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FOR PREMIUM TRAVEL PROFESSIONALS

SAIL AWAY

Caribbean bookings are on the rise despite problems with the dollar exchange rate and thanks partly to promotion of activities other than the conventional beach-lounging

Plus: a weekend safari, family holiday ideas, Myanmar magic, sweet treats in Vienna, Germany jaunts, style seeking in Amsterdam, cruising in Cambodia and the latest from Japan

Cruise control

A river cruise on the Aqua Mekong mixed with a stay at a boutique hotel in Siem Reap, the classical appeal of Raffles and temple time in Angkor makes an ideal Cambodia concoction

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Every temple of the vast Unesco-listed Angkor complex has its own attraction, even if that charm is simply because it happens to be one that will be the quietest. It's a fact these days that you have to be up pretty early, visit as the day ends or just be lucky to catch the most popular ones without the growing crowds attracted to Cambodia.

At 7.30am, I was waiting at one of the gates to Ta Prohm to make sure I was among the first to get in and I was there on time, thanks to the wake-up call by my hotel, Phum Baitang, and the diligence of my driver and guide from AboutAsia rather than my own initiative. They were waiting for me at 6.30am on a bright morning, and made sure I collected my pass ($20 for one day) from the Archaeological Park Entrance, which is a more sophisticated system than when I first visited the country a couple of years back.

We entered Ta Prohm via the west entrance with just a handful of others, so it was easy to take the classic pictures in this temple tangled with giant Kapok and Strangler fig trees. One of the largest Angkor temples, Ta Prohm was built under King Jayavarman VII in the late 12th century. Among myriad carvings, my guide found the famous hidden "stegosaurus", a mysterious piece (presumably a later addition), which seems incongruous among the delicate apsara carvings, but that's a key reason why you go into the temples with experts like AboutAsia in the first place. They also make sure they find a mean spot for breakfast; in this case someone's garden, where a friendly grandmother went about her business around me as I enjoyed croissants and juice in the shade.

Another temple I was keen to visit that day was the Phum Baitang Spa Temple, which resembles one of the more modest buildings you would find around Angkor.

One of the hotel's previous guests is Angelina Jolie, who filmed *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* at Ta Prohm and subsequently fell in love with the country and adopted a son from here. She's also made the harrowing film *First They Killed My Father*, due for release on Netflix this year. During shooting, she stayed at Phum Baitang, which had been open for just a few months in 2015; the hotel all but shut down to other guests while she was there.

Phum Baitang means "the green village" in Khmer and you can see why Jolie loves this blissfully quiet hotel, where you can wander pathways or cycle among working rice paddies. There are 45 villas, designed to resemble a traditional village and with a monastic zen feeling. Incredibly spacious, some have their own pools in lush gardens. What's most striking is the understated interiors, made with natural textures and earthy tones in a way that gives a really soothing feeling. The hotel is also peppered with artefacts and antiques from all around south-east Asia, while bedheads are formed from old shutters, doors and panels.

I wasn't the only one enjoying Phum Baitang: guests share the hotel with what must be the happiest water buffalo in the world, treated like kings by staff who tend the fields and care for their beasts of burden. One morning, I looked out of my window to see someone showering and watering a very content-looking giant grey buffalo down on the grass. And at night, the sound of the frogs that inhabit the paddies came to life in a non-stop chorus that was magically atmospheric – hard to imagine the hustle of Siem Reap is a few minutes' drive away.

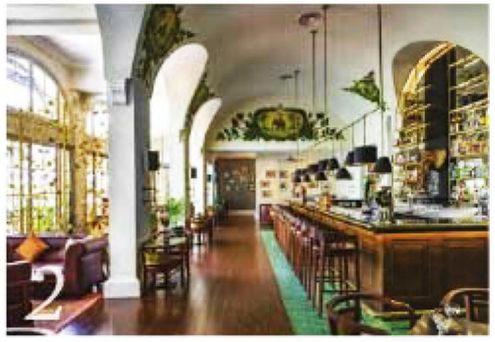
It was to Siem Reap that I headed the next day with the hotel's chef to shop for ingredients for my cooking class with her. We made our way around the bustling vegetable section as she smelled and squeezed various things I didn't recognise, and it was great to see the market through her eyes. Back at the hotel and under the shade of a canopy, we chopped and chatted, and I now have a certificate to say I completed the "program in basic Khmer cooking skills". And I survived eating my own creations, including delicious curry and a shrimp and pomelo salad, which always reminds me of Cambodia.

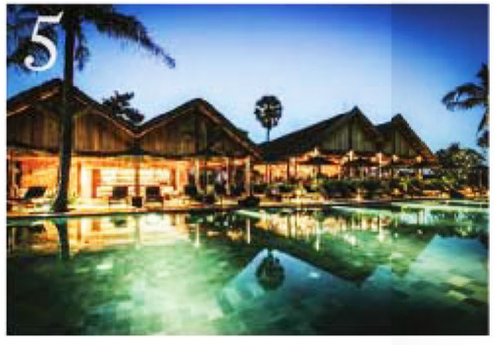
Auspicious beginnings

My trip had begun five days earlier in Phnom Penh. Arriving off a Vietnam Airlines flight from Heathrow via Hanoi, I'd been swept through the airport in VIP fashion, thanks to my UK tour operator Red Savannah, and was taken to a little air-conditioned lounge with cold towels and smiles proferred at every turn as my visa and passport were checked. Then it was into the sleek Lexus of the Raffles Le Royal Phnom Penh for a chauffeur drive downtown.

My stay at the 175-room hotel was made even more special as I was given the Jacqueline Kennedy suite for the night, and Red Savannah had arranged for me to meet up with British journalist Nick Ray, a huge Cambodia fan, Lonely Planet author, location scout and adviser with local DMC and "fixer" Hanuman Travel.

In the Elephant Bar, I had to try the signature Femme Fatale cocktail given that it was first concocted for Jackie Kennedy during her visit to Cambodia; she had come here in 1967 to fulfil her lifelong dream of seeing Angkor Wat and also stayed in the very room I did, one of four "personality suites" at Raffles.





Over a dinner in the hotel's Crystal Room, we chatted about how fast things were changing in the city – even the hotel's restaurant and bar had just had a refresh. The rush for progress is transforming the capital, which these days is a sea of cranes and a crush of traffic, but still packed with plenty of charm and occasional quiet places for moments of contemplation, especially on the country's past.

The next day, it was time to visit Tuol Sleng, also known as S-21, or the genocide museum. A collection of old school buildings, it's where prisoners of Pol Pot's horrific regime were kept, tortured and often killed, with as many as 14,000 people losing their lives there. I conversed in hushed tones with my guide as he told me how the situation in the 1970s had escalated and the legacy for the country since, as we sat on a shady bench with a mild breeze rustling the leaves at our feet. It is truly heartbreaking to fathom what it must have been like for people to live through this, but you can sometimes meet people who actually did – two survivors of S-21, Bou Meng and Chum May, who spend time there meeting visitors and selling their books. I met Bou, a tiny man, with a huge heart, clear sparkling eyes and smile that must mask unimaginable sadness. He graciously sits with any visitor who wants a photo with him and sells copies of his book.

Afterwards, I met Nick Ray for lunch with Cambodia's most famous chef, Meng Luu, at his popular restaurant Thalias. In between checking how I am enjoying the food, he tells me how excited he is that Cambodia's rice is gaining recognition as some of the best in the world, and how he wants everyone to pay more attention to what he calls Cambodia's "white gold".

All aboard Aqua Mekong

I had to rush off to catch a boat – the Aqua Mekong, which was to take me from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap on a three-night cruise and waiting for me onboard was a special guest – company founder Francesco Galli Zugaro. The 20-suite Aqua Mekong is one of two river cruise vessels he's launched, with this one covering the Mekong River between Cambodia and Vietnam, or in this case an itinerary just within Cambodia, travelling some of the 75-mile Tonle Sap River and then up into Tonle Sap, south-east Asia's largest freshwater lake.

Sleek and elegant, the vessel really cuts a dash when you first see it on the riverbank in Phnom Penh, with the design sensibility of a boutique hotel in Milan yet the capacity to take you to the most remote places: if Dr Who were Italian, I think this is what his Tardis would look like. Being on Aqua Mekong gets guests up close to the reality of life on the river and they can go even deeper into the environment, either via excursions on the skiffs – small boats stored onboard, unique for the Mekong – ashore by bike, or even by kayak.

The 205ft floating five-star hotel has a guide-to-guest ratio of 1:10, so you are always sure of the ear of one of the brilliant team if you have a question. I know you should never have favourites, but mine was Visoth, as his disposition was always so cheery, his passion for his country and for telling its story so contagious and his depth of knowledge impressive for someone so young.

The 20 suites are said to be the largest on the water in this part of the world, overlooking the waterways through floor-to-ceiling windows, with spacious bathrooms with walk-in showers, a huge bed and plenty of storage space. As well as an excellent restaurant with cuisine from top south-east Asian expert David Thompson, there's a convivial book-stocked lounge-bar, a gym, screening room, outdoor cinema, observation deck, upper-deck pool and spa treatment rooms.

Tonle Sap was designated as a Unesco biosphere reserve in 1997 and there are 300 species of freshwater fish in the lake, as well as snakes, crocodiles, tortoises, turtles and otters, while more than 100 varieties of water bird also make their life around it. So rich was this water system that it maintained the Angkorean civilization, the largest pre-industrial settlement in history; as many as a million people were living around Angkor at the time when only 50,000 lived in London.

The lake plays a key role for the three million people who live around it, some 90% of them earning a living by agriculture and catching fish, with the lake providing half the fish consumed in the country. The floating villages are susceptible to the changing water levels, depending on the monsoon and dry season and life revolves utterly around the water. People live on a boat; they travel to and from markets on boats; there are floating "mini-marts" plying their wares; the schools, the police station, the karaoke room are all on boats; we even see a busy floating ice factory in the lively village of Kampong Chhnang.

Off the beaten track

Given the size of the ship and the ease of travelling on the skiffs, we could see villages barely no one else ever sees. One of them, Moat Khla, Galli Zugaro thinks no other tourists have ever made it to at all.

He came across Moat Khla when on a scouting mission before launching Aqua Mekong and he tells me in his relaxed way how he and a guide sailed in, found the monks, who live in a stilted monastery, with the "temple" being on a boat, of course, and started talking to them about bringing visitors here.

On the welcome card back in my cabin, there had been an atmospheric picture of three saffron-robed monks standing on the deck of a green stilted building; Galli Zugaro tells me it's a picture he took when he first encountered this village.

Now the villagers seem pleased when visitors from Aqua Mekong pootle in. Life looks peaceful and the water serene, but of course it's tough etching a living out of nothing much more than fishing, reliant on your small community, remote from towns, shops and facilities. As part of the Room To Read initiative which Aqua supports, story books in Khmer are given to local children. Visoth and the other guides say hello to locals and get updates as young teenagers and toddlers come running to the end of their boats while we sail past and hand out the books. I had to keep my sunglasses

on to hide the tears that welled up as I saw how happy the children were to receive such a simple gift.

There was more to come as we gathered in the floating temple, surrounded by curious kids who'd turned up to stare and giggle. Visoth talked to the monk, who said he wanted to give us all a blessing ceremony, so one by one we knelt in front of him as he chanted. He tied a piece of red string around each of our wrists (I kept mine on for weeks afterwards) and Galli Zugaro thanked him for continuing to allow Aqua to bring people into the village.

As we sailed out, everyone waved, kids leapt from one bow to the next and dogs barked. It was getting close to dark, but rather than head back to our ship, we stopped the skiffs a little way outside the village. Soon, surprise champagne was produced and canapes served in a ceremony of a different kind, one that celebrated the day and being mindful of the differences in people's lives.

On the final morning of the cruise, I clambered excitedly on to one of the skiffs, excited to see what the day would bring. We headed to the 22,000-hectare Prek Toal Core Bird Reserve, a flooded forest that's seen as the single most important breeding ground in south-east Asia for globally threatened large water birds such as greater and lesser adjuncts, black-headed Ibis, painted stork, milky stork, spot-billed pelican, grey-headed fish eagle and many more. We had to weave our way through thick vegetation that clung to the boats, but eventually we made it through to small patches of open water and as I looked up, I noticed the local rangers, who literally live out here in the trees as they keep watch over proceedings in the reserve. On the way out, we saw a father and daughter in a boat – "they're catching snails", Visoth told me. It seemed like a fine way indeed to spend a Sunday.

How to book it

Red Savannah offers an eight-night trip from £5,795pp, including flights from Heathrow to Phnom Penh/Siem Reap with Vietnam Airlines; two nights at Raffles Hotel Le Royal (with breakfast); three nights in a First Deck Cabin on Aqua Mekong (full board with excursions); three nights (with breakfast) at Phum Baitang; all airport and port transfers; VIP Terminal Services on arrival at Phnom Penh Airport including visa; driver and guide in Phnom Penh; Ta Prohm and Angkor Thom by bike with a guide and lunch; guided visit to Angkor Wat; and a two-day Angkor Heritage site pass. ■

Tel: 01242 787800,
redsavannah.com

Pictured
1. Aqua Mekong
2. Elephant Bar at Raffles Le Royal Phnom Penh
3. Cocktails at Raffles
4. River snails
5. Pool at Phum Baitang
6. Ta Prohm
7. Ice factory in a local village
8. Excursions by skiff

Adding on Vietnam

Vietnam is easily combined with Cambodia, thanks to plentiful connections with Vietnam Airlines and many high-end hotels

It's just over five years since Vietnam Airlines started flying from London and it now features Boeing 787-9 Dreamliners on its daily services from Heathrow to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, or Saigon as many people still call it.

Walking into The Reverie Saigon (*pictured right as part of the city's skyline*) for my one-night stopover in this vibrant city was quite a shock to the system – in a good way. Seven years in the making, this lavish hotel is the work of 20 of Italy's biggest names in interior design, such as Poltrona Fau and B&B Italia among many others. The 286-room hotel was built with the sole intention of putting Ho Chi Minh on the map as a leading world destination, and it certainly has done that.

Twin centre

There's much development happening on the country's coast too, especially Cam Ranh, which is a beach destination to watch in the future. The Anam recently opened its doors there, with 105 superlative villas, beach club and signature restaurant, Indochine Cafe.

For something as beautiful, but perhaps more low-key, the well-known rustic chic of Six Senses can be found in two resorts in the country, one in Ninh Van Bay and one in Con Dao, protected as a national marine park.

• **For more on Vietnam, see the Summer issue of *ttgluxury***