

Better together

A twin-centre trip to Cambodia and Bali reveals some of the tourism initiatives shaping a more sustainable future for travel, writes **Rhonda Carrier**



At the Phare Ponleu Selpak arts school in Battambang, Cambodia, I watch spellbound as You Sarann, a 24-year-old trans woman, demonstrates movements from the native Apsara dance – 1,500 codified hand and finger gestures symbolising facets of nature, such as seeds being planted and leaves unfurling.

Sarann is learning traditional Khmer dance with support from the Tui Care Foundation, and the non-profit school is, in turn, funding her university degree in psychology. When she graduates, she wants to become a therapist using dance and other arts to aid self-expression – something that doesn't exist in Cambodia at the moment.

Later, I bump into Sarann and her friends dancing along with the crowds at the S'Art Urban Art Festival (*pictured*), a colourful six-day event designed to revitalise the arts scene and draw tourists to Cambodia's third-largest city.

Battambang was once renowned as a centre for creativity, until the brutal Khmer Rouge regime of the 1970s wiped out its artists and clamped down on all forms of cultural expression. Now, amid a throng of happy locals, I lose myself ➤

WHERE TO *stay*



Tui Blue Angkor Grace, Siem Reap: Available with Tui Blue since 2025, the Angkor Grace wellness hotel was opened by Elain Yunn, a refugee who returned to Cambodia with the aim of bringing a healing dimension to the tourist hotspot. It includes a vast yoga and sound healing centre, not just for tourists but also for hosting community events, and trains young local women as wellness practitioners.



Tui Blue Berawa Hotel and Villas, Bali: This stylish 134-room resort opened in 2024 in the trendy coastal neighbourhood of Canggu. It features a rooftop infinity pool, wellness area and private-pool villas for up to four.



among murals, street food, local crafts, hip-hop battles and even women's drumming – something traditionally the preserve of men in Khmer culture.

Raising Battambang's profile as a tourist destination is also a way of tempting visitors away from Siem Reap and its iconic temples Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom and Ta Prohm. The world's largest religious complex remains a must-see, but too many visitors jet in just for Angkor Wat and miss how much the rest of the country has to offer.

Cambodia is on the UN's list of 'least developed countries' and is looking to tourism to bring in much-needed income. So a visit to several Tui Care Foundation-supported projects offers an interesting perspective on the impact tourism can have.

WORKING FOR WOMEN

Women make up more than half the workforce in southeast Asia's tourism sector, but are often concentrated in service roles with lower pay and limited advancement. Yet in Siem Reap, the Tui Care Foundation is supporting Satcha, a social enterprise created after the pandemic to help artisans make a living by creating meaningful handmade products that are an alternative to cheap, mass-produced plastic souvenirs.

Visitors are free to chat to the artisans as they go about their leatherwork or weave baskets using water hyacinths grown in the gardens. The centre markets their products with a cooperative model that ensures they earn more than the Cambodian minimum wage, as well as teaching money management skills. Ceramics maker

“The aim is to make farming sexy again, to restore Bali's soil and reconnect people with food sources and nature in general

Nimol tells me she's learning to create intricate designs so she can start running pottery classes from her home.

Another local beneficiary is DMC Journey Cambodia, which runs everything from food tours to village visits. We go to the home of rice noodle maker Sey, who supports her family by selling her noodles at nearby markets. She welcomes tourists to watch her craft the noodles, with time to taste them afterwards in a nourishing, herb-laden soup.

BALI: SEA OF STARS

For a very different take on southeast Asia's tourism economy, we fly to Bali, where decades of overtourism have led to water shortages, traffic congestion and plastic pollution. The island accounts for nearly half of Indonesia's tourism, despite making up only 0.29% of its land mass. But several regenerative projects are working to counteract these effects and also to help women shift from traditional roles to earn a sustainable living.

In the fishing village and ferry port of Padangbai, on the island's southeast corner, I chat to Ni Luh Putu Juliandari (Putu) and Salma Salsabila from the Living



FROM FAR LEFT: Street display at S'Art Urban Art Festival, Battambang (top); Subak Uma Lambing farm, Bali; weaving demonstration at Satcha, Siem Reap; Living Seas Foundation volunteers prepare to install coral reef stars in Bali **PAGE 41:** S'Art Urban Art Festival **PICTURES:** Tui Care Foundation; Shooyi Zhang

Seas Foundation, established to restore and expand coral reefs and to raise awareness of the need to do the same around the world. Putu, an original fellow of the Tui Care Foundation, tells me she was headhunted for her English and swimming skills and, though she now works as a chef, she still volunteers for Living Seas in her free time. Salma, 23, gained a degree in marine science, and learnt about science diving with help from the Coral Catch restoration scholarship programme, which empowers Indonesian women to pursue a career in marine conservation.

We join in with their work one sunny morning, heading out to a floating pontoon to make reef stars out of coral fragments, which are then added to the growing reef below. Visitors can dive down to help attach them or watch from above while snorkelling, and see how turtles and other marine species have proliferated as the ecosystem re-establishes itself around the reef. Tui Musement visits the project on its Bali Coral

Restoration Snorkelling Tour with Lunch, from £31, or £88 with guide and hotel transfer.

FAIRER FARMING

We also visit Subak Uma Lambing farm, part of the Astungkara Way regenerative movement, which combines sustainable farming with travel experiences. The aim is to "make farming sexy again", according to 30-year-old trail operations manager Oka Dewani. "That is, instruct the younger generation in organic and traditional non-chemical farming methods so as to restore Bali's soil and ecosystems and reconnect people with food sources and nature in general," she says. "Bali has lost 40% of its agricultural land in the last few decades, partly due to tourism."

Subak Uma Lambing is the base for a coast-to-coast trail via nine villages, camping at various regenerative farms along the way, including one in a jungle and one on a coffee plantation. Visits include planting veg or flowers for *canang sari* (local offerings), learning to make

rice farming more sustainable through traditional techniques, watching compost being made using banana trunks and gamal leaves, or learning the art of yoga nidra followed by lunch from female chef Ni Luh.

As an unforgettable ending to our Bali adventure, we head to Besikalung on the slopes of Mount Batukaru, surrounded by wild coffee and cacao plants, to release a pair of critically endangered Bali myna birds into the wild. The wildlife sanctuary here is managed by Friends of Nature, People and Forests, a local NGO and Tui Care Foundation partner.

It is working to develop trekking routes that pass through villages, taking visitors beyond the better-known areas, such as the Unesco-listed Jatiluwih Rice Terraces nearby, and giving rise to activities such as river tubing. It's a far cry from the Instagram version of Bali's travel scene, offering hope that the income – and the benefits – of tourism can reach beyond the hotspots to support the communities that contribute the most. **TW**

BOOK IT

Tui offers a seven-night holiday to Bali, Indonesia, staying at Tui Blue Berawa Hotel and Villas on a bed-and-breakfast basis, from £1,105 per person, based on two sharing a Deluxe Double Room with Courtyard View, including flights from Heathrow on November 16, with luggage and transfers. tui.co.uk

A seven-night stay at **Tui Blue Angkor Grace** in Cambodia starts from £655 per person, based on two sharing a One Bedroom Suite on a bed-and-breakfast basis, for a September 21 arrival. Flights not included. tui-blue.com