

my kind of place Battambang, Cambodia

Bang for your bucks

The north-western Cambodian city has made the switch from stopover to cultural destination, writes **Lara Dunston**

Why Battambang?

A 2.5-hour drive from Siem Reap and five hours from the capital Phnom Penh, Battambang in north-west Cambodia is the second most-populated city, yet, laid-back and unpretentious, it feels like a country town. And that's its charm. Straddling the coffee-coloured Sanker River, its dusty streets are lined with French-colonial edifices, its surrounding villages dotted with traditional, stilted, timber houses, while its forests conceal crumbling Khmer Empire ruins. Until recently, Battambang was little more than a stopover on over-land journeys between Bangkok and Phnom Penh. Visitors did little more than ride the exhilarating bamboo "train", a gasoline-engined platform that hurtles through lush rice paddies along abandoned railway tracks. Now, after a flurry of restaurant, cafe and gallery openings, visitors dine at stylish eateries, attend art shows and take in experimental music.

A comfortable bed

Battambang's best hotels are near the riverbank and in villages on its outskirts, 10 minutes by tuk tuk from the centre. In the tranquil, riverside Wat Kor village, Khmer-style wooden houses at Maisons Wat Kor (www.maisonswatkor.com; 00855 98 555 377), which overlook a lotus pond and swimming pool, have high-ceilinged rooms with polished floorboards from US\$78 (Dh286). The terrace restaurant serves the city's finest Cambodian cuisine. Nearby, Battambang Resort (www.battambangresort.com; 00855 53 6666 7001), set among emerald rice paddies, has minimalist rooms from \$55 (Dh202), looking over a small lake. Activities include evening street-food tours (\$13 [Dh48] per couple) and morning bike rides to breakfast soup stalls. In the centre, with an inviting swimming pool and superb restaurant, Bambu Hotel (www.bambuhotel.com; 00 855 53 953 900) has spacious rooms decorated with silk textiles from \$70 (Dh257) in a colonial-style villa and Khmer-inspired buildings.

Find your feet

Easily explored on foot, Battambang's compact, charming old centre boasts glittering pagodas, an incense-filled Chinese temple, 1960s modernist buildings and elegant French-colonial mansions



Girls ride scooters past old French Colonial buildings in Battambang, the capital of Battambang Province and second largest city in Cambodia. Getty Images

like the grand 1907 Governor's Residence. Print out Khmer Architecture Tours' (www.ka-tours.org) self-guided walking map. You'll have to hire a tuk tuk or bicycle to explore Battambang's villages. A three-hour tour (\$25 [Dh92]) with Battambang Bike (www.thebattambangbike.com) visits an atmospheric, century-old Khmer house. Maisons Wat Kor and Bambu Hotel can arrange countryside tuk tuk tours (from \$15 [Dh55]) to artisanal workshops where families make rice noodles and incense; 11th-century Angkorian temple ruins, such as the hilltop Wat Banan (lovely at sunrise) and the ramshackle Wat Ek Phnom; and Mount Sampeau (best at sunset), the site of the Killing Caves, a memorial filled with the bones of victims of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime, where millions of bats fly at dusk. Backyard Travel (www.backyardtravel.com) offers a three-day private Battambang tour covering most activities above, including transfers from Siem Reap, hotels and meals, for \$439 (Dh1,612) per person for two people.

Meet the locals

Slurp a bowl of soup at a street-food

stall at the central Phsar Nat market or the main Phsar Boeung Chhoeuk market. Stroll the grounds of the pagodas to meet a monk – most are keen to practise their English. In the late afternoon, locals participate in mass dancercise classes on the riverside – you're welcome to join in.

Book a table

Kick-start your day with Cambodia's best coffee at Kinyei Café (www.kinyei.org; Street 1½; 00855 17 860 003), where the 2013 Cambodian barista champion Sakana Long makes her award-winning Cambodian Cappuccino with palm sugar, pineapple syrup and coconut milk (\$2.50 [Dh9]). Follow that with French crepes at the bohemian Cafe Eden (www.cafeedencambodia.com; 85 Street 1; 00855 53 731 525), which has antique tiles and balcony seats upstairs. For lunch, a local favourite is the no-frills Lan Chov Khorko Miteanh (145 Street 2), or "Chinese Noodle", for homemade dumplings and hand-pulled noodles (\$1.50 [Dh6]), while the sleek newcomer Lotus (Street 2½; 00855 92 260 158) has a Culinary Institute of America chef cooking up scrumptious burgers and salt-and-pepper calamari.

Upstairs, a gallery hosts art-film screenings, DJs and experimental sound nights. Try the stylish new Jaan Bai (www.cambodianchildrenstrust.org; Street 2; 00855 7 826 3144) for dinner (around \$30 [Dh110] for two), in a refurbished colonial building with murals by local artists. The menu focuses on local, organic, seasonal produce, Cambodian specialties like Kampot pepper crab and pan-Asian favourites, including Thai dishes by the celebrated chef David Thompson of Nahm Bangkok, who's an adviser to this hospitality training restaurant.

Shopper's paradise

Phsar Nat market has handmade baskets and colourful cotton kramas (scarves), a quintessentially Khmer souvenir. The boho-chic boutique Jewel in the Lotus (Street 2½) sells locally made gifts, including handmade soaps, incense, textiles, retro postcards and music from Cambodia's 1960s "Golden Age". An emerging art destination, Battambang has several galleries on Street 2½, run by local artists, including Make Maek and Sammaki Gallery (www.facebook.com/sammakibtb).

What to avoid

Exploring Battambang in the middle of the day during the hottest months (March and April). Save the sightseeing for mornings and late afternoons.

Don't miss

A night at the circus. Battambang is home to Cambodia's largest performing arts school, Phare Ponleu Selpak (www.phareps.org; 00855 77 554 413), which trains disadvantaged children in visual arts, music, theatre and circus skills. Visit during the day (8 to 11am and 2 to 4pm) for a behind-the-scenes look, then watch the distinctly Cambodian Cirque du Soleil-style circus under the big top at 7pm.

Getting there

Etihad (www.etihad.com) flies direct from Abu Dhabi to Bangkok from Dh2,460 return, including taxes (journey time is about six hours). From there, fly to Siem Reap (one hour) on Cambodian Angkor Air (www.cambodiaangkorair.com), from \$200 (Dh735) return, including taxes. A driver with car to Battambang costs \$35 (Dh128).

hotel insider Point Yamu by Como, Phuket, Thailand

Straight to the charmingly cool Point in Phuket

The welcome Charm all the way, from the entrance – where asymmetrical pillars studded with mirrored glass flank a broad flight of steps up to a lofty, open-sided lobby with sea views on both sides. Someone takes my bag, someone else offers me a glass of cold sage lemonade; Bond, the cool star of the front desk, makes witty chat and the owlishly bespectacled general manager, James, emerges from his office with a smile. The hotel opened in December and visitors still seem a novelty.

The neighbourhood Topping a narrow peninsula on Phuket's east coast, the hotel is surrounded on three sides by Phang Nga Bay, with its photogenic limestone islands. A few minutes' walk down the hill, past walls concealing expensive villas, brings you to the jetty, from where you get a long-tail boat for the 15-minute ride to the hotel's island beach club.

The scene Everyone keeps to themselves; an immaculate Singaporean couple



A guest room pool at the Point Yamu. Courtesy of Como Hotels and Resorts

on the pool terrace, he with geek glasses and sharp haircut, trying to read a broadsheet newspaper in the constant breeze, she all svelte fragrance in hat and long sleeves, protecting that must-stay-pale skin; two design types from London; a plump young Chinese family.

The room Paola Navone, who is famous in Italy for her breezy, blue-and-white

Mediterranean look, designed every element of the interiors – and from rattan-disc light shades to black-and-white striped crockery, it's all bespoke. Flooded with natural light, my suite is all airy, white minimalism with flashes of turquoise. The bathroom – its circular bath lit by a cluster of suspended light bulbs that look like bubbles – is as big as the bedroom, which, like the living area, opens onto a terrace across that runs a plunge

pool long enough to swim eight to 10 strokes in. It all feels a bit stark at night, though.

The service Disarming. There's almost too much of it. On my first morning, I open my door to go to breakfast to find a teeny micro-woman waiting outside. "Hello. I am Dim, your daytime butler," she says, covering her mouth to giggle uncontrollably. "I take you to restaurant."

The food Breakfast is the main meal here and entirely delectable. You can get anything that you can think of in terms of traditional Thai, Japanese, British or German breakfasts, plus freshly made smoothies and juices. The high-ceilinged, glass-walled restaurant opens onto the pool terrace, making it a lovely place to linger for an hour or two. This is deliberate: according to the manager, what guests want now is a leisurely brekkie, to skip lunch and eat just a light dinner before an early night. I find the Thai restaurant – open for dinner – the only unappealing space in the hotel, with one wall covered by a print of a giant goldfish. But

the food is delicate and delicious, although "spicy" means scarlet-in-the-face, eye-wateringly hot.

Loved Being on the relatively undeveloped east coast of Phuket rather than the overcrowded west, and discovering the 19th-century heart of Phuket Town, about a 20-minute drive away, and exploring its old Chinese shops and engrossing museum.

Hated Not being able to walk out of the hotel onto a beach. The water's edge below the hilltop hotel is a muddy stretch where local people forage for molluscs.

Verdict Design-wise, this is easily the coolest place to stay in Phuket.

The bottom line Room rates range from 17,805 Thai baht [Dh1,982] per night, including tax and service, right up to 54,000 baht (Dh6,012). Cape Yamu, Phuket, 0066 2 625 3322, www.comohotels.com/pointyamu.

★ **Adriaane Pielou**

in brief

Group plans ladies-only trip to Guatemala
The World at Her Feet, a women's travel group based in Dubai, is organising a trip to Guatemala next month. The trip departs for Central America on February 21 for seven days, and promises ancient Mayan ruins, Spanish colonial heritage, natural biodiversity and flavourful food. The trip costs Dh8,500 per person including taxes on a twin-sharing basis. The World at Her Feet promises a Guatemala tour complete with an array of sightseeing, food and traditional crafts. For more information and to book, visit www.theworldatherfeet.com.

Two-for-one Egypt tours with On the Go
As part of an effort to tempt more travellers back to Egypt following the Arab Spring, the adventure tour operator On the Go Tours (www.onthegotours.com) is offering two-for-one deals on all its group tours to the country until November 30 this year, but bookings must be made by January 25 and are non-refundable. Trips range from a compact six-day tour of Cairo and Luxor to a two-week trip covering Cairo, Aswan, Luxor and Hurghada; with the discount, the first tour costs from US\$277 (Dh1,017) per person and the second from \$408 (Dh1,500) per person. It includes accommodation, local transport and guides, but not international flights or visas.

Dual-branded New York hotel is tallest in US
The tallest hotel in the US was opened in New York City this week by Marriott International and G Holdings. The \$320 million (Dh1.18 billion) dual-branded hotel has combined the 378-room Courtyard hotel with the 261-suite Residence Inn hotel in Midtown Manhattan. Located at 1717 Broadway, the 68-storey building is close to and Times Square. Rooms from \$168 (Dh617) per night including taxes (www.marriott.com).

Hertz offers worldwide sale on car rentals
The international car hire company Hertz is running a winter sale offering up to 33 per cent off selected car rentals in Europe and the Middle East, up to 20 per cent off in Asia and 15 per cent off in North America, for rentals booked by January 26 for pick up between now and June 30. For more details and to book, visit www.hertz.com.

Anantara opens second hotel in Phuket
The Thai hotel company Anantara this week opened its second property in Phuket. Anantara Phuket Layan Resort & Spa is situated beside a beach in a secluded area on the north-west coast of the island, 20 minutes from the airport. The hotel offers 77 suites and villas. Its opening offer starts at 17,436 Thai baht (Dh1,956) per night including taxes and breakfast, for a pool villa.

★ **Rosemary Behan**



Anantara Phuket Layan Resort & Spa. Courtesy Anantara Phuket Layan