and easy enough to navigate in an hour or two. The centre is around Psar Chaa (Old Market), the administrative district is along the western bank of the river, and accommodation is spread throughout town. National Hwy 6 (NH6) cuts across the northern part of town, passing Psar Leu (Main Market) in the east of town and the Royal Residence and the Grand Hotel d'Angkor in the centre, and then heads to the airport and beyond to the Thai border. Stung Siem Reap (Siem Reap River) flows north-south through the centre of town, and has enough bridges that you won't have to worry too much about being on the wrong side. Like Phnom Penh, however, street numbering is haphazard to

say the least, so take care when hunting down specific addresses.

Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom are only 6km and 8km north of town respectively, while the Roluos Group of temples is 13km east along NH6 – see the map on pp142–3 for the location of these and other places beyond the city centre.

Buses and share taxis usually drop passengers off at the taxi park about 3km east of the town centre, from where it is a short *moto* (small motorcycle with driver) ride to nearby guesthouses or hotels. Fast boats from Phnom Penh and Battambang arrive at Phnom Krom, about 11km south of town, and most places to stay include a free transfer by *moto* or minibus. Siem Reap airport is 7km west of town and there are plenty of taxis and *motos* available for transfers to the town centre. For more details, see p138.

INFORMATION

Pick up a copy of the *Siem Reap Angkor Visitors Guide* (www.canbypublications.com), which is packed with listings and comes out quarterly. For further insights into the restaurant and bar scene in Siem Reap, pick up the *Siem Reap Drinking & Dining* guide, produced by the Pocket Guide (www.cambodiapocketguide.com).

Bookshops

Cheap books on Angkor and Cambodia are hawked by kids around the temples, and by amputees trying to make a clean start in Siem Reap. Be aware that many are illegal photocopies and the print quality is poor.

Carnets d'Asie (Map p120; 333 Sivatha St) Boutique bookstore specialising in French editions, plus English coffee-table books.

D's Books (Map p120; Bar St; ☎ 9am–10pm) The largest chain of second-hand bookshops in Cambodia, this is conveniently located for night browsing.

Monument Books (Map p120; FCC Angkor) Well-stocked new bookstore with a branch at FCC Angkor and at Siem Reap International Airport in both international and domestic terminals.

Siem Reap Book Center (Map p120; Pithnou St) Large selection of new titles on Angkor and beyond.

Emergency

Tourist police (Map pp142–3; ☎ 012 969991) There's an office at the main ticket checkpoint for the Angkor area. This is the place to come and complain if you encounter any serious problems while in Siem Reap.