



Phnom Penh slowly swims upstream. RIGHT: Green and modern pockets now dot the capital.







# CONNECTING IN THE CAPITAL

Ever so slowly, Phnom Penh is emerging from its tattered history, writes **CONNLA STOKES**, and it's an evolution best seen through the eyes of young entrepreneurs who put livability, sustainability and community first.

**PHOTOGRAPHED BY MORGAN OMMER**





## “I HOPE, ONE DAY, MY CITY WILL LOOK LIKE THIS.”

That’s what Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew told his host, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, in 1967 as he drank in the pleasant prosperity that enveloped postcolonial Phnom Penh’s wide boulevards, stately villas and crisply manicured lawns.

Today, of course, that urban interest would be steered in the other direction, with high-rises and global franchises mushrooming in the aspirant Cambodian capital, after a generation spent staggering to its feet. Yet the city’s tallest building, a US\$170 million luxury office and retail development called the Vattanac Capital, is struggling for tenants and still feels like a flag of hope, rather than a statement of arrival. “From ghost town to boomtown” goes the refrain, but to see how this city is coming to life right now, look not to the clouds.

Long a magnet for development workers and do-gooders—there are nearly 5,000 NGOs registered in Cambodia—the country, still lacking in basic infrastructure and social services but with an abundance of laissez-faire attitude, is ripe for creative capitalism. Now, Phnom Penh is finally getting the from-the-ground-

up microeconomic love that has helped propel forward neighboring Vietnam, for example. It’s a gentle gentrification, generated by a wave of sustainably and locally minded entrepreneurs whose ventures, from books to breweries, make the city more livable for residents and more alluring to visitors. “The goal is creating connections,” says Brittany Sims, founder of Farm to Table café, “to community, to food, to the environment and to Cambodia.”

Originally from Oregon, Sims is a perfect prototype of this cohort of trendsetters. Working for an NGO here, she struggled to bring locally grown produce to the market before realizing the constraints of her development project presented an opportunity. “I decided to set up a business and work backwards trying to connect with farm projects while creating a local marketplace,” she says while sitting in her leafy café, a laid-back, bucolic sanctuary where kids can frolic in the “edible garden” while the rest of us tuck into hearty salads, rice bowls and breakfast staples. “Farm To Table offers access to more ethically produced products, supports local farmers, and creates sustainable and healthy dishes.”

“People want to be able to come here and make more conscious choices,” Sims says of her restaurant, but it easily applies to the city as a whole. Just look at Coco





Khmer, a Phnom Penh-based social enterprise creating high-quality coconut oil and coconut-based products founded by Canadian Robert Esposito and his girlfriend Meaghan Tierney, who arrived with backpacks, not business plans. Esposito started the business in 2013 by teaching six women to press coconut oil after they had lost their homes and livelihoods in a sketchy property development. “We sold the first batch of virgin coconut oil in old peanut butter jars with no labels,” he says. They now whip up 1,500 to 1,600 liters a month, produce nine different products, and are starting to export.

Coco Khmer’s all-natural, high-quality, still entirely handmade goods—including, travelers take note, Dopp kit necessities such as lip balm, aftershave balm and deodorant—are now beautifully packaged and are available in more than 30 stores around Cambodia. Esposito does his best to ensure his 21 staff members have good housing and health care, their children go to school, and they have financial support for their own studies. “I really wanted to show that you don’t need a million dollars to do something here. In Cambodia, the danger is that during wartime, or in the aftermath, people did what they had to do to survive. That attitude is brought forward to business—there is still a lot of distrust,” Esposito says.

“But business doesn’t have to be war; the winner doesn’t have to take all. There is another way, whereby in a pursuit of betterment, Phnom Penh as a city, and its people, come before profits.”

**IT HELPS, THOUGH**, as anyone who’s been to Cambodia knows, that a permissive Wild West aura still pervades the country. Former Reuters correspondent Rupert Winchester and some partners now publish *Mekong Review*, a new literary journal printed in Phnom Penh and distributed regionally. The magazine, he admits, is “flying slightly under the radar” as the proper bureaucratic channels proved to be too tedious—and, it seems, unnecessary. “This is a great city for starting a small business,” Winchester says. “No one really cares what you do here, and it’s cheap to live.”

Erich Phillips and Bob Oudemans, who have kept their own passion project afloat for three years without taking any salaries, would raise a glass to that. They both came to Phnom Penh as trailing spouses; now they own a brewery, Cerevisia, and a bar, Botanico Wine & Beer Garden, pouring a full range of their craft ales, stouts and IPAs—all of which have been warmly welcomed in a city that’s otherwise awash with light, commercial beers.

“A friend of ours runs a restaurant and when he complained about his supply of craft beers, we saw that as a call to serve our community,” Phillips laughs. “In Phnom Penh, you can really see how each small business



ripples out a spear of influence within a neighborhood. We employ eight people at the brewery and it's been a joy teaching them the art of brewing. We are still basically passionate beer geeks who have never taken a paycheck." These guys see Botanico as a "third space," where expats and Khmer alike can escape the dusty streets and kick back in the chilled, verdant setting, sipping on, say, an Irish Red Ale—a full-bodied brew with a velvety smooth finish—or a fruity Mandarin Pale Ale.

Cambodia is also a huge market for whiskey, but for the Venezuelan owners of Samai Distillery, Antonio Lopez de Haro and Daniel Pacheco, if life gives you sugarcane (one of Cambodia's biggest crops), you best make rum. The former, also a restaurateur and bar-owner, and the latter, CEO of a solar energy company, started distilling rum for fun, but soon realized there was an opportunity worth exploring. They opened the country's first rum distillery in late 2014 and trained their seven Khmer staff from scratch. Demand has always outstripped supply. "It's amazing to think we introduced a whole new industry to Cambodia," Lopez de Haro says. "By the end of 2016, we will be able to triple the amount of bars we sell to in Cambodia, and we will start exporting to Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia."

On Thursday evenings, Lopez de Haro and Pacheco turn their beautiful, oak-barrel-filled distillery into a funky tasting room, inviting guest mixologists to make handcrafted cocktails (think a Khmer Colada, Mango Mojito or Samai Latte) that showcase the versatility of their sweet, 40-percent proof, dark rum, made with all Cambodian ingredients for an eclectic crowd of revelers and industry insiders.

If you're in town on an off-night, no worries, just head to Le Boutier, the city's newest craft cocktail bar, and order a 1,000 Tears of a Tarantula, which is made with Samai rum, kaffir, curry, coconut, Bénédictine, pineapple and, for a dash of local umami... *fish sauce*.

It's just one of many signature concoctions that's been dreamed up by Annemarie Sagoi, a relative newcomer, who first came to Phnom Penh from Chicago in 2015 on a consultancy gig for a hotel bar but was soon enthralled. When her business partner got wind that a shop on Street 308—the epicenter of the city's hippest, and still burgeoning, drinking quarter—was up for sale, they didn't hesitate. Their three-floor cocktail emporium has been an instant success, attracting expats, young Khmer and tourists, all of whom appreciate how the bar pays tribute to Cambodia's swinging golden era in the 1960s.

"Ultimately our aim is to help Phnom Penh's cocktail industry take a similar trajectory as Singapore or Shanghai," Sagoi says. "Phnom Penh has not had a fair





chance to recover from war but the city is growing in confidence, and I want to contribute to the city's revival. I get a lot of 'What the hell are you doing in Cambodia?' but I'm sure that Michael Callahan [of Singapore hot spots 28 Hong Kong St. and Proof & Company] got that when he moved to this part of the world."

**PERHAPS. I WOULDN'T RUSH** to equate Phnom Penh with those major global cities just yet. But there's certainly more reason to visit the Cambodian capital than ever since the days Lee Kuan Yew colored himself so impressed. "In years past, as a destination, Phnom Penh was better known for 50-cent beers and sleazy bars," says Mark Bowyer, founder of Rusty Compass, an online guide with local insight on Indochina. "Now, thanks to a host of small businesses, it's organically getting a rep for being cool, sophisticated and health conscious."

It's an equation that, many hope, ultimately will make for a more robust economy than one reliant directly on tourism. At the two locations of Feel Good Coffee are stellar fair-trade, bean-to-cup brews. The original café is

an urbane affair found in the hectic heart of downtown Phnom Penh, the second, more of a hideaway, where you can sit in an enclosed and shady garden and inhale the thick aroma of roasting beans—all sourced from Cambodia, Vietnam and Thailand. "We don't just train staff for jobs they are doing now," says Jen Green, a self-described "recovering lawyer" from New York who is one of Feel Good's owners, "but for the jobs they want in the future." The company offers in-house workshops and training, and financial support for education. "We look forward to the time when they follow their own dreams even if that is with another business," she says.

Not that they're trying to get rid of them; in fact, the Feel Good staff, well-known for being infectiously good-humored, are incentivized to keep up the good work by being made part of the business—they receive shares in the company after 12 months. "Eventually," Green says, "we will leave this business in their very capable hands." From crafting a cuppa for the community, to planting seeds for the next generation to flourish, that sounds like the very definition of sustainability. ☺



Samai Distillery doubles as a tasting room on Thursdays. FROM FAR LEFT: A Farm to Table salad; Annemarie Sagoi mixes it up at Le Boutier.

## THE DETAILS

### HOTELS

**Sun & Moon, Urban Hotel** So sleek and modern for Phnom Penh, it feels otherworldly, but it is fun, too, with funky, Pop Art-inspired rooms, and a fab rooftop pool area for sundowners and lounging. 68 corner of Street 136 and 15 Phar Kandal 1; 855-23/961-888; [sunandmoonhotel.com](http://sunandmoonhotel.com); doubles from US\$59.

**La Maison d'Ambre** A chic and cosmopolitan accommodation with 10 spacious, individually designed rooms, each named after one of the owner/designer's favorite films (for classic Cambodia, request *Rose de Bokor*; for 1960's Hong Kong, *In the Mood for Love*). 123 St. 110; 855-23/222-780; [lamaisondambre.com](http://lamaisondambre.com); doubles from US\$100.

### RESTAURANTS + BARS

**Artillery Café** The elder sister of Farm to Table, Artillery offers scrumptious, super-healthy dishes including vegan and gluten-free options, all made using organic and locally sourced ingredients, in a laid-back setting with a comfy lounge area and outside seating. 82EO St. 244½; 855-78/985-530; [artillerycafe.com](http://artillerycafe.com).

**Barsito** Wander down the lane dubbed "240 and a half" and head through a large wooden door to find an artfully designed, smoky speakeasy—and a perfect Negroni. Street 240½; 855-17/873-101; daily 8 p.m. to 2 a.m.

### Botanico Wine & Beer Garden

9B St. 29; 855-77/943-135; [craftbrewhouse.org](http://craftbrewhouse.org); Monday to Saturday from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m., check the website for where else you can find Cerevisia's craft brews.

**Farm to Table Café** 16 St. 360; 855-78/899-722; [fb.com/farmto](http://fb.com/farmto) tablepp; daily 8 a.m. to 10 p.m.

**Feel Good Coffee 1** 79 St. 136; 855-95/380-163; [feelgoodcoffee.com.kh](http://feelgoodcoffee.com.kh); daily 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.

**Feel Good Coffee 2** 11B St. 29; 855-77/694-702; [feelgoodcoffee.com.kh](http://feelgoodcoffee.com.kh); daily 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

**Himawari Microbrewery** Grab a pew on the Garden Terrace, over the Mekong, and work through a menu of five high-quality, house brews, including a sweet stout, an American-style IPA, and an award-winning Australasian-Style Pale Ale. Himawari Hotel, 313 Sisowath Quay; 855-23/214-555; daily 12 p.m. to 10:30 p.m.

**Le Boutier** 32 St. 308; 855-97/675-3004; [leboutier.com](http://leboutier.com); Monday to Saturday from 6 p.m. to "as late as possible!"

**Samai Distillery** 9 St. 830 (corner of Sothea's Blvd.); 855-89/257-449; [samaidistillery.com](http://samaidistillery.com); Thursdays from 6:30 p.m.

### AROUND TOWN

**Coco Khmer** [cocokhmer.com](http://cocokhmer.com).

**Mekong Review** [mekong-review.com](http://mekong-review.com).