

Capital gains



Few Asian cities have transformed so thoroughly, and in such a short time, like Phnom Penh. We trace the unstoppable rise of Cambodia's largest city over the last decade

Words **Jonathan Evans**

It's Friday night in the city and there's an electric vibe in the air.



I'm standing at the confluence of French brasserie and wine bar Le Manolis, popular European diner Khéma and a spruced-up Sisowath Quay, running parallel to the Mekong riverside, and everyone is heading somewhere – to dinner, to drinks, to a river cruise with dinner and drinks. There's an intoxicatingly fresh élan and vivaciousness to this city, where before there was merely a sense of urban chaos and downbeat resignation.

Wind back the clock a decade ago, and Phnom Penh felt far from glamorous. The Royal Palace, Wat Phnom and Central Market provided isolated historical points of interest, with only a handful of New Khmer Architecture buildings – a tropical modernist style fused with vernacular elements – surviving from this seminal movement of the 1950s and '60s. A grungy, traffic-choked city characterised by decaying tenement blocks and dingy backstreets offered few reasons for the average tourist to return.

When the Vattanac Capital tower opened near the train station in 2014, it proved a turning point for the Cambodian capital. Only the second skyscraper in Phnom Penh, its angular architecture – although its shape is inspired by the dragon – felt revolutionary for this developing country. It would provide not only a headquarters for Vattanac Bank but a luxury mall, serviced apartments, office space and, in 2018, 15 storeys devoted to luxury hotel Rosewood Phnom Penh.

What followed was little short of remarkable, as the city underwent a radical transformation from low-rise terrace patchwork to Southeast Asia's fastest-growing metropolis, strewn with high-rise towers, pristine thoroughfares, spotless parks and upscale hangouts. The icing on the cake was Cambodia's selection as host venue for the 2023 SEA Games, the country's biggest sporting event ever. The metamorphosis was crowned by the unveiling of the grandiose Morodok Techo Stadium in out-of-town Chroy Changvar, which hosted the opening and closing ceremonies, and is now the national football stadium.

There's more to the glow-up: this now-prestigious peninsula also hosts many tourist attractions and swanky condominiums, including the super-luxe integrated resort Morgan EnMaison which comprises five soaring towers (one of which is Cambodia's tallest building) that incorporate residences, a mall, a luxury hotel, helipad and yachting marina. It's an all-embracing makeover that has brought not just cosmetic improvements, but a stylish look and confidence to every conceivable facet of lifestyle, from the arts and dining to retail and entertainment.

Street artist and muralist FONKI's (Fonki Yav) designs, for instance, are emblazoned across city spaces, telling the story of Cambodian culture and history. "We believe Cambodia can be a place for cultural discovery, and travellers can be drawn here by its open-air museums and thriving art scene," says the artist, who also heads FT Gallery, which specialises in urban contemporary art. He calls his gallery "a space where art breathes and tells stories, much like the vibrant streets of Phnom Penh."

Previous spread: The Chaktomuk Theater, an example of New Khmer Architecture
This page: Sisowath Quay; street artist and muralist FONKI
Opposite page: The gilded Royal Palace against gleaming skyscrapers

IMAGES: NICK SELLIS (PREVIOUS SPREAD), SHUTTERSTOCK (CHAKTOMUK THEATRE & SISOWATH QUAY)



FONKi has collaborated with hospitality brands like Rosewood Phnom Penh, which is increasingly spearheading the city's artistic and cultural renaissance, and which styles itself as a "canvas for creativity" for Cambodia's evolving arts landscape. The luxury hotel is a patron of the Khmer Literature Festival, has just hosted Phnom Penh Designers Week in June, supports non-profit arts school Phare Ponleu Selpak and curates quarterly exhibitions, displaying work from artists Chan Dany and Leang Seckon. Along with ArtSpace, the country's largest gallery, the hospitality brand is teasing out the creative impulse innate to so many Cambodians.

"I believe Cambodia aims to be recognised not just for its past challenges, but as a vibrant, forward-looking country that honours its rich heritage," says Rosewood's managing director Daniel Simon, recently voted the country's best general manager. "Phnom Penh's rapid transformation reflects this vision. The influx of international investment – in architecture, hospitality and the arts – signifies a strategic effort to promote the country, while urban-planning initiatives demonstrate a commitment to sustainable development."

THE CAPITAL'S RECENT DEVELOPMENTS – WHICH MAY BE TAKEN as signs of growing prosperity – has undeniably been boosted by foreign investment, but it's also heartening to know that many desirable locales in Phnom Penh are locally owned and run, particularly in the food and beverage industry.

Restaurants are often the first cultural point of entry into a city, and two of Phnom Penh's finest are overseen by Kimsan Pol and Mariya Un Noun – at Sombok and Restaurant Un respectively. Commanding a prime position on Sisowath Quay, Sombok's all-female team rustle up inventive, artfully presented Khmer dishes in an arresting dining space. At Restaurant Un, chef Mariya's Nouvelle Khmer Cuisine re-invigorates Khmer cooking's rich flavours with European gastronomy. For both, the subtext in the experience is that Cambodian cuisine, although not as globally renowned as its neighbours', is right up there with the best of them.

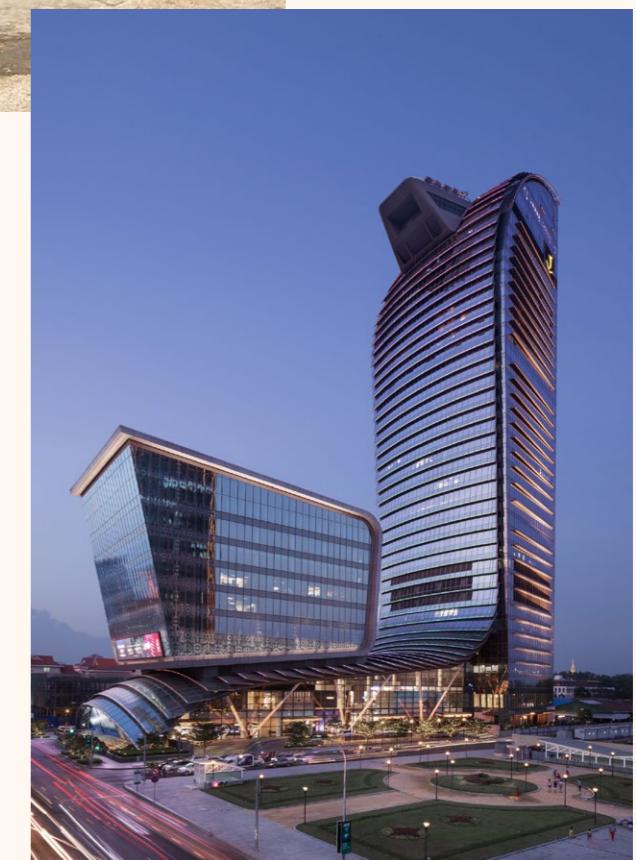
Not that we require further proof of this, but the city's best-known celebrity chef – Ros Rotanak, aka Chef Nak – clinched the top prize at the 2023 Gourmand World Cookbook Awards for *SAOY: Royal Cambodian Home Cuisine*, in which she creatively reimagines dishes from the pre-war years. At her luxurious, century-old wooden residence by the Mekong, Chef Nak hosts home-dining evenings, cooking classes and visitors staying overnight in the adjoining wooden house: an immersive exposure to Cambodian cuisine, heritage and community.

There's a palpable alignment of vision across cultural sectors, and all these efforts in the F&B space echo how FONKi describes his own endeavours in the arts: "I'm digging into my roots; the city's really developing in its own way. So, there's room now for contemporary art and for our new generation to get back our history and recreate our narrative."

THE ONWARD MARCH SHOWS NO SIGN OF SLOWING – NOW, work is under way on an ambitious, 57ha urban-regeneration and ecotourism initiative that aims to enhance the lifestyles of those perusing the Mekong riverside in Daun Penh district. Phnom Penh Pedestrian Street comprises three zones; the first juxtaposes stores selling Cambodian crafts and international brands with restaurants serving cosmopolitan cuisines. In the dynamic second

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From top:
Morodok Techo
Stadium; a buzzy
street with
Central Market in
the background

zone, contemporary pop-up stores and bars make for potentially exciting nightlife. But the third zone will be most welcome in this space-strapped capital: an area of lush greenery with landscaped gardens and comfortable seating, ideal for unwinding near Sisowath Quay. Due for completion later this year, Pedestrian Street could be the most transformative project yet seen in Phnom Penh.

Elsewhere in the city, new developments are springing up that are raising eyebrows with their audacious design credentials and ingenuity. Architectural pioneers Urban Living Solutions (ULS) are making waves across Cambodia for their community-focused, eco-savvy “live-work-play” projects. In Phnom Penh, the firm’s sprawling Factory – a textile manufacturing and creative business hub – is joined nearby by spectacular residential high-rise Urban Village. Another project called Odom, an avant-garde, mixed-use “vertical city” incorporating 8,000sqm of green space, is under construction and aims to bring the traditional feel of Khmer villages into the future.

“We believe urban development should not only cater to tourists, but also fundamentally improve residents’ quality of life,” says Corbett Hix, ULS’s community and creative director. “Skyscrapers, modern infrastructure and commercial areas have sprouted, changing the skyline. [But] these developments alone don’t create a vibrant, liveable city; it’s their integration with community-centric spaces that makes the difference. The new pedestrian-only zone is a perfect example of how urban planning can reshape and beautify the city.”

A century ago, Phnom Penh’s French colonial architecture earned it the moniker Pearl of the Orient. Now, almost 50 years after war and conflict had decayed Cambodia, there are many more reasons for the capital – affordable, attractive, culturally rich and exciting – to reclaim its exalted standing within Southeast Asia.

Chic stays

Homegrown brands of sophisticated hotels, both luxurious and mid-range, have been on the upswing in Phnom Penh in recent years



Baitong, designed by Asma Architects, is a lush, beautiful sanctuary in the bustling BKK1 district, and flaunts wide-open spaces and clean lines that are the firm’s calling card. baitonghotel.asia



Penh House – with its wow-factor foyer and rooftop – arrived in 2018 around the corner from Street 240’s numerous fair-trade stores crammed with artisanal craftsmanship. penhouse.asia



Plantation Urban Resort and Spa, looking brighter and airier after last year’s sweeping renovation, is a calm downtown oasis and is ideal for families with kids. thepplantation.asia



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