

VIETNAM, CAMBODIA & LAOS

The Insiders' Guide

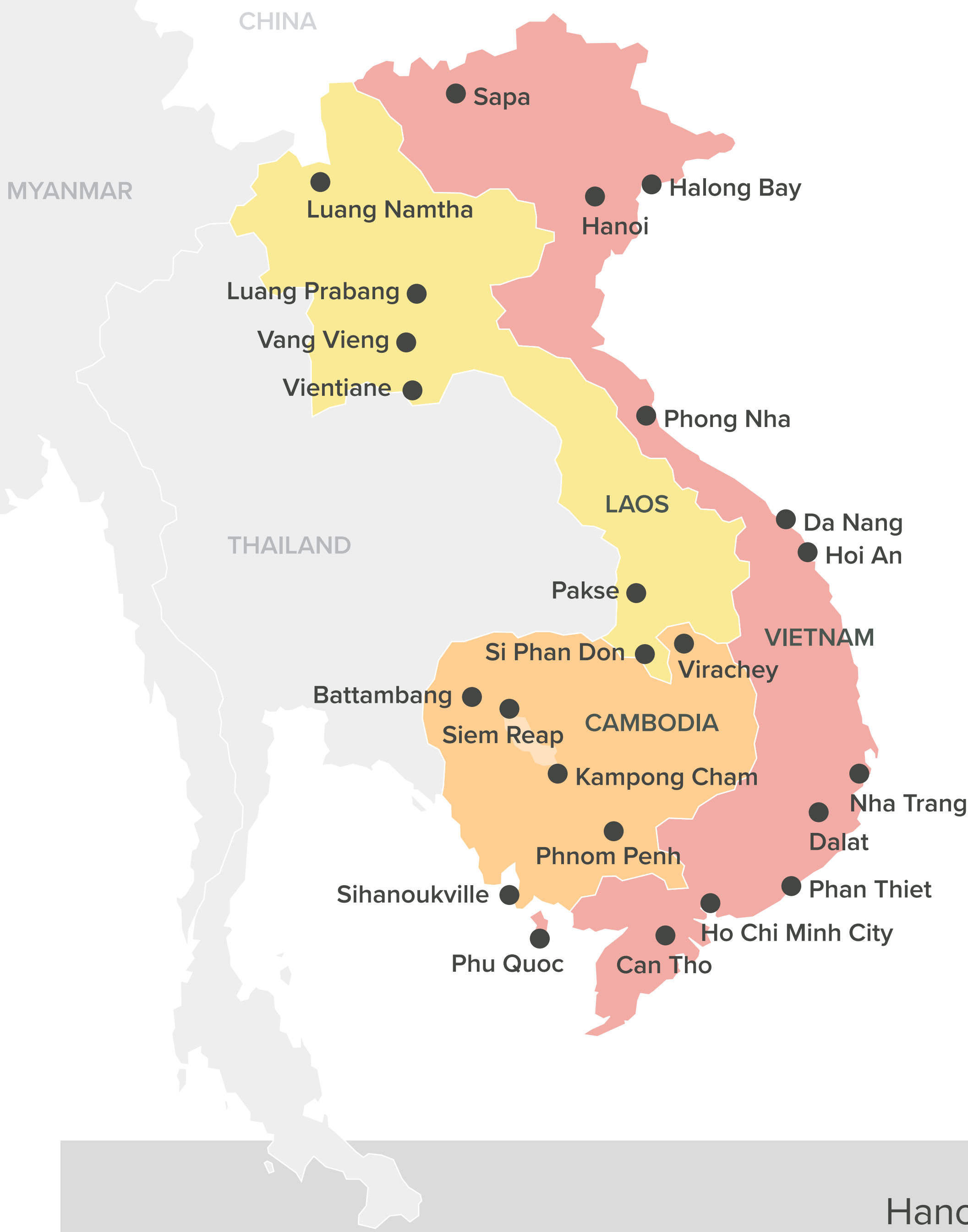


Experience local festivals, discover ancient cities and explore these three exciting countries, off the beaten track.



Welcome!

Our local insiders share their tips on the most incredible experiences around Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, and that'll take you off the well-trodden Banana Pancake Trail. Choose the season you travel wisely, and you'll experience unique cultural events, go trekking, rafting and camping in remote areas, or perhaps be lucky enough to spot a rare Irrawaddy dolphin in the Mekong River.



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DON'T MISS

Vietnam



Explore Tam Coc by bike

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Explore the caves in Phong Nha-Ke Bang National Park, Vietnam

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See Linh Phuoc Pagoda, Dalat

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Go kayaking in Bai Tu Long Bay

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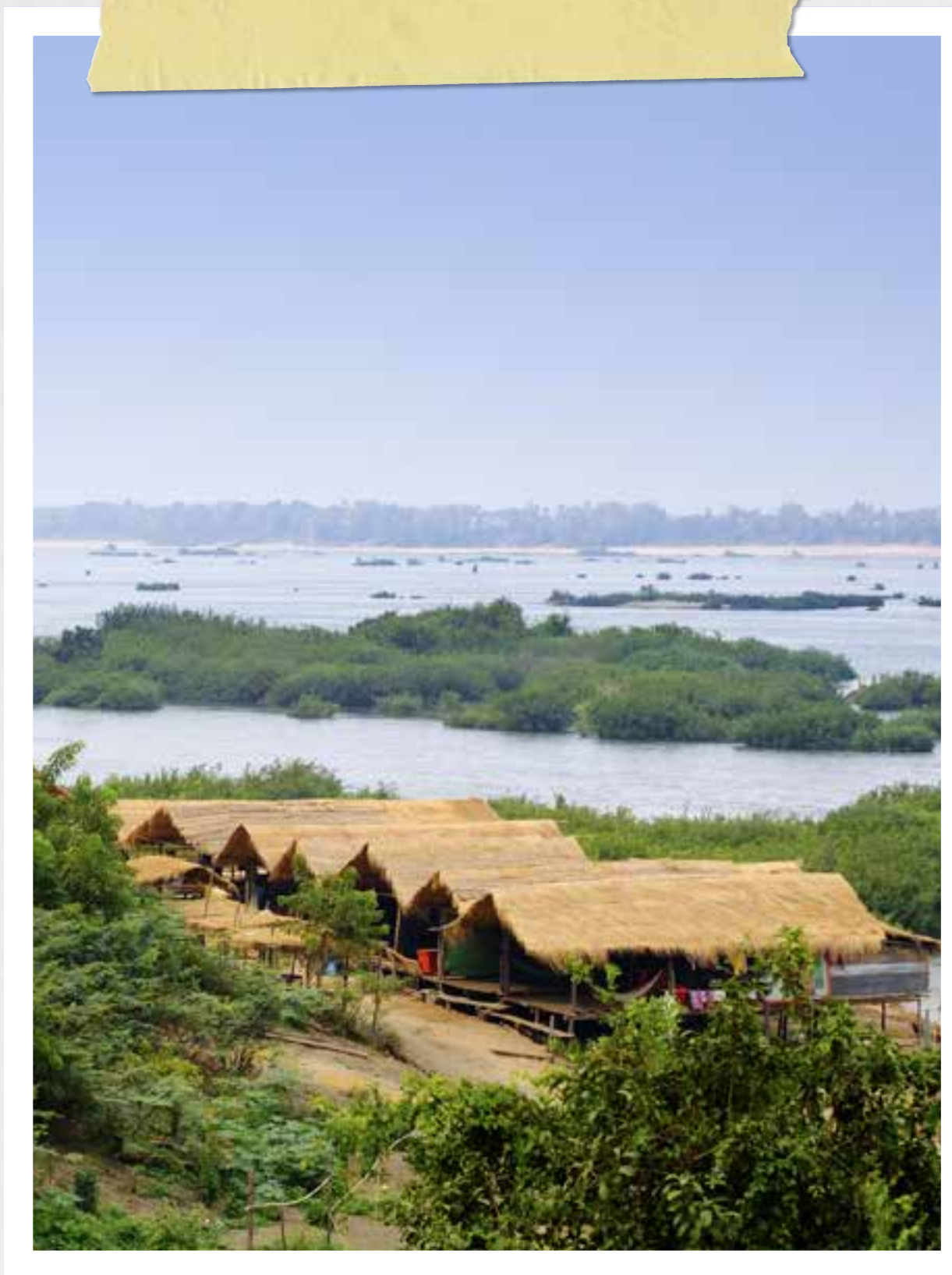


Find quiet hiking trails in Sapa

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Cambodia



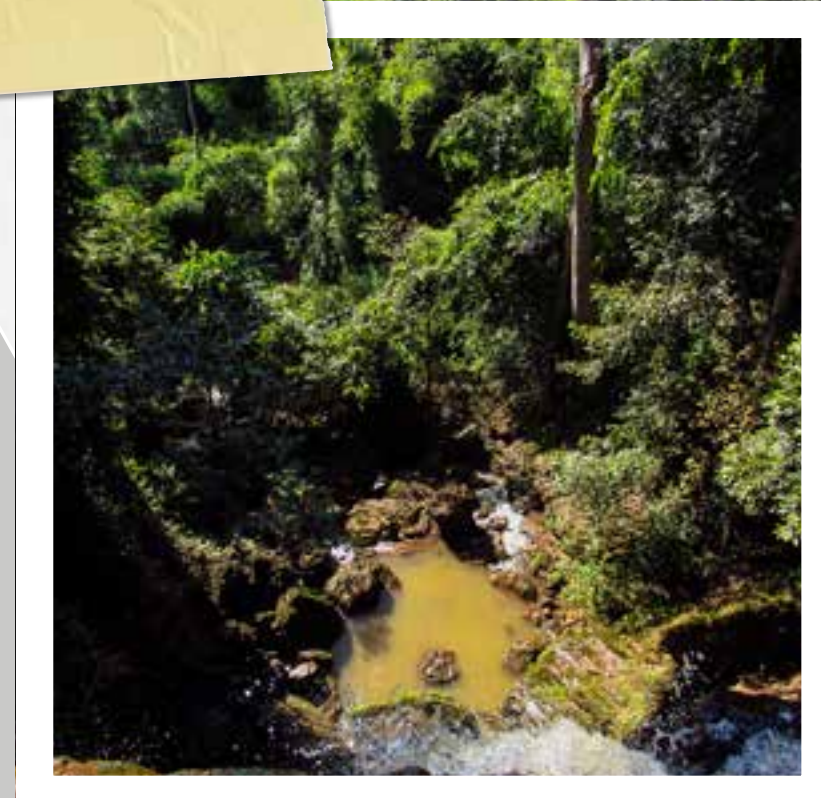
Spot the rare Irrawaddy river dolphin in Kratie

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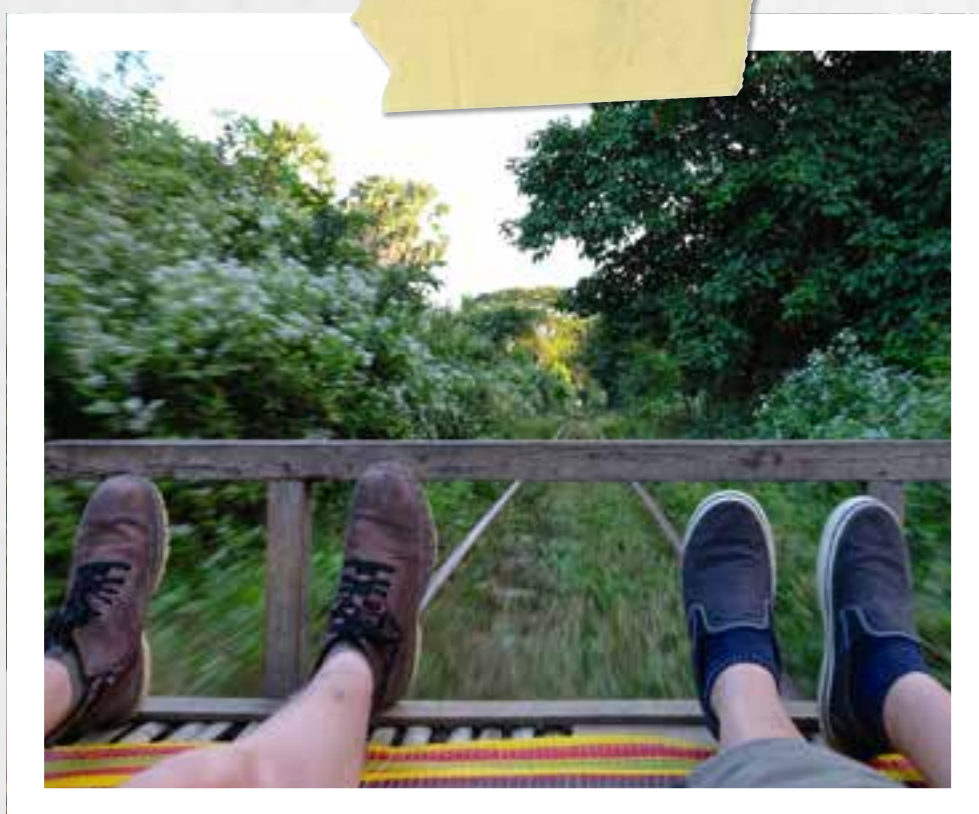
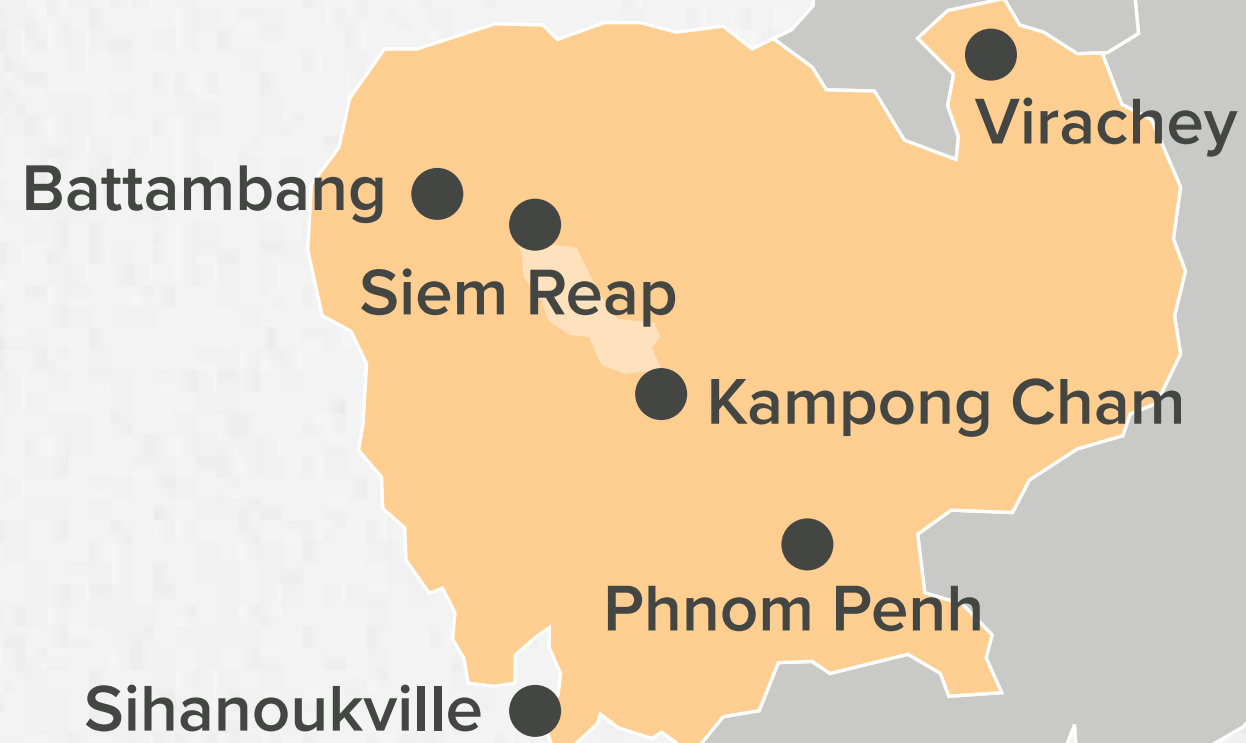
Relax on Koh Rong Island

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Go trekking, rafting and camping in Ratanakiri province

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Take a ride on the Bamboo Train in Battambang

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Explore the Angkorian temple complex of Koh Ker

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Laos



See shining temples in Vientiane

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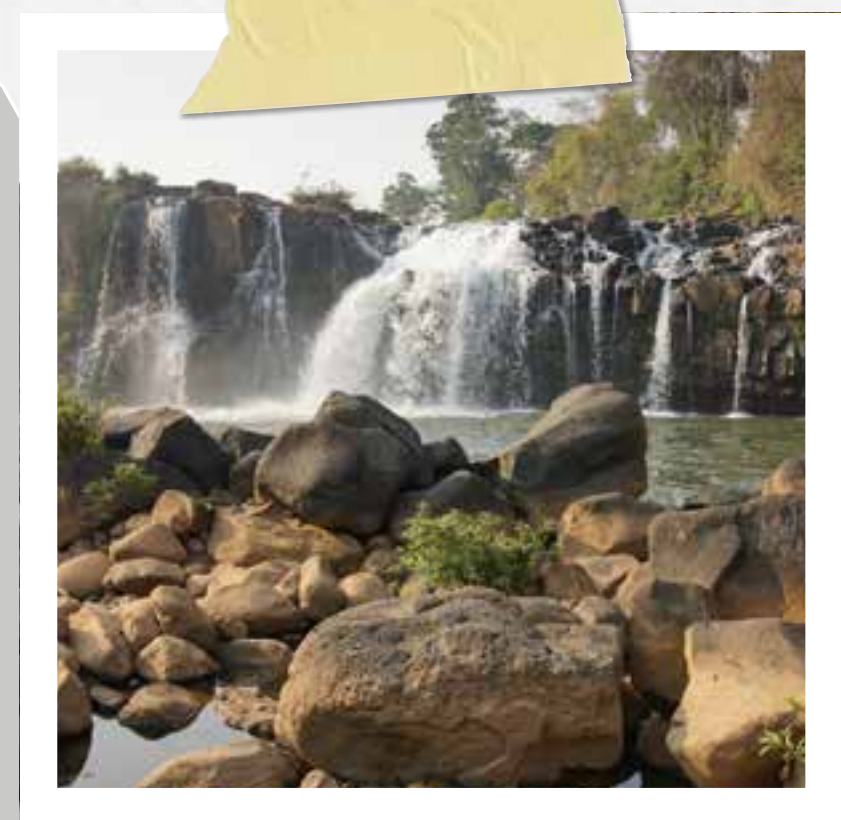
Cycle into the countryside surrounding Vang Vieng

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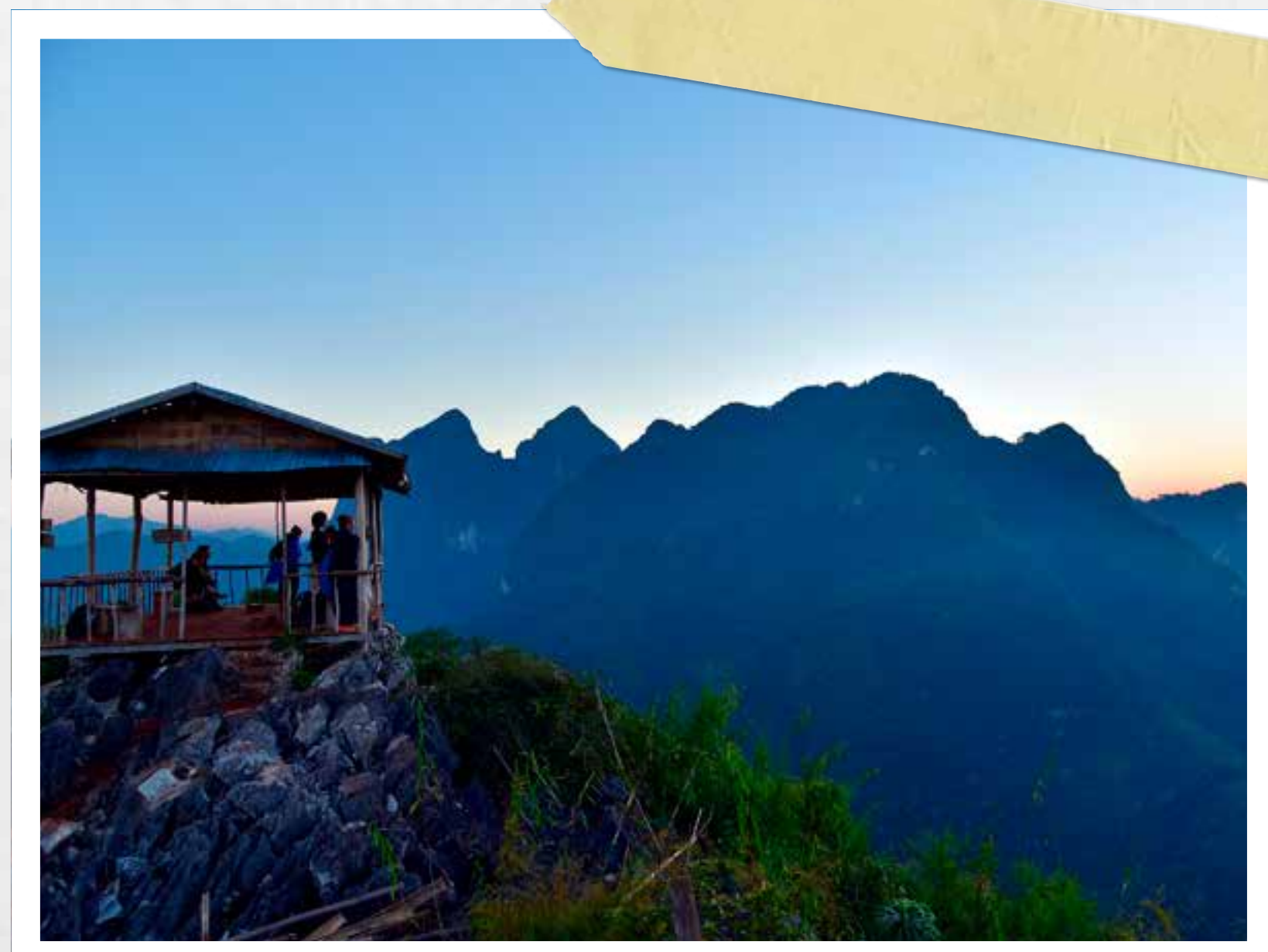
Discover the 4,000 Islands

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Bike the Bolaven Plateau

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Go hiking in Nong Khiaw

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Border Crossings

All you need to know about traveling overland between Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos.

The previously drawn out process is now slightly faster, and some of the borders even have nice air-conditioned waiting rooms. But, you still have to allow an hour or two and be prepared to stand in line for a while. You'll come across people who will offer to help carry your bags across the border for a small price, but letting your bags out of sight – even for a moment – could be a recipe for disaster.

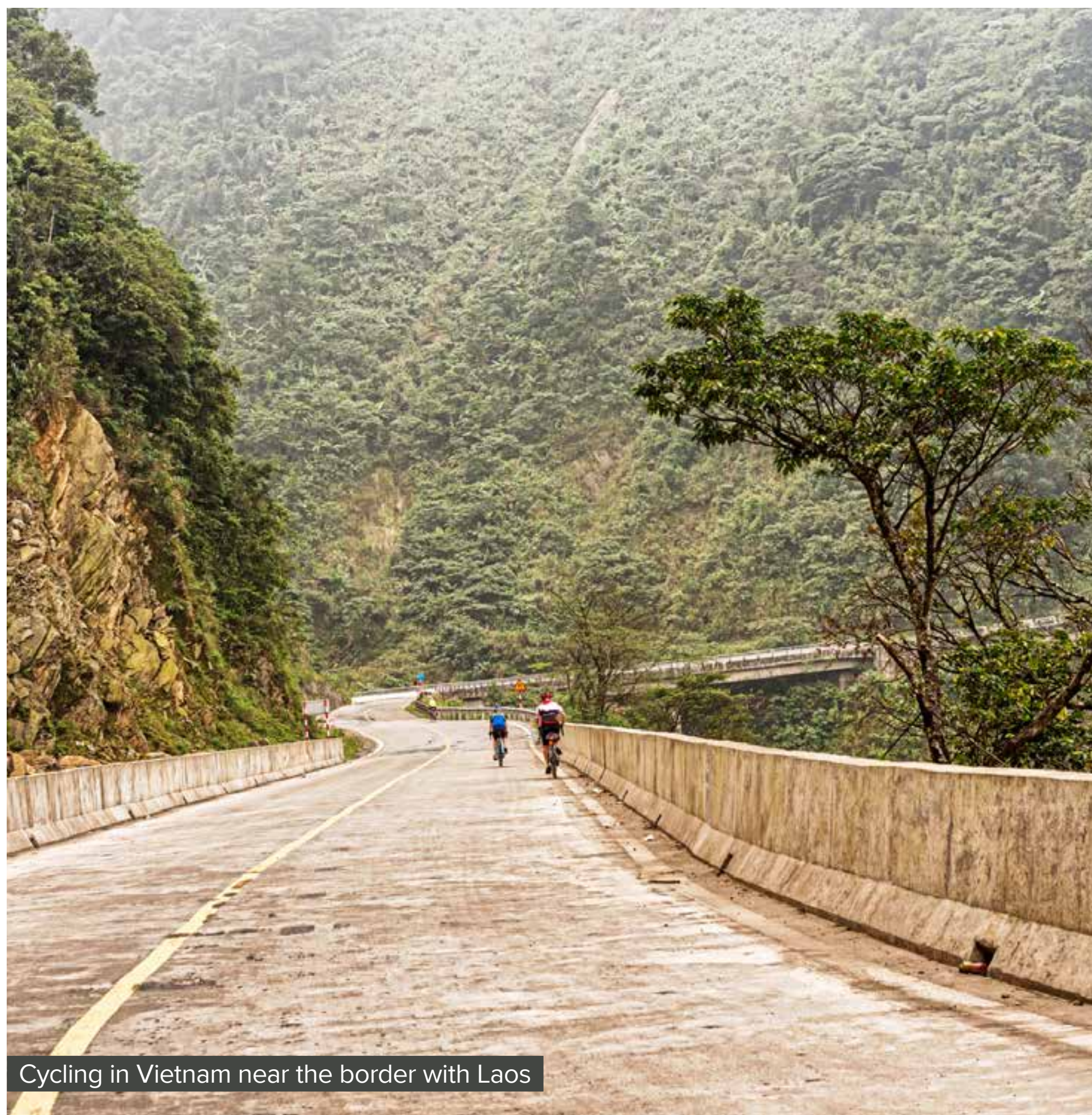
Border scammers

Most visitors will arrive in Thailand and cross into Cambodia at the



Getty Image / Karin de Marniel

Boats at Preah Rumkel



Cycling in Vietnam near the border with Laos

Getty Images / MarcPo

notorious Poipet border. Although it has improved in recent years, the best way to avoid any uncomfortable run-ins with the infamous border scammers (which can include bogus officials) is to hold onto your passport and hand it over at the counter yourself, keeping some small bills for any extra 'fees' you might entail, preferably paid in USD. Never give your passport to anyone who isn't standing behind the counter.

However, while you're waiting at the entry terminal at the border, such as at the Ha Tien and Chau Doc border between Vietnam and Cambodia, some bus companies will offer to take passports in for stamping to save time. You may be asked to hand your passport over to the official bus staff, but be prepared and have a photocopy of your passport with you, in the unlikely case you don't get the original

“
Most visitors will arrive in Thailand and cross into Cambodia at the notorious Poipet border.”

back. When the officials are done processing the visa they will call out your name, take your fingerprints and give you back your passport.

What to bring

When crossing the border, ensure you have passport photos, a pen to fill out the visa forms, and your first night's accommodation sorted, in case you are asked for an address. Having small change available for any necessary trips to the bathroom is also advisable.

A few extra tips include:

Don't overstay your visa in any country – it'll cost you US \$10/day in Cambodia, for example. Keep your exit forms safe, as well as any pieces of paper that are stapled into your passport, as fines for losing these can also add up.



A truck drives on a muddy road in Laos

Getty Images / mathess



Water way to Chau Doc Vietnam

Getty Images / gjornixxx

To-Do List

Check your visa requirements before you go. Most nationalities need to get a visa before arrival to Vietnam, so don't risk being turned around at the border.

Double check your passport has blank visa pages and is valid for at least six months.

Ensure you have passport photos and the exact change for your visa. Visas for Laos and Cambodia must be paid in USD.

Keep small bills such as US \$1 in your pocket in case of any extra 'fees'.

Research when it's busy, and avoid crossing on weekends and public holidays. If using private transport, the morning and the afternoon are the busiest times to cross, as it's when all the buses arrive. If you arrive at the border late you be charged extra fees for the inconvenience.

Show respect, be patient and courteous. A smile goes a long way!

Watch your bags at all times. Turn your back for a moment and they might just disappear.

Visas

Research and find out what currency you'll need to pay for visas at the border, and if you need to apply for a visa in advance.

Visas for Cambodia and Laos

In both Cambodia and Laos, most border crossings allow visas on arrival for visitors from most European countries, as well as the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Visas cost around US \$35, but double check before you travel.

If you're traveling on passports from Asian, South American, African, and Middle Eastern countries you should check to see if you need to apply for a visa before arrival.

Visas for Vietnam

Vietnam allows certain European countries, such as the UK, 15 days of visa-free entry, although citizens of other countries, such as Australia, the US and Canada, still need to apply for visas before arrival. This can be done online as an e-visa, via a letter of approval, or by applying at the nearest consulate before you travel.

Some airports also offer visas on arrival to certain nationalities arriving by plane, so it's worth double checking your country's requirements beforehand.

Currency exchange

Change some money before you arrive in each country, especially



Cai Rang floating market in Can Tho Vietnam

Stock / Nina Hilitukha

if you need USD to pay for a visa. The border exchange rates on the Thai side of the Cambodian border aren't too bad, but it's worth being prepared so you can afford a snack from the 7/11 before the long drive to Bangkok.

You can often find the best exchange rates at the local market, although it is worth shopping around to see who will give you the best deal, and you should always check for fake or torn bills. The bank and official exchange offices can also change money, but the rates might be higher. Download the XE currency app to get the current exchange rate, to make sure you're not getting ripped off.

“**Vietnam allows certain European countries, such as the UK, 15 days of visa-free entry, although citizens of other countries, such as Australia, the US and Canada, still need to apply for visas before arrival.**”

When to Go

While high season has great weather and lots of local festivities, traveling during this time can be incredibly crowded and expensive. Use these tips to make sure you plan your trip for the best time of year.

Seasons to travel in Cambodia and Laos

Cambodia and Laos have two seasons; from November through April, you can expect sunny, dry weather – especially in January and February. Monsoon season begins when the winds shift between May and November and the southwest monsoon rolls in. The wettest month is usually September, at the height of the monsoon. April, May and October are good months for trekking around Luang Nam Tha (Laos).

Travelers can still visit during monsoon season, but some activities may be more difficult



Cassie Wilkins

Sambor Prei Kuk, Cambodia



Cycling outside Hanoi, Vietnam

Unsplash / Hoach Le Dinh

during this time (e.g. jungle trekking or kayaking), and, due to the flooding of roads, transportation can be difficult.

Seasons to travel in Vietnam

Southern Vietnam has similar seasons to Laos and Cambodia, with a cooler season between November and April, and a hot season from May to October.

The mountainous areas of northern Vietnam have four distinct seasons: winter in the northern town of Sapa can be quite cold and wet. Trekking in northern Vietnam is better during spring and fall. April, May and October are good months for trekking around Sapa as the weather is most consistently fair. Views of Sapa’s rice terraces will be best in October after the wet season, while during spring trekkers will encounter the best weather and a blossoming paradise of flowers.

“The south of Vietnam has similar seasons to Laos and Cambodia, with a cooler season between November and April, and a hot season from May to October.”

Festivals Calendar

Here's a snapshot of what's going on throughout the year.

Vietnam

January: Tet, the Lunar New Year in Vietnam, is celebrated from the first day of the first month in Lunar Calendar and lasts a week. During this season, many shops are closed, as people visit family and friends to exchange gifts and enjoy generous meals. During Tet, you'll see fireworks, elaborate flower displays, parades, and can sample specialty foods only made during Tet.

February: See the **Perfume Pagoda Festival** in Chua Huong. Buddhist pilgrims flock to the pagoda to pray for happiness, prosperity, and to celebrate the full moon.

April/May: The **Hue Festival** is held once every two years. Travelers can see boat races, street performances, live theatrical re-enactments of royal ceremonies, and watch plays which bring Vietnam's history to life. During this time, the city is alive with art, music and delicious food.

August: Trung Nguyen (Wandering Souls Day) is the second-largest festival in Vietnam (after Tet) when the living and the dead meet. Food and fire are a big part of the festivities.



Lion dance ceremony in Ho Chi Minh City, Lunar new year

iStock / Quangpraha



Floating candles on the river in Hue

Getty Images / Pham Ty

Cambodia

April: Choul Chnam Thmey (Khmer New Year) is celebrated with parades, dancing, singing and water throwing. It's great fun, and not to be missed.

September: Pchum Ben honors the spirits of ancestors, who are believed to return to earth at this time. It is one of the most colorful and photogenic times of year in Cambodia.

October: Bon Om Touk is a water festival, held in Phnom Penh, which marks a reversal of the flow between the Mekong and Tonle Sap rivers. Travelers can watch dragon boat races and see fireworks.

December: The **Sea Festival** is celebrated in December, when music, acrobatics, fireworks and food markets pop up around Sihanoukville.



Wat Ounalom during Pchum Ben festival

Getty Images / Elizabeth Beard

Laos

February & March: The **Boun Khoun Khao** (Rice Festival) is held to give thanks for an abundant harvest season, and is celebrated with large servings of local dishes and rice wine, as well as singing, dancing, and traditional music.

April: Boun Pi Mai (New Year) is celebrated with parades, dancing, singing and water throwing. This is great fun, and not to be missed.

May: During **Boun Bang Fai** (Rocket Festival), bamboo rockets are made to carry prayers directly to the god of rain to ask for a harvest season free from drought, floods, or pests.

August: Boun Souang Heua is a boat-racing festival near Luang Prabang. Similar festivals occur throughout Laos (including Khammouane) over a six-week period, before the end of Buddhist lent, from the end of August until October.

November: That Luang is Laos's national symbol and most important religious monument. The **Boun That Luang** festival is held here for three days at full moon, when offerings are made to earn merit for rebirth into a better life.



That Luang Festival, Vientiane

Getty Images / John Lund



Dragon Boat race

Ribeirodos Santos

Year-round Festivals at a Glance

	Vietnam	Cambodia	Laos
JANUARY	Tet		
FEBRUARY	Perfume Pagoda Festival		Boun Khoun Khao
MARCH			
APRIL	Hue Festival	Khmer New Year	Boun Pi Mai
MAY			Boun Bang Fai
JUNE			
JULY			
AUGUST	Trung Nguyen		Boun Souang Heua
SEPTEMBER		Pchum Ben	
OCTOBER		Bon Om Touk	
NOVEMBER			Boun That Luang
DECEMBER		Sea Festival	

Transport

While roads and timetables might be unreliable across much of Southeast Asia, here are some of the best ways to get around Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Travel by bus

The best and most affordable way to get around each country is generally by bus, although the train journey through Vietnam is absolutely spectacular and can provide a nice change of scenery. There are several bus companies that service the main tourist hot-spots in each country, and local buses will get you to remote areas if you want to go far off the beaten track.

When traveling by bus, always keep all your valuables in your hand luggage and keep it as secure as possible, especially before falling asleep. Unfortunately, theft is common on buses, so exercise caution where possible and try to keep your phone hidden.

Another thing to note is that a lot of buses will drop you off at bus stations a little way out of the main city, so be prepared to haggle for a taxi or Tuk Tuk to get to your hotel. If you can, make friends on the bus to split the cost, and if all else fails, turn down the price and start walking towards town – a driver will probably chase after you and offer a discounted price. However, it might be worth downloading an offline map and saving your destination in case they call your bluff



Brian Rapsey

and you end up having to walk all the way on your own.

Traveling by motorbike

An increasingly popular way to get around is by motorbike. It is mandatory to have a Vietnamese driving license to ride any motorcycle over 50cc, and it is currently impossible to get a Vietnamese driving license on a tourist visa and without being a resident of the country for at least three months. Without this, your travel insurance won't cover you if you get into an accident, and the local police may pull you over and impound your motorbike if they catch you riding without a license.

You will also need to have travel insurance that covers you for personal medical injury when riding a motorbike, and most companies require proof of your motorbike license from your home country (for the same size and style of bike you're hiring) before they will cover you, so you should always ensure you have the paperwork in order before you buy or rent a bike and take to the open road.

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Food

To find the best street food while exploring Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos you should always follow the locals. Here, the ingredients are fresh and local cooking techniques result in some of the tastiest dishes in Southeast Asia.

Cambodia

Freshwater fish is a staple in Cambodia, and fish *amok* – often referred to as Cambodia’s signature dish – is unlike any version of the dish you have eaten elsewhere. The slightly-sweet fish curry, steamed in banana leaf, is flavored with creamy coconut, lemongrass and lime leaves resulting in a delicate yet tasty concoction.

Prahok is Cambodia’s take on fermented fish paste and is often used to flavor soups and sauces. The strong-smelling paste is very much an acquired taste but delivers a kick to local dishes.

Several very affordable rice, noodle, and stir-fried dishes are widely available and will probably serve as the basis for several budget meals, as many cost as little as US \$1–\$2 from street stalls. Noodle soups with vegetables and grilled meats, as well as vegetable/egg fried rice or noodles, often flavored with fish sauce, are common.

Much of the food in Cambodia’s tourist areas is heavily influenced by western and Thai flavors, but typical



Fish on sticks in Cambodia

Kelly Beckta

Cambodian dishes feature on some menus. A favorite go-to street food is tender grilled pork and rice (*bai sach chrouk*), enjoyed with a cold beer on the streets of Siem Reap.

Insects are commonly eaten as snacks throughout Cambodia, and while they have also become somewhat of a tourist attraction, with some vendors even charging travelers a small fee for taking photos of the deep-fried bugs on sale, they also turn up in some restaurant dishes, such as stir-fried beef with red tree ants.

Vietnam

Freshness, simplicity and a blend of all the right herbs are the benchmarks of Vietnamese cooking. Perhaps the best-known Vietnamese dish is *pho*, a light rice noodle soup, flavored with fresh herbs, topped

“
A favorite go-to street food is tender grilled pork and rice (*bai sach chrouk*), accompanied by a cold beer on the streets of Siem Reap.”



Parinaz Bilimoria

Food in Hue, Vietnam

with bean sprouts and meat. Try the dish in Hanoi's Old Quarter.

Another staple is *goi cuon*, Vietnam's famous spring rolls stuffed with fresh vegetables, herbs and shrimp or pork. *Cao lau*, a dish based on pork and noodles is typical in Hoi An, and is said to be prepared using only water drawn from a secret well somewhere near the town.

Coconut milk features widely in Vietnamese desserts, and is commonly found in *che*, a sweet drink or pudding, available in different flavors. Sweet sticky rice with coconut milk is a popular after-dinner dessert. Tapioca and mung beans tend to be used as ingredients in Vietnamese puddings, which may also be flavored with green pandan leaves.

Laos

Lao cooking is similar to that found in the northern parts of Thailand and is characterized by sticky rice, fresh vegetables and grilled fish or meat, flavored with herbs and chili.

A favorite dish from Laos is *laap*,

a minced meat salad, lightly flavored with citrus and fish sauce. Don't miss out on *kaipen*, flat sheets of fried crispy river algae, sold from stalls and restaurants beside the river in Luang Prabang.

While rice is a staple all throughout Asia, *khao niew* (sticky rice) is mainly found in Laos, where it's served in individual bamboo baskets and eaten by hand. *Tam mak hoong*, a spicy green papaya salad, is also a Lao specialty, although it's not uncommon to find it in neighboring countries, too.

Cooking classes

Learning to cook local food is a great way to take something of your destination home with you. Not only will you learn how to make great food, but the best classes will also teach you about the history of regional food and its context in the local culture.

Many cooking classes are organized by local restaurants and will include a market tour where you'll learn about the herbs and ingredients used in traditional cooking, followed by a class led by one of the restaurant staff.

Colonial Influences on Food

The influence of French food (Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were part of French Indochina for around 60 years from 1887) is obvious in all three countries, where crusty baguettes, stuffed with an assortment of fillings, are commonly eaten for breakfast and throughout the day. French bread is also used for *banh mi*, one of Vietnam's most popular street foods, stuffed with pâté, pork, and pickled vegetables. Cafes serving coffee and pastries are ubiquitous in the cities across all three countries.

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Our favorite dish from Laos is *laap*, a minced meat salad, lightly flavored with citrus and fish sauce.”

Sustainable Travel Tips

Use these tips to make a positive impact while traveling through Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

Animal tourism

While we'd all love to encounter elephants, tigers, and other exotic animals, they should only be viewed in their natural habitat. World Nomads is against all animal tourism experiences that put animals in danger. Don't contribute to cruelty, poaching, or the theft of wild species from forests for souvenirs. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Always read traveler reviews about a particular animal encounter or destination.
- If you are considering joining a tour that involves animals, remember that riding them is unkind, photo opportunities generally involve sedated animals, and any time an animal is taken out of its environment (e.g. into the streets of Hanoi), it is being harmed.
- Human behavior in animals, like watching a show where elephants paint, has to be trained and is usually done with punishments.
- Do your research on all zoos before visiting.
- The best way to see animals is on a wildlife-watching tour, a guided jungle trek or by visiting (or



Artisanal stone carving, Siem Reap, Cambodia

Sam Grimmer

volunteering at) a wildlife sanctuary.

Souvenir shopping

Always try and support local producers, makers and artisans. This way, you are giving back to the community that is supporting you on your travels, you will meet fascinating people and have more interesting stories to tell.

Do your research when shopping:

- Avoid animal products.
- Don't buy products, such as ivory or tiger parts, used in Chinese medicine, as you could be supporting poachers and endangered rare species.
- Never take things from monuments such as ancient ruins or places with deep cultural or religious significance.
- Ask questions to make sure what you are buying isn't stolen,

“

Always try and support local producers, makers and artisans. This way, you are giving back to the community that is supporting you on your travels.

especially if the seller is claiming the item has historical or cultural significance.

Sustainable tours

Booking with a tour provider that is committed to sustainability, ethical business practices, and local prosperity is a great way to make a difference. Before booking any tours, do your research online and ask other travelers or locals.

Find out about Community Based Tourism or other development projects, which usually work with international donors or INGOs, local partners, or universities to give tourism training or increased handicraft skills to local people.

For example, the trekking industry around Sapa has been heavily supported by tourism development partners which has allowed local ethnic minorities to offer authentic local products to travelers while improving their own economic potential. One example is Sapa O'Chau, the first international and not-for-profit tour operator, founded and run by a woman from the Black Hmong minority.

When researching, keep in mind the following:

- Look at the business website and read its sustainability policies; what type of promises are they making about their products?
- Has the operator won any awards, or participated in the development of sustainable tourism practices in the area? Does it blog about its

sustainability or local prosperity initiatives?

- Is the company supporting or implementing any sustainable tourism criteria, such as the UNWTO's Global Code of Ethics for Tourism?

Cutting out the plastic

Travel with a reusable shopping bag to help cut down on single-use plastic bags, avoid products made of or wrapped in plastic, especially in rural communities which often don't have adequate waste disposal schemes.

Travel with reusable cutlery, and buy a Steripen or a Lifestraw water filter bottle. This will limit your need to buy bottled water, which will save you money in the long run, and you won't be contributing to the plastic waste problem.

“

Buy a Steripen or a Lifestraw water filter bottle. This will limit your need to buy bottled water.



Sam Grimmer

Safety and Scams

Most issues travelers will face in Southeast Asia are related to pickpocketing, travel scams and over-priced taxi rides. Stay safe with these tips.

Petty crime in Vietnam

Crime in Vietnam is low, but it's best to keep it on your radar just like anywhere else you travel. Don't leave your bag dangling from your body, to avoid drive-by bag snatchers. Keep valuables in your hotel safe so if you do come across a snatcher, you can just let your bag go and head to the markets for a new one. Don't try to hang onto your bag as you risk being dragged or injured.

Some children in the streets of Vietnam, particularly in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, are incredibly good at pickpocketing, taking wallets, cameras, and passports, without being caught. When talking to children, watch your belongings.

Pickpocketing in Cambodia

Pubs and clubs are usually built with an open design adopted by most public buildings. While this helps with the humidity and tropical air it also helps pickpockets who are masters of weaving in and out of the bar stools that spill out of the pubs and onto the walkways in Cambodia, stealing from unsuspecting, and often inebriated, travelers.



Hue, Vietnam

Parinaz Bilimoria

Here are a few tips to avoid becoming a target:

- Select a seat with a high, solid back set against a wall.
- Never pick a seat which leaves your back pockets exposed, especially if that's where you keep your valuables.
- Sit on top of your wallet (or passport if you've carried it with you) and check they're still there whenever you get up to move.

Dangers, scams and petty crime in Laos

Walking off established paths at The Plain of Jars in northern Laos could prove deadly, as unexploded items from years of war remain. Stick to the well-worn trails to avoid any injuries.

Always take necessary precautions to avoid becoming a victim of would-be thieves. Keep your belongings close and leave your valuables locked up in the hostel or hotel safe.

River tubing in Vang Vieng is tightly controlled and run by police-affiliated bars, where scams between Tuk Tuk drivers and tube rental vendors are rife. Avoid this, by making sure you're back before dark to get your deposit back from the tube rental office.

Tips to Deal with Scammers

Always inspect what you have bought (especially electronics) after buying. A common scam is to switch the items you have bought for a cheaper version. And always check you've received the correct change.

Many prices for food, hotels, and transportation are quoted in US dollars throughout Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia. Always confirm what currency a price is in. If a vendor tells you that something costs "five", clarify whether it's in US dollars or *riel/dong/kip*.

Taxi drivers often set their meters to jump at a speedy rate, so you end up paying more for a short journey. Only use Maillinh and Vinasun taxis while traveling in Vietnam.

VIETNAM

From the white sand beaches of the south to the wild surf of the east coast and the jagged limestone karsts in the far north, Vietnam's landscapes are as captivating and varied as its culture.

Ho Chi Minh City

This is a city that never stops, a cement jungle where millions of motorbikes flow through insane traffic in one of the fastest-growing economies in the world.

South Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City is an exciting place to be, famous for its wide boulevards and French colonial architecture – remnants from pre-1975 when the city was also known as Saigon.

To understand the city's beautiful soul, you must visit its markets, walk through its alleys and, of course, sit on the ubiquitous small plastic chairs used at every sidewalk restaurant and cafe.

Markets for locals

The Ben Thanh Market is only for tourists. For a local experience, head to Xóm Chiếu Market in District 4. It's noisy, smelly and crowded, but it also serves a delicious variety of street food, including *bún mắm* (seafood noodle soup). This is an evening market, so visit after 4pm.

For a mid-morning market, check out Võ Duy Ninh Street, in Bình Thạnh District. It's a vibrant neighborhood where travelers are rare, and many of Vietnam's wonderful culinary treats are on display, including frogs, duck and all kinds of fruits and vegetables.



Food and drink

To understand why this is one of the best street food cities in the world, spend an evening on Vĩnh Khánh Street in District 4. This street is famous for seafood, and dinner with drinks will only cost you US \$10. If you come earlier in the day, you can get breakfast or lunch for as little as US \$1.

The streets that border the Nhieu Loc–Thi Nghe Canal (Trường Sa and Hoàng Sa streets) are lined with local restaurants and outdoor vendors selling icy-cold beer and grilled dishes. Visit the northern side where the two streets intersect Điện Biên Phủ to see how locals enjoy their evenings in Saigon. The canal's tree-lined paths are also great places for morning walks, and you'll often see people exercising at outdoor public gyms.

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To understand the city's beautiful soul, you must visit its markets, walk through its alleys and, of course, sit on the ubiquitous small plastic chairs used at every sidewalk restaurant and cafe.

VIETNAM

Spend some time exploring the tiny alleys and bars of nearby Little Tokyo – or if the traffic's driving you mad, head up to a rooftop bar.

Turtle Lake

Turtle Lake in District 3 is a great spot to see Vietnamese social life. Young people park their motorbikes and spend their evenings enjoying snacks from street food carts, while sitting on the concrete walkways that sit above the water. The towering cement sword emerging from the center of the pond symbolizes the harmonious layout of the city, with the head of a dragon resting at Independence Palace and the tail lurking under Turtle Lake. The sword pins the dragon's tail to keep it from disturbing people's lives.

Where to go for history

The War Remnants Museum, Independence Palace and the Củ Chi Tunnels, just outside the city, are the best places to learn about the Vietnam War (or the American War, as it's known locally). But you won't enjoy the tunnels if you're claustrophobic. This extraordinary network of tunnels, built by the Việt Cộng during the war, can be a tight squeeze.

If you travel to the Củ Chi Tunnels as part of a boat trip, it will also include a tour of the Saigon River. You'll see Landmark 81, the tallest building in Southeast Asia, as well as the Majestic Hotel, built in 1925 in the French Colonial style.



Bui Vien Street

Unsplash / LIM ENG

Motorbike tours

Though it may seem terrifying, because of the famously insane traffic, a motorbike tour is the best way to take in the sights, sounds and smells of this city, and most of the drivers speak English, so they double as guides. Just remember to always wear a helmet – if you're not wearing one, your travel insurance won't cover you for any accidents.

City tours usually start with the colonial buildings and then take in the hectic alleys and side streets of outlying districts, with stops for street food along the way. You could just ask a motorbike taxi driver to show you around, but you'll have a much better experience if you book with a reputable company, such as Tigit Motorbikes or VN Bike Tour.

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City tours usually start with the colonial buildings and then take in the hectic alleys and side streets of outlying districts, with stops for street food along the way.

Southern Vietnam

The energy is palpable in Vietnam's south, felt everywhere from the lush mountainsides of Dalat to the winding river bends of Can Tho. To witness this region's startling pace of change, look no further than the south's beautifully bizarre temples, sizzling street food, tech-forward start-ups and boho-chic coffee farms.

See a pagoda built out of beer bottles

The journey to the Linh Phuoc Pagoda, Vietnam's most eccentric temple, is pee-in-your-pants terrifying. The harrowing trek starts at the Dalat railway station and involves rumbling along rusted tracks in an old train, careening toward steep mountain passes and ending up in the sleepy hamlet of Trai Mat.

But that's not the strangest part. What is are the 12,000 beer bottles



Camly waterfall in Dalat

Getty Images / galitskaya



Linh Phuoc Pagoda

Getty Images / efrid

that are built in every wall, ceiling and pillar of this sacred temple along with porcelain and terracotta.

More than six decades ago, the bottles were broken, polished and then painstakingly placed, one by one, on the temple by an ever-so-patient group of Mahayana Buddhist nuns and monks. Today, the glass shards gleam under the sun, and snake along the spine of the 164-foot-long dragon that winds through the temple's grounds. The pagoda also boasts one of the world's largest standing Buddhas, decorated with thousands of small flowers.

Spend a night in a madman's hotel

Nestled in the otherwise serene town of Dalat, the Crazy House is an unusual villa not unlike an *Alice in Wonderland* fever dream. Featuring Gaudí-meets-Disneyland architecture, the Crazy House has been open since

“More than six decades ago, the bottles were broken, polished and then painstakingly placed, one by one, on the temple by an ever-so-patient group of Mahayana Buddhist nuns and monks.”

VIETNAM

1990 and has 10 themed rooms.

A short saunter around the hotel grounds is something of an adventure, taking you through a labyrinth of gates and winding passageways, ducking into tiny tunnels and hidden crannies. A night's stay in one of the hotel's themed rooms starts at 540,000 VND (US \$24), or you can pay a modest admission fee of 30,000 VND (US \$1.30) to explore during the day.

Authentic life on the Mekong Delta

Take a pilgrimage to Phoenix Island on Vietnam's Mekong Delta, where you'll find a 500-year-old shrine filled with a hodgepodge of dragon-emblazoned columns, spaceship-like steeples and a decaying floating pagoda.

In its glory days, this barren and beguiling wonderland was once the holy ground for devout worshippers who paid their respects to the most hallowed and hollowed of Vietnam's fruits — the coconut. Disciples used to seek salvation through a steady diet of coconut flesh and coconut water.

Can Tho beyond the tourist traps

The city of Can Tho is the heartbeat of the Mekong Delta, with gushing rivers that serve as the lifeblood for locals and city folk. The best way to get an unvarnished view of local life is to take a boat ride along the river and delve into the city's bustling traditional floating markets. Arrive early to avoid the push and shove of tourists, who often come later in the day, and be sure to stop by Cai Rang, Phong Dien,



Phoenix Island, Mekong Delta

Getty Images / Lucas Pacheco

Nga Nam and Nga Bay to sample seasonal fruits and fresh seafood.

Book a tour via your hostel/hotel, or go to the river and rent a boat and skipper to explore the riverbanks.

Hiking in Cat Tien National Park

Nothing beats hiking in Vietnam's Cat Tien National Park, where travelers can wander through forest groves of soaring centuries-old trees below misty billowing clouds.

Often regarded as a destination for wildlife and bird watching, the vast national park is also quite spiritual, filled with pagodas, found beside gurgling streams, where monks gather to meditate and pray.

Snorkeling the Con Dao Islands

Vietnam's hot temperatures could easily break the thermometer. The fix? Visit these islands dotting the southern coast of Vietnam, edged with sun-dappled beaches and surrounded by iridescent blue waters. Float in the waters of Con Dao Islands, or explore the underwater world of coral reefs and tropical fish by scuba diving or snorkeling with a local operator on the island.

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Nothing beats hiking in Vietnam's Cat Tien National Park, where travelers can wander through forest groves of soaring centuries-old trees below misty billowing clouds.



Chris Slupski Unsplash

Phu Quoc

Village life in Nha Trang

Just a few hours away from Ho Chi Minh City, the high-octane beach resort of Nha Trang is where most Saigon residents go to relax on the weekends and breathe in the sea breeze. Along the promenade, locals relax on the laid-back beaches and watch surfers ride the waves as the sun goes down. Head to fishing villages, like Ninh Thủy, about 24mi (40km) away from Nha Trang, to feast on the day's catch of crab and fish, grilled in front of you.

Sandboarding in Mui Ne

Head to the golden sand dunes of Mui Ne, on the southeastern coast of Vietnam, to try your hand at sandboarding. Even if you're not particularly keen on shredding down the red and white sandy slopes, you can still get a sneak peek into the year-round rigorous training regimen of Vietnam's Olympic athletes who train for snow and ice sports here.

History on Phu Quoc Island

Phu Quoc is best known for the sand

and surf, but one of the most haunting reminders of the Vietnam War can also be found on the island. The doors of Phu Quoc Prison have long been closed, but a large part of the building has been transformed into a moving memorial and museum worth visiting to understand the Vietnam War from the local's perspective.

Whale temples in Phan Thiet

One of the best ways to explore Phan Thiet is on foot. Wade into the coastal city's shallow turquoise bays to explore a raised coastline with coral cliffs. Or take a stroll down to the Dinh Van Thuy Tu, one of the city's so-called whale temples and the largest museum for whale skeletons that are several storeys high. Here, whales are worshipped as divine creatures that safeguard against storms and bad fortune.

Coffee in Dalat

Try a cup of silky sweet iced coffee brewed at one of the small, family-run operations of Dalat, many of which hail from the remote tribal minorities of Vietnam's mountainous highlands.

This southern city has emerged as a major producer of specialty, boutique coffee beans. In the past, colonial rulers sought out Dalat as a summer retreat. Today, it is known as the country's "Petite Paris" – a city that hugs lush Lang Biang Mountain, and enjoys spring-like temperatures. Get your Bourbon Arabica caffeine fix at coffee plantations and find out more about the tribal ethnic minority culture.

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One of the best ways to explore Phan Thiet is on foot. Wade into the coastal city's shallow turquoise bays to explore a raised coastline with coral cliffs.

Central Vietnam

Between the imperial glory of Hue and the heritage hotspot of Hoi An, the heart of Vietnam has cultural gems, pristine beaches, and stunning landscapes.

Cycle around Hoi An

Start your journey around central Vietnam in the UNESCO World Heritage town of Hoi An, an enchanting place where lanterns hang from buildings along the Thu Bon River.

Hire a bike for the day, and cycle through the countryside where you'll pass rice paddies and large water buffalo, and see the locals tending their fragrant vegetable farms. In town, take a stroll past the ornate Japanese bridge, the stunning Chinese Fukian assembly hall, where Chinese migrants met to socialize, and the many golden-yellow French colonial buildings.



Skewered meat in Hoi An

Stock / gac



Hoai river in Hoi An

Stock / Gargolas

Shopping in Hoi An

Hoi An was once a major hub along the silk trade route, and is still the best place in Vietnam to get bespoke clothes made. You can shop for customized clothing at talented tailor boutiques, including the family-owned BeBe. Take along a photo of what you want made.

Explore the My Son Ruins

Hop in a taxi, join an organized tour or, if you're feeling adventurous, hire a motorbike, and enjoy the hour-long ride through quaint villages to the My Son ruins, a group of abandoned and partially destroyed Hindu temples dating from between the 4th and 14th centuries. Arrive at sunrise to peacefully explore the monuments that were destroyed during ancient battles and bombings during the Vietnam War. The decaying temples,

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Hire a bike for the day, and cycle through the countryside where you'll pass rice paddies and large water buffalo, and see the locals tending their fragrant vegetable farms.

VIETNAM

dedicated to the god Shiva, aren't as big as Angkor Wat or Bagan, but there's something fascinating about the resilience of these crumbling structures.

Take a cooking class in Hoi An

A favorite among travelers, the Vegetarian Cooking Class at family-run Minh Hien Vegetarian Restaurant is hands-on and includes a bike ride to the Tra Que Vegetable Village to learn about local agriculture, and a visit to an open-air produce market to hand select vegetables for the class. Local delicacies include the chewy *cao lầu* noodle dish with its secret ingredient of ash and white rose.

Da Nang and the Marble Mountains

Da Nang is Vietnam's fastest-growing city, and has several religious sites as well as a few quirky places to visit, such as the Dragon Bridge, which breathes fire on weekends at 9pm.

Take a drive around the Son Tra Peninsula and stop by the gigantic Linh Ung Pagoda. The 219ft (67m) Bodhisattva of Mercy is the tallest Lady Buddha in Vietnam and protects the expansive bay from destruction by typhoons. Traditional bamboo basket boats full of sardines linger in the sea, as skyscrapers loom in the distance, making for an astonishing juxtaposition.

The best view of Da Nang is from the top of the Marble Mountains. On your way up, you can visit a stunning mosaic pagoda dedicated to a



iStock / YaraPham

Vietnamese princess, Buddhist and Hindu shrines, and an underground cave depicting the levels of Hell.

Don't miss Cau Vang, the spectacular new 500ft-long (150m) bridge that appears to be held up by two giant stone hands and is a remarkable sight. At 4,600 ft above sea level, the 500-ft long bridge offers uninterrupted views of the surrounding mountains.

Hai Van Pass

Hai Van means "the pass of rising sea" due to the daily phenomena of clouds filling a gap between the rolling hills.

Hire a motorbike, hop in a taxi or join an organized tour for the full-day drive along the scenic road from Hoi An to Hue.

Along the Hai Van Pass, most travelers stop at the Elephant

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The best view of Da Nang is from the top of the Marble Mountains. On your way up, you can visit a stunning mosaic pagoda dedicated to a Vietnamese princess.



Vietnam's most famous dragon at Ho Thuy Thien

Lola Mendez

Springs to cool off, but there are other waterfalls to be discovered, too. Don't miss Dam Cầu Hai, the largest saltwater lagoon in Vietnam with its colorful fishing boats, or the Lập An Lagoon where the sea meets mountains and oysters grow in abundance.

The pristine Chan May Bay remains undiscovered. The entire beach is virtually empty, except for a few food shacks and the occasional local floating on the crystal-clear waters on an old tire.

Visit An Bang ghost town

About a half hour before reaching the Nguyen Dynasty Imperial Citadel in Hue, stop off at An Bang, a sprawling cemetery with more than 4mi (7km) of incredibly adorned mausoleums. Each is an individual tomb, with mosaic artwork that would leave Gaudí speechless.

The unique waterpark of Ho Thuy Thien

The most famous dragon in Vietnam is at the abandoned Ho Thuy Thien waterpark, near Hue. The massive dragon once housed an aquarium, and today is a canvas for graffiti artists. There are hollow water slides and other old rides to visit, but tread carefully as the structures are vulnerable. It's no longer possible to pay off the guard to enter, but if you take the footpath before the entrance and trek through the jungle (stay left), you'll find yourself standing in front of the majestic dragon.

Beaches of An Bang

An Bang is the most popular beach on the backpacker trail in Vietnam, but there are many nicer beaches to visit including the aptly named Hidden Beach. Located just south of An Bang, (easily located using

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The massive dragon once housed an aquarium, and today is a canvas for graffiti artists.

VIETNAM

Google Maps). Hidden Beach boasts silky sand, turquoise waters and cheap massages on the beach.

Take a day trip to the Cham Islands with local NGO Karma Waters, to go snorkeling or scuba diving.

Visit Tam Thanh, a fishing village that isn't well-known to travelers but will be soon due to its vibrant street art murals that depict daily life. Volunteers painted the town a few years ago to create Vietnam's first mural village under the ethos of art for better community.

Explore the Central Highlands

After exploring the stunning coastline of central Vietnam, take a bus inland to the Central Highlands to learn about agriculture, view endless green vistas, and discover waterfalls off the beaten path.

The pristine Hồ Lắk Lake in Dak Lak is only accessible by boat. Travelers can explore the area by hiking the hills or kayaking to local villages to try their hand at the region's famous pottery at artisans homes.



Lola Mendez

Endless mosaic tombs at An Bang ghost town



Phong Nha Caves

Parinaz Blimoria

Caves of Phong Nha-Kẻ Bàng National Park

Explore 400 million years of history inside Vietnam's Phong Nha-Kẻ Bàng National Park, a UNESCO Heritage Site in central Vietnam that remained undiscovered until two decades ago.

Tra Ang Cave: Explore Tra Ang Cave as part of a tour. Once inside, you can only get around by swimming in the river running through it, which is 0.62 miles (1km) long and 164ft (50m) wide. After reaching the end, you can lie on your back and let the current float you back to the mouth.

Paradise Cave: At 19mi (31km) long, Paradise Cave's limestone formations are the size of cathedral pillars. Since it was discovered by a local man in 2005, it's become one of the most impressive locations to visit in Phong Nha-Kẻ Bàng National Park.

8 Ladies Cave: This is one of the easiest to visit without a tour guide, and is a 20-minute drive from Paradise Cave. Vietnam's rich yet heartbreaking war history is apparent inside. Here in 1972, a group of women perished after becoming trapped inside by a bomb blast during the Vietnam War. Today, a cave shrine and temple stand to honor them.

Hang En Cave: If you're after a more serious adventure, the Hang En Cave is the third largest cave in the world, and can be explored on a two-day, one-night camping and trekking adventure tour. For this trip, you'll have to go with Oxalis Adventure Tours, a company that takes care of the safety and logistics of the trip and employ locals from Phong Nha and Tan Hoa village for a sustainable, eco-friendly experience.

Travel Insurance and Caving

Before you go, be sure your travel insurance covers you to go caving. You may have to buy a particular plan or upgrade your adventure sport coverage before cover can apply. Some plans may exclude caving completely.

Hanoi

Vietnam is well known for its communism and conservatism, but now a blossoming counterculture scene is emerging, bringing more independent creatives to the country's quaint capital city.

Hanoi's Old Quarter

This area is known for its kitsch hangouts, where hipsters cool off with iced coconut drip coffee and you can chow down on local street food from early morning until late at night. Grab a dish with grilled pork, fragrant fish sauce, vermicelli noodles mint leaves and herbs. Try a cinnamon pork and *banh cuon*, or rice rolls filled to the brim with minced pork.

Creatives of Hanoi

Hanoi may seem like a strange place to seek out brown leather man-bags and fixed-gear bikes, but the city has your creative needs covered, including indie bars, caffeine-fueled



Fresh vegetables in Hanoi



Hanoi park

Unsplash / Lukasz Saczek

dens, and vintage underground shops selling zany and vintage post-war trinkets.

Stroll around Hanoi's charming lakeside neighborhood to find vegan food or try a legendary egg-yolk coffee, while folk tunes play in the background.

In Hanoi, art is not just for the museums, and is also on display for everyone to see – from murals filling city walls to street art festivals, and the ever-present French and Vietnamese-infused flavors of sizzling street food.

Government-banned music concerts

Focused more on grit than glitz, Hanoi is a hub for trendy speakeasies filled with throngs of Vietnamese blues fans and aspiring punk rock artists.

Invite-only, underground concerts, hosted inside dingy, pop-up studios,

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Stroll around Hanoi's charming lakeside neighborhood to find vegan food or try a legendary egg-yolk coffee, while folk tunes play in the background.



Parincaz Bilimoria

Ho Chi Minh Mausoleum

are the antithesis of the simpering love ballads Vietnam's radio airwaves are usually known for.

Here, in the land of state-approved singers, these musicians march to a far more raucous, alternative beat, singing about the rise of the counterculture, and sometimes politics, in Vietnam. How to get in? Keep a close eye on the social media of banned political pop artist, Do Nguyen Mai Khoi, as she often organizes these sort of events. If the police arrive, the event organizers usually get a slap on the wrist and maybe a fine.

Ho Chi Minh's Mausoleum

For culture of a different kind, head to the mausoleum of former Vietnam leader, Ho Chi Minh, who led the country from 1951 to 1969. While the final resting place of Ho Chi Minh may not sound like a lively attraction, every day thousands of visitors – mostly Vietnamese – make the

pilgrimage to pay their respects to so-called Uncle Ho.

Based on the design of Lenin's Mausoleum in Moscow, the building's visitors must show great respect and reverence. As you pass silently by the glass case containing the revolutionary leader's body, you will be under close watch by armed, stone-faced guards. No photography or videoing is allowed. Lines to get in can be long, so arrive early in the day.

The body is allegedly sent to Russia every October for a couple of months for re-embalming.

Why Civet Poop Coffee Really is Shit

Many visitors to Vietnam are keen to try or buy weasel, or civet-cat coffee, with its rare and chocolatey flavor, developed from coffee beans having passed through the civet's digestive system. However, for this process to take place, the civets are trapped with painful snares and wires, held in tight battery cages, and force-fed kilos of coffee beans, narrowing their diet and causing them great harm. While civets are not currently endangered, their rate of capture is bringing the species horribly close. While there are farmers who let their civets roam free to eat beans at their leisure, and later collect the droppings, the markets are flooded with unethically produced versions of this coffee.

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While the final resting place of Ho Chi Minh may not sound like a lively attraction, every day thousands of visitors – mostly Vietnamese – make the pilgrimage to pay their respects to so-called Uncle Ho.

Northern Vietnam

The craggy lime islands of Halong Bay are perhaps the most iconic natural wonders in Vietnam. But, the real treasures of northern Vietnam lie in the rural areas off the beaten track.

Halong Bay

Despite the growing number of visitors each year, and the accompanying environmental issues, there are ways to visit Halong Bay without causing too much harm to the fragile environment of this UNESCO-listed site. First, check that your tour operator is eco-friendly: read traveler's reviews on TripAdvisor and look for positive reviews about the disposal of garbage, cleanliness of boat emissions and level of professionalism on the trip before booking.

Most trips to Halong Bay leave from uninspiring Halong City, or from Hanoi. You'll have to buy an admission ticket to Halong Bay, and you'll need individual entrance tickets for some caves, grottos and fishing villages.

You can explore Halong Bay on a cruise boat, by kayak, and on half-day, one-day or overnight trips on houseboats. One of the best ways to visit is to go on a combined two-day, one-night trip from Hanoi, skipping Halong City altogether, which will include visits to villages and caves, as



Kayaking in Bai Tu Long Bay

Parinaz Bilimoria

well as kayaking and great food, all from the comfort of a nice boat.

Cat Ba Island

Still in Halong Bay, Cat Ba is a beautiful island, in spite of a massive surge in tourism and thoughtless development in the main town. However, the jungle-clad interior of this craggy islet is raw, pristine and untouched. Don't miss the Cannon Fort and Lan Ha Pay, an equally beautiful, but less-crowded, version of Halong Bay.

Bai Tu Long Bay

The equally dramatic coastal topography of Bai Tu Long may play second fiddle to Halong when it comes to visitor numbers, but that doesn't mean it isn't as beautiful. Come here for a more relaxed Halong experience.

The slower pace of tours here means that you'll probably have

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The equally dramatic coastal topography of Bai Tu Long may play second fiddle to Halong when it comes to visitor numbers, but that doesn't mean it isn't as beautiful.



Brian Rapsey

more time to explore the accessible caves, swim in the clear waters between the towering limestone formations, possibly spot dugongs, enjoy kayaking and explore the forest reserves found on the larger islands in the bay.

Hiking around Sapa

Home to Fan Si Pan, Vietnam's highest peak, and hillsides of emerald green rice terraces, Sapa is one of the most beautiful places in the country. First developed by the French as a refreshing hill station, far from the sweltering heat of the jungles, and as the gateway to the region. But peace here didn't last. Following WWII there was a series of battles in the Tonkin region which left many of the most notable colonial buildings leveled in its wake.

In the 1940s to early 1950s, Sapa was attacked by independence fighters who drove the colonists from the region, but the French retaliated by bombing the area in a series of air raids. It wasn't until the late 1990s that tourism was revived in the

region, and Sapa began to flourish as one of Vietnam's best travel hot-spots.

A great place to base yourself for trekking, Sapa has many hiking trails, and local tour operators can guide you through these stunning landscapes for a fee. Hiring a local guide helps the economy (on top of the entrance fees you'll pay for different places) and they will make it easier for you to communicate with the locals in the villages.

If you prefer hiking independently, there are plenty of marked trails around Sapa. Cat Cat, Giang Ta, and Lo Chai are just three of the trails that are quite easy to do without a guide. All are beautiful trails and lead to lovely little villages.



Trekking in Sapa

Brian Rapsey

“
A great place to base yourself for trekking, Sapa has many hiking trails, and local tour operators can guide you through these stunning landscapes for a fee.”



iStock / Thanh Ngoc Tran

Harvest season in Tam Coc valley

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Bear Dong Van Plateau (also known as the Dong Van Karst Geopark) is a wonderful alternative to popular Sapa.

Explore the Dong Van Plateau

Dong Van Plateau (also known as the Dong Van Karst Geopark) is a wonderful alternative to popular Sapa. Previously off the tourist radar, due to difficult access on poor roads, visitor numbers to Dong Van are slowly starting to rise.

This is a stunning area of Vietnam to trek in, the trails are less worn, easy and well-marked. Located in Ha Giang Province, this region is also a very ethnically diverse population, with 80% of the people living in remote, rural areas. As you trek from village to village, deeper into the Dong Van Karst Plateau Geopark, you'll notice the numbers of tribal and ethnic groups increasing, dressed in fascinating clothes and selling local wares.

Culture in Mai Chau

About 99 mi (160km) southwest of Hanoi, Mai Chau is world's away from the noise of the Vietnamese capital. Here, rice terraces spill down the

hillsides around the tiny village, and are great to explore on foot or by bike, or just to chill out in.

The ethnic minorities in Mai Chau are predominantly White and Black Thai, whose ancestors are from Thailand. These people live in traditional stilted homes but have abandoned their traditional dress, and the town is now fully set up for visitors, so don't expect a truly authentic cultural experience here. Lots of tour buses arrive every hour and the locals know how to sell their beautiful woven souvenirs.

See Ban-Gioc and Dietan Falls

You can visit these two waterfalls on a tour from Hanoi or visit independently by hopping on the public bus at Cao Bằng station in Hanoi. On the way, check out Ngườm Ngao Cave to see stunning stalactite and stalagmite formations inside, and enjoy the cooler temperatures as you explore deeper and deeper below ground.

VIETNAM

After a visit to the cave, hop on a motor taxi (US \$2) to take you the final 1.8 mi (3km) to the falls. There are signs everywhere that read “No Swimming” in both Vietnamese and English, but many tourists and locals find it hard to resist the blue pools that surround the cascading falls. It’s best to follow the rules and just enjoy these falls from the viewing platforms or from the bamboo rafts that offer tours closer to the falls.

Bac Ha market

Bac Ha has a popular Sunday market, and even if you’re not here to shop, it’s worth visiting to experience the explosion of color and chaos in this otherwise sleepy village. There are also some interesting markets a few miles from Bac Ha, including at Can Cau and Lung Phin, which offer a comparatively low-key village market experience.

Tam Coc

The location of the Oscar-winning film *Indochine*, Tam Coc has recently exploded on Vietnam’s tourism scene. With large, dark karsts emerging from vibrant green rice paddies, the scenery is larger than life in Tam Coc. On a sunny day, when the rice is ready for harvest, you could easily go through an entire memory card of photographs and video clips. The best way to explore the rice paddies and limestone karsts is by bike. You can rent them in town, or join a tour that takes you around these beautiful



iStock / Thanh Ngoc Tran

formations, and usually includes lunch.

Don’t miss the many caves and grottos here, and try asking the local women to teach you how to row a Sampan boat the traditional way – which is with your feet.

History in Hua Lu

History buffs should check out the incredibly ornate ancient capital of Hua Lu. There are dozens of historical monuments in the area, including Dinh Tien Hoang Temple, Le Dai Hanh Temple, and Le Dai Hanh Tomb. Also check out the 15th-century Bich Dong pagoda, a fascinating group of mountain temples that lie a few miles north of Tam Coc. Built in 1428, this historical site climbs up Ngu Nhat Mountain. Visitors typically ascend the mountain, viewing three separate pagodas along the way (Hạ, Trung, and Thượng) before reaching the top and enjoying views of the surrounding countryside and karst formations.

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There are dozens of historical monuments in the area, including Dinh Tien Hoang Temple, Le Dai Hanh Temple, and Le Dai Hanh Tomb.



Hung, the Boat Women of Hue

An encounter on Vietnam's Perfume River raises the question, how much can we understand the lives of others?

“For years, I had loved the words “Perfume River.” I imagined sailing down this Vietnam waterway of which I knew nothing. I imagined it smelled gorgeous and the experience would be one of romance and poetry. That’s why, on my single day in Hue, the ancient, imperial capital of Vietnam, the first thing I did was find out how to take a boat ride on the Perfume River.

Since I had only a day, the boat ride needed to be short as I was keen on seeing the famous Imperial City, the 14th-century walled palace complex, in the afternoon. “No problem,” said the girl at the hotel desk. She arranged a taxi to pick me up in the morning and take me to one of the river’s dragon boats. The boats, shaped and painted like dragons, stop at the main sites along the river, and tourists can hop on and off. Since I didn’t have much time, she suggested I go directly to the Thien Mu pagoda and get a taste... or rather, a whiff of the Perfume River, then return to Hue.

At the dock, I found a boat waiting for me and soon realized I would be the only passenger. “Hallo Lady!” A thin, aged woman called to me. She reached out to hold my arm and steadied me as I jumped aboard the wobbly craft. She then bade me sit in a white plastic chair on the deck.

*I raised the expectation,
You shook your head sadly.
Like fish in water
and fowl in the air
It’s not easy to meet...
I saw you off on your way
And felt hundreds
of jumbled feelings.*

Nguyen Binh (1918-1966)



**Maxine
Rose Schur**

Maxine’s travel essays have appeared in numerous anthologies and publications, including the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, and *Salon.com*.

A NOMAD'S STORY

Most of the dragon boats looked grand, with two great dragon heads at the prow; this boat had only one. Like the woman, it was small and weathered, but I had complete confidence in its safety because the pilot, a silent, middle-aged man, looked steady.

With a long wooden pole, the woman, agile as a child, pushed the boat away from the shore. The engine rumbled to a start and off I sailed down the Perfume River.

The river gets its name from the fragrant scent of the blossoms from nearby orchards, that float along the water in autumn. In that season, the river must seem poetic but now, in winter, the wide, slow river was as gray as dust and the only fragrance I smelled was engine fuel.

I sat back and relaxed, watching other dragon boats chug past under the cloudy sky.

As soon as our journey was underway, the boat woman got busy. She unrolled a bamboo mat on the damp floorboards, went back into a small, dim cabin – the only room on the boat – and emerged with a styrofoam cooler of soft drinks for sale. I bought a can of Coke and the selling continued. The woman must have made at least eight trips back and forth into the room, returning each time to present a different array of wares: silk pajamas, embroidered cloth bags, freshwater pearl earrings, horn bracelets, agate necklaces, key chains and sets of chopsticks, each charmingly tucked into a silk case. She spoke little English, but enough to be tireless in her effort to sell. Each time she brought out something new, I shook my head regretfully to show I was not at all interested, but after a short while, seeing her look disheartened, I relented and bought chopsticks.

I couldn't see much life from the boat, as the riverbank was hidden behind thick foliage, so I became curious about the woman. I stole glances at her as she moved about. Her own stolen glances revealed she was equally curious. Now and then we smiled at each other, but made no attempt to converse.

After an hour or so we came to the Thien Mu (Celestial Lady) Pagoda. I jumped off the boat onto the sandbank and walked up the hill path, through the small pine forest to the pagoda. Built in 1601, it is the oldest religious structure in Vietnam, and the crown of the Buddhist monastery surrounding it.

The seven-tiered pagoda and the grounds of the monastery exude peace.

“

I stole glances at her. Her own stolen glances revealed she was equally curious. Now and then, we smiled at each other, but made no attempt to converse.





Yet this most tranquil place was a center for anti-government fervor during the early '60s. It was from here in 1963 that one of the monastery's monks, Thich Quang Duc, drove to Saigon, where he set himself alight in protest at the Catholic President Diem's persecution of Buddhists.

Sobered by my visit, I returned to the boat and we headed upstream, back to Hue. Like all Vietnamese I had met, the boat woman was curious about a woman traveling alone and she began to ask me questions. We started to communicate with hand gestures and three-word sentences. I told her I was from America, that I had flown here from Hanoi, and the next day I would be going over the Marble Mountains to Hoi An. I told her my name and she told me her name was Hung, which I later learned means "pink rose." With a hint of pride, she told me how old she was: 65.

She asked my age and I told her.

We were the same age.

The knowledge stunned us both into silence... and melancholy. Though the same age, my life was privileged. I was on vacation, overfed, with a full set of teeth, smiling, carefree, enjoying the freedom that comes with having leisure time and credit cards. She was still doing hard physical labor and struggling to sell trinkets to one passenger – and I sensed, struggling with something else.

The speed at which her smile vanished on realizing we were both 65 told me she, too, had felt the disparity. For the rest of the ride, she no longer smiled.

When we did speak again, I learned she had been married when she was 17. She had loved her husband since she was a little girl and, after they married, she bore seven children. One was her son, the dragon boat pilot with whom she now lived on the boat. She had never left Hue. Ever.

As she spoke, I did the grim math.

“

The boat woman was curious about a woman traveling alone, and she began to ask me questions.

A NOMAD'S STORY

She and I were 19 in January of 1968. While I was in college, acting in plays and preparing for a fun-filled summer in Israel and Greece, she was a young mother in Hell. In January 1968, during the Tet Offensive to take back control of the south, the Viet Cong captured Hue, set up a provisional Communist government, and murdered thousands of civilians they thought were South Vietnam sympathizers. Nearly 3,000 men, women and children were tortured, executed, and thrown into mass graves. Another 2,000 went missing. 100,000 residents lost their homes, and no one in the city could have escaped the tragedy. After three weeks, the city lay in ruins and corpses lay everywhere. This was the infamous “Massacre at Hue.”

“Come,” the woman beckoned, and I followed her into the cramped, shadowy room. It was painted mint green and was sparsely furnished; in the corner rose stacks of cardboard boxes filled with her tourist wares. She walked over to a large, framed black and white photograph, pointed to it, then pointed to herself.

“Me,” she said. “Marry.”

I looked up at the photo to see the face of pretty, teenage girl – an innocent bride.

“Beautiful.” I said. She understood this word and nodded.

“And your children?” I asked.

“No more,” she said quietly. “No more here. No more now.” She pointed to her son whose back was facing us as he piloted the boat. “One boy. No more now.”

She didn’t have the words to tell me more; I didn’t have the words to ask her more. And, even if we shared the same language, we would have had no words that could matter.

No more now.

We docked in Hue, she helped me climb out of the boat and I waved goodbye to her. She stood at the prow waving back for a long while.

As the boat sailed away up the Perfume River, the figure of the woman shrunk smaller, and it is that miniature, waving image of her that haunts. Not because my last view of her was at such a great distance, but because my full understanding of her – what she lived through and how – was at such a great distance, forever impossible for me to justly breach.



“

While I was in college, acting in plays and preparing for a fun-filled summer in Israel and Greece, she was a young mother in Hell.



Kelly Beckta

CAMBODIA

Go beyond the ancient temples of Angkor Wat to discover the Kingdom's most spectacular landscapes, elusive wildlife, and uncrowded islands and beaches.

Phnom Penh

There's more to Cambodia's capital city than a base for a visit to the sobering genocide museums of Tuol Sleng and Choeung Ek, relics of the brutal Khmer Rouge regime.

The culture of Phnom Penh

Visit the Buddhist wats, wander the wide boulevards to see colonial architecture, and explore traditional markets to get an insight into Cambodia's cultural past and present. The pretty riverfront area of Phnom Penh imparts an authentic charm where relaxed locals share snacks while strolling along the promenade. The persistent calls from Tuk Tuk drivers can be irritating, but there's a growing food scene emerging, with quaint cafes and trendy restaurants popping up in the area.

Festivals and events

During the three-day *Bon Om Touk* (Cambodian Water Festival) which



Sam Grimmer

Phnom Penh Rickshaw



Buddhist monks walk up the stairs to Wat Phnom

iStock / Joel Carillet

usually takes place in November, boat races, colorful parades, fireworks and performances make it one of the biggest celebrations of the year. Travelers are welcome to join local spectators cheering on their favorite rowing boat in this non-religious festival, which celebrates the change in direction of flow of the Tonle Sap River.

The Royal Ploughing Ceremony, sometimes held outside the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, marks the beginning of the rice-growing season. The King (or his appointee) will plow a plot of land using two oxen. After three rounds, the animals choose a type of fodder from a set of trays. The oxen's choice of food and drink is said to determine the agriculture harvest for the coming season.

The King takes his birthday

“ Visit the Buddhist wats, wander the wide boulevards to see colonial architecture, and explore traditional markets to get an insight into Cambodia's cultural past and present.

CAMBODIA

seriously, and it has been declared a national holiday. The King celebrates by making offerings to the monks, while banners depicting his image line the streets, and spectacular fireworks light up the sky.

Temples in Phnom Penh

Not far from the riverfront, the 14th-century Wat Phnom sits at the top of a small hill. Worshippers come here to pray for good luck at all times of the day. To beat the crowds and enjoy the temple's architecture, visit during or after sunset.

The 15th-century Wat Ounalom, which has been restored after being damaged during the Khmer Rouge period, is Phnom Penh's most important temple and the center of Cambodian Buddhism, as it is said to hold an eyebrow hair belonging to Buddha.

Wat Langka, also built in the 15th century, is close to the Independence Monument. Silent meditation sessions, which can be attended by locals as well as visitors, are often held here.

The Royal Palace

Construction of Phnom Penh's glistening jewel, the Royal Palace, started in 1866 and although it has undergone several major modifications, it has been inhabited by the royal family ever since. It's a pretty place to explore, with its manicured grounds and Khmer architecture. Make sure you dress appropriately, as you could be turned

away if your knees and shoulders aren't not covered. Covering your shoulders is not acceptable.

As the official residence of the royal family, some sections of the palace are closed to visitors, but the beautiful Silver Pagoda, with its silver-tiled floor, and Emerald Buddha, are fascinating sights. Photography of the buildings' exterior is allowed, but it's forbidden to take photos inside. The forbidden zones are clearly marked, and your guide (many professional ones can be engaged upon entering the complex) will instruct you accordingly.

Old Market

Take a stroll through Phsar Chas, Phnom Penh's Old Market. Although this is a relatively small market, a vast array of wares, from trinkets to fabrics and clothes, shoes and

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Royal Palace in Phnom Penh

Cheeky Passports

CAMBODIA

jewelry are sold here. Check out the food section, where colorful fruits and vegetables, large chunks of fresh meat, skinned frogs, live fish and other animal parts are for sale.

Tuol Sleng Museum and the Killing Fields

The Tuol Sleng Museum and the Choeung Ek Killing Fields are a stark reminder of the persecution of millions (estimated to be anywhere between 1.5 to 3 million) by the infamous Khmer Rouge regime, between 1975 and 1979. Followers of the leader, Pol Pot, forced the Cambodian population into an agrarian society in which anyone suspected of having ties with the previous government was brutally executed. This included people wearing spectacles, who were perceived as intellectuals.

During the regime, external communication was impossible, and Cambodia was cut off from neighboring countries. Unlike other historical persecutions, the regime



Sam Grimmer



Sam Grimmer

executed (mostly) its own nationals, and little was known about what was going on in the country. Tuol Sleng was a former high school which was turned into one of many prisons during the genocide. The prisoners from this detention center and others were killed at the Choeung Ek Killing Fields, a former orchard.

Most travelers visit these sites when in Phnom Penh. Be warned that the displays are graphic and will probably elicit a range of emotions and reactions. Always show respect to the victims when visiting, and try not to be alarmed by seeing bones and rags poking through the soil which may have been unearthed by heavy rain, painful reminders of the many bodies buried in mass graves that have not been identified.

Remember, it is likely that the locals present may have lost some of their relatives to the genocide.

“
Most travelers visit these sites when in Phnom Penh. Be warned that the displays are graphic and will probably elicit a range of emotions and reactions.

Northeast Cambodia

Hike, bike and kayak through Cambodia's remote, wild east to discover some of the Kingdom's most spectacular landscapes and exotic wildlife.

Kampong Cham

Your first stop on the drive northeast from Phnom Penh is the sleepy riverside city of Kampong Cham. Home of the famed Bamboo Bridge, which is rebuilt annually to link the city to the small Mekong River island of Koh Paen, Kampong Cham isn't high on the list for most visitors to the Kingdom, but has plenty of interesting places to see.

A short drive from the city, the sites of Wat Nokor (an Angkor-era temple set among rice paddies) and Phnom Pros and Phnom Srey (Man Temple and Woman Temple) feature several intricate pagodas built on adjacent hills, and offer a great vantage point of the surrounding countryside. During the Khmer Rouge era, the valley between the hills was used as a place of torture, and now there is a small shrine to those who were killed. Not far from here, history buffs should check out an old American ATC tower and runway that was used during the Vietnam War.

Back in the city, the famous Kizuna Bridge was the first to span the Mekong. Prior to its opening in 2001, ferries and rafts were the only way



Sunrise in Kampong Cham

Cassie Wilkins

to traverse east and west and cross Cambodia. Crossing the bridge to Tbong Khmum feels like taking a step back in time. Adventurous souls will get a kick out of the rickety ladders and great views from the top of the 19th-century French Tower, and don't miss the local stilted Cham Muslim villages, with their traditional wooden houses and unusual-looking mosques.

The best way to cram everything in is by hiring a Tuk Tuk, or renting a scooter or bicycle for the day – don't forget to wear a helmet. There are plenty of accommodation and restaurant options available in Kampong Cham, but check out the guesthouses on the riverbank for spectacular sunrise views.

Kratie

Following the Mekong north leads

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Crossing the bridge to Tbong Khmum feels like taking a step back in time.

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to Kratie, once famous for being the home of the Irrawaddy river dolphin. A good jump off point between northern and eastern Cambodia, this laidback town is a pleasant place to hang out for a few days and break up the long drive to Banlung or Stung Treng. Sit and watch the sunset over the river, while the town's faded colonial streets come to life with food stalls and families out for an evening stroll.

Historically, Kratie's most popular activity was dolphin-spotting on the Mekong from Kampi, a few miles north, these days the Irrawaddy dolphins are so elusive that it can be hit or miss. Once common across Asia, these blunt-headed, unusual-looking dolphins are closely related to the killer whale. They live in the Mekong between Cambodia and Laos, where legend goes that they are reincarnations of their ancestors. However, with the rise of fishing in the region, especially using explosives, and a difference of opinion between Vietnamese and Khmer fishermen (one group believe the dolphin to be sacred while the other catch them as food) there has been a huge decrease in their population.

If you don't feel like taking the gamble, there are plenty of other activities around Kratie. You can rent bicycles to explore the countryside and see Phnom Sombok, a modern pagoda 6mi (10km) north of the city, worth visiting for its colorful paintings depicting what happens to those



Floating houses on the Mekong near Kratie

Alex Robinson Photography

who choose not to live a virtuous life.

Alternatively, hop on a boat to nearby Koh Trong Island and rent a bicycle. Check out the Vietnamese Wat and floating village before heading to the beach for sunset views and a swim – if you're brave enough to swim in the murky waters of the Mekong! Tour companies also offer overnight kayaking trips up the river.

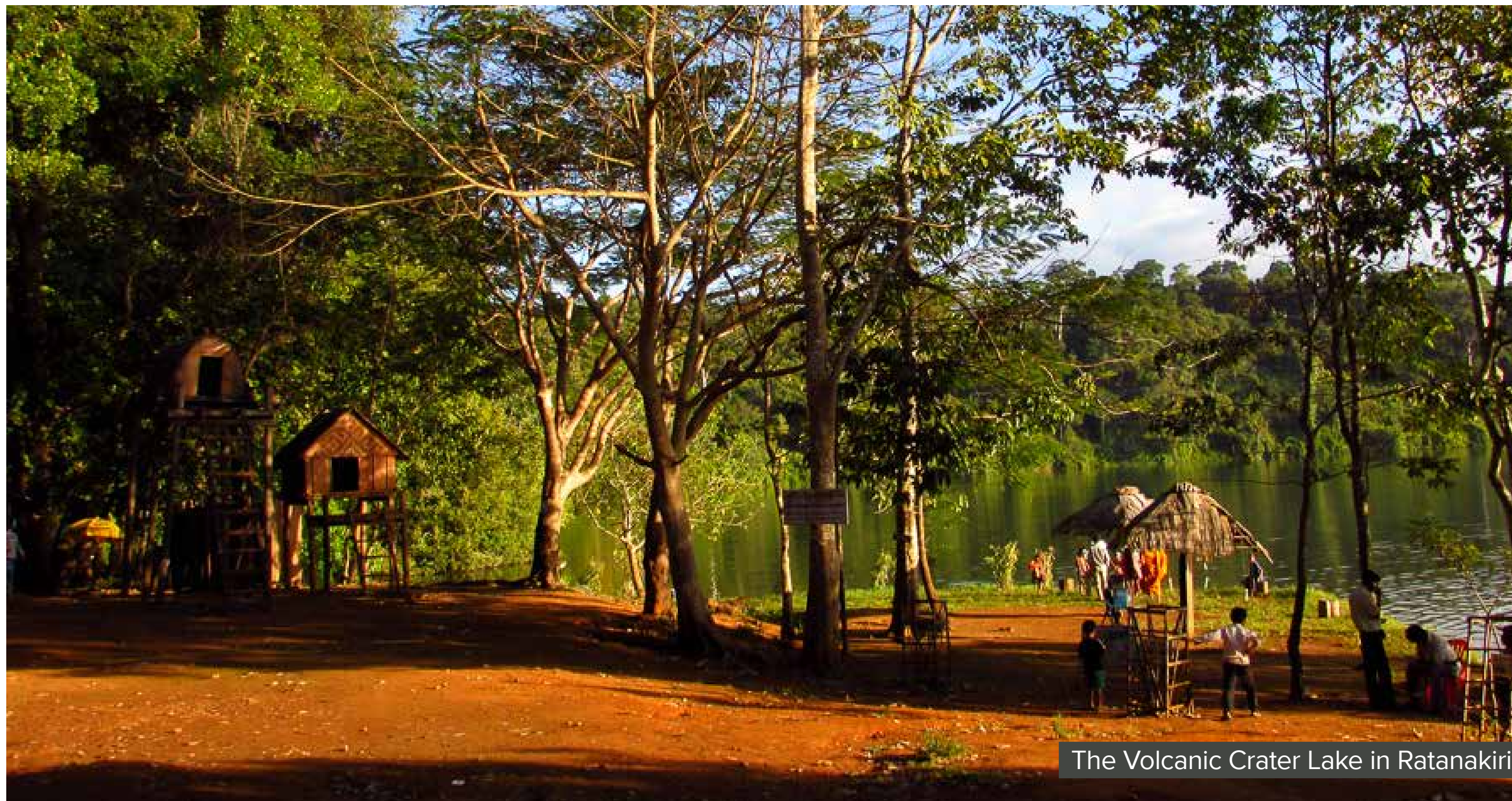
There are plenty of transport and accommodation options in the city and around the riverbank. Tourist buses are available to destinations all over Cambodia and Laos.

Mondkiri and Sen Monorom

A few hours east of Kampong Cham lies Mondul Kiri, one of Cambodia's most untouched and beautiful regions. This wild province is as famous for its rolling hills dotted with pine forests, waterfalls, tribal villages, and lush jungle as it is for its sustainable elephant sanctuaries. Here you can learn all about these remarkable creatures and the wonderful work that local groups,

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Cassie Wilkins

The Volcanic Crater Lake in Ratanakiri

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This remote province is also the adventure hub of Cambodia, where you can go on rafting and camping trips.

like the Mondulkiri Project and the Elephant Valley Project, are doing to help care for injured animals and rehabilitate and retire working elephants in their natural habitat.

While Mondulkiri is perfect for lovers of hiking, nature, wildlife and coffee, including several species of endangered primates including the black-shanked doucs, thrill-seekers can also go on multi-day treks and camp out in the jungle, go wild swimming, and zipline over one of Cambodia’s most spectacular waterfalls, the double-tiered Bousra.

A variety of accommodation options can be found in the capital, Sen Monorom, which is about a five-hour drive from Phnom Penh. From Sen Monorom, it’s a beautiful drive to Ratanakiri up the so-called ‘Death Highway’, which is now fully paved (and far less deadly). It takes three and a half to four hours to drive by minibus, but you can also hire a motorbike (if you’ve got the right license to drive one at home) or a bicycle if you want to take your time

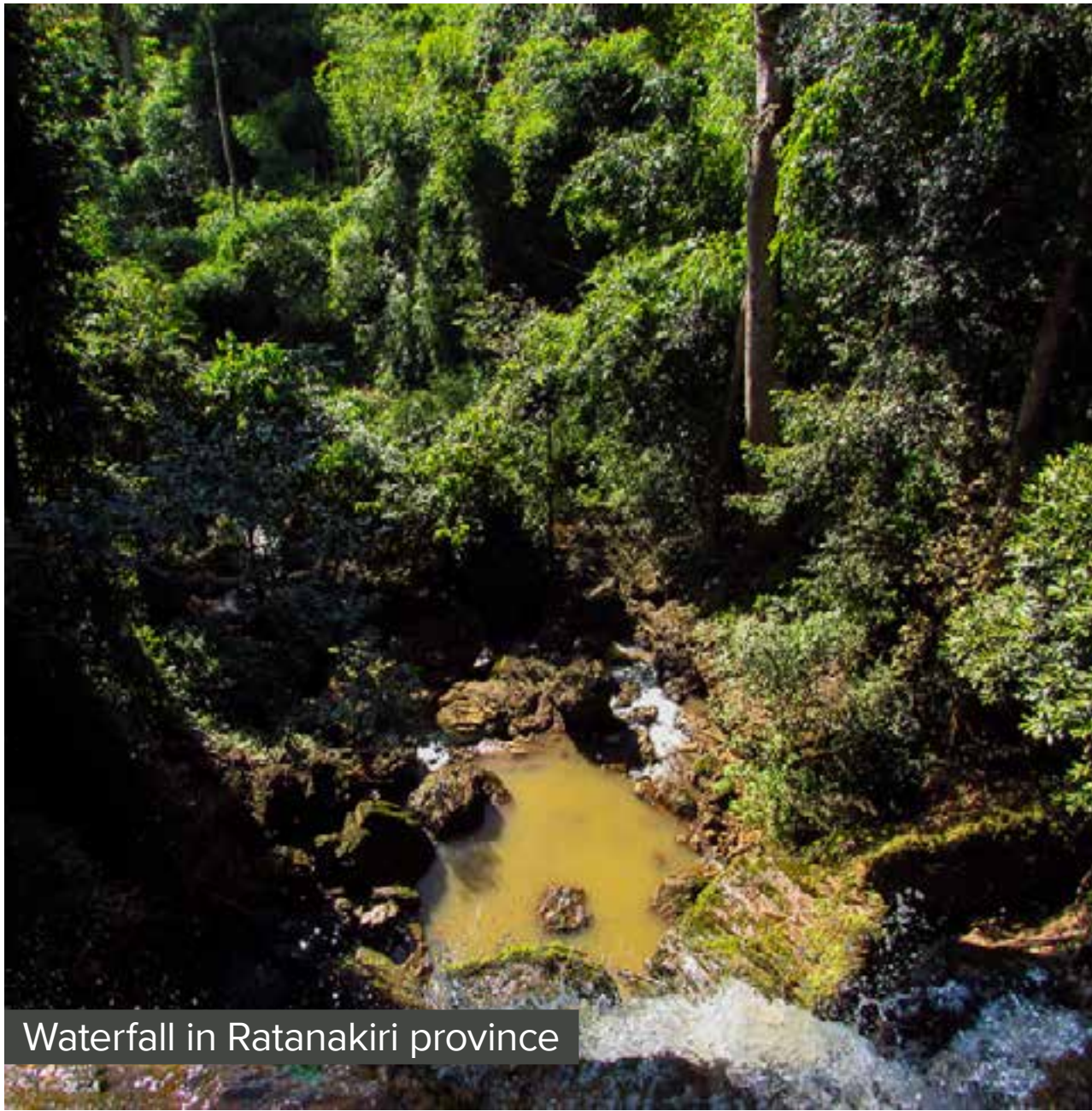
exploring these beautiful off-the-grid regions.

Banlung and Ratanakiri

In the far northeastern reaches of Cambodia lies the remote Ratanakiri province, with vibrant green hills and plateaus, thick jungle, crater lakes, rivers, and mountains.

The capital of Ratanakiri, Banlung, is a small city with cool eateries and interesting accommodation, especially around the lake. The new highways have made transport links much easier, and you can now get from Banlung to the 4,000 Islands (in Laos) via Stung Treng, or cross the local border into Vietnam, just make sure you organize your visa in advance.

This remote province is also the adventure hub of Cambodia, and you can go on rafting and camping trips, trek through jungle and lava forests, and visit remote waterfalls, gem-mining quarries, and off-the-grid coffee plantations. Just outside of Banlung, you can also visit the



Cassie Wilkins

Waterfall in Ratanakiri province

magical Yeak Loam crater lake and swim in the turquoise waters of a volcano that has been extinct for 700,000 years.

One of the most interesting things about Ratanakiri, however, is its tragic history, especially when it comes to its tribal villages and ethnic minorities. For more than 1,000 years, Ratanakiri has been home to the tribal Khmer Loeu people, who have long been persecuted. Initially they were sold and traded as slaves to neighboring empires, and then were part of a forced 'Khmerization' campaign beginning in the 1950s. Many traditional villages were destroyed when the area was bombed by the US during the Vietnamese War.

During the civil war, the Khmer Rouge took control of the area and attempted to stamp out the traditions of the Khmer Loeu, forbidding them from speaking native languages or practising their religious traditions. There were ethnic purges and many indigenous people were killed. In recent years, the opening up of the region has led to an influx of Khmers,

increased land prices and political corruption which has threatened their way of life even more. These days, it feels like the young people in the villages are more interested in mobile phones and the outside world than continuing the traditions of their ancestors, leaving their future in jeopardy.

One of the ways the local communities are reversing this trend is by working as tour guides, sharing their traditions and opening up their villages to sustainable tourism, including homestays and opportunities to view their unique way of life.

Virachey National Park and hill tribe villages

Despite the challenges facing them, Ratanakiri is still home to 12 of the kingdom's most unique ethnic minority groups, most of whom still live traditionally, in remote semi-nomadic tribal villages around the forests of Virachey National Park. One of the Kingdom's premier wildlife spotting destinations, the 1,283mi² (3,325 km²) national park is also the home of the incredibly rare northern yellow-cheeked gibbon.

Whether you do a short tour to the tribal villages or a multi-day tour into the depths of the beautiful Virachey National Park, book your trip with a local organization and ensure the profits go to the locals. The tribal village tours are all led by indigenous guides to villages and fascinating forest cemeteries with elaborately

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One of the Kingdom's premier wildlife spotting destinations, the national park is also the home of the incredibly rare northern yellow-cheeked gibbon.

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carved memorials. You can find out more about their unique traditions and way of life, that have barely changed over the last thousand years. Photographs are permitted, but ask first and be as respectful as possible.

Longer treks include nature walks through the jungle, bamboo river rafting and visiting hidden waterfalls deep in the Virachey National Park. Trips lasting from one to seven days can be easily organized in Banlung, including a guide, transport, food, accommodation, and fees to the national park and nature preserves.

Stung Treng

Historically, Stung Treng has been nothing more than a jump-off town on the way to Laos or Banlung, but these days it's an attraction in itself, with community-managed eco-villages popping up along the banks of the river. You can kayak through flooded forests, cycle through the countryside, and dolphin spot on the border with Laos.

From Stung Treng, you can easily take a boat all the way up to the 4,000 Islands, where you can see the mighty Sopheakmit Waterfall, and check out the remnants of the 19th-century French-built boat docking station. Here, boats were lifted onto train carriages to transport them across the islands, bypassing the waterfall, and continuing up the Mekong to China. From Stung Treng, you can also visit Thala Barivat, a pre-Angkorian site with ruins dating back to the 7th century.



Boat trip through the floating forests outside Stung Treng

Cassie Wilkins

Preah Rumkoul

About 37mi (60km) to the west of Stung Treng, Preah Rumkoul is an ecotourism site on the southern border of Laos. To get here you can either take a Tuk Tuk to O'Svay and hire a shallow canoe to take you across the river past the flooded forests, or hire a bike or a moto-dop in Stung Treng and ride the 40 mi (60 km) around the river. The ride is one of the most beautiful in Cambodia, passing limestone karsts, fossilized trees, and isolated backwater villages.

Those who brave the journey will be rewarded with local homestays and family-cooked meals in a beautiful location, plus birdwatching, swimming, cycling, and beautiful waterfalls. This is also one of the only spots in Cambodia where you might see the river dolphin from the shore. From here, you can head back the way you came, and continue onto Laos, carry on toward Prasat Preah Vihear, or head down to Siem Reap.

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Go kayaking through flooded forests, cycling through the countryside, and dolphin spotting on the border with Laos.

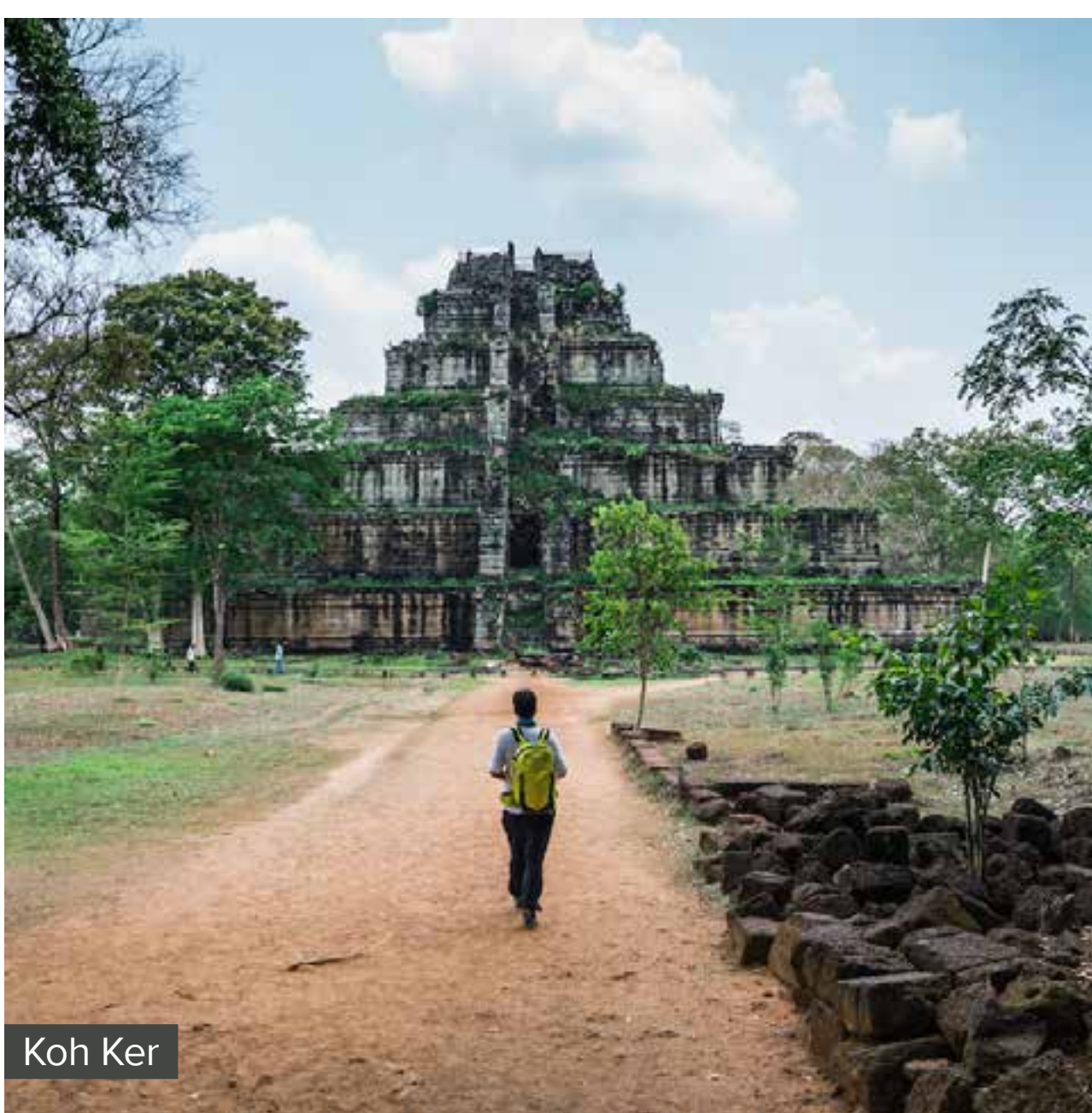
Siem Reap

As the gateway to Angkor Wat, Siem Reap is a popular destination. Here you can discover Cambodia's rich culture and heritage by exploring the quaint but bustling town and surrounding countryside.

Sunrise at Angkor Archaeological Park

Start your day at Angkor Wat watching the sun peek from behind the 12th-century temple's iconic towers. While it's hard to avoid the thousands of people who flock here to capture photographs at sunrise, this is one of those moments that makes jostling the crowds worth it.

Spend the rest of the day exploring impressive Bayon Temple marveling at 2,000-plus giant faces carved into its 54 towers, and root-riddled Ta Prohm – famous for providing the backdrop to Angelina Jolie's 2001 movie *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. Keep an eye out for the mysterious stegosaurus etched into



Kelly Beckta

Koh Ker



Angkor Wat at sunrise

Kelly Beckta

Ta Prohm's walls, which have left historians baffled.

There are also several other Angkorian temple complexes nearby, including Koh Ker and Beng Mealea, where the ancient ruins lie shrouded in lush jungle. Although you may have to hire a car or Tuk Tuk to get out of the city, once there you can explore these long-abandoned temples in peace, walking in the footsteps of great kings from years gone by.

Refresh in gushing waterfalls

Phnom Kulen National Park, 31mi (50km) from Siem Reap, is Cambodia's most sacred mountain and a place of pilgrimage. On weekends and religious holidays, locals descend on the holy site to pray and leave offerings at the temple that sits atop the mountain. Its

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Streets of Siem Reap

Kelly Beckta

1,400ft (427m) peak is the spot where Khmer Empire founder Jayavarman II declared himself a devaraja (god-king) in 802AD.

A short walk from the temple – which also houses one of the country’s largest reclining Buddhas – you’ll find two waterfalls, swimming spots and waterfront picnic areas.

Take a break and refreshing dip before strolling to the nearby River of a Thousand Lingas, where 1,000 carvings of Hindu gods and symbols, believed to date back to the 11th-century reign of King Udayadityavarman, are etched into the stone riverbed.

Visit a floating village

Tonle Sap Lake, Southeast Asia’s largest freshwater lake, is home to rare fish and endangered birds, such as painted storks, greater adjutants and grey-headed fish eagles, as well as hundreds of people who live in

lakeside villages with schools, homes and shops.

Visitors love the village of Kampong Phluk, but for a more off-the-beaten-track experience, head a little further out of town to Kampong Khleang, where villagers offer boat tours, sunset cruises, fishing trips and the chance to spend a night with a local family in a basic floating home. Organized tours operate in the area, or you can catch a Tuk Tuk and arrange activities on arrival.

Haggling at Phsar Chas

Markets form an integral part of Cambodian life, and residents go at the crack of dawn to snap up the freshest ingredients for the day. Siem Reap’s largest market, Phsar Chas is in the center of town.

While it is more geared towards tourists, it offers an insight into local life, and is packed with fruit and vegetables, swinging slabs of meat, flapping fish as well as souvenirs. It’s

“Visitors love the village of Kampong Phluk, but for a more off-the-beaten-track experience, head a little further out of town to Kampong Khleang.”



Sam Grimmer

Siem Reap mine victim rehabilitation centre

a great place to have some fun with the stallholders and barter for a bargain.

Banteay Srei

Head out of town to Banteay Srei, the embodiment of rural Cambodia, where rice paddies and wooden stilted houses dominate the landscape, and clusters of sugar palms offer shade to the grazing buffalo.

In 2016, the Visit Banteay Srei campaign launched a number of homestays, ranging from private villas to a mattress on the floor of a local family home. Here, you can help with daily chores, cycle through the pristine countryside or learn more about the lives of villagers. Banteay Srei is about 21 miles (35km) from Siem Reap, and can be reached by Tuk Tuk or taxi.

Making artisan pottery

The intricate artisanal crafts used to build the temples at Angkor Wat Archaeological Park have inspired a wealth of workshops that showcase

these traditional techniques. Learn the ancient art and craft of Khmer pottery at a class.

Khmer Ceramics holds daily lessons where visitors can learn from a local artisan how to create an Angkorian bowl, using a traditional wheel. The bowls are finished off by adding Khmer carvings before being fired and glazed, ready to take home the next day.

Pick fresh dragon fruit

Gorge on the deliciously sweet, pink superfood at Happy Dragon Farm. The organic farm in Banteay Srei is home to hectares of the cactus-like plants, which produce the sweet and slightly tangy fruit, and welcomes visitors to try samples.

After exploring the farm, guests can spend the night and get a home-cooked meal. While this is basic living, nothing quite beats watching the sun melt into the horizon, casting its warm hue across the Cambodian countryside, and waking up to uninterrupted views of rice paddies and stretches of farmland.

Learn about landmines

The Cambodian Landmine Museum serves up a sobering reminder of the country's bitter past. The small museum features displays that highlight the devastating impacts the deadly explosives continue to have on the country.

At its center, sits a large case of mortars, mines and other recovered unexploded ordnance

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The Cambodian Landmine Museum serves up a sobering reminder of the country's bitter past. The small museum features displays that highlight the devastating impacts the deadly explosives continue to have on the country.”



John Magas

(UXO). Visitors can also attempt to locate deactivated mines in a mock minefield, and view information about the ongoing efforts to rid Cambodia of UXOs.

As the most land-mined country in the world, remote areas of Cambodia, especially along the border with Thailand, are still littered with mines leftover from years of civil war and Khmer Rouge reign, which ended in 1979. Don't go too far off the beaten path if you suspect there may be landmines (or if there are blatant warnings). Your travel insurance cannot help if you put yourself at risk or injury.

Sample the street food

The many street food vendors that line the streets of Siem Reap serve a selection of local bites, from grilled seafood to pork and rice or noodle dishes.

While the town center is dotted with food carts, step off the tourist trail and eat with locals, who from 5.30pm gather at Road 60, on the outskirts of town. Here you'll

find a long stretch of food stalls offering every kind of local treat. Adventurous foodies can tuck into deep-fried tarantulas, stuffed frogs, crickets and other bugs. A must-try meal is the popular Cambodian dish of *num banh chok* (Khmer noodles), and with the scent of barbecued meat hanging heavy in the air, make sure to try the sweet marinated pork.

See the circus

No trip to Siem Reap is complete without catching a performance of *Phare*, the Cambodian Circus. Every evening at 8pm, crowds gather at the big top to watch the talented troupe. Run by NGO Phare Ponleu Selpak, which teaches art forms to underprivileged youngsters, the shows retell ancient Khmer folktales using acrobats, contortionists, clowns, jugglers and trapeze artists.

“The many street food vendors that line the streets of Siem Reap serve a selection of local bites, from grilled seafood to pork and rice or noodle dishes.”



Street Food in Siem Reap

iStock/Quics

Northwest Cambodia

Go beyond Siem Reap to see ancient temples hidden in the jungle, crumbling ruins on mountain tops, colorful lakeside villages and vibrant floating markets in the country's northwest.

Battambang

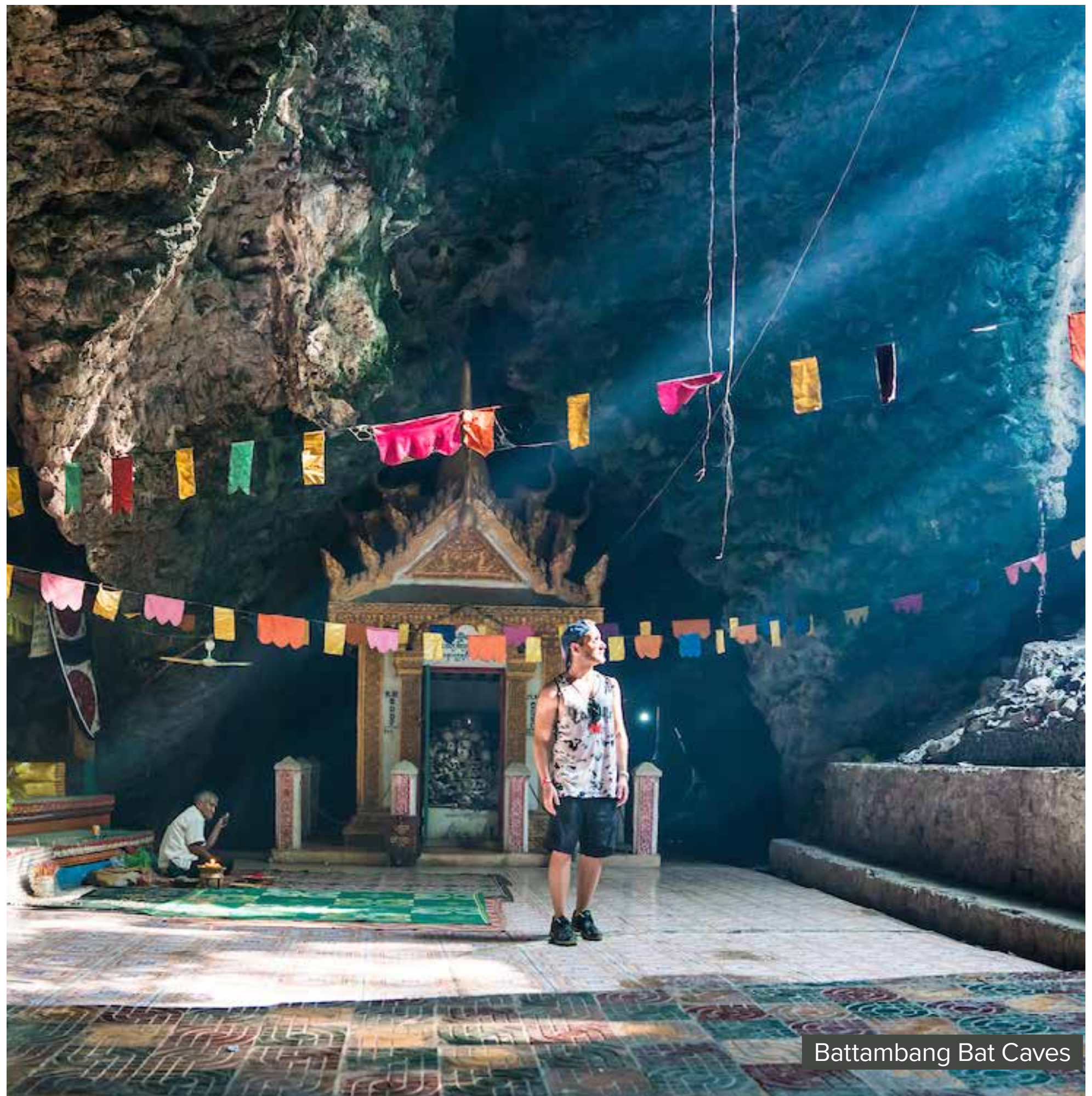
Three hours southwest of Siem Reap, Battambang is a laidback riverside city with many preserved historical buildings, and a vibrant art and food scene. The artistic capital is home to a wealth of art galleries and studios, and a variety of unique and inspired social enterprise cafes, bars, and restaurants.

For many, the city's highlights lie outside its walls. The fertile countryside is perfect for exploring on two wheels, or while hurtling through on the rustic bamboo train; a small bamboo platform attached to a go-kart engine that speeds along



Getty Images / Kevin Yulianto

On board the bamboo train in Battambang



Battambang Bat Caves

Kelly Beckta

a specially built railway track through the rice paddies.

Other highlights include a visit to Wat Banan, a small but picturesque Angkorian-era temple at the top of a seemingly-endless flight of stairs, and Phnom Sampeau, a mountain-top temple that sits alongside the Killing Caves, the former Khmer Rouge execution site that offers a chilling reminder of the country's dark past. Take a hike up the mountain for epic views, and on the way back down don't miss the Bat Caves, where every day at dusk thousands of bats fly out of the cave, forming unique patterns in the sky.

It's easy to get to Battambang by bus from Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville, or even from Bangkok, where you can grab a taxi or hop on a different bus once you cross the border.

“The fertile countryside is perfect for exploring on two wheels, or while hurtling through on the rustic bamboo train.”



Monks near Battambang

Kelly Beckta

Banteay Chhmar

Deep in the heart of northwest Cambodia's jungles, the ruined temples of Banteay Chhmar are slowly being overgrown by strangler figs and forest. An ancient city with carvings that once rivaled that of Bayon and Angkor Wat, Banteay Chhmar is one of the country's least explored and most fascinating historic sites, but its relative inaccessibility means only the most intrepid explorers might capture a glimpse of this mysterious temple complex for themselves.

To get there, you can hire a taxi from Siem Reap for around US \$50, or you can take a bus to Sisophon from Battambang or Siem Reap, and then hire a shared taxi. Accommodation options are limited, but simple village homestays are available. You can organize these in advance by contacting the Banteay Chhmar Community-Based Tourism group.

Prasat Preah Vihear

One of the most unique and beautiful Angkor-era temples in the region, the previously remote Prasat Preah Vihear (the temple in the clouds) is now just a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Siem Reap.

Built on top of a rocky cliff face, this unique temple has been the site of active skirmishes between the Thais and the Cambodians since the early 20th century, and is now home to an entire army encampment, who live at the top of the mountain to protect the ancient memorial from invasion.

Due to escalating violence from 2008 to 2011, you can no longer stay around the temple, but accommodation can be found in nearby Sra'Aem, a small military town about 18mi (30km) away.

Phnom Kulen National Park

Located in the Cardamom Mountains, between Prasat Preah Vihear and Siem Reap, Phnom Kulen National

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Park is where Jayavarman II (founder of the Khmer Empire) declared himself King of Kings in 802 AD.

There are several uniquely fascinating ruins, including the Terrace of Sdach Kamlung, a small brick temple which was once covered in lava, several Buddha statues dating from the 16th century, and an ancient carved riverbed known as the ‘Valley of a Thousand Lingas’.

For those looking to escape the heat of Siem Reap, the national park is also home to some of the region’s most picturesque falls, such as Phnom Kulen waterfalls, and crystal clear rivers that are perfect for cooling off in the middle of the jungle.

Kompong Thom

About halfway between Siem Reap and Phnom Penh, Kompong Thom is a slightly dusty and unassuming provincial capital, and the jump-off point to one of the most interesting historical sites in the country, Sambor Prei Kuk. A 45-minute drive from the city, Sambor Prei Kuk is the ancient capital of the Chenla Kingdom, pre-dating Angkor Wat by 400 years. Hire a local guide to explore this fascinating area so you can see the best temples; many of the most picturesque and interesting ones are hidden by vines and set back in the jungle.

There is a variety of good accommodation and transport options in Kompong Thom, and if you want to stay a few days can also take boat trips along the Stung Sen River

or go on a motorbike tour through the local villages.

Skuon

Following the road from Cambodia’s northwest back into Phnom Penh, you can stop off at the town of Skuon. Here, you can find many market stalls specializing in one of the kingdom’s more unusual delicacies – *a-ping* – palm-sized tarantulas tossed in MSG, sugar, salt, and crushed garlic and then deep-fried until crispy. It’s thought that people originally started eating the spiders out of necessity during the Khmer Rouge era, but that over the years they have become more of a treat, and are now bred in holes in the ground and foraged from nearby forests.

The markets also sell myriad other insects, including grubs and scorpions fried with chili and other local herbs, as well as a variety of slightly more palatable options including fresh fruits and fried noodles.

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For those looking to escape the heat of Siem Reap, the national park is also home to some of the region’s most picturesque falls.



Wat Ek Phnom temple near the city of Battambang

Kelly Beckta

Sihanoukville & the South

Beyond Sihanoukville you'll find water that shimmers with bioluminescent plankton and islands with beach huts and the promise of solitude.

Transport around Cambodia's south

The bus system in Cambodia is affordable and efficient. Luxury buses and minivans connect most of the major cities, while domestic flights tend to be quite expensive. Ferries to and from the islands in the south run daily during high season. It's wise to check schedules during the monsoon season (May to November) when the waves are rough, or avoid traveling to the islands during this time altogether.

Sihanoukville and surrounds

There are 22 islands in Sihanoukville's province, a few of



Long Beach in Sihanoukville

Getty Images / Valentin Wolf

which are privately owned. What was once a small, lively beach town is now a casino and resort hotspot. The unique and relaxed atmosphere of Sihanoukville is long gone. It now caters to a specific type of visitor looking for the glitz and glam you'd find in many beachside resort cities.

Just outside Sihanoukville, you'll find Otres Village and Otres Beach, hippie havens on a stretch of white sand flanked by beach bars with live music. On Saturday evenings, you can check out live music at the night market, which sells handcrafted jewelry and second-hand clothing.

The locals own many of the restaurants, offering good western and local food like *amok* curry and *lok lak*. During the three-day Khmer New Year, in the middle of April, locals flock to nearby temples to give thanks to Buddha and cleanse their sins, and then to the beach for seafood barbecues. On the second and third day of the New Year, the locals run around the islands and

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Just outside Sihanoukville, you'll find Otres Village and Otres Beach, hippie havens on a stretch of white sand flanked by beach bars with live music.”



Fisherman's house in Sihanoukville

Getty Images | Jean-Claude Soboul



Sunset from Otres Beach, Cambodia

Getty Images / Cesarecantonio

village with talcum powder and water pistols and spray each other, and love when visitors join in with the fun.

Occasionally, Otres Village can go without water for hours, even days, because the water reservoirs run dry. This tends to happen during the dry season from December to May, when Cambodia goes for long periods without rain. Minimize how much water you're using while you're here.

Ko Ta Kiev Island

An hour-long longtail boat ride from Otres, Ko Ta Kiev Island is a great place to experience local island life. There's barely any electricity, no WiFi, and just a handful of guesthouses, but you can eat delicious seafood at the Fisherman's Village, and watch the sunrise from a local guesthouse.

Koh Rong Island

About an hour's ferry ride from Sihanoukville, Koh Rong is the second-largest island in Cambodia.

It's a great place to start your scuba diving adventure, as there are many dive sites nearby, and you'll have the chance to see stingrays and whale sharks. You might want to avoid the touristy section of Koh Touch, however it does have bar shacks that offer good food and affordable but basic accommodation.

Instead, head for Lonely Beach, which lives up to its name. It's an isolated area of Koh Rong in a serene setting undisturbed by visitors, and is a great place to see beautiful sunsets and fluorescent plankton. Close by, Palm Beach and Sok San Beach offer accommodation ranging from cheap guesthouses to luxurious high-end resorts.

On Koh Rong Island, Long Set Beach (also known as 4k beach) is an inviting white sand beach with clear water and an awning of jungle. It's a wonderful place to snorkel, sip a coconut, and watch the slow island life pass by. One side of the

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Minimize how much water you are using in while in Otres Village.

CAMBODIA

beach is slowly developing, with a few restaurants and hotels, while the other side remains untouched.

Koh Rong Sanloem

Thirty minutes by speedboat, and two hours on the slow boat from Sihanoukville's ferry port, Koh Rong Sanloem is a 6 mi (9km) long horseshoe-shaped island with beach huts dotting the white sand, and sprawling jungle just a few steps from the shore. You can also reach Koh Rong Sanloem via 20-minute ferry from Koh Rong.

This is where to go to escape, swim with bioluminescent plankton, and feast on some of the freshest seafood you'll find. Search online for cozy family-run guesthouses, rent a paddleboard or stay in a beach hut nestled into the jungle.

Ream National Park

Established in 1993, Ream National Park is 11mi (17km) from Sihanoukville and has colorful plant life, an immaculate coastline, islands, mangroves, and forests that shelter endangered animals, including pileated gibbons and sun bears.

Spend a night under the stars at one of the guesthouses, and let the soft breeze and the sound of crickets lull you to sleep. There are well-marked hiking trails along the north side of the park, through estuaries and jungle. Take a riverboat tour with Ream Yacht Club to explore the mangroves. If you're lucky, you might possibly spot a Mekong freshwater



Getty Images / Michael Roberts

dolphin between December and April.

Botum Sakor National Park

The largest in Cambodia, Botum Sakor National Park has grasslands, deep jungles, and swamps. You'll find otters, sun bears, and many species of birds by kayaking along the river or hiking through the national park. You can camp at the Cardamom Eco-Camp and sleep under the canopy of trees in a safari-style tent to the trumpet of elephant calls in the distance.

Many of Cambodia's endangered animals live here, including the Malayan tapir, pileated gibbon, and clouded leopard, as well as the largest population of Asian elephants in Cambodia. The Cardamom Tented Camp offers trekker and explorer package tours lasting three or four days.

Bokor National Park

Visit the ruins of Damnak Sia

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This is where to go to escape, swim with bioluminescent plankton, and feast on some of the freshest seafood you'll find.

CAMBODIA

Khmao, (Black Palace), formerly King Sihanouk’s summer palace, built in 1963, the Popokvil Waterfall, best visited in the rainy season, and Catholic church ruins. Eat at Epic Arts Café which employs disabled people.

Kep National Park

Nearby, Kep National Park offers spectacular hiking opportunities to points such as Sunset Rock, Little Buddha, and Stairway to Heaven where you can watch the sunset from the lookout in the jungle. On nearby Kep Beach, you can munch on crab caught and cooked straight from the water at a local restaurant, or visit one of the many local huts selling trinkets and jewelry along the water.

Cardamom Mountains

The Khmer Rouge fighters called this mountain range home until 1994. Today it’s peaceful, welcoming visitors to see burial jars from the 15th to 19th centuries, containing human remains, scattered across the mountains.

Wildlife such as tigers, elephants, monkeys, crocodiles and bears roam the mountains, rivers and forests. Wildlife Alliance rescues animals from traffickers, and they are rehabilitated in Phnom Penh. You can help the rangers when they take the animals to wildlife release stations in the Cardamom Mountains, help feed the wildlife and observe their release by setting up camera traps.

The peaks are unremarkable, reaching no higher than 6,000ft



Cambodian landscapes near Kep and Kampot

Getty Images / Yanygin

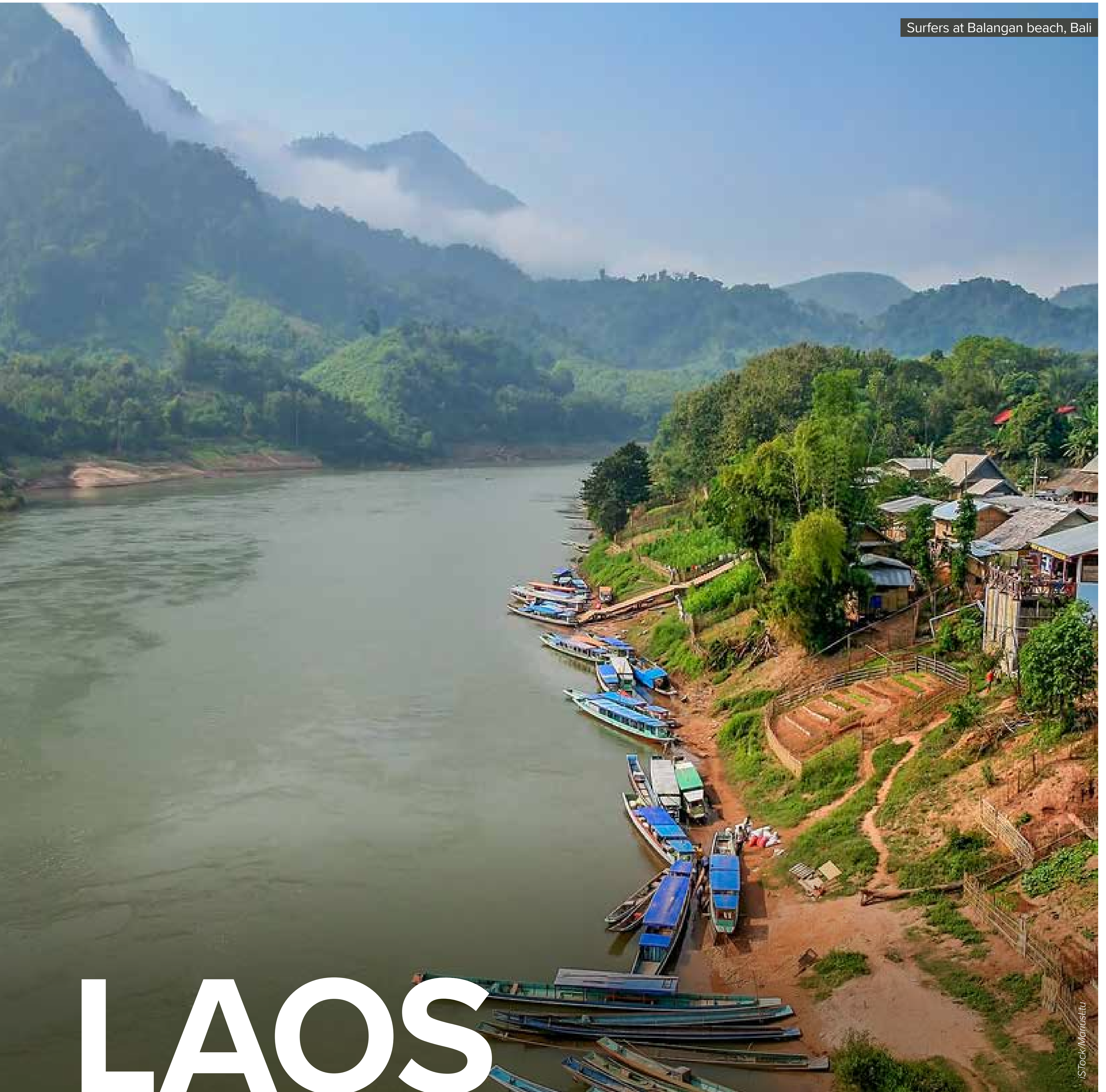
(1,800m), but the forests and mysterious history of the mountains draw many visitors for the numerous trekking opportunities to Chi Phat, Osoam, and Mount Aral. This area is also home to some of the Khmer ethnic groups of Cambodia, and you could enjoy a homestay in Chi Phat to experience something of local Cambodian life in the south.

Traveling Responsibly

Plastic waste is a massive problem in Cambodia. Driving from Sihanoukville to Otres Beach, you’ll see tons of water bottles, beer cans, and plastic wrappers thrown onto the side of the road, which have now turned into massive mounds of trash.

During high season, expats and locals living in Otres get together to help clean up the waste. Unfortunately, there’s no efficient garbage disposal process to conquer the exponentially growing plastic crisis, so trash tends to make its way into the ocean.

To help reduce the plastic problem, use reusable water bottles – many restaurants and guesthouses in Sihanoukville and the islands offer cheap refills of water. Avoid drinking from cans and using plastic straws, as well as single-use plastic. Always carry a reusable bag with you when you travel.



LAOS

Enjoy the slow vibe of beautiful Laos as you discover coffee plantations, traditional villages, towering limestone karsts and unique cultural quirks.

iStock/MariuszTutu

Vientiane

There's a palpable energy on the streets of Laos's capital city, fueled by investment from China, Vietnam and Thailand. Outside influences aside, Vientiane's renaissance is real, and its young, forward-looking population is confidently helping to forge a modern identity.

History of the city

Laos' self-imposed isolation in the 1980s and '90s meant Vientiane was left behind by its neighbors. The Communist government ended trade and diplomatic relations with many countries in 1979, a move that affected all aspects of social and economic life in the small landlocked country. Today, even though the country is still a one-party state, Vientiane is finally waking from its slumber, shaking off its image as Southeast Asia's sleepy backwater, and enjoying playing catch-up. New buildings regularly change



Getty Images / John Seaton Callahan

The Patuxai Monument



Xieng Khuan Buddha Park

Getty Images / Barry Kusuma

the skyline, the café and restaurant scene is blossoming, and the youth are tapping into their creativity.

In this sprawling city on the Mekong River, there is much to see and discover at numerous annual festivals and events, the biggest and most boisterous being the annual *Boun Pi Mai* celebration in mid April. It's a time to visit temples to take part in the ritual bathing of Buddha images to make merit (merit-making is important to Buddhist practice, as it's believed it will help determine the quality of the next life), and when water fights occur in the streets from dawn until dusk.

Local food

Lovers of local food experiences should rise early and head to Kua Din fresh market or one of the weekly organic markets around the city, sign

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Today, even though the country is still a one-party state, Vientiane is finally waking from its slumber, shaking off its image as Southeast Asia's sleepy backwater, and enjoying playing catch-up.



Getty Images / Spaceindy

That Luang stupa

up for a cooking class or culinary tour with Tuk Tuk Safari, and search out a restaurant serving authentic food.

Alms-giving at Phra That Luang

Considered the spiritual heart of Laos, Phra That Luang is a golden stupa dating from 1566, set in the center of a quadrangle. Each November, the grounds surrounding the temple host a vibrant week-long festival with food stalls, music, and merit-making at the stupa. The event ends with a mass alms-giving ceremony that draws thousands of monks from all over the country.

Xieng Kuan Buddha Park

Created by one of Laos' great eccentrics, Xieng Kuan Buddha Park is an essential day trip from Vientiane. On the banks of the Mekong River, 15.5mi (25km) south of the city and 1.5mi (3km) from Friendship Bridge on the Laos-Thai border, the park was established in 1958 by Bounlua Sulilat. The shaman priest recruited

local people to build enormous surreal concrete sculptures, including a 164ft (50m) reclining Buddha, and numerous other statues that combine elements of Buddhism and Hindu mythology.

Bronze Buddhas at Haw Phra Kaew

Built in the 1550s, Haw Phra Kaew originally housed an Emerald Buddha image but when neighboring Siam (now Thailand) sacked Vientiane in 1778, it was stolen and taken to Siam's capital, Thonburi. The revered Buddha now resides in Wat Phra Kaew, Bangkok. Haw Phra Kaew was also destroyed during the Siamese invasion and rebuilt by the French in the 1930s. The temple is now a museum of religious art and houses a collection of fine bronze Buddha images.

That Dam

That Dam or the Black Stupa is a crumbling Vientiane landmark which

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Each November, the grounds surrounding the temple host a vibrant week-long festival with food stalls, music, and merit-making at the stupa.

LAOS

is thought to have been built to house relics of the Buddha. Although today weeds and plants grow in the brickwork, local folklore says that it was once covered with gold. Legend also says that it is inhabited by a seven-headed snake, known as a *naga*, that protects Vientiane. Today, the neglected stupa acts as a roundabout for the city's traffic.

Wat Si Muang

A small but beautiful temple, Wat Si Muang is the site of the city pillar, which marks the symbolic heart of the city. The original ordination hall was razed to the ground by fire in 1828 and rebuilt in 1925. It's an auspicious and very popular temple as it is said to be protected by the spirit of a young girl, who sacrificed herself when the pillar was erected here. Across the road, stallholders make and sell wax floral decorations to present as offerings.

Tad Moun Waterfall

More of a series of rapids than a



Getty Images / Paul Chesley

waterfall, Tad Moun is one of the closest areas of scenic natural beauty to Vientiane. About 13mi (21km) from the city, the area is a popular picnic site with locals. There are lots of food stalls and bamboo pavilions to relax in when not enjoying the water.

Getting around

The best way to explore the city is by bicycle or on foot. Although taxis and Tuk Tuks are available, travelers coming from Thailand or Vietnam will find them expensive. Buses in the city are cheap, but the network is limited.

There are no trains in Laos, other than one that runs on just a couple of lines over the border bridge to Thailand.

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Wat Si Muang is the site of the city pillar, which marks the symbolic heart of the city.



Getty Images / Guenterguni

Southern Laos

Many travelers spend much of their time in Laos' northern towns, leaving little time to explore the south.

Boat trips in Konglor Cave

East of Vientiane, the spectacular Konglor Cave is a four-mile (7km) long cavern created by the Hin Bun River. An exciting boat trip along the river takes you into the dark eerie depths of the cave to discover chambers of stalactites and rock formations. Although not quite off the beaten track, the cave is appealing to adventure-seekers looking to explore some of Laos' natural beauty.

Explore Champasak

The province of Champasak is one of the best-explored regions in southern Laos, home to most of the Bolaven Plateau, the 4,000 Islands and some stunning Khmer ruins. It's



Stock / Scott Pockock vs The World

Champasak



Vat Phou complex in Pakse

Cheeky Passports

easy to explore the area by public transport, using Pakse, the main town in southern Laos, as a hub.

Regular overnight sleeper bus connections between Vientiane and Pakse are the most popular transport option between the two cities. The buses, which contain beds rather than just a reclining seat, are very comfortable.

Travel to the quiet town of Champasak, from where you can explore the Khmer temples of Vat Phou, Angkor Wat's smaller but older cousin, dating from the 11th century. Vat Phou might not be as impressive as the Angkor Wat complex, and comparisons are inevitable, but as it sees a lot fewer visitors, the site is more pleasant to explore, and also features a museum.

An electric shuttle cart will take you from the entrance of the complex

“**Regular overnight sleeper bus connections between Vientiane and Pakse are the most popular transport option between the two cities.**”

LAOS

to the temple area, and from where you can make your own way to the ruins. The site is small enough to explore on foot in a couple of hours. Carry water with you, as it can get unbearably hot.

Biking the Bolaven Plateau

Motorbiking the Bolaven Plateau Loop has to be one of the best experiences in Laos. This rural area retains an unspoilt charm, and is home to mighty waterfalls and coffee plantations.

You should know how to ride a motorbike before you arrive in Laos. Always wear a helmet, and remember, if you don't have a license to ride back home, your travel insurance won't cover you.

You can choose between a short or long loop, depending on your time, but don't rush it; you'll want time to stop to enjoy a dip in some of the waterfalls and learn about coffee cultivation from local farmers.

The area around some of the waterfalls has been developed, while others are still surrounded by lush jungle, but in most places, there are clearly marked paths. While on the Plateau, remember to respect any wildlife you might encounter, and avoid any tours that offer elephant rides.

Traditional villages

The southern regions of Laos are home to traditional ethnic villages, some of which remain free of the comforts of the modern world.



Tad Lo waterfall in the Bolaven Plateau

iStock-AI / Travelpicture

Find out about the beliefs of local followers of the animism religion on a visit to an ethnic Katu village on the Bolaven Plateau. Animism is the religious belief that objects, places, and creatures all possess a distinct spiritual essence.

For example, one should never knock on the door of another villager's hut because of the fear of losing the 'good' house spirits. The penalty for knocking on someone's door is a fine of one water buffalo. The villagers also believe that if one of the locals dies because of an accident, his family should be banished to the forest for a period of around five years in case bad luck is brought upon the entire village.

A local guide will show you around the village and explain various stages of coffee cultivation, including the differences between male and female

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The area around some of the waterfalls has been developed, and others are still surrounded by lush jungle, but in most places, the paths are clearly marked.



iStock / ALS

Sunset on the island of Dot Det

coffee beans. The female is the flatter coffee bean which can be split in two, while the rounder male coffee bean is considered to be stronger in taste. Hear about medicinal properties of various plants growing in the area.

The village of Ban Kok Phung Tai is accessible via a marked path leading from the Bolaven Plateau main circuit. Village tours are held a couple of times a day and there's no need to book; you can just turn up and join in. Help contribute to the sustainability of the region by staying in local homestays, eating at local eateries, and only buying handmade products made by the local community.

How to see the 4,000 Islands

South of the Bolaven Plateau lies Si Phan Don (the 4,000 Islands), an archipelago on the Mekong River

close to the Cambodian border. This part of Laos is more of a backpacker hangout and less of a cultural hub, but if you're looking for a place to enjoy a cold beer while taking in the sunset from a hammock, this is definitely the spot.

Don Det is popular with younger backpackers, with all sorts of accommodation and food options. If you're looking for some activity, rent a bicycle and head over across the bridge to Don Khon, where you can visit waterfalls, or take a boat trip to spot the rare Irrawaddy dolphins.

Both Don Det and Don Khon can be reached via a short boat ride from the village of Ban Nakasang which in turn, is accessible by bus from Pakse. Onward journeys to Cambodia can easily be arranged on Don Det. natural beauty.

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Both Don Det and Don Khon can be reached via a short boat ride from the village of Ban Nakasang which in turn, is accessible by bus from Pakse.

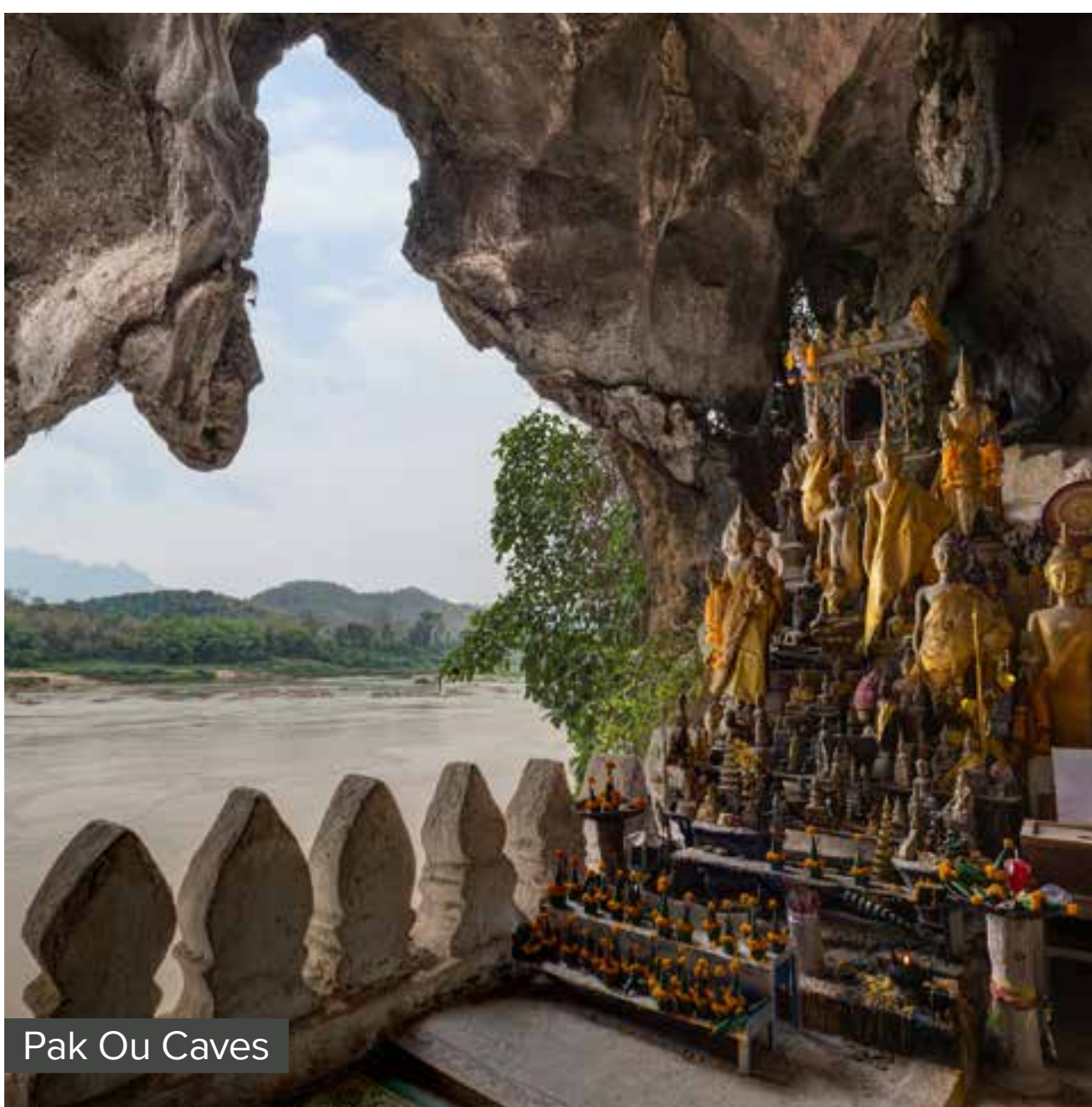
Luang Prabang

Situated where the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers meet, and surrounded by mountains, Luang Prabang's traditional wooden houses and dazzling temples make it a great place to soak up Laos's culture.

Kuang Si Waterfalls

Cool off with a visit to these multi-tiered limestone falls. It'll take you about 45 minutes in a *songthaew* (share bus or taxi), or opt for a motorbike, taxi, van or boat. Once you reach the cascading falls with turquoise blue pools, there's nothing left to do but jump in.

If you want to enjoy a swim with fewer crowds, continue hiking up the path. If you continue uphill through the jungle you'll be rewarded with quieter falls and panoramic views. The entrance fee is 20,000 kip (US \$2.50). There are some street stalls at the entrance to the falls, but pack your



Getty Images / Tuomas

Pak Ou Caves



Luang Prabang night market

Sam Grimmer

own water bottle, bathing suit, towel and some snacks to save a few kip.

Check out the night market

Sisavangvong Road is closed off and vendors came from all over to set up stalls for the popular night market, which sells local jewelry and crafts, and opens from 5pm to 11pm. It's a great place to shop for souvenirs, clothing, or trinkets, but it's also a great place to chow down on some tasty local street eats.

Try a cooking class

Though you'll find many restaurants in Laos serving French meals, the country's distinct dishes are filled with flavor, including lemongrass, kaffir lime and garlic. Try a cooking class in town so you can learn to cook local food and return home to recreate the feast for your friends.

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Once you reach the cascading falls with turquoise blue pools, there's nothing left to do but jump in.



Getty Images / Marcin Kilarski

Tamarind Cooking School runs trips to the market to pick out ingredients for the dishes you be cooking in class – *jeow* (dipping sauces), herbed fish, lemongrass stuffed with chicken, minced meat salad, sticky rice, and dessert. The class is a full afternoon event.

Pak Ou Caves

Hop on a boat and cruise up the Mekong to reach the Pak Ou Caves. You can get there by Tuk Tuk, but the boat journey is a more enjoyable experience. For more than 500 years, these caves have been a popular pilgrimage site, with the first pilgrims leaving behind a Buddhist idol. Inside the limestone caves, there are thousands of Buddha images and statues.

Before reaching the caves, the boat will stop at a whiskey village to learn about the making of Lao Lao Whiskey, with hopes that you'll purchase a bottle, although it's not mandatory to buy.

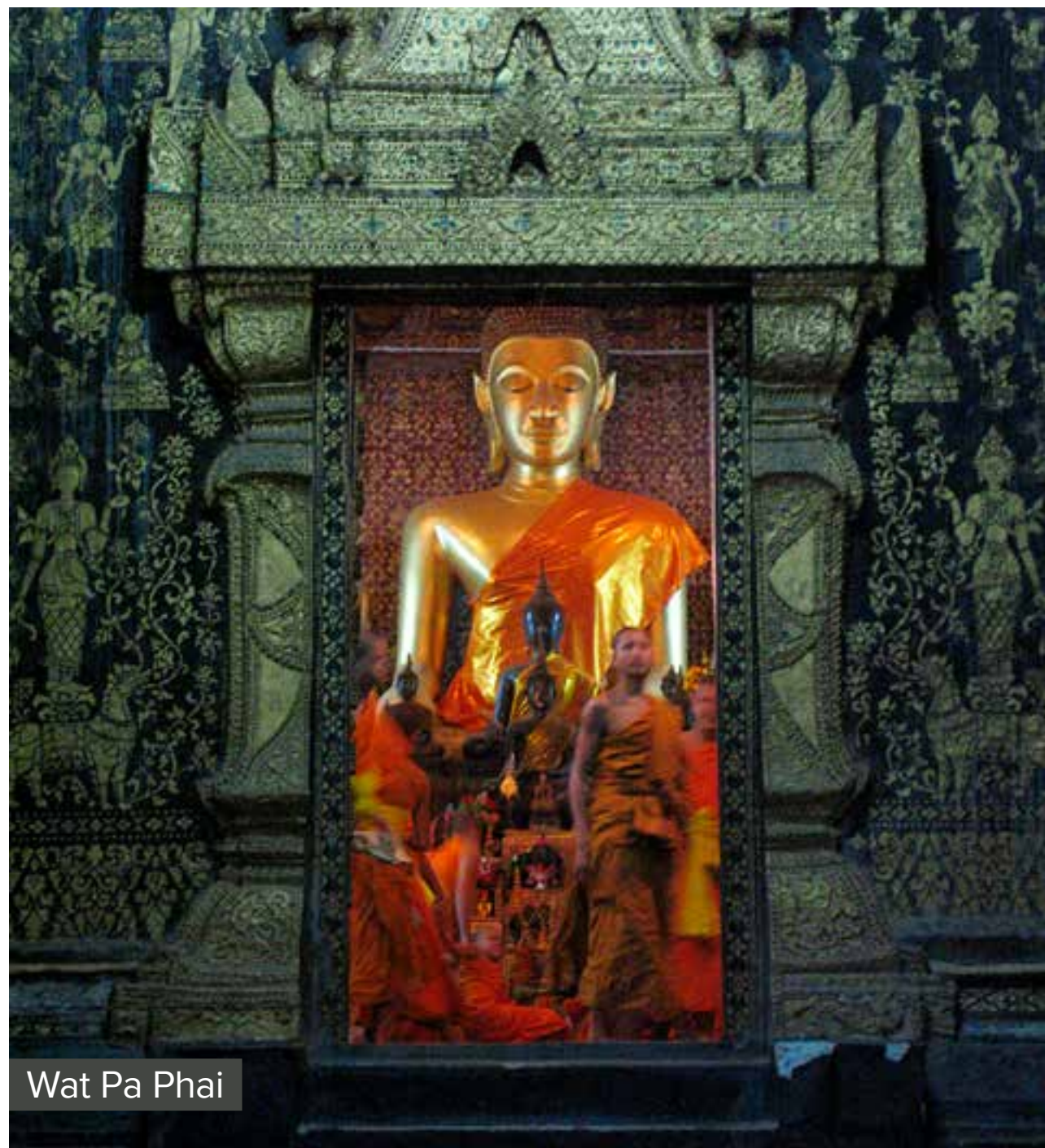
See glittering temples

Don't miss the incredibly ornate Haw Pha Bang (Royal Palace) with its gold exterior, multi-tiered roof and steps leading up to the arched entrance. Inside you'll find a statue of the highly revered Phra Bang Buddha.

Wat Mai Suwannaphumaham (The New Temple), which was built in the 18th century and has been recently restored, is one of the largest and most popular temples to visit in Luang Prabang. It was once the temple for the Royal Family and is home to the Pra Sangkharat, the highest Buddhist dignitary in Laos. You'll find the New Temple right next to the Royal Palace.

Wat Pa Phai is a wooden temple that has incredible frescoes depicting life in Laos during the late 19th century. Here, you may find some monks who are eager to practice their English with you.

A couple of miles outside the city center, you'll find the monastery of Wat Phon Phao. Set in a lush forest,



Sam Grimmer

Wat Pa Phai

this golden temple features intricately designed windows and balconies, and inside you'll see bright paintings. Visit during the day or at sunset when it's cooler and the light is golden.

Hire a bicycle for the day to explore these temples at your own pace. Most guesthouses, hostels and hotels will have bikes for hire, and you'll pay no more than US \$5.

Local food

Start the day at a streetside cafe in town with a tasty pastry, a caffeine boost or a *pain au chocolat* – a very French way to start the day. For lunch, walk across the Nam River by bamboo bridge to the restaurants, or stick around for a bite to eat on Sisavangvong Road. You'll find a wide variety of foods here, from traditional Lao dishes (buffalo sausage, *khao soi* soup made with mincemeat and clear noodles, fermented fish stew, and spring rolls) to high-end French fare. Another excellent spot for finding cheap eats is the street between the night market end of Sisavangvong

Road and the Mekong River.

A must-try meal in Laos is *sin dat* (also called Laos fondue or Laos hot pot) and you can find it at a few restaurants around town. This dish is served from a communal hot pot, kept hot by burning coals. You cook your own meat, vegetables and noodles either by poaching them in the flavorful broth, or grilling them. These hot pots typically cost around US \$10 for two for a sit down meal. Or, if you're traveling solo, you can order a smaller pot all to yourself.

Once dinner rolls around, you might still be full from the hot pot lunch, so head to the night market and have a light meal of chicken on a stick, or grilled vegetables. While dining alongside the river, make sure you bring some insect repellent.

Accommodation

From boutiques and upscale hotels to hostels and guesthouses, there are options for all budgets in Luang Prabang. The town is a hotspot for package tours and, because of this, there are many more luxury accommodations opening. If you want to stay in the posh area near the tip of the peninsula, or in a building in the old town with Mekong River views, expect to shell out more money; these luxury rooms are around US \$100/night.

When searching for somewhere to stay on a shoestring, check out the road between the post office and the river, or the narrow lanes that jut off of Phomathat Road.

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Wat Pa Phai is a wooden temple that has incredible frescoes depicting life in Laos during the late 19th century.

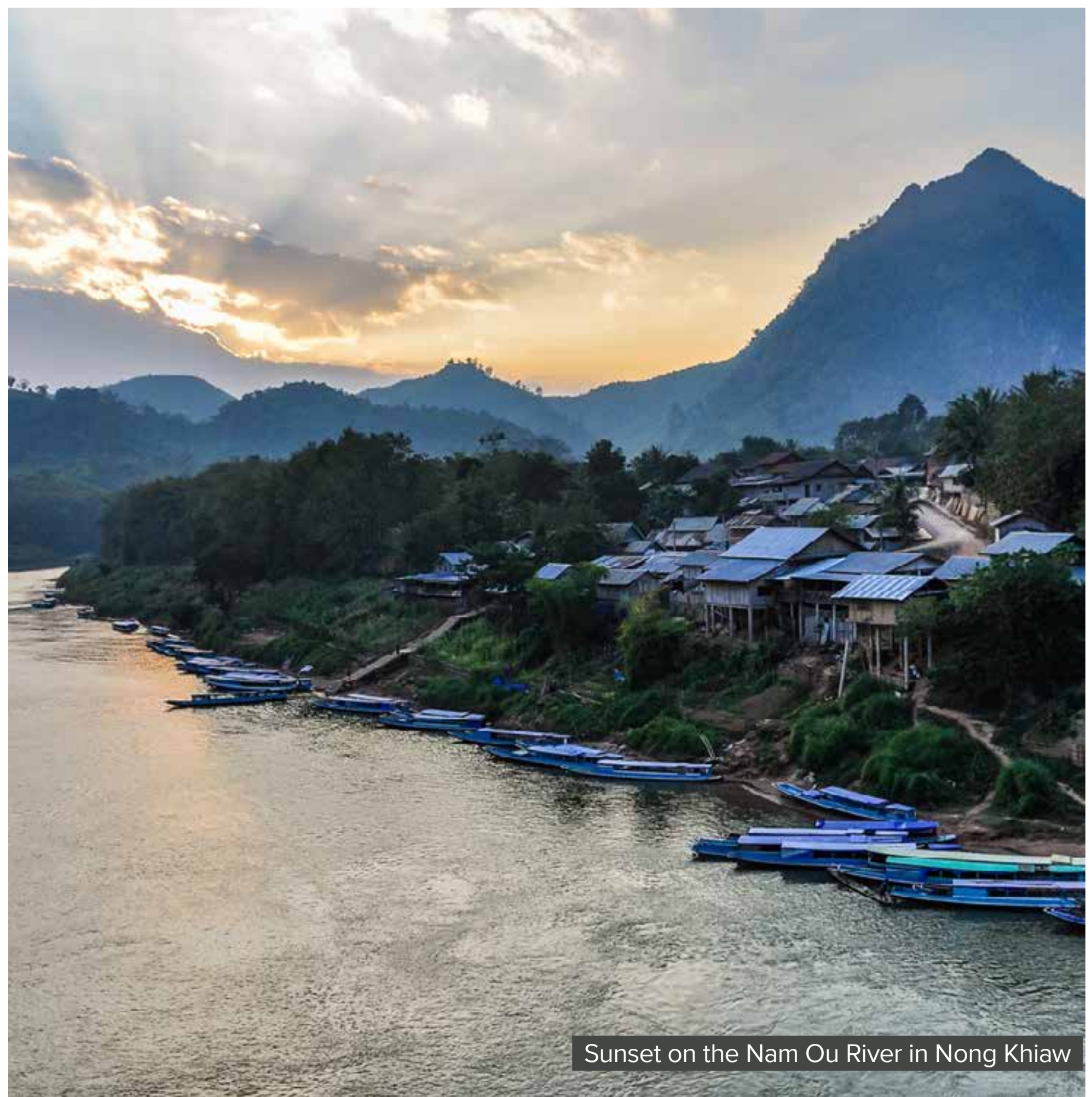
Northern Laos

Venture into the north of Laos for caving, mountain biking, kayaking, hiking, and visiting waterfalls. See vibrant rice paddies, towering limestone karsts, and learn about the traditional hill tribe villages.

Nong Khiaw

Take a three-hour bus ride from Luang Prabang to the village of Nong Khiaw. The Nam Ou River snakes along the valley floor passing the towering limestone karsts surrounding the town, but while the scenery from your guesthouse balcony will be stunning, venture into the countryside for a real adventure.

Take a hike to the 100 Waterfalls with local tour operator Tiger Trail. First, you'll take a boat to Nam Ou Village, then walk through rice paddies before reaching the falls. You can go for a swim and enjoy a traditional Laos lunch before taking



Sunset on the Nam Ou River in Nong Khiaw

istock / kovgabor79

the boat back to Nong Khiaw.

Explore Tam Phatok Cave (a one-hour walk south of town, or rent a bicycle to get there in 20 minutes). During the Vietnam War, local people sheltered here during bombings. Explore the wide-open chamber in the cave, which gets a lot of natural light, so you don't really need a flashlight or a guide.

Take a three-hour return hike up to the Nong Khiaw viewpoint for spectacular views across the valley and the town below. To find the trailhead, go past the bridge on the guesthouse side of the river and you'll see signs with arrows pointing you in the right direction.

Muang Ngoi

For a more remote experience, make your way upriver by boat to Muang Ngoi. This village attracts more of a

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The Nam Ou River snakes along the valley floor, passing the towering limestone karsts.



Hike in Nong Khiaw

Getty Images / Vincent Jary

LAOS

backpacker crowd than Nong Khiaw which caters to all budgets. Muang Ngoi only started receiving 24-hour electricity in 2013, and still retains its authenticity.

Take a multi-day trek to nearby Tai, Hmong and Khmu villages. You can book a multi-day tour through Lao Youth Travel or you can hike independently.

Take the road that leads out of Muang Ngoi and walk to the Tam Kang Cave to enjoy a refreshing dip in the river.

For epic views over the village, hike the steep, 30-minute trail to Pha Noi viewpoint. Entrance to the trail is at the north end of Muang Ngoi, behind the temple.

Vang Vieng

Vang Vieng used to be known for its drug scene, TV show-themed bars (such as *Friends* and *Family Guy*), tubing down the river while heavily intoxicated, and endless parties. However, these days the town is much more relaxed, with quiet surrounding farmland, red-tiled rooves and towering karsts, similar to those found in southern Thailand.

Renting a bike is one of the best ways to see Vang Vieng, with many guest houses offering mountain bikes, regular bicycles, and advice on places to visit. Free maps are no longer available, but you could either ask for detailed directions or download a Hobo Map. There are numerous caves in the surrounding karsts, including Lusi Cave, which is



Vang Vieng

iStock / kitchakron

across the bamboo bridge (look for the signs near Otherside Restaurant), about a 25-minute walk, or about a 10-minute bike ride.

Don't forget to bring a torch, as it's damp, dark and slippery on the rocks inside Lusi Cave. You'll wander through the cave with only your light to guide you, while passing by numerous stalactites and stalagmites. After a 25-minute walk inside the cave, you'll reach the lagoon with a few tubes floating in the darkness. It's safe to swim in the lagoon, although with the only light will be from your torch, so it can be a bit scary.

For a more enjoyable swim, take a 45-minute cycle out of town to the Blue Lagoon. You really can't get lost on your way here as there are numerous signs.

Plain of Jars

At Phonsavan, 248mi (400km) north of Vientiane, lies one of Asia's greatest mysteries, The Plain of Jars.

LAOS

Huge Neolithic stone urns litter the countryside, some as tall as 10ft (3m) and weighing several tonnes. Historians are still baffled as to why these stone jars were carved 2,500 years ago. One local myth suggests the jars were used to keep human remains, while another says that the stone jars were used to ferment wine. Or, perhaps they were there to collect rainwater for drinking.

From Phonsavan you can organize a local tour, or hire your own motorbike. Tuk Tuks are not allowed to take travelers to the Plain of Jars, and there are no buses available. Once you reach the plains, be aware that only a few of the sites are open for visitors. During the Vietnam War, the Americans dropped 270 million bombs on Laos and today, there are still unexploded bombs around, so stay on the marked paths.

Luang Namtha and Nam Ha National Park

Located next to the new Nam Kan National Park, this stunning area of rainforest is a great place to hike and visit hill tribes (expect to encounter people from the Mien, Karen, Hmong and Akha Tribes). Luang Namtha is the jumping off point to the nearby national park.

The most common trip from Luang Namtha is a three-night, two-day journey to nearby villages, which includes jungle trekking, guide fees, accommodation, and food. However, if you're feeling especially adventurous and are physically

fit, there are longer trips of up to eight days. When researching various different tour operators, ask to see photos of where you'll be sleeping and for details about what you'll be eating. Some places offer comfortable mattresses with mosquito nets, while others are just sheets on the ground with banana leaves for padding.

After a long hike, reward yourself with a visit to the herbal sauna in Luang Namtha, and enjoy a pizza from Bamboo Lounge, a restaurant that gives back to the community by training and employing ethnic minority locals. It also provides free drinking water, which really helps to cut back on single-use plastic bottles.

Go mountain biking to the surrounding village of Ban Nam Dee, or continue to Nam Dee waterfall, (great if it's rained recently, but quite dry otherwise).

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Tribal hill village near Luang Namtha

Sam Grimmer

Essential Insurance Tips

Travelling to Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos? Here are the top three tips to look out for to protect you and your belongings.

Traveler's Diarrhea

Diarrhea can take down even the most seasoned of travelers, so if a local dish leaves you feeling ill, our assistance teams can help find the nearest doctor. And, with World Nomads travel insurance, you can make a claim for reimbursement for these medical expenses (less any excess, which may apply), even if you're still traveling.

Travel insurance is designed for even the smallest medical emergency, and our assistance team can support you 24/7, even if you're held up in a squat toilet. If it's really serious, they can arrange for an emergency evacuation to the nearest hospital, and guarantee payments if necessary, so you have one less worry.

The danger with gastro is you can lose more fluids than you can keep down. Dehydration can be deadly, so even though you may have a trusty stash of Pepto-Bismol, don't rely on your own instincts or Dr Google for medical advice.

Riding Motorbikes & Scooters

Motorbike/scooter accidents are common throughout Southeast Asia.

It's easy to hire a bike, so, it's not surprising that we see everything from exhaust pipe burns to injuries caused by horrific crashes, which can sometimes be fatal. If you're going to ride a bike anywhere in Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos, it's essential that you know what your travel insurance covers, what it doesn't cover, and how to get help if you need it. Bring your driver's license from home (paired with an international driver's permit for the class of vehicle you're intending to hire).

Importantly, you have to comply with local laws, and buy the correct plan or adventure sport upgrade (if applicable) for World Nomads to cover you to ride a motorbike or scooter in the class you're licensed to ride.

Theft

Theft is very common across Asia. It's a good idea to leave valuables at home, and, if you take out your camera, smartphone or money in public, be aware of your surroundings, and keep an eye out for passing motorcyclists. Before you travel to Vietnam, Cambodia or Laos, store a copy of your gear receipts or other proof of ownership, as you'll

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Real-claim story

“After three weeks of dysentery in Cambodia, I went to a clinic where they did a blood test and found that I had typhoid fever. They gave me medicine intravenously, injections, and medicine to take after I left the clinic. After finishing the medicine, the diarrhea persisted so I went to the hospital where they confirmed I still had the typhoid by another blood test. They prescribed more medicine.”

Australian in Vietnam and Cambodia

need to provide this with any claim if your gear is stolen. Contact your bank before departure to let them know how long you will be overseas in case of suspicious transactions, especially after you return home.

All World Nomads travel insurance plans will have some coverage for theft or if a carrier has lost your checked in luggage. However, with any insurance plan, limits, conditions and exclusions may apply, for example, if you have simply misplaced your gear or if your tech gets damaged. Generally, you need to be able to show that you took reasonable care to look after your gear. That means not leaving your gear behind or your camera in your checked-in baggage. You should carry your electronics and valuables with you at all times, and lock your gear up in a secure location when you can't take it with you. If your stuff is stolen, you will need a police report, or some other kind of report from an authorized representative (e.g a property irregularity report from the airline or bus company if your bags were checked in), to validate your claim.



Tribal hill village near Luang Namtha

Sam Grimmer

Real-claim story

"We arrived in Siem Reap on the motorcycles that we own (purchased in Hanoi, Vietnam), when some dumb driver pulled out right in front of me. I slammed on my brakes, fell, and was given a lift to a clinic. They took an X-ray and said there was no break, but prescribed medications."

US resident in Cambodia

Real-claim story

"I was walking along the pavement and I was robbed by men on a motorbike. The pillion passenger snatched the bag I was carrying. I was in shock and did not give chase as the motorbike was too fast. The street was not empty, with some pedestrians and food sellers. I made a police report at a local police station."

Singapore resident in Vietnam

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A monk at Angkor Wat

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for your next adventure?

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