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# Phnom Penh Rises

As a new luxury hotel opens, change looks afoot in the Cambodian capital, a city where quality of life shifts in small but persistent steps.  
By Jeninne Lee-St. John



See the sights in style via Rosewood's electric tuk-tuks.

COURTESY OF ROSEWOOD PHNOM PENH





**MY FRIEND ASHLEY LIVED IN** Phnom Penh's Raffles Hotel Le Royal for two months 10 years ago, in the historic wing in the front of the building, which opened in 1929. His room had a clawfoot tub. He has fond memories of their *tom yum* soup, their French restaurant with classic silver-service dining and their old-school gin-and-tonics.

Rosewood Phnom Penh—which is contemporary and crisp, while artistically and pragmatically incorporating local design elements, like wall panels that resemble louvered shutters—opened this year, and, from our high-floor room, we literally look down on the Raffles, as well as parkland Wat Phnom to its west and the fortified U.S. Embassy to its east. “I’ve never seen Phnom Penh from this perspective,” Ashley marvels. “It looks so clean.”

I met Ashley the day he moved to Saigon, where I was living, from Phnom Penh. He arrived with tales of dodgy nightclubs and a general sense of lawlessness. That same year, 2008, the *New York Times* noted the arrival of KFC and other foreign money in Cambodia, advising: “This may be your last chance to see Phnom Penh before this former village...once called the Pearl of Asia, turns into a booming metropolis. The city seems to shimmer with the sense that its low-slung buildings, ambling cows and smiling monks are not long for this world.”

Ah, that ground-level rural-urbanity is still very much the world of Phnom Penh. The city has seen significant expansion, both in population (it’s now at 2 million) and cash flow (thanks to Chinese and Japanese donations, the city bus system has gone from one line to 10 since 2016, with free rides for factory workers), but it hasn’t exploded in any way close to the way Saigon has. The country’s economic growth hovers at 6 to 7 percent year on year.

That’s not to say things aren’t moving forward. “We have peace and stability. You can sit here in a nice coffee shop not worrying about war,” Nov Povleakhana, 27, a digital reporter for Voice of America Khmer, says when we meet her in a nice coffee shop, a roastery, in fact, that is the flagship of a hugely popular home-grown chain in a



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Phnom Penh’s newest personification of top-notch service, at Rosewood; tuna Nicoise in the hotel’s Brasserie Louis; Rosewood’s main lobby/lounge is aptly named The Living Room.



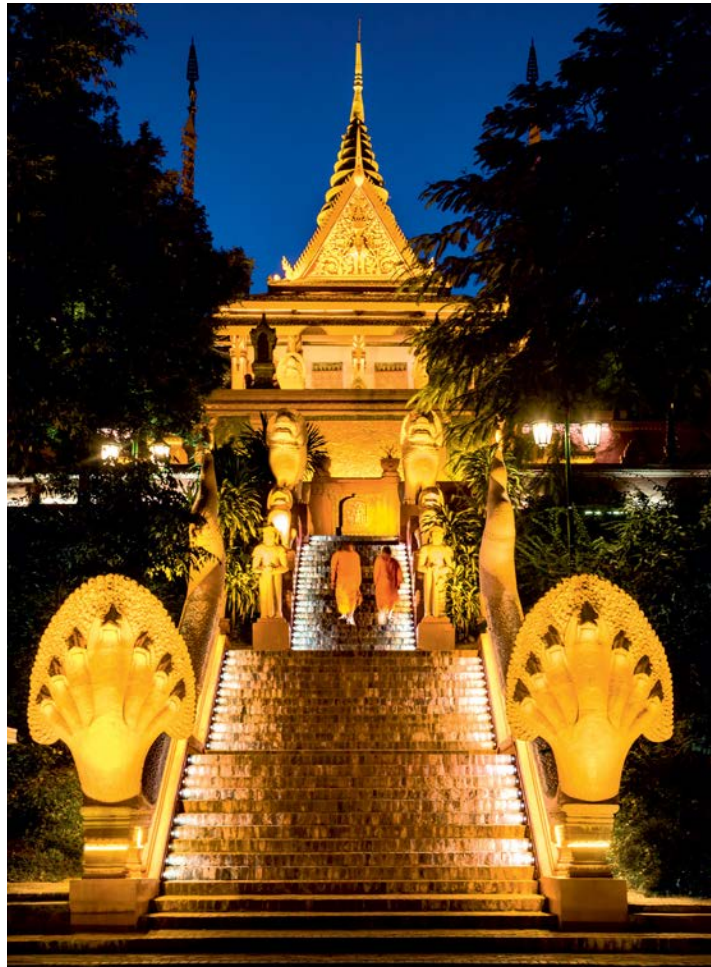
leafy neighborhood where villas go for US\$1 million. “People are spending more money.” Subtle shifts over the past decade span innovative native non-profits like Tiny Toones, which uses breakdancing to keep kids off drugs and in school, and community-minded entrepreneurs like the expats behind Cerevisia brewery, who teach locals to make craft beer and have created a social space that pulls from across the cultural and economic spectrum.

Yet things like these have been incremental quality-of-life changes, nothing to signal that Phnom Penh was making a play for tourism prime time. So, when I heard a Rosewood was opening in the city center, I was intrigued. There have long been a Sofitel, an InterContinental and, of course, grande dame Raffles Hotel Le Royal, but besides those retreats, this has been at best a boutique town. On my first visit in 2009, the riverside roofbar of the Foreign Correspondents’ Club was the coolest spot in town. What glittering future did one of the world’s more elite hotel brands see in Phnom Penh? It sounded like the city was skipping a few steps. How were they going straight from KFC to, like, Noma? I brought Ashley with me to find out.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Rosewood's leather-filled Whisky Library; views of the river from a Mekong suite in the hotel; the capital's famed Wat Phnom lights up the night.



**IT'S NO EASY TASK TRYING TO LOOK** Rosewood-refined while slurping a bowl of soothing *kuy teav*, the Cambodian version of beef pho, while making small talk with the hotel lounge singer, who has pulled up a chair for some tea. The clear afternoon sky stretches out over his shoulder and I put down my spoon, drawn up from the table to check out the near-vertigo inducing view.

We're right on top of the Central Market, its four canary axes looking like a giant compass. The low-rise city sprawls out southward and I can make out the peaked roofs of the Royal Palace. Following the river, I can see the not-yet-finished, planned suburb Diamond Island. Once a

fishing village, it has its own diversions and offices and municipal services, from a golf course to a city hall to luxury apartments going for US\$3,500 per square meter. Developers are upgrading the moniker to "Elite Town."

It occurs to me that this ridiculous title could aptly describe the property I'm standing in, if only Rosewood weren't such a decidedly, endearingly unpretentious brand. Phnom Penh is full-on, there are no enclaves of complete serenity. Rosewood is at last such an enclave, all subtle sophistication. Witness the cut-crystal glassware you'll love to cradle, the branded leather cocktail kits in the boutique, the Giza-sized pyramid of house-made chocolates. Located in the top 14 floors of the country's tallest building, the Vattanac Capital Tower, it's ideal for business travelers. Comfy but stylish open-plan spaces invite you to treat the hotel like your living room. With its French brasserie, Japanese izakaya, multiple bars, spa, gym and 20-meter pool, it's an oasis from the chaos and grit that you really needn't leave. But it also welcomes the city in, not least via the many floor-to-ceiling windows. It showcases local art: on my visit its gallery featured a show by Nok Cheanick on the terror of the Khmer Rouge. It has a local brewery make its craft beer. It has a fleet of sleek, sustainable, navy, electric tuk tuks. Pull up to the National Museum in one and the envy emanating from other tourists is palpable.

**THE CITY'S TOURIST ATTRACTIONS** haven't changed much over the years. But the social life certainly has. For the local rising middle class, it started with coffee. **Brown Coffee and Bakery** ([browncoffee.com.kh](http://browncoffee.com.kh)), where we meet Nov, was founded in 2009 by a Cambodian who had



studied in Australia. It has 19 outlets, a baking facility and a training center that prioritizes underprivileged students from the provinces. “Before when you had a photo of yourself with Starbucks, people would say, ‘Wow, you are so well off,’ because you had to leave the country to get it,” Nov says. “Now we have choices here.” Nov says going out at all is a generational change, and her friends usually choose foreign dining. “As long as it’s from outside, people will try it. They want new things.”

One such spot is **Oskar** ([oskar-bistro.com](http://oskar-bistro.com)), a recent outpost of the popular French bistro in Bangkok. Also on



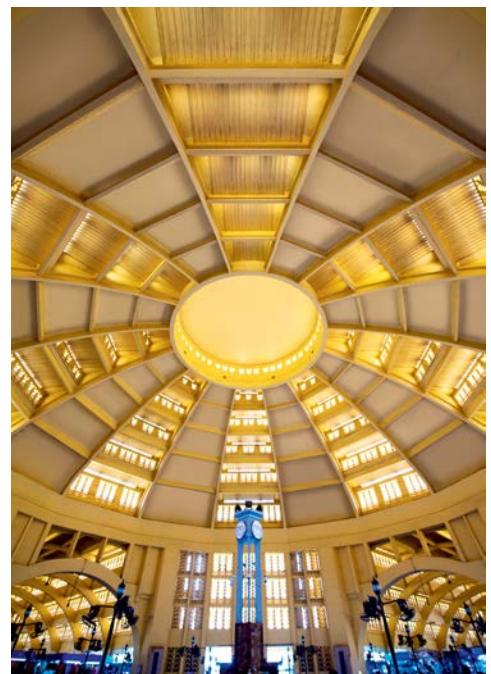
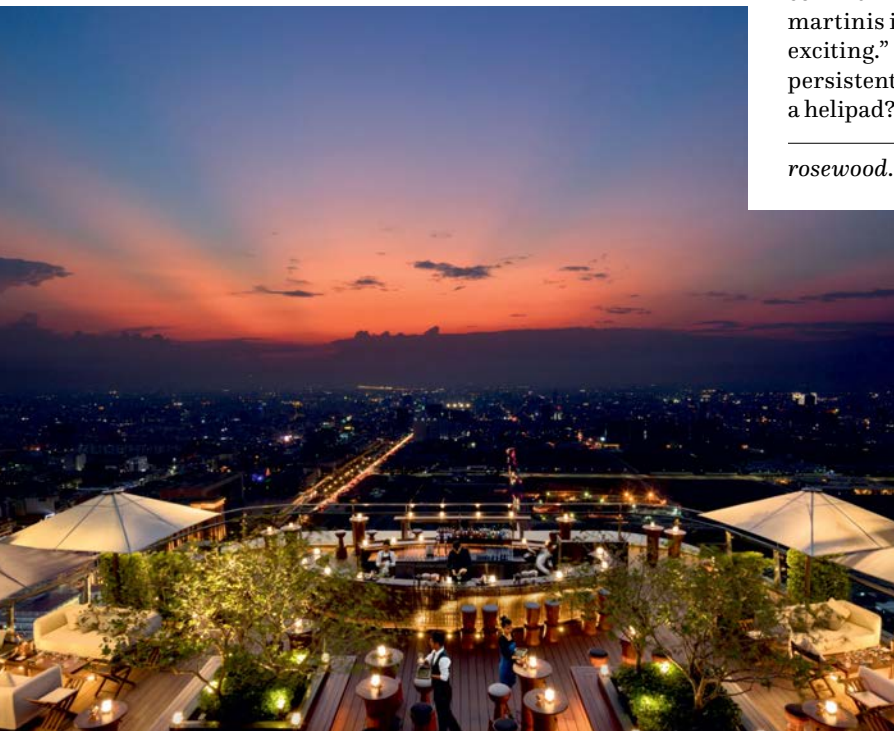
FROM TOP: Craft-cocktail pioneer Le Boutier; Sora skybar, atop Rosewood, is the hottest drink in town; the Art Deco ceiling of the city's Central Market.

my must list is **Le Boutier** ([leboutier.com](http://leboutier.com)), which heralded the arrival of the craft-cocktails culture in the city. Small and glass-fronted, it has a varied clientele and a blissfully syrup-free cocktails menu. The manager, Visith, offers sample-size drinks, allowing me to winnow my choices down to La Vie en Ros Sereysothea. Made of pineapple-infused vodka, Campari, grapefruit, jasmine tea tincture and bubbly, it’s named after a beloved Cambodian singer.

The next night we hit up **BattBong** ([fb.com/battbongbar](https://fb.com/battbongbar)), a leather-filled, den-like speakeasy behind a fake antique Coca-Cola machine in an alley. The musicians are playing chill acoustic, and the bartenders let me shake a few things behind the bar. We also go to **Est** ([estbar.com](http://estbar.com)), a bright wine bar that looks 1980s Wall Street but is friendly, well-stocked, and open til 2 a.m. Ashley remembers a “wine bar” in Phnom Penh circa 2008 where the owner had to leave to buy prosecco when he ordered it.

The apex of Rosewood perfectly encapsulates the new nightlife scene. Delicious Japanese restaurant Iza has open-kitchen areas for ramen and udon, sushi, and its centerpiece *robata* and *irori* charcoal grill, plus a sake list to drown in. Whisky Library has a wall of bottle lockers for club members and a stash of Cohibas. And then there’s the bauble-ceilinged inside of Sora, which spills out onto a spectacular roof bar that feels like a beach club and is westward-facing for perfect sunsets, making it the hottest drink in town. From here we’re looking down several stories over an old helicopter pad. “The city’s never seen Phnom Penh from this perspective,” says Hanny Gunawan, the Rosewood’s director of communications, as we watch the sky go magenta, martinis in hand. As Nov told me, “living here now is exciting.” No, it’s not your last chance to see the capital’s persistent rural-urbanity. But being able to look down on a helipad? Surely that’s a sign of a city on the rise. 📍

[rosewood.com](http://rosewood.com); doubles from US\$240.



FROM TOP: MORGAN OMMER; COURTESY OF ROSEWOOD PHNOM PENH (2)