



# Phnom

Cambodia's capital city, Phnom Penh is a hive of cultural activity with an abundance of relics, galleries and performances that must be experienced to properly understand the country's rich story

**A**nimistic native Khmer art and architecture – mixed with additional influences from Japan, China and Thailand – is the foremost style across Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh.

The city's most awe-inspiring buildings stand as monuments to kings, deities and colonial powers, extending Cambodia's rich and complex history far beyond the trauma of Pol Pot's regime. Over the years, the capital has built up impressive feats of modern architecture, sending Cambodia into a new era of cultural identity.

**Above: The Throne Hall of Royal Palace in Phnom Penh  
Right: A statue of Buddha at the Royal Palace**

Phnom Penh's oldest structure is the intricately detailed Wat Phnom tower; a survivor from the city's original foundations laid in 1373. Standing at 27 metres high in the very centre of the city, the Buddhist temple, alongside the Wat Preah Chedey Borapaut pagoda is the tallest religious structure in the city.

A little more than two kilometres along the banks of the Tonle Sap River, the Royal Palace still serves as the King's residence and plays home to the royal family. It is a venue for court ceremony and a symbol of the Kingdom, with some sections open to the public.

The Silver Pagoda, named for its gleaming silver floor, takes a prominent place on the riverside

where visitors can stroll through the manicured gardens and discover the ornate temples, libraries and galleries.

The French, who were the colonial masters from the 19th century to the 1940s, also left their mark, with various colonial villas, French churches, boulevards, and the Art Deco market Phsar Thom Thmei.

Among the most popular cultural hotspots is Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, a former Khmer Rouge prison and the National Museum, constructed during the French colonial era in the late 19th century.

Independence in the 1950s signalled an opportunity for King Sihanouk to flex new-found freedom and Phnom Penh underwent tremendous growth with a new golden era of architecture invigorating the nation. New Khmer architecture, often characterised by a fusion of Bauhaus, European post-modern architecture, and traditional elements from Angkor popped up across the city.

Chief national architect Vann Molyvann created landmark buildings such as the Preah

Suramarit National Theatre (ripped down in 2008) and the Council of Ministers building. Other prominent architects helped construct the newly founded Royal Khmer University, the Institute of Foreign Languages and the National Sports Centre.

Today, music and the arts are making a revival and there are a number of festivals hosted here throughout the year. The city celebrates Cambodian New Year (Chaul Chnam Thmey) between 13-15 April with water thrown around to cool off part revellers. Water is also the central theme to Bon Om Thook; a lively gathering celebrating the reversing of the flow of the Tonlé Sap river, where fireworks, colourful boat races, live concerts, eating and partying last for three days.

[tourismcambodia.com](http://tourismcambodia.com) ■

