

A photograph taken from inside a train, looking out through a window with a dark frame. The landscape outside is a rural Cambodian countryside. In the foreground, there is a dry, grassy field with two cows grazing. In the middle ground, there are several tall, thin palm trees. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a bright, hazy sky. The overall tone is warm and scenic.

FRESH HORIZONS

After more than a decade, the rail route between Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh has recently resumed, finally opening up the beautiful countryside of Cambodia's rural south

By Jonathan Evans
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Just as the sunrise split the horizon in an exquisite orange, Sihanoukville's train station came into view – a parade of white and blue arches with latticed metal frames. I'd arrived at the unfeasibly early hour of 6.30am on a Saturday, with my head still spinning. After reflecting on two hedonistic days in this seaside town, I was still none the wiser as to what "Snook" (as it's known to expats) is trying to be.

A middlebrow beach resort, a gambling mecca, a backpacker hotbed? Developers have come and gone, leaving a curious hotchpotch of all the above. I'd tried to sample it all, resulting in an ill-advised late night and an embarrassing exchange with a bemused station attendant. I had enquired where my seat (C74) was, only to find out that the "C" carriage didn't exist and I could rest my tired body where I chose.

Only 25 years ago, with the Khmer Rouge casting dark shadows over Cambodia, the idea of a Westerner paying a visit would have been laughable, not to

mention dangerous. Sihanoukville was mere jungle until the Vietnam War, when its port was established, initially as a military base. It was well after the French had left that the 260km "Southern Line" was built to complement the road link with Phnom Penh, only reaching completion in 1969.

Despite beaches that are easily Cambodia's finest, Sihanoukville suffers from a perennial image problem. The town's functional history is mirrored in its equally utilitarian appearance: gaudy statues of golden lions and sky-blue dolphins bookending the main street, Ekareach, sum up its visual appeal.

But there's a far more pleasing side to Snook, and it's all clustered in pockets around the disparate beaches. Sokha, the most alluring of Snook's white-sand stretches, is only accessible to guests at its eponymous luxury hotel. So aesthetes with smaller budgets head for Otres, a boho-chic beach harbouring all kinds of gourmet delights, eye-catching beach huts and boutique boltholes.

Near Victory Beach, I stayed at Harbour Boutique – a jaw-droppingly pretty hotel complete with an art gallery and magnificent sea views. Over at Serendipity Beach, the younger, more refined near-neighbour of party-central Ochheuteal Beach, there's even a "vegetarian eco-café and knowledge hub" (Dao of Life) and artisan rum bar (La Rhumerie). I visited during Chinese New Year, so Ochheuteal's pyrotechnics, torch-twirling dancers and noisy beach bars meant its normal serenity was harder to find. It also made my early start that bit more challenging.

The contrast in surroundings could hardly have been starker as the train chuntered out through the shanty villages of corrugated iron and into

TOP TO BOTTOM:
TWO WOMEN
PREPARE TO CATCH A
TRAIN ON THE
NEWLY REOPENED
"SOUTHERN LINE";
THE WHITE-SAND
BEACHES AROUND
SIHANOUKVILLE ARE
SOME OF THE BEST IN
CAMBODIA



the countryside. Looking around, I struggled to comprehend how a ticket could only cost US\$7; there was nothing basic about this air-conditioned, lavishly upholstered carriage with push-down windows and even a TV. Joining me were an earnest English couple, a Frenchman with his Cambodian wife and their sleepy kids, a chatty Australian backpacker and, at regular intervals, a ticket inspector making announcements through a barely necessary loudspeaker.

Aside from the tourist-beloved Bamboo Train, Cambodian rail services ceased entirely in 2009 when the Battambang–Phnom Penh line stopped running. Sensing potential demand, local and foreign backers collaborated on plans to revive the dilapidated railway. When Australian logistics group Toll pulled out, Cambodia's Royal Railway – now the sole licensee – refurbished French rolling stock from the 1960s and opened the route in April 2016. On a railway once plagued by Khmer Rouge bandits, there could hardly be cosier confines from which to watch the idyllic rural scenery – palmyra palms, gaily coloured houses, gently ruminating oxen – slowly unspool.

Yet even this vista paled in comparison with the genteel treasures of Kampot, where I was greeted under a perfect mid-morning sky by a driver with a decorative red *remorque* (tuk tuk). The gentrification of this pepper-blessed town, a kind of Asian Aix-en-Provence, has been underway for years. It even hosts a Readers' and Writers' Festival and comedy club,

alongside a multitude of hip cafés and foreign-run businesses nestled in Chinese shophouses under billowing bougainvillea.

Kampot's greatest delights, though, are of the natural kind – a magical lotus pond whose purple blossoms unfold skyward in the morning; the elegant riverside promenade ("The Front") studded with manicured flowerbeds and immaculately sculpted white lampposts. At every turn is a feast for the eyes; the slow onset of sunset had me frantically chasing its beauty all over town, from The Front to the durian monument and every odd roundabout and ramshackle townhouse in between.

As I digested a chewy, spicy beef *chaa kdow* (stir-fried beef with pepper), a lengthy blackout hit central Kampot at 9pm. Thumping dance beats drew



GOOD TO KNOW

To pre-book Royal Railway tickets, visit **baolau.vn**; for timetables and the latest information, visit **railtravelstation.com/royal-railways-cambodia**



LEFT: PASSENGERS MAKE THEMSELVES COMFORTABLE DURING THE SEVEN-HOUR JOURNEY BETWEEN SIHANOUKVILLE AND PHNOM PENH, WHICH COSTS JUST US\$7

PHNOM PENH

me towards a giant night market and fairground. An outdoor disco under a multi-coloured Ferris wheel had young locals lost in its spell, while I tried (and failed) throwing darts at bright-hued balloons to win prizes. The market stretched for miles, selling every conceivable knick-knack and clothing item. Motorcyclists weaved through the hordes, shouting “Hello!” Friendliness is engrained in the Khmer DNA, and reluctant though I was to leave the next morning, a kindly driver sped me (for a trifling US\$2) through the mustard shophouses to the triangular roofs and food stalls at Kampot station.

Snaking through the outer edge of Bokor National Park, the terrain was noticeably different. Limestone karsts rose sharply, and in the paddies, ducks – sometimes people and cattle, too – scuttled through miniature ponds. Spellbound, we eased into Takeo province after a faltering forward-backward manoeuvre at a railway crossing.

To visit Takeo after Kampot is to understand the true meaning of contrast. From a town in full bloom



“The slow onset of sunset had me chasing its beauty all over town”

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: THE TRAIN ROUTE CUTS THROUGH THE VERY HEART OF RURAL SOUTHERN CAMBODIA; FRIENDLY RAIL STAFF EPI TOMISE THE KHMER PEOPLE'S WARMTH AND GENEROSITY; THE DISTINCTIVE ARCHITECTURE OF KAMPOT TRAIN STATION



to one in near-total shutdown, my experience of Takeo was best summed up by the fact that my pre-booked guesthouse was closed. The owner had left for the holidays, her daughter told me, so I should head to her friend's B&B next door instead. Right.

It wasn't that Takeo lacked amenities; it was more that none of them were open. Short of cash and craving food, I resorted to the petrol station's convenience store and feasted on what seemed to be the only meal in town – a tube of Pringles.

Twenty kilometres from here lie the ruins of Angkor Borei, a small but significant walled city close to the Vietnamese border. It predates Angkor Wat by two centuries, and is chiefly responsible for the province's designation as “the cradle of Khmer civilisation”. In the absence of any meaningful transportation, I was reduced to absorbing what minor curiosities the town had to offer. Yet even in these insipid surroundings lay beauty: an incongruously grand temple complex, Seihak Ratanaram, where two trainee monks made a cheeky entreaty for “money!”, and pagoda spires glistened as the sun sank over a football-sized plaza of Buddhas guarded by golden umbrellas.

Back at Takeo station, awaiting the 8.50pm Phnom Penh express, my sole companions were a muttering old lady selling snacks (more Pringles), a troupe of friendly canines, and several persistent

PHNOM PENH



mosquitos. By 10.30pm, as I desperately watched for signs of life on the desolate track, only occasional car headlights penetrated the darkness.

A young man named Vitlun apologetically strolled over to say he'd called Kampot station and checked the arrival time for me. I hadn't even asked him to. The driver had waited for missing passengers before setting off, he explained, and thankfully the mystery train finally appeared.

Even at 1am at Phnom Penh's imposing, 85-year-old station, I found kindness in unlikely quarters: a driver who not only took me to my waterfront hotel, but was happy to stop and help me buy food and drink at a tiny booth along the way.

Phnom Penh may be one of South-East Asia's smaller capitals, but its buzz can be felt from miles around. It's a chaotic place of claustrophobic alleyways and vast open spaces; of glamorous riverside restaurants and kerbside fried-tarantula vendors; of stunning palatial landmarks and tumbledown tenements; of rich history and striking modernity. There's the newly boutique-ified Bassac Lane; and Street 240, a gorgeous road of non-profit emporiums that's also home to Bar.sito, Phnom Penh's coolest cocktail bar. A sunset walk down Sisowath Quay – flanked by the Mekong and the Royal Palace – ranks among Asia's finest promenades.

A deliciously shabby hybrid of Asia and Europe, Phnom Penh is easier to navigate than Saigon or Manila, and prettier and cheaper too. It's also arguably more fun. The reason? The same one that made my trip through this undervalued slice of Asia such a revelation – the great warmth and generosity of the Khmer people. ✈



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
THE DISTINCTIVE CHARMS OF KAMPOT;
THE BUSTLING ENTRANCE TO PHNOM PENH'S STATION; FOOD SELLERS AT KAMPOT TRAIN STATION



EXPANDING THE LINE

Now that Sihanoukville and Phnom Penh are linked by rail for the first time since 2003, efforts to restore the "Northern Line" from Phnom Penh to Battambang, Sisophon and Poipet on the Thai border (388km) are also underway. Work was slated for completion in February 2017, but difficulties in upgrading infrastructure, along with a late rainy season, have caused delays and there's no official word on an opening date. Prime Minister Hun Sen has also enthusiastically backed a rail link from the capital to Siem Reap. As yet, though, the project has not received an official go-ahead.



SilkAir flies 21 times weekly between Singapore and Phnom Penh