


ASIA: CAMBODIA

# New beginnings in Battambang





NOT ONLY A MASSIVE  
MOVE TO A NEW COUNTRY  
BUT A RENOVATION  
OF HISTORICAL AND  
HYSTERICAL PROPORTIONS  
– HAS REWARDED  
THESE TWO STYLISH  
ADVENTURERS WITH  
SOMEWHERE TO SHARE  
THEIR CREATIVE TALENTS.

The shop, the residence, the  
cooking school and tassel-  
making continues on.

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**B**attambang, quip Cambodians, is where tourists come when they are ‘temped out’. In my case, it’s where we came after tiring of too many long flights to and from Australia. Indeed, my partner Morrison Polkinghorne and I had hosted foodie tours to Southeast Asia for over a decade, while in between he ran a bespoke tassel and trimmings business and me, a television food styling career. With regular business trips to America and Europe on top of everything else, we needed a new middle ground.

A sea change over an ocean beckoned. But to where? We knew Thailand, Vietnam and Laos well, having previously written books on their cuisines. Or perhaps Myanmar / Burma? After all, *The Burma Cookbook* won us first prize for Best Asian cookbook of the year – so that was a definite consideration.

As for Cambodia...well, that hadn’t entered our equation.

For years we neglected visiting Battambang because Cambodia’s northwest highways were shocking. The relatively short but rutty 170km drive from Siem

Reap took eight hours, and the boat even longer. Then, seemingly overnight, regional highways improved and the drive lessened to just a couple hours.

It was our first trip as tourists to Battambang that sealed the pact. We’d long been attracted to the city’s colonial architecture – remnants of both French and Thai occupation. What we didn’t expect was a vibrant art scene. On our first night we attended a vernissage (the term used for a preview of an art exhibition, which may be private, before the formal opening), and were feted by aspiring Khmer artists. Battambang, claims its promoters, has the kingdom’s highest per capita rate of artists – plus, it’s home to the internationally-renowned Phare circus. This city’s creative pool won us over instantly.

Decision to move made, it seemed a straightforward case of learning a new language, appreciating an alien culture, and befriending a new cadre. How naively simple it all appeared.

We sourced our new home in the city’s French colonial architectural heart,

amid enchanting two-storey high-gabled shophouses with open porticoes running along the streets. We adored our neighbours’ decaying window shutters and distressed finished walls. During renovations new possibilities raised their daily heads: what started as just a home with weaving workshop, transmogrified into a three-room deluxe B&B, Boutique gift shop, and Libations Bar. We decided to call our new venture Bric-à-Brac – fitting for a stylist with an overload of film set props. It suited the grand luxe style of bygone French Indochina. Considering we were in Battambang, the letter ‘B’ became the catch all.

Alas, our three-storey premises needed much more than just TLC. We were overwhelmed, and I was sorely tempted by valium too-easily sold without prescription at unlicensed pharmacies. Our sole electricity was three 15-watt bulbs, and the top floor a building site of gravel and detritus. Three squat toilets were so infested I refused to move in until they were replaced. The original exterior was gaudy swimming pool green, looking ►



like a tiered birthday cake on acid. We commissioned outdoor blinds, but they inexplicably arrived with ‘Happy New Year’ stenciled in Khmer. Emissions from unsealed plumbing took weeks to locate and remedy. During our first cocktail party, water seeped through a back wall where workers forgot to glue the joints. On one occasion, Morrison was thrown across the floor when an untapped electrical wire touched the metal piping we used to conceal wires.

Luckily, local labour was cheap – albeit not so skilled. Presiding over a minor army of 25 non-English speaking workers under our command, daily each sought orders about electrics, plumbing, painting and resurfacing. And us, with no plans, nor prior experience. We winged it, but fretted when labourers worked without safety belts or ladders – one day I saw a man tiptoeing from the third-storey railing reaching high to paint. Jack-hammerers

declined to wear earplugs, while welders preferred to squint and fire instead of donning protective goggles. We were inundated with dust and grit for months on end, and the only thing ubiquitously worn were surgical masks. I purchased so many that I nearly bought shares in a medical company.

We strove to demonstrate that renovation means restoration, not desecration. We were inspired by French nostalgia, and aesthetically by Japanese wabi-sabi, the latter embracing and glorifying transience and natural ageing. We made each room a design statement, preserving original vintage tiles and dado wall finishes, sealing distressed finishes and window grates under layers of glaze. We juxtaposed industrial chic electrical fittings and polished concrete with Persian carpets. We built ensuites for all four bedrooms, forming sink pedestals from bamboo moulding. Fortuitously, our

shipping container contained enough furnishings for a small hotel.

Battambang is a city of contradictions, and now it has us. It boasts Cambodia’s longest runway, but an airport without planes. There’s no hands on the clock tower of its art deco central market. The city has the charm of a quiet laid-back provincial town, when in fact this is Cambodia’s second largest city. And the train station has no trains nor track, although nearby O Dambong boasts the exhilaratingly bumpy Bamboo train – so named because its flat bed carriages are made of bamboo. (Lonely Planet describes it as ‘one of the world’s all-time unique rail journeys.’)

Battambang is destined for international fame. Its colonial architecture is in line for World Heritage status, and at its ancient ruins one can view temples free of jostling tourists. Yet for us, it’s acquired a unique status. It’s our new home. •



And your bed is ready.

## FAST FACTS

The closest airport to Battambang, Cambodia, is Siem Reap, home to famed Angkor Wat. There are numerous connecting flights from Australia via Ho Chi Minh / Saigon, Singapore, Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong or Phnom Penh, using variously Vietnam Air, Silk, Air Asia, Jetstar or Hong Kong Express. Regional airlines include Bangkok Air, Cambodia Angkor Air, Scoot, Hong Kong Express and numerous others. Battambang is 2.5 hours from Siem Reap airport or 4-5 hours drive from Phnom Penh and Bangkok. The city is serviced by numerous public coach – public minivans, plus sleeper overnight coaches, including direct buses to and from Bangkok. Private taxi transfers in Cambodia are inexpensive. Siem Reap to Battambang by river boats takes about seven hours in rainy season from June to November, and many hours longer in the dry season. contact [\[@\] www.Bric-a-Brac.asia](#) for food tours [\[@\] www.GlobetrottingGourmet.com](#) Morrison's trimmings and tassels available on [\[@\] www.passementeries.com](#)



Sunrise in Battambang.