

Kingdom of Cambodia (Kampuchea)



Location: Asia

Status: UN Member Country

Capital City: Phnom Penh

Main Cities: Battambang

Population: 15,000,000

Area: 181,040 km²

Currency: Riel (KHR)

Languages: Khmer

Religions: Buddhist, Muslim, Hindu

Calling code: +855

Drive on the right

Situated in the middle of the mainland of Southeast Asia, Cambodia is a destination like no other. The country is characterized by numerous cultural heritages that have seen it open its doors to many tourists from all around the globe. The country's governance follows a constitutional monarchy where a king is selected by a royal throne council to head the nation. This monarchical kind of government has led to the establishment of many historical palaces dating from the past, which still stand as landmarks in Cambodia.

There is a lot to see and do in this country in particular for an adventurous tourist. There are a series of islands and a long stretched beachfront. Also, there are a couple of ancient temples that date back in 9th and 13th centuries such as Angkor. They feature magnificent architectural designs and are still intact to date. The country has a rich culture and friendly citizens who are very hospitable to tourists.

Best time to go

Cambodia is an all year travel destination. Tourist numbers usually peak during the dry season. This period is from October through April. It is defined by periods of scorching sunshine and a warm breeze that sweeps across the entire country. It is the best time to travel to the remote areas as roads are still in good condition. In addition, it is an excellent time for touring the beach and engaging in various water sports. Rainfall is minimal and temperatures range from around 24 to 27^oC.

General Information

History

Cambodia is beginning to be recognised for its beauty and friendly, welcoming people; however it has a tragic history.

From 1975 to 1979, the Khmer Rouge regime, led by the infamous Pol Pot, killed an estimated one and a half million educated Cambodians (about one fifth of the country's population at the time) in an effort to create an agrarian society. Thousands more were either tortured, killed or fled the country. The Khmer Rouge was finally ousted by the Vietnamese in 1978. In 1979 Cambodia was gripped by civil war which lasted until the mid 1990s.

Angkor Wat, of which Cambodians are fiercely proud, is the highlight of any trip to Cambodia. It was the heart of the Khmer Empire which ruled most of the Indochinese peninsula during the 11th and 14th centuries.

Passport and visa

A visa and a valid passport are a must have to for one to gain entry to Cambodia. The passport must be valid for six months before the expiry date. One can obtain a visa upon landing at the airport or in the Cambodia embassies in their home country. To get a visa at any port of entry, you will be required to bring with you, two passport size photos and a filled in application form. This form is offered on flights. There are two types of visas: a tourist visa that goes for \$20 and a business visa that costs \$25. Be sure to specify which one you want. All visas are valid for 30 days and must be used within 60 days after being issued.

Money

The official currency in Cambodia is the Riel denoted as KHR. However, most citizens prefer to use the US dollars over the riel. You can do with the dollars but transacting in riel might expose you to better deals, during your shopping adventure. One US dollar is approximately 4000 Riels. In the remote parts, Riels are largely used but in the city, the shops accept both currencies. ATMs are widely available in Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambang and Sihanoukville will give out money in US dollar denominations. There are not many ATMs outside these areas. Please note while there are many gem shops in Cambodia, we advise against any purchase as the majority of gems are fake.

Post and telecommunications

Post in Cambodia is routed by air through Bangkok, making the service much more reliable than in the past. Telephone connections to the rest of the world are widely available but can be expensive. Internet access is available in most major tourist places such as hotels and restaurants.

Transportation

Transportation in Cambodia is not a problem. There is an elaborate transport network to get you anywhere you want to go. The roads are in good condition; all-weather, sealed highways and streets. Taxis are generally only used to and from the airport, and are at a set price. Tuk-tuks are used around town and cost approx\$1-3per journey in Siem Reap and around \$2 - \$3 in Phnom Penh. In both cities, short journeys of less than 1km are about \$1 and prices tend to increase at night. Motorbike taxis: Travel by motorbike in Cambodia is not safe and under no circumstances is this sanctioned or recommended.

Health and Safety

Climate

Cambodia has a characteristic tropical monsoon climate. Temperatures can be 21⁰C on the lower range and 35⁰C on the upper limit. In the month of April, highs of 40⁰C are common. The country experiences two seasons. The rainy season starts in May and ends in October. During this time, the weather is basically hot and humid. Heavy rains are encountered during the month of September and October with Tonle Sap and Mekong basins receiving the most rainfall.

The dry season is from November to early April, when the northeast monsoon winds reign. In December and January temperatures fall below 20⁰C. In this period, tourists flock to Cambodian points of interest.

Health and wellbeing

Please be aware that your health can be at risk in Cambodia due to poor sanitation and lack of proper medical facilities. Rural areas have few, if any, pharmacies and hospitals so make sure you travel with a full supply of any prescribed medicine you take. If you need medical assistance, we recommend Royal Angkor International Hospital in Siem Reap, (t: 063761888) and International SOS Medical & Dental Clinic in Phnom Penh (t: 023216911). Each traveller is responsible for his or her own health. First and foremost, make sure that you have travel insurance for your trip. You should also consult your doctor or local travel clinic for the latest information and advice on travelling to Cambodia before departure.

If you have a medical condition or allergy which requires particular attention, carry a doctor's letter with you that describes the nature of the condition and treatment needed. We also recommend you pack a medical kit, including paracetamol and a diarrhoea remedy.

Vaccinations

Before travelling to Cambodia, please ensure you have adequate protection against disease. Contact your doctor for the latest medical advice on the vaccinations you need, no less than two months before your departure.

Travel insurance (compulsory)

We do everything possible to ensure a safe and enjoyable trip. However, travel inevitably involves some risk and this should be recognised by holiday-makers. Travel insurance is a cost effective way of protecting yourself and your equipment should any problems occur such as cancelled trips, delays, medical emergencies, baggage loss or damage. It also gives you peace of mind. Please also ensure your travel insurance covers all activities planned on your trip.

Culture & Customs

Etiquette and cultural differences

Experiencing different cultures is one of the joys of travelling and it is important that these differences are respected. Cambodia has cultural norms and taboos which we encourage visitors to understand and abide by.

Try not to get angry. Showing any frustrations or annoyances by shouting or becoming abusive is extremely impolite and it is unlikely to achieve a positive outcome. The Khmer's don't like to 'lose face'.

The culture and customs of Khmer people are evident in their way of dressing and music. Their culture draws much from the Buddhism religion that is practiced by most of the population. Everywhere you go in Cambodia, the locals tend to ask you personal questions. You might think that they are being nosy but their intentions are harmless. According to their religion and culture, it is important to understand the rank of a person before embarking on any conversation with them.

Greetings take the form of a bow with hands clasped as if you were saying a prayer. The way you greet a respected person will be different as compared to how you greet other people. Some Cambodians have come to embrace the western form of greeting but the bow remains a significant way of greeting. It is important to learn a few things before you travel to this beautiful country. For instance, 'Lok' is used to address men whereas 'Lok Srey' is an honorific title for women.

Sometimes, you will spot members of the same sex hugging or holding arms walking together. This is not a sexual orientation display but it is a form of showing friendliness, which is largely acceptable in Cambodia. However, if you are traveling with your significant other in this country, never make the mistake of portraying how much you love them in public. Public display of affection is mostly considered offensive. Only maintain eye contact with people whom you share the same social ranking otherwise, always keep an indirect eye contact. Lastly, do not touch anyone on top of their heads, you might just want to show appreciation but not in this country.

Temple visit etiquette

Foreigners are always welcome in temples. However, it is important that a few simple rules of etiquette are followed:

Dress appropriately and act with the utmost respect when visiting Wats (pagodas) and other religious sites, including the temples of Angkor.

Do not wear shorts or tank tops and make sure your shoulders and knees are covered.

Remove your shoes and hat before going into a vihara (monastery).

If you sit down in front of the dais (the platform on which the Buddha's are placed), sit with your feet to the side rather than in the lotus position.

Never point your finger or the soles of your feet towards a person or a figure of the Buddha.

A woman may accept something from a monk but should never touch a monk.

Show respect and turn off mobile phones, remove headphones, lower your voice and avoid in appropriate conversation.

Please note: The central tower of Angkor Wat is closed to visitors on Buddhist holidays.

Food and drink

It is not advisable to drink tap water in Cambodia. Bottled water is cheap and widely available. Khmer food is a blend of a number of nationalities. Being a French colony for some years and with numerous Chinese immigrants, most of its dishes are greatly inspired by the two nations. In the west, the cuisine is influenced largely by Thailand dishes while in the East, Vietnam cuisines are abundant. Seafood is a characteristic dish in coastal towns such as Sihanoukville, cooked in European and Japanese style.

In general, a typical meal will feature a salad, soup, main fish dish, rice and vegetables. Their dessert mostly comprises of fresh fruits and sticky rice. It is hard to not find fish and rice in any Cambodian cuisine may be due to their availability. There are plenty of fresh water bodies and expansive rice fields. To settle the food, Cambodia people take their local brands of beer, which you will really like. Coffee and tea are also available in their cafes and restaurants. Foreign wines and beers can be purchased from any of the restaurants.

The most well-known Cambodian dish is amok. Amok is a coconut based curry traditionally cooked with fish, however it is not uncommon to have it with chicken.

Public holidays

There are many religious public holidays in Cambodia. The main one is the Khmer New Year which takes place from 14 to 16 April every year. The celebrations usually go on for about a week. The second biggest is Pchum Ben. This national holiday was established for Buddhists to pay their respects to deceased relatives. It is also known as Ancestor's Day, and usually celebrated in September or October.

New Year's Day on January 1 to celebrate the Gregorian New Year

Victory Day on January 7 to commemorate the end of the Khmer Rouge regime in 1979

Meak Bochea in February for monks

International Woman's Day on March 8

Khmer New Year April 14-16

Visaka Bochea celebrated either in April or May for all Buddhists

Labor Day on May 1

King Sihamoni's Birthday May 13-15

International Children Day on June 1

Queen Mother's Birthday on June 18

Constitutional Day on September 24

The Pchum Ben Festival celebrated in September or October for all Buddhists to pay tributes to their dead loved ones

King Father's Commemoration Day on October 15

Paris Peace Agreement Day on October 23 to commemorate the treaty of Paris of 1991

Independence Day on November 9

Water Festival; Boat Racing Festival in November

Human Rights Day on December 10

Helpful tips

Donations and gift giving

Cambodia is a very poor country with little in the way of social services and you are likely to see poverty. Please read the following advice about donations and gift giving.

Do not give money to people begging, especially children. This reinforces the belief that begging is an acceptable way to make a living. If children make money from begging, their parents are less likely to send them to school. Children working on the streets are also vulnerable to abuse. Giving money and goods to beggars can accentuate an unequal relationship between locals and visitors, with tourists being seen as purely money givers.

Do not give sweets to children in villages that we visit.

Do not feel that you necessarily have to give material things. Sometimes, giving your friendship, time and interest to locals can be the best gift of all.

Tipping

Tipping is a personal matter and travellers are encouraged to tip any amount they feel is appropriate. For your convenience, we have included a suggested tipping guide below:

Bellboy: \$1

Chambermaid: \$1 per day

Guides: \$5-\$10 per day for guides (depending on group size and performance)

Drivers: \$2-\$5 per day, per person

Restaurants: In smart establishments you may find that the tip is already included in the bill. In local restaurants tips are not expected but you may wish to leave loose change on the table.

Price guide

Restaurants

Khmer food: from \$3

Western food: from \$4

Drinks

Soft drinks: \$1

Local beer: \$1

Bottled water: Small \$0.50, large \$1

Juice: \$2

Other Items

SIM card: \$3

Mobile phone: \$15-\$20

Books: \$10-\$15

DVDs: \$2.50- \$3

Pre-departure checklist

Travel insurance

Passport with at least six months validity from date of entry

Photocopy of passport

Visa or a passport photo and US\$20 for visa on arrival

Vaccinations

Foreign currency (US\$) and/or ATM card

All relevant tickets

Reconfirmed flights

Lightweight clothing

Long-sleeved shirts and trousers (recommended for evenings)

Electrical adaptor: 220V, 50Hz; 2 pin plugs

A small bag/backpack for day and overnight trips

Appropriate shoes for trekking, cycling and walking

Insect repellent

Sunscreen

Medication/first aid kit

Please note: Domestic airlines impose baggage weight restrictions of around 20kg maximum, so travel lightly where possible.