



CUTE,
COMFY &
CENTRAL

THE KINGDOM OF CAMBODIA

Without a doubt, Phnom Penh is my favourite city in the world. Given I haven't actually been anywhere further than Asia, Australia, or the Pacific Islands, that's not really saying much, but I love this city; every time I leave Phnom Penh fills me with sadness. Although I can't quite put my finger on exactly why I love the place so much, I just accept that I do and can't wait to go back in September.

Phnom Penh is the capital of the Kingdom of Cambodia, and is often skipped over by tourists to the country who head straight for the temples of Angkor in Siem Reap. While Siem Reap is amazing, Phnom Penh has a charm of its own and is equally worth a few days to look around.

Phnom Penh can be an assault on the senses. The sights, sounds, and most of all the smells all come at you from everywhere. Compared with other Asian capitals, there's a distinct lack of infrastructure, and it's a little bit run down. However when you consider its recent history, it's surprising how far it's actually come.

The Khmer Rouge, and Pol Pot's brutal regime need no real explanation. In 1975, Phnom Penh was the last place to fall to the Khmer Rouge. When it did, the entire population – then about two million people – was forcibly evacuated out to the countryside. The city lay essentially empty for four years until the Vietnamese drove the Khmer Rouge out. Years of civil war took place, but following the peace agreements in the early '90s, Phnom Penh has flourished.

Of course the remnants of the Khmer Rouge are one of the principal tourist attractions in the city. The notorious Tuol Sleng (s21) Prison, a former high school where about 20,000 people were tortured to death is a grim reminder of this past. The contrast that one feels here on a sunny day, in the well-kept grounds, knowing what happened within the walls of the school

is indescribable. The prison is exactly how the Vietnamese found it, with blood stains still visible in some rooms more than 30 years on.

While Tuol Sleng is heavy. It doesn't compare with the Choeung Ek Killing Fields. Immortalised in the Oscar winning film *The Killing Fields*, these fields are where the thousands tortured at Tuol Sleng were buried. It's a surreal experience as the area is so serene today, yet a walk through any part of it will easily uncover more bones, and clothing that people were buried in. It's all very hard to take in, but essential to really understand how Phnom Penh, and Cambodia, has got to where it has today.

Today, Phnom Penh is a mecca for shopping. Knock-offs, ranging from \$3 CK undies that will fall apart in days to factory-seconds from The Gap and Banana Republic can be found in any of the major markets in Phnom Penh. But remember you do get what you pay for and why would you want something fake anyway? The central market has everything you could want and is in a big, beautiful, old, bright-yellow building in the heart of Phnom Penh. If the heat gets too much, the biggest mall in Phnom Penh, Sorya Mall, is just a block away full of fast food and all the modern conveniences you could need (and the best public toilets in the city!)

The city is a great place for food. Restaurants serving every kind of cuisine can be found all over the city with prices starting from \$4 a meal. The busiest spots are on Sisowath Quay, alongside the Tonle Sap River, however my pick is Khmer Kitchen (not far from Tuol Sleng) for genuine Khmer cuisine at a bargain price. We paid \$35 for five of us to have several courses and ended up with way too much food.

Phnom Penh's nightlife can be pretty intense. The Heart of Darkness nightclub was notorious for Cambodia's nouveau riche spoilt brats

getting into fights, sometimes with guns; now everyone is subject to a pat down, bag search and metal detectors. It's a lot safer now, but watch out for those Khmer prostitutes wanting to give you a good time.

In terms of a gay scene, Phnom Penh is quite small when compared to her Asian sisters in Bangkok or Bali. However Blue Chilli bar is one of the best I've ever been to. It's quite small, with a relaxed seating area out the front. The punters are super friendly and always welcoming of new faces, the prices are cheap, the service efficient and the music is good, with a small dance area inside. If hooking up is your thing, and you don't have a Gay Romeo profile, then head along to Romantic Sauna.

If you're not big on shopping, and don't wanna have a gay old time, there's still heaps to do in Phnom Penh. There's the Royal Palace near Sisowath Quay, and while it's no Buckingham Palace, the silver pagoda is a stunning sight; watching Khmers doing aerobics beside the Vietnamese Friendship monument at dusk is an interesting site; pay \$2 and you can jump on the back of a motorbike and be taken anywhere in town, and if that scars you, for \$1 more a tuk-tuk can take you there instead; and nothing beats a moonlight walk alongside Sisowath Quay and it's parade of flags – even little Aotearoa's flag has made it there.

However it's the people that really make any trip to Phnom Penh. A real friendliness and what seems like a genuine excitement to have you in their city permeates. Sure they'll try and get you to part with as much money as they can for a pair of rip-off Gucci glasses, but a bit of friendly banter gets the price down quickly to what it's really worth. But it's the people's spirit, and their smiles, that will stay with you. I can't explain why I love Phnom Penh so much, but perhaps you should see it for yourself? | Aaron Halliwell

Wellington City Gay Stay

Many people who came to Wellington for Outgames stayed in hotels – you know the places. They're the ones with endless hallways and cookie-cutter rooms that look exactly the same.

They're small, cramped and often don't have windows that open. Now, don't get us wrong, we love a good hotel from time to time, but on this particular occasion we have to brag – we stayed at the gorgeous, cute and heritage-listed City Cottages owned by the guys from Wellington City Gay Stay... and we loved it!

Partners Jeff and Dean own the City Cottages and their home / B&B in Mount Victoria. If that wasn't enough to keep them busy, they also own a café out in Lower Hutt and in their spare time like to bring delicious cake and friendly smiles to the people working at the swimming events for Outgames. (We think they might be a pair of Supermen!)

The City Cottages were built in the 1880s, but have been renovated into the wonderful accommodation they are today in late 2010. During our stay we got to use the self-contained kitchen, the shiny new shower and the free wifi. We also got to make use of the sliding door that separates the bedroom from the lounge and sofa/futon bed, which provides a great noise barrier between an editor needing sleep and a restless, teeth-grindy feature writer. Not naming names... Anna Loren.

Overall we loved staying at the cottages – they're bright, pretty, iconic and central. (The fact that the cottages are only a stumble from the Cuba Street restaurant quarter was much appreciated by the express team!)

We recommend you stay with Dean and Jeff next time you're in Wellington, either at their B&B or the cottages. For more information on the accommodation, visit www.wellingtoncitygaystay.co.nz.

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