

Siem Reap, we meet again

Travelling is often a disorienting experience, even more so when you return to a destination that you thought you knew. At times, it leaves so profound an impression, it makes you question the very nature of travelling. BY JONATHAN EVANS

My first whistle-stop tour of Asia in 2007 took in two rite-of-passage stops that left me with vastly different impressions. First, the Cambodian temple gateway of Siem Reap where, awestruck by the genius of the Angkorian empire, I luxuriated in small-town serenity, shaded from the sun by frangipani blooming over riverside cafes. Next, its polar opposite: the chaotic frenzy of Ho Chi Minh City, where the overpowering intensity of District 1 — rats scurrying around restaurants, blistering heat, industrial-strength coffee, deafening motorbikes — sent me spinning back to my hotel, dazed, dehydrated and delirious, desperately seeking sanity and air-con.

While I vowed never to return to Saigon, Siem Reap became my new favourite destination — despite a sneaking feeling that, temples aside, there wasn't an awful lot to actually do here. Years later, on two very different occasions, these hasty first impressions were completely turned on their head. In 2014, I found a Saigon far more attractive than the one I'd left, replete with skyscrapers, pulsating nightlife and Parisian-style cafes lining the boulevards.

Then, returning to Siem Reap for a sultry fortnight this April, I discovered a town in the throes of a renaissance, packed with desirable bars, gorgeous laneway hotels, pop-up cocktail stalls and alluring crafts. Quietly and under the radar, this sleepy heritage museum — where monks strode alongside historic buildings and tuk-tuk trundled down bumpy lanes — had metamorphosed into a global melting pot. Now a living, breathing city, Siem Reap had lost none of its innate charm, captivating me so completely that I made it my next home.

The French have a phrase, *jamais vu*, that describes the sensation of being in a situation that seems familiar yet feels somehow unrecognisable. In Siem Reap, I discovered exactly what the phrase meant. The way we experience travel is like the way we appreciate music — our first impressions of a place or a song coloured irrevocably by context, the unique circumstances of that moment, the life stage we were at, the mood of the day, the company we kept. And yet a destination, like a piece of music, takes on new meaning over time as your life grows into it, bringing fresh perspectives, imbuing it with new significance.

There are places that feel different over time, and those that have seen large-scale aesthetic change. The *jamais vu* I experienced in Siem Reap differed greatly from that which

I felt upon reacquainting myself with London's Shoreditch, 20 years after working there; Bali's Canggu, shortly after marrying there; or Siargao in the Philippines, three years after first visiting. These were places that had undergone startling facelifts, lined with endless locales to eat, drink or stay. Gentrification had transmogrified not just the areas' physical geography and clientele, but their entire character.

In Siem Reap, myriad new outlets reinvigorated these old streetscapes, yet its languorous, low-rise ambience had changed little. The difference was in the time I took to explore it. As a first-time visitor, I'd been far more preoccupied with admiring lotus-turreted temples than sizing up local businesses or meeting Khmers. This time, wandering down a leafy backstreet, I made my temporary home at Rambutan Hotel & Resort, a secluded idyll possessed of such restorative energy that I barely left it for a week.

The store assistants were so ubiquitously charming that I began to derive enormous pleasure from such quotidian tasks as visiting the laundry lady or buying drinks at the 7-Eleven. The litter-free riverside looked lovelier than ever, its white lamp posts and bridges reflected in still emerald water, silhouetted by flame trees billowing over its banks. But these were not new areas; they had been here for years. How did I not know them? Was my memory playing tricks on me?

When I did sample the new Siem Reap, I sidestepped Pub Street — no longer a calm gastronomic enclave but a bustling, Patong-like circus — and stayed by the river, where hip eateries and bars overflowed not with Western artists, dreadlocked yogis or temple-hoppers, but young Cambodians. At Pou Restaurant, I feasted on the beautifully plated nouveau-Khmer cuisine of Mork Mengly, one of the country's most buzz-worthy chefs. In Kandal Village, I perused Korean leatherwork at DSK workshop, admired photography at Tribe art gallery and munched plant-based dishes at Vibe. Each evening, I'd meet friends for sundowners at Treeline Urban Resort, a stately boutique hotel with impeccable eco-credentials designed by renowned architect Hok Yang, complete with a contemporary art gallery.

At the plush three-storey Sokkhak River Lounge, I sat with the owner, Bodia Spa founder Soann Kann, serenaded by Khmer folk singers. Purely by chance, I stumbled upon Menaka Lounge, a lavish cocktail bar decked out in scarlet, while ambling through the alleyways west of the river. And an evening at Villa Chandara, on the banks of the West Baray reservoir, was one of the most indescribably wonderful experiences I've had in Asia: I sipped barista-made passionfruit martinis, watched musicians coax melancholic strains from traditional instruments and dined like royalty in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by nothing but spiky sugar palms, starry skies and the occasional ox.

Millions of visitors are drawn to Siem Reap's temples each year, especially those set within Angkor Archaeological Park

PHOTOS REMI YUAN AND WEI GAO/UNSPLASH

Most of these enterprises are owned not by get-rich-quick expats, but by locals. Saryroth Chan, who manages Villa Chandara's holding company DineBeyond, believes the development is down to an entrepreneurial streak that's newly empowered by government initiatives.

"The last two governors focused on street lights, electricity, cleanliness, pavings and parking. Now, we run our own small companies, to give back to the family and benefit local people. The rent is cheaper, because you know the owner and run fewer costs. The government is encouraging family businesses to register, and they get three years free of tax."

Likewise, the hotel industry has witnessed a revolution in this once traditionally leaning city. It's been spearheaded by innovator-in-chief Christian de Boer, who since arriving at Hotel de la Paix (now Park Hyatt) in 2007 has redefined the way hoteliers treat their customers, staff, environment and community. Aside from insisting his staff receive equitable healthcare — thus skirting the worker exploitation that's rampant in Cambodia — he has introduced large-scale reforestation, the no-plastic Refill Not Landfill initiative that now operates in 10 countries, and the Made-in-Cambodia Market to support disadvantaged local artists. What lies behind his all too apparent love for the city?

"I just feel it," de Boer ponders. "I think it's the people I've been allowed to work with. It's amazing what I've been able to do. I'm able to think differently, and it's been accepted by all three of my owners [Hotel de la Paix, Shinta Mani and Jaya House River Park, currently Siem Reap's top hotel on TripAdvisor]. I want to promote everything Khmer. Cambodia in 1963 was the number-one country in Southeast Asia, with a GDP on par with London. Let's bring it back, because it's still here, right now."

In this poor country where economic adversity has often seen talent going unrealised, many of his trailblazing ideas are born out of what he sees as a sense of fairness to the local people.

"If you want to help people out of poverty, you create jobs. Instead of getting stuff from China, we can get it made here, which means it has a story, it has an impact. We make sure all the service charge goes to the staff — same with annual leave, public holidays. That results in better staff and service. It's about changing the industry and educating."

De Boer's chief advocacy is to improve the environment in areas that are most susceptible to climate change. "We brought plastic to Cambodia," he says, pointing at himself and me. "I believe we have a responsibility as a mature generation to take the lead and change it. At Jaya House, we've planted 1,100 trees. We need to start valuing trees. So that's why I'm adamant to continue, and change mindsets."

Reintroducing travellers to nature is a priority for DineBeyond's Chan, whose adventurous eating tours include deluxe dinners along the Tonle Sap freshwater lake and



(left and above) Located along the Siem Reap River near the Angkor World Heritage sites, Jaya House River Park's long-term vision is to be plastic-free; (right) Villa Chandara, on the banks of West Baray reservoir, offers wonderful experiences in the middle of nowhere; (below) DineBeyond's mission is to reintroduce travellers to nature



PHOTOS JAYA HOUSE RIVER PARK AND DINEBEYOND



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temple picnics. She chanced upon her romantic rustic escape, Villa Chandara, while cycling along West Baray on weekends.

"There was this small hut, a family with one kid," she recalls. "So I suggested building this place up. I want people to have a luxurious experience among real people and bring back memories of when they were young. We like going somewhere where no one knows us. Siem Reap is more than just temples; you can experience a lot if you know where to go."

If the nearby landscape is a key attraction, it also explains why — Pub Street's backpackers aside — Siem Reap remains a city largely enjoyed by an older crowd. For as much as we train our minds to appreciate beautiful, cultured cities as youngsters, we rarely feel the same gravitational pull towards them until later on. When I first encountered Asia in my thirties, travel meant more to me than ticking bucket lists of famous monuments. There was the nightlife, the spontaneity, the happening hotspots. In my 40s, those ephemeral moments mean less. Details that once seemed incidental — comfort, customer

service, meaningful encounters — have assumed greater importance.

Unwittingly, I've become an advocate of slow travel: taking time to gauge the character of a place, meet its residents, chance upon its secrets. I lived contentedly in London for 13 years; now I find it cold, frustrating and exhausting. Siem Reap was a place I'd never contemplated living — sedate and touristy, it was the antithesis of what I looked for in a hometown. Now, its gentle pace and cosmopolitanism fit this phase of my life more perfectly than I'd ever imagined. I hardly know anyone here; I barely understand Khmer. But Siem Reap and I have had a meeting of minds. It feels like we're on the same wavelength. It feels like home.

"It's a funny thing, coming home," says the lead character in the F. Scott Fitzgerald film, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*.

"It looks the same, smells the same, feels the same. Then you realise that what's changed is you." **A**

