

Come wat may

Explore Cambodia in comfort on a river cruise, writes Katie McGonagle

@katie_mcgonagle



Maybe it was divine providence, maybe it was just Cambodia in rainy season, but within moments of walking inside Angkor Wat's ancient walls, the heavens well and truly opened.

This wasn't rain, it was a flood, pelting down in torrents from a stormy sky, sending streams of water to chase away our footsteps and streaks of lightning

across the horizon, and spurring us to race for shelter under the sagging ruins of one of the temple's twin libraries.

An enterprising young lad already had a roaring trade in bright plastic ponchos – a bargain at a dollar a pop – while his friends larked about in the rain, not caring how wet they got.

Perhaps they knew what we

were yet to realise – as quickly as the clouds appeared, they were gone again, leaving the weathered stone of this one-time Hindu, now-Buddhist temple glistening in the sunshine. The calm after the storm, if you will.

Not that Angkor Wat needs any added drama: it's quite impressive enough on its own. The entire complex covers nearly

500 acres, making it the world's biggest religious monument, and as it still inspires awe and adulation today, one can only imagine the impact it must have had on its first wave of worshippers in the 12th century.

It sets quite a precedent for the start of a cruise from Siem Reap to Ho Chi Minh City on board new CroisiEurope ship

➔ *Indochine II*, which was christened in Cambodian capital Phnom Penh in September (*Tried & Tested*, page 65). If the cruise could kick off with such a star attraction, what more lay in store along the river?

▶ SIEM REAP

Starting off with a couple of hotel nights in Siem Reap – though the cruise can also be done in reverse – the pace is leisurely enough to take in Angkor Wat’s many beauty spots.

That means there’s time to appreciate the huge, smiling faces carved from stone at Bayon temple mountain, pause to admire the intricate reliefs of the Terrace of the Elephants and the Terrace of the Leper King without feeling jaded, and wander around Ta Prohm. This half-ruined temple has started to sink back into the jungle as trees have grown up through the structure, weaving gnarled roots and branches through its crumbling stones, which provided an atmospheric setting for the filming of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*.

The itinerary also includes a Khmer royal dancing show and time at the Angkor Night Market, though we switched those for a night of artistry



I defy anyone not to sit open-mouthed at the dizzying acrobatic exploits of the circus’s young performers

and entertainment at Phare Circus. This social enterprise trains young performers in dizzying acrobatic feats – I defy anyone not to sit there open-mouthed at their extraordinary exploits – while also telling the story of Cambodia’s tragic history. Tickets for the nightly performances start at \$18 and must be booked in advance.

▶ TONLE SAP

While the Mekong often gets top billing, the ship actually sails along the Tonle Sap River until Phnom Penh, where it joins the Mekong for the Vietnamese sector of the cruise. Thanks to the prodigious rain, we were able to cross Tonle Sap Lake, but water levels vary hugely depending on the season – in times of flood, the river actually reverses direction, filling the lake up to cover 4,000 square miles, while drier months see it fall to barely 1,000 – so avoid March or April if clients are averse to the possibility of a bus transfer around the lake.

Once cruising, though, the banks of the Tonle Sap River offer greenery in abundance, a reminder that Cambodia is still an overwhelming rural, relatively poor population.

An excursion took us past floating villages, where families crowd into the tiny wooden shacks topped with corrugated iron roofs that float at the river’s edge. There’s no sewerage or electricity save that from small petrol-powered generators, and single-engine boats sail to and fro carrying fishermen fresh from their daily catch.

After mooring at the nearby port ➔



CroisiEurope
cruise From Angkor Temples to the Mekong Delta, on board *Indochine II*, starts at £2,263 based on a departure on August 27 for an 11-night itinerary (including eight-night cruise) which covers all excursions, meals, one soft drink or beer at each meal, and tips. Flights, transfers and visa fees not included.
croisieurope.co.uk



ABOVE:
Tonle Sap River

LEFT:
Dancers at Angkor Wat



LEFT:
Royal
Palace,
Phnom Penh

The sparse, tiny cells make for a claustrophobic and often upsetting experience, so do warn clients that it's not something they're likely to enjoy, but those with an interest in the recent history of the country will find it an essential part of their itinerary.

VIETNAM

After the French colonial architecture of the capital, the cruise crosses the border into Vietnam, starting with the colourful markets of Chau Doc, then the floral gardens of Sa Dec, and Vinh Long, where small houses sit atop stilts in the middle of the delta.

After that, it's on to Ho Chi Minh City, where CroisiEurope has a prime docking point

in the heart of the city, for a guided tour of the Reunification Palace, Notre Dame Cathedral and Central Post Office, and an overnight in port for guests who want to explore independently. There's also the option of adding a four-day extension to see Hanoi and Halong Bay.

The growing popularity of this itinerary is undeniable, hence the addition of CroisiEurope's fifth ship along the route, offering greater comfort and more modern facilities compared to existing vessels.

The rest of the itinerary did indeed live up to the wonders of Angkor Wat, so for travellers wishing to combine culture with convenience, there's no doubt a river cruise is the way to do it. **TW**

→ of Kampong Chhnang - home to a lively market street where strings of live chickens or pigs' heads are as likely fare as fruit and veg or knock-off sports shirts - we were once again out in the countryside within minutes, surrounded by rice fields and distant trails of smoke from the pottery kilns which gave this region its name ('chhnang' means 'clay pot').

A visit to one small home-based enterprise proved just how varied the local economy is. Owner Mr Ry styles himself 'Spiderman' thanks to his ability to scale his towering palm trees in no time at all - not bad for a 67-year-old - to tap the flowers for their valuable juice, which he collects in a bamboo pot to boil down into palm sugar, fermented beer or a spirit strong enough to make your eyes water just at a whiff. As well as selling all manner of palm tree products, they make earthenware pots by hand - without even the luxury of a potter's wheel - and a host of other small souvenirs.

PHNOM PENH

Another day's sailing and we were back to the big city, docking in the heart of Phnom Penh, within walking distance or a short tuk-tuk ride of the

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main attractions. The gold-laden Royal Palace is certainly not to be missed - even the Silver Pagoda, which forms part of the royal estate, is dripping in gold and bejewelled statues of the Buddha, though it takes its name from the 5,000 silver tiles that cover its floor - for a glimpse of Cambodia's royal history.

But for an altogether more chilling insight into the country's more-recent horrors, there's the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, an uncomfortable but necessary exploration of the atrocities committed by the Khmer Rouge in the late 1970s. It was the site of former prison S-21, where as many as 20,000 prisoners were tortured and killed over the course of the regime's rule; just seven are known to have survived when the prison was liberated in 1978.

Tried & Tested

INDOCHINE II

CroisiEurope's new-build premium-level ship is a welcome breath of fresh air for its Cambodian fleet. It accommodates 62 passengers in 31 cabins - all with good-sized balconies, though beware of bugs if opening the doors in the evening - with a 29-person, mainly Cambodian crew.

Its red Vietnamese wood decor offers a touch of French colonial elegance, though it feels modern thanks to a contemporary finish and splashes of colour in its soft furnishings. There are three passenger decks: the restaurant, reception area and

a handful of cabins on the main deck; the balance of cabins on the upper deck; and a comfortable air-conditioned lounge bar plus exterior pool and day beds on the sun deck.

Dining is mostly family-style and by set menu - worth noting for fussy eaters or those who prefer individual service - but attentive waiters and a spacious, well-appointed restaurant make meals a pleasant experience. Alcoholic drinks are available at extra charge. Look out for very reasonably-priced spa treatments and the sociable evening atmosphere in the lounge bar.



PICTURES: RATANIA/BREM FILM; CHRISTINA GUAN; GREGORY GERAULT; BEVERAGGI