



THE RESURRECTION OF TEMPLE TOWN

Following a major infrastructure overhaul, Cambodia's Siem Reap is now more magnificent than ever.

WORDS JONATHAN EVANS

PHOTOS JONATHAN EVANS, TOMOKA COCKTAIL COMPANY, UNSPLASH

In mid-2019, my wife and I moved into our new home by the riverside in Siem Reap, hoping to settle into a more peaceful existence after spending several years in larger Southeast Asian metropolises. Having tired of big-city life, we took a hiatus before deciding that the second largest city in Cambodia — a jewel we'd admired for many years — perfectly fit our vision for community life, because it seemed to have everything we wanted without the urban bustle that increasingly alienated us.

What we didn't realise was the extent to which over-tourism had damaged the city's look, feel, and natural charm. The preceding decade's influx of visitors had

brought unchecked overdevelopment to Siem Reap's modestly-sized centre. Ad hoc buildings encroached upon the narrow streets, and infrastructure struggled to contain the traffic, rain, and teeming crowds. The bar beside our apartment blasted dance music until 3am every night.

Within a few months of our move, though, the pandemic arrived, instantly replacing the city's year-round hubbub with unsettling silence as visitors — as well as thousands of hospitality-sector workers — simply vanished. Cambodia's COVID-19 caseload remained minimal, but for this built-for-tourism locality, the pandemic's economic effect

was devastating. Arrivals at Angkor Archaeological Park dwindled by 98 percent, while sprawling Pub Street — one of Asia's most popular nightlife districts — was reduced to a boarded-up backwater. But the pervasive tranquility and deserted, dusty dirt tracks started to restore the city to a semblance of its original form — the nascent tourist town I'd first fallen in love with as a tourist in 2007.

Visitors to Angkor Wat stroll along the sugar palm-lined boulevard that leads to the world's largest religious structure.



THE 38 ROADS PROJECT

As major coronavirus outbreaks continued to occur and tourists stayed away, the government took the opportunity to announce the 38 Roads Project, a USD 150 million (SGD 200 million) facelift for Siem Reap covering more than 100km of public space. The reconstruction promised broader streets, improved drainage, new sidewalks, riverside pathways, and cycling paths. An overdue panacea for timeworn city infrastructure neglected during boomtime, the project also included plans to beautify the UNESCO park’s prominent public spaces, as well as the entrance to Angkor Wat. It was an acknowledgement that Siem Reap’s relentless expansion had reached its tipping point.

By October 2021, progress on the 38 Roads Project was accelerating, and the first road was laid near the end of a long monsoon season in November. Our new city was taking shape, and while the reconstruction had taken its toll on both residents and businesses, we began to bask in the rewards.

In mid-December, there was even a three-day arts event — the Writers and Readers Festival in *bijou* enclave Wat Bo Village — which felt like a street party with circus and musical performances, workshops, as well as literary talks.

Residents revelled in the sparkling new streets, which were embellished with pedestrian crossings and traffic lights. Freshly constructed footpaths and grassy banks restored the riverside’s beauty, while cycling paths helped to improve traffic congestion and road safety. Temple Town felt more attractive, intimate, and innately soulful than ever.

But this wholesale renewal went beyond mere aesthetics; with these improvements, Siem Reap had evolved into a mature, cultured, and slower-paced destination. Tourism gradually returned in 2022 to the revitalised city, and fashionable businesses launched in Wat Bo and beyond. Within a year, the area was even crowned “Asia’s Coolest Neighbourhood” by *Time Out*.

(This page, clockwise from left) Cycling paths enhance road safety and provide new channels for exercise; Pub Street comes alive at night with various dining and entertainment options; stalls selling local food and fresh produce are scattered around the city. (Facing page, clockwise from top left) The attractive façade of River Café; Manava is a delightful retail outlet run by a social enterprise that employs women artisans; an eye-catching mural and water feature in the garden of Endora restaurant.



IN AND AROUND STREET 26

The most notable beneficiary of the regeneration has been Street 26, where two long-established Pub Street refugees have relocated: 20-year-old music bar Laundry and ornate cocktail lounge Miss Wong. The street also hosts the stylish eatery River Café, and newcomer Stewart on 26, which opened during the roadworks to bring tropical, airy interiors, DJs, and fusion bites to this suburban hotspot.

Over on Wat Bo Street, POU Restaurant Siem Reap has re-opened in boutique hotel Maison 557's garden, showcasing local chef Mengly Mork's adventurous Khmer home-style cooking. Just across the water sits Endora, an idyllic Francocentric brasserie and wine bar. Its manager Philippe Robic, who also runs the legendary neighbouring nightclub Barcode, has loved the house on Little Pub Street since he moved to Siem Reap seven years ago. When it became available two years into the pandemic, he jumped at the chance to move in, naming the restaurant Endora after a character from the 1960s fantasy TV series *Bewitched*. "I got a call which was a wrong number. Suddenly the caller's photo appeared on my phone, and I knew I'd found the name for the restaurant. As easy as that — or was it a message from a witch?" he recalls with a laugh.

Robic, a first-time restaurateur, attributes Endora's success largely to chef Kanha Pheak, who has full control over the menu. Meanwhile, he oversees the stylish décor himself, which is all about eye-catching contemporary paintings, sculptures, and water features.





WAT DAMNAK

In the nearby Wat Damnak Village is Seiha Chomnab’s Jomnó, a Khmer fine-food restaurant that has been reinvigorated with a move to a stunning garden setting. Chocolate Garden, a spacious site with a playground and library, serves superior coffee and hosts pop-up markets – a departure for the team behind the popular Dialogue and Bean Embassy cafés. It is joined next door by The Keys by Tomoka (known simply as The Keys), a sublime venue mixing next-level cocktails.

Tomoka Cocktail Company has manufactured and sold its range of syrups, bitters, and liqueurs from Phnom Penh since 2018, while also offering other bar-industry services. Once COVID-19 eased in Cambodia, they set their sights on finding their own venue. “When we came across what is now The Keys, with its two guest villas, swimming pool, and beautifully maintained gardens, we fell

in love with it,” recalls company director Hermione Brooks. “We ended up building a kind of mini-cocktail resort, where guests can spend an hour or an afternoon, or even use it as a base for a week.”

The drinks selection has both complex and creative cocktails alongside easy-drinking classics, and seeks to showcase local flavours, using ingredients like Kampot Pepper Tincture and Mekong Aromatic Bitters. “We’re aiming for a relaxed, casual space – more of a chill-out space than a late-night party spot,” Brooks says, although The Keys occasionally hosts guest DJs and live music.

(This page, clockwise from left) A tantalising platter of cold cuts, cheeses, and bread at The Keys; the outdoor pool and traditional-style villas at The Keys; creative cocktails at The Keys often combine diverse flavours.

(Facing page, clockwise from top left) Night markets offer an array of clothing, accessories, and jewellery; locally made bags at Shop SATU; a ceramics store located along Pub Street.





EXPLORING LOCAL BOUTIQUES

In chic shopping quarter Kandal Village, new outlets have popped up during the pandemic. A recent arrival is Bao Kandal, a pork belly bun and noodle specialist that creates multiple iterations of these popular Taiwanese street snacks. Directly opposite lies The Village Bakery & Café, a pastel-hued establishment selling artisanal breads, cakes, and premium coffee. Next door, Dutch designer Ka-Lai Chan runs a retail store for social enterprise Manava, which showcases eye-popping clothing and accessories made by women artisans.

“We had intended to open our store two years ago, but the pandemic hit and since then, we’ve been looking for the right moment,” says Chan. “We started looking for a shop space last April, and from there everything moved very quickly – we signed a contract in June and opened in August. Kandal Village is the perfect location – we love this street’s beautiful stores that are filled with unique finds.”

The shop is installed in the type of older Khmer building that is typical of the area, but after a vigorous paint job, it was largely ready to move into before styling work began on the shopfloor. “It’s an ongoing process and it’s not perfect yet, but we’re so happy with the result,” says Chan. The brand is already a big hit with overseas customers through its online store, and is consolidating its international presence with two appearances this year at the Maison & Objet design fairs in Paris.

By the river, Shop SATU has opened next to boutique hotel FCC Angkor, and sells craft products and clothing made by Cambodian artisans; The 1961, a cavernous design café by the river, offers excellent coffee and local bites. The city’s post-pandemic reinvention was crowned with Angkor Botanical Garden, a multi-faceted horticultural attraction, and Angkor Wildlife & Aquarium, a home for elephants, tigers, sun bears, and crocodiles.

It seems ironic that a global health emergency triggered such large-scale investment, both in infrastructure and businesses. It looks as if the 38 Roads Project wasn’t just about bringing long-term benefits to Temple Town, but was part of a prescient masterplan to reimagine the city. In late 2023, a new airport – a much larger hub than the existing terminal – will open outside Siem Reap, and a nearby satellite city, Siem Reap Thmey (“New”), will help to accommodate the anticipated influx of tourists. These forward-looking plans look sure to help Siem Reap reclaim its rightful position among Indochina’s most cherished cities. ■



SIEM REAP IS ON SINGAPORE AIRLINES' REGULAR FLIGHT NETWORK. SCAN THE QR CODE ON THE LEFT FOR THE LATEST AVAILABLE SCHEDULES.