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KHMER CHAMELEON

PICKING UP WHERE IT LEFT OFF IN THE 1960S, CAMBODIA IS IN THE THROES OF CHANGE AS IT CATAPULTS ITSELF INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY > JURRIAN TEULINGS



THE WHITE BUILDING, PHNOM PENH

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If scanned scribbles of an octogenarian monarch count as blog posts, Norodom Sihanouk, the late king father of Cambodia, should probably be considered the first-ever royal blogger in history. Like any good blogger, he was prolific and knew good click bait when he saw it. His handwritten notes, posted by his court secretaries to norodomsihanouk.info, cover literally anything that came to his mind, from recipes for escargots à la narbonnaise, to pictures of beloved pets and endless musings celebrating the beauty of Cambodian women – of whom he married six.

Interestingly, the monarch also used his blog to profess his adoration of gay people. The fact that out of 14 children, his favourite son – the current king of Cambodia – never married and spent most of his life pursuing a career on the flamboyant side of the arts in Chechnya and France (thus remaining the only royal ever seen on stage in tights and a tunic) just might have had something to do with that. Or perhaps it was his own hyperactively-artistic bent as a poet, actor, composer and filmmaker that exposed him to the LGBT side of his subjects. Whichever it was, he seemed particularly taken with the concept of same-sex marriage. In 2004, after witnessing same-sex marriages being performed on television in San Francisco, the then 81-year-old king came forward to express a typically-Buddhist take on sexuality. “I must have compassion for human beings who are not like me but who torture nobody, kill nobody,” he said, adding that a “liberal democracy” such as Cambodia should allow “marriage between man and man, or between woman and woman”.

A blossoming gay scene

Eleven years on – his highness passing away in the meantime – no such legislation has been passed and the issue of gay rights remains largely ignored. In 2007, Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen publicly disowned his adopted daughter for being a lesbian while, bizarrely, urging parents not to follow his example and stop discrimination against gay people – all in the same speech. Nonetheless, where before the turn of the century, gay life was virtually non-existent in the capital of Phnom Penh, a highly-visible LGBT community is blossoming today. Gaynewscambodia.com's gay map of the city features



PHNOM PENH



no less than nine bars and clubs and eight gay saunas and spas. In a wealthy area south of the city centre, two beautiful, adjacent boutique hotels cater to a gay clientele; the gay-owned Rambutan Resort and the men-only spa resort Arthur & Paul. Last May, during the city's 11th Gay Pride celebrations, the latter hosted the launch party of *Q*, Cambodia's first-ever LGBT lifestyle magazine. The rest of the two-week event included seminars, workshops, LGBT cinema screenings, and of course, a good amount of club nights and pool parties. In lieu of a march, a rainbow-tinged 'fabulous tuk-tuk race' was held.

In this fast-changing backdrop, a younger generation of Khmers (as ethnic Cambodians call themselves), having grown up with gay bars with open patios, LGBT Facebook groups and dating apps, is coming out of the closet. Pros Nix, a 23-year-old graphic designer who designed this year's Gay Pride campaign, came out to his friends at 16. This didn't cause much of a problem. "They teased me a bit, but I wasn't bullied," he says. A little later, he came out to his family – but only after he got a good job as a graphic designer and could take care of himself – that the 'problem', as he describes it, was already fixed. "My grandmother accepts me. 'You're still a human being,' she says. My father says he thinks I will change. It's not a religious thing – he respects my decisions and is happy to see me living my life, but he's afraid of what society might say.

To be honest, I think that if I were to move in with my parents again, they'd probably still tell me to get married to a girl. So I really have to be independent."

Bath house family values

Dirk de Graaff, whose gay-friendly Rambutan Resort became a focal point in the Pride celebrations, explains why families often have financial motives to push their sons and daughters towards conformity. "Most of my staff's income goes directly to their parents, with whom they live, often even after they've married. They're expected to take care of them." In a country without social welfare, your child's career options might be a matter of survival. "Most of the gay men here are forced into arranged marriages. After work, they fuck like bunnies in the saunas, and then go home to their wives and children."

De Graaff worked closely with members of the local gay community to help set things up for Gay Pride this year. One of them was Srorn Srun, a young gay man who is perhaps the most outspoken activist for minority rights in Cambodia. His CamASEAN Youth Future was formed in 2012 to promote, protect and respect human rights of minority communities. "Right now we are fighting for acceptance. After that, we must fight for protection," he says, and paints a picture of modern-day Cambodia that's in stark contrast with the happy Gay Pride pool-party photos on the local



EM RIEM



MONG AT SHINTA MANI



POOL PARTY AT RAMBUTAN RESORT

“GAYS ARE ACCUSED OF DESTROYING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATION. FOR THIS REASON LGBT YOUTH STILL HAVE GREAT DIFFICULTY FINDING JOBS

gay community's Facebook pages. “The stigma is still strong, and especially in villages, a lot of hate-mongering remains. Gays are accused of destroying the development of the nation. For this reason LGBT youth still have great difficulty finding jobs. Local authorities further crack down on them by defining anyone who dresses differently, wears earrings or a tattoo, as a gangster.”

I am what I am

Em Riem, a local artist featured on the cover of the first issue of *Q* magazine, is of the 30+ generation that never really came out – though anyone who has seen his high-heeled, flamboyant and androgynous presence on television would have little doubt about his sexuality. “Being gay here is a bigger problem if you are from a rich background,” he says. “Poor guys are ok as long as they provide for the family. ‘Do what you want, but don’t forget us,’ parents will say. But rich families are more concerned about what others might think. That’s because they want them to intermarry with other rich families so they can move up the social ladder and get even more rich. I know a few of them, and they all were forced into marriage.” Still, Riem, who came from a more humble background than his rich friends, has to admit that family members never address his sexuality. In 2008, he started his own gallery, X-EM, a few blocks away from the Royal University of Fine Arts. His portraits of hunky Khmer guys on burlap rice bags are a few of the eye catchers of Males, the hotel restaurant of the Arthur & Paul resort. Similar rice bag pieces are on display in his gallery – though here, they carry haunting portraits of victims of the genocidal Pol Pot regime that ruled the country in the 1970s, alongside a giant bright painting of a hippopotamus on a fire-engine-red background. “I like to paint exotic animals, just like little children do,” he says. “This is how I relive my childhood that I lost to the Khmer Rouge.”

It is hard to understate the disastrous effect a

genocide of nearly two million people has on the psychology of a nation, and the Khmer Rouge was especially keen on destroying the cultural elite of Cambodia. Intellectuals, musicians and artists were ‘purged’, with the distinct goal of destroying all traces of pride in modern and traditional Khmer culture. This is the kind of trauma that is carried over generations. Riem says that today, most of his clients are foreigners: because Khmers lack education, he says, they do not understand contemporary art, preferring imported goods instead. “The rich would rather buy a big car than put art on their walls.”

Charming girls

‘Gay’ as an identity is such a novel concept to Khmer culture, that the language actually has no word for men who seek love and committed relationships with other men. Traditional notions of gender and sexuality have little to do with intimate relationships and are rather focused on sex and hair length. ‘Short hairs’, or *sak klay*, are understood to be men who are generally married and might have some sexual escapades with other men that their wives don’t know about. ‘Long hairs’ or *srei sros* (charming girls) are transgender persons who wear their hair long, identifying, dressing and acting as women. The latter have always been marginalized, and their stories of life under the Khmer Rouge regime, where going against the grain often resulted in torture and death, are slowly surfacing. Only last year, Kasumi Nakagawa, a Japanese professor of gender studies at Pannasastra University in Phnom Penh, published the first-ever in-depth study of the treatment of sexual minorities during the Khmer Rouge era. All gay men and most of the transgender women surveyed said they had experienced sexual violence. Interestingly, Ms. Nakagawa said this could be attributed to the definitions of ‘moral offenses’ lined out by the communist party’s upper echelons. Even in the murderous regime it was a crime if a man abused



ANGKOR WAT



SHINTA MANI CLUB IN SIEM REAP



languished in the dark ages, this Khmer megacity stretched over at least 1,000 square kilometres, providing a home to up to a million inhabitants. Today, the yearly number of visitors is close to two million and steadily rising. Therefore, it's a bit of an art to find a quiet place. If you must get your iconic picture of the sun rising over Angkor Wat, prepare to brave a dark forest of selfie sticks. Alternatively, you can just buy it on a postcard and head for blissful tranquillity at the lesser-known temples first. There are plenty to choose from. Take Bat Chum, for example, which is just as beautiful as the more famous Ta Prohm, but lacks the association with the Tomb Raider film that many go for. If you plan your visit during the rainy season between May and October, it's even better. The moats will be fuller and lush with water lilies, there will be more wildlife to spot, it will be cooler, less dusty, and, most importantly, a lot quieter. The rains rarely last very long, making it a great season to visit Cambodia in general – hotel deals abound.

SLEEP IN SIEM REAP

For a perfect stay, book a room at the upscale Shinta Mani Club in Siem Reap, a breezy 15-minute tuk-tuk ride away from Angkor Wat. The modern design by acclaimed architect Bill Bensley was inspired by the temple complex, and includes quirky details like tables on swings and Hindu deities crayoned on blackboards. Excellent service and a generous support of local causes helped this property skyrocket on TripAdvisor, which recently ranked it the 3rd best hotel in the world. Alternatively, opt for the more affordable rooms of the intimate Rambutan hotel across the river, the sister property of the Phnom Penh resort by the same name. WWW.SHINTAMANI.COM WWW.RAMBUTANRESORT.COM

ANGKORWAT – AND HOW

The beautiful jungle ruins of the ancient city of Angkor remain the single biggest attraction to Cambodia. For good reason: this collection of magnificent structures – some well-preserved, others dreamily overgrown and consumed by gigantic trees – once supported the largest pre-industrial city in the world. While Europe



INSTITUTE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, A NEW KHMER BUILDING IN PHNOM PENH

a woman, but sexual aggressors felt that if they abused other men, they would not be punished. "As far as I know in my research, no women were forced to do oral sex, but my research showed that gay men and transgender women were," Nakagawa said.

Cambodia's transgender community continues to be the worst off. "I'm really proud that I was born in Cambodia, but people here can't accept who I am," says Mong, a 22-year-old transgender woman who lives in Siem Reap, Cambodia's second city and a major tourist hub close to the famous Angkor Wat temple complex. She works three jobs to bring her parents from Phnom Penh to a safe place to live in Siem Reap, but plans to move abroad herself. "There are many ladyboys who have an education but they can't find work here. People like me can only be performers. I was the first ladyboy to get an office job here, doing sales and marketing for Rosana Broadway show [a drag cabaret] where I also perform on stage."

The next generation

Off-stage, Mong might be a little shy, but she is strong-minded. Like a lot of young Khmers interviewed for this article, she has a clear focus on where she is, and where she is going. Christian de Boer, the General Manager of Shinta Mani, one of the more opulent luxury hotels in town, is so impressed with her that he tries to help her in her career any way he can. "He wants me to be a superstar," Mong says.

But de Boer is not just an avid fan of Mong – he is quick to praise all young Cambodians, many of whom are his staff members. He stresses how far the new generation has already come. Often

having gone from no electricity to iPhones in a decade, they work against the grain, in a corrupt and unequal society, compensating for their parents' lack of education and war trauma, getting an education whilst working full-time. This industrious generation offers hope that the Kingdom, stripped from an estimated 90 per cent intellectual and artistic population only three decades ago, will regain its footing.

The golden age

One thing is for sure is that it was capable of great things in the past. To the naked eye, the Angkor Archaeological site just outside Siem Reap may look like 'just' an awful lot of picturesque temples, but in fact you only see the stone remains of the religious structures that served a wooden megacity, comparable to a 17th-century Paris reduced to its stone churches and cathedrals. Recent laser air surveys show carefully-planned city grids under the jungle foliage, at last revealing an accurate picture: Angkor was once the largest city the pre-industrial world has ever seen. But one doesn't even have to look that far back in time to find a justified source of Khmer pride. Though often overlooked by visitors and citizens alike, Cambodia enjoyed a brief golden age between independence from the French in 1953 and the arrival of the Khmer Rouge. This time was marked by a great cultural revival, abundantly expressed in film, music and architecture.

Foreign influences from rock 'n' roll to modernist architecture were given a tropical makeover and forged into a unique brand of Khmer brilliance. Traditional crooners took to psychedelic surf rock



RUIN OF MODERNIST VILLA IN KEP



OLYMPIC STADIUM, PHNOM PENH



INSTITUTE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, PHNOM PENH



ROYAL UNIVERSITY OF PHNOM PENH

FROM TRAUMA TO ART

A number of innovative programmes are helping the country deal with collective war trauma inflicted by the deranged, xenophobic and genocidal Khmer Rouge regime from 1975 to 1979. One of these programmes is the Phare Ponleu Selpak Circus School in the province of Battambang, where local kids suffering from dire poverty and domestic violence (often aggravated by their parents' war traumas) are radically transformed into proud Cambodian acrobats and artists. The school was founded by Khmer Rouge survivors that learned in refugee camps that art can be a means to forget trauma. After completing their education, the kids, having blossomed both mentally and physically, follow careers in circuses in Battambang, Siem Reap and Phnom Penh. Some shows are re-enactments of Khmer history – including the genocide – while others are more of a cabaret, occasionally including gay characters. Another project, the Sleuk Rith Institute, is a new institution and genocide memorial that will bring together a museum, a graduate school, a research library and an archive containing the largest collection of genocide-related material in Southeast Asia. It will be housed in a yet-to-be built congregation of five futuristic wooden towers designed by Iranian superstar-architect Zaha Hadid. The institute's founder Youk Chhang, himself a genocide survivor, wanted to move away from the angular, 'distress-invoking architecture' of memorials. The first renderings of Hadid's design definitely look like they will be worth the wait: serene yet poignant, like castles in a gothic fairy tale. Construction is set to begin at the end of 2015 and is expected to take three years.



INSTITUTE OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES, PHNOM PENH



KNAI BANG CHATT VILLAS IN KEP

from the 1960s and produced spookily-warped mashups abounding with funky basslines and psychedelic keyboard sprees. Even King Sihanouk himself got involved, as an actor, composer and filmmaker, perhaps most famously with his hugely-entertaining 1969 film *La Joie de Vivre* (The Good Life) – which you might call a Cambodian Motown musical, including hyperactive shimmying to the sounds of a Khmer James Brown. Many of these gems are only slowly being rediscovered today. Some brave souls risked their lives and held on to their vinyl and today local bands like the Cambodian Space Project – whose records would make excellent Tarantino soundtracks – are picking up where they left off.

The most tangible legacy of the Cambodian 1960s heyday came from a man named Vann Molyvann. This visionary architect and urban planner was trained in Paris and received Norodom Sihanouk's carte blanche to redesign Phnom Penh to double in size. Together with students and contemporaries, he added an Olympic Stadium, university buildings,

SLEUK RITH INSTITUTE, EXPECTED TO OPEN IN 2019, RENDERING COURTESY ZAHA HADID ARCHITECTS



KNAI BANG CHATT VILLAS IN KEP

social-housing projects, theatres and monuments that served to underscore the glory of the new nation, often conveniently on the way to the airport to woo visiting foreign officials. His style, branded New Khmer architecture, merged Le Corbusier's principles of high modernism with the layout, building and water-management techniques of his Angkorian forefathers. It was like nothing Southeast Asia had ever seen: when the late Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first prime minister, visited Phnom Penh during the 1960s, he told Norodom Sihanouk that he hoped Singapore would one day look like Cambodia. Miraculously, most of these rather marvellous buildings survived the city-hating Khmer Rouge regime. Unfortunately, many are poorly maintained and threatened by demolition. Trees are sprouting from their walls in the same fashion as the much-loved temples of Angkor Wat. In hope of salvaging these gems, a New York's New School of Design-backed 'Vann Molyvann Project' is underway, surveying and re-measuring to recreate the architectural drawings that were



RAMBUTAN RESORT IN PHNOM PENH

destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. Vann Molyvann's masterpiece, the Olympic Stadium in Phnom Penh, is still in use. Every day around dusk, refrigerator-sized speakers are wheeled in, each blasting its own pick of the latest electronica to enliven a mass workout.

Excusez moi, Madame, Je Suis Homo

In 2009, *Who Am I?*, a Cambodian movie with a lesbian love plot, became an unexpected blockbuster. It was perhaps a bit too melodramatic to merit a comparison to *Brokeback Mountain*, but it did a good job of highlighting the hardship of same-sex love in Cambodia, including the issues of forced marriage, to a wider audience. Still, its writer/director Phoa Phuong Bopha wasn't the first to produce a LGBT-themed film in Cambodia. That honour went to the late father King Norodom Sihanouk, who, just before his death, surprised everyone with the news that the same royal production company that churned out his 1960s hit films, was producing a movie called *Excusez moi, Madame, Je Suis Homo* (Excuse me, Madam, I Am Gay), of which he penned the scenario. The stills he posted on his blog – which is still up and running today – reveal a rather uninspired story line: woman meets man, falls in love, follows man to his hotel room, meets his boyfriend coming out of the bathroom, runs off in a huff. Not quite a masterpiece, but at least in this story, nobody is forced into marriage. And Sihanouk's beloved son, King Norodom Sihamoni, remains a bachelor to this day. ■



RAMBUTAN RESORT IN PHNOM PENH



KNAI BANG CHATT, KEP

RELAX, NEW KHMER-STYLE

A Khmer Riviera

In the 1950s, when the sleepy fishing village of Kep, a 2.5-hour drive from Phnom Penh, was still called Kep-Sur-Mer, King Norodom Sihanouk decided it would make the perfect location to create his own Southeast Asian Riviera. Led by the monarch, the area became an artistic playground for the wealthy French colonial elite, and an estimated 150 villas in the style of the home-grown Modernist New Khmer movement appeared along the coast. When his country fell to the Khmer Rouge, many of these ostentatious villas were stripped and destroyed. Only about 30 of them, including Sihanouk's summer house, survive to this day. Most are in ruins, covered in graffiti, slowly pulled apart by vines and tree roots that strangle walls like octopus tentacles. There are, however, a few exceptions. In 2006, Jef Moons, a Belgian visitor who had just been considering buying a property in St Tropez, fell in love with three Kep seaside

villas. Seemingly on a whim, he decided to salvage the buildings and build a new life in Cambodia. Today, Moons, a single gay father raising an adopted Khmer son, provides jobs and schooling programmes for the local community by running the gloriously-restored villas as luxury boutique hotel Knai Bang Chatt, as he named it (meaning 'a rainbow encircling the sun' in Khmer language) it attracts a well-heeled crowd seeking both natural and architectural beauty. Those interested can still visit the other ruins of Kep's golden era – a fascinating, if somewhat ghostly, experience. WWW.KNAIBANGCHATT.COM

Rambutan Resort

Compared to other Asian capitals, Phnom Penh may feel provincial, but nonetheless, the streets can get quite hectic. Escape the roar of a thousand tuk-tuks in the little oasis of Rambutan, a gay-friendly boutique resort around a gorgeous pool in a quiet street south of central Phnom Penh. The building retains the retro feel of New Khmer architecture and was brightened up with Dutch owner Dirk de Graaff's pick of local art. For the men-only, clothing-optional experience, try the French-run Arthur & Paul resort and spa next door. WWW.RAMBUTANRESORT.COM; WWW.ARTHURANDPAUL.COM

[Travel info]

This article was made with the generous support of China Airlines and Lolei Travel. Lolei Travel is a Siem Reap-based, Dutch-run travel agency specialised in Southeast Asia, creating custom itineraries, including gay packages, in and around Cambodia. For information and bookings, visit: WWW.LOLEITRAVEL.COM/GAY-TRAVEL WWW.CHINA-AIRLINES.COM