

NAVIGATING THE GLOBE

SMART TRAVELER

**“Despite its breathtaking
pace of transformation, this is
still, for me, a city of echoes,
reverberations of the past.”**

—VADDEY RATNER
ON PHNOM PENH

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Cambodian
monks at the
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Khmer color:
badminton at Neak
Banh Teuk Park; a
seafood dish at Malis
restaurant (below)



MY CITY

Phnom Penh Crossroads

IN THE FAST-FORWARD CAMBODIAN CAPITAL, THE PAST STILL HAUNTS By VADDEY RATNER

"MAMA, DO YOU SEE that echo?" my daughter asked. "On the wall there, looking at me." She was three years old, and it was her first visit to Phnom Penh, the city of my birth. "Why are there so many in Cambodia?"

I followed her gaze, where she had spied a gecko clinging to a high corner. In her innocent mispronunciation, she'd touched on something I felt was hauntingly apropos: Despite its breathtaking pace of transformation, this is still, for me, a city of echoes, reverberations of the past.

At the Hotel Le Royal, where we'd taken refuge from the city's bustle during our stay, lizards scaled the walls, and monkeys still ventured from the frangipani trees to steal room keys and fruit from poolside lounge chairs (the monkeys have since been moved to the city zoo). The scene recalled the verdant grounds of my own family estate in the middle of the city, where as a young girl I

always had to be on the lookout for sly characters descending from the trees amid the festive din of mealtimes in the garden.

There are echoes too of generations before, as in the Elephant Bar at Hotel Le Royal, where one can imagine the likes of Somerset Maugham and André Malraux, intellectuals and explorers, archaeologists and collectors, discussing in these smoke-filled rooms what to pillage and what to preserve in the fading days of the French protectorate. And in the black-and-white tiled hallway just outside, visitors peer into a display case of elegant cocktail glasses commissioned for the visit of Jacqueline Kennedy in 1967.

So much was destroyed in the war and revolution that emptied Phnom Penh of its residents and plunged the country into genocide in the 1970s that it is all the more striking that such fragile physical remnants should survive. Today one can stroll





A wedding procession makes its way along the Tonle Sap riverfront.

among the colonial mansions lining the streets around the Royal Palace, and visit the ornate iron pavilion assembled on the palace grounds as a gift from Napoleon III. Across the way is the National Museum, with its graceful multi-tiered wooden roof that for years housed a massive bat colony, bedeviling the efforts of curators trying to preserve the Angkorian sculptures below.

A few steps from the National Museum, along a thoroughfare of family-owned galleries, is Reyum, an arts collective that encourages youths to give meaning to their troubled pasts by reinterpreting traditional forms of painting and sculpture. Tucked in a side road around the corner is the non-profit Friends restaurant, which provides on-the-job training for

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young people, some of whom are former street children. A short walk behind the palace brings the visitor to Street 240, a row of shops offering fine crafts, silks, and the uniquely Cambodian concoction of Belgian chocolate sprinkled with Kampot pepper.

Not far beyond, at the convergence of boulevards bearing the names of kings, rises the Independence Monument. Among my most precious memories, I recall, as a girl of four or five, walking here with my father. He would tell me stories that would stay with me in the ensuing years of chaos, stories I would invoke in quiet moments during my struggle to survive. If you arrive early enough in the cool morning hours, you will find the park here filled with people, young and old, rich and poor, ministers and students and street

vendors, walking, playing badminton, catching a moment's rest, or exchanging stories before the start of another busy day.

While the city is frenetically rebuilding in what feels like a race to make up for lost time, this is a land of survivors, where each of us is shadowed by our own particular collection of echoes. To the casual observer, the history of opulence and tragedy, artistic achievement and suffering compressed into just a few generations may feel irreconcilable. Yet, for those willing to listen and inquire, the city is full of clues marking junctures where our collective histories intersect, places that remind us what we've lost, and what might endure.

VADDEY RATNER is the author of the bestselling novel *In the Shadow of the Banyan*.

ATLAS

Phnom Penh, Cambodia



Cambodia has 27 public holidays a year (the U.S. has 10), including Khmer New Year, the king's birthday, and Victory Over Genocidal Regime Day.