



PUCKER LIPS NOW

Words by Caroline Phillips Illustrations by Neil Shrubh

Our tuk-tuk driver goes the wrong way down streets, against the oncoming traffic of entire families on motorbikes and cycle rickshaws taking ladies to work. "Quicker?" he grins. Our first stop is the 19th-century Royal Palace and Silver Pagoda. "Must wear," insists the guide, handing me a sarong to cover my bare legs. And it's worth the sartorial indignity to see the ochre palace with turquoise roof, silver floor tiles and Emerald Buddha. Welcome to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia.

Phnom Penh was once considered one of the loveliest French cities in Asia. But now it has a reputation for drugs, guns and prostitution. (Apparently, there aren't many taxis as there's a risk of being held-up at gunpoint.) It was also a ghost town during the Khmer Rouge's regime of terror from 1975 to 1979 – the brutal revolution led by Pol Pot and aimed at turning the country into a peasants' agrarian co-operative – when the population was forced to march to work as slaves in the countryside. Originally a city of two million inhabitants – today there

are half that number.

But Phnom Penh is making a determined comeback. We stay in Raffles, which hosted royalty and Jackie Kennedy before it turned into a backpackers' hotel; but now, once again, the Art Deco grande dame boasts French colonial-style décor and Cambodian doormen in traditional garb. Outside there are reinstated monks in saffron robes, Lexus-driving Khmer and some stylish new restaurants. Plus shops that sell twenty different models of rice cooker and roads thronging with thousands of motorbikers sporting fabric face masks. "Burqas for bikers," remarks my husband, Adrian.

Phnom Penh is known for its silverware, hand-loomed sarongs and Buddhist artefacts. We visit the 'Russian Market' with its mounds of authentic Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirts (circa \$2.50 a pop) and fake Ray-Bans alongside piles of papaya. Here, in hot, narrow lanes, we find yards of silk and 'antique' bronze Buddhas for sale.

The Khmer cuisine is equally colourful, with its accompanying slivers of chilli, aromatic coriander and basil. We love eating at

Malis amid Angkorian-inspired pools, gardens and architecture. And we laugh in the fashionable Titanic restaurant on the river front. It has traditional instrumentalists who also play one western tune: Jingle Bells. Even though it's August. And, hilariously, we eat 'Amok' – a curried fish in coconut milk – in the dark as waiters bump into one another during a power failure.

On a more chilling note, we visit the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum – known also as S-21. It's the former school in which the Khmer Rouge tortured 17,000 people (only seven survived) before executing them 15 kms away at the killing fields of Choeung Ek. The torture instruments remain in the classrooms. Like the Nazis, the Khmer Rouge meticulously documented their barbaric acts. Our guide points to hundreds of harrowing photos on the walls.

"Professors, children, lawyers," she says. "All of them killed." Her own father was murdered.

It's in silence afterwards that we visit the Killing Fields – where human bones and clothing still stick out of the soil. Nearby, a



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Buddhist stupa is full of human skulls and a sign marks the tree against which babies were beaten to death. It saved wasting bullets.

It may be a still-traumatised society, but it's a country grappling bravely with hardship and evil. There are restaurants such as Friends where cooks and waiters are former street children trained by an NGO; massagers staffed by the blind; and Daughters, a boho chic shop and cafe run by women and girls escaping the sex industry – and masterminded by an English woman, Ruth Elliot.

Ours is to be a whistle-stop tour and it's time to move on to Siem Reap. We drive past jungle and rice paddies; temples, monasteries and lotus fields. A six-hour journey and worth every moment. Particularly the stop in Skun Market where they sell fried grasshoppers (with chilli) and tarantulas. "Try this," proffers Adrian. "Ants with lemongrass, I think."

It's a culture shock to reach Siem Reap, a modern city with pubs, massage parlours and hotels – but redeemed by Chinese shop

fronts and colonial houses. We stay downtown in Hotel de la Paix, a shrine to style. It's so cool it's almost Arctic. Think Khmer minimalism with Art Deco influences and a groovy illuminated bar. (It's not the cocktails that makes it change from pink to blue).

We walk the streets and try the latest craze: la cha fish therapy – where you stick your feet in a tank and fish nibble the dead skin off your feet. But I prefer the traditional Khmer massage (the therapist uses her hands, feet and elbows) that I have in our contemporary spa suite.

But we're really here for the temples of Angkor, the ancient capital of the Khmer empire and a Unesco World Heritage site. At 400 square km, the site would cover over a quarter of Greater London. The temple of Angkor Wat was abandoned by Khmers in the 15th century and rediscovered in the jungle in 1860. The largest religious building on the planet, it has incredible 12th-century buildings which King Suryavarman II took 34 years to construct. Now shall I test you?

We catch it from the air in a gleaming Helistar Cambodia Squirrel. Capt Dave Taylor guides us over the awesome temples, moats and constructions. Then he helicopters over a patchwork quilt of paddy fields, a crocodile farm and floating village. "They move their houses around according to the flood waters," he motions, "towing them with motorboats."

We also get up at 5am to catch sunrise over Angkor Wat. We wander over the sandstone and volcanic rock structures, dodging Asian tourists. There are two million visitors annually and I think they've all come today. "No one," said Somerset Maugham, "should die before seeing the temples of Angkor." Correct. But he also pitched up before the Japanese, Korean and Chinese holiday-makers.

We sit alone in the temple library with a monk. He blesses us by shaking his palm-leaf brush and sprinkling us with scented holy water. "He wish you long life and health," translates our guide, Ting. But it occurs to me that he could have been asking whether we're Arsenal supporters. At any

rate, the first question everyone else asks is: "What team do you support?"

Afterwards, it's three-ish hours – mostly on red dirt road – to reach the remote jungle temple of Banteay Chhmar. There are no other visitors. Just us. (It attracts 100 tourists monthly – but once the new road is built, 10,000 are expected). We stand alone amid the almost-untouched antiquity of the architectural masterpiece commissioned by King Jayavarman VII in 1191. For 800 years, until 1956, its towers and temples lay hidden in undergrowth – harmed only by nature. And then by looting in the 1990s.

We clamber amid a jumble of fallen sandstone blocks. Think arches, walls, temple ruins – nearly everything lopsided and toppling. Light filtering through the dense jungle foliage. Picking our way over building blocks, we discover magnificent carvings. Here, a bas-relief of naval warfare, with some dead sailors being gobbled by crocodiles; there, scenes of warfare with infantry and elephants; and over there, carvings of the Bodhisatva Lokeshvara with 32 arms.

Now we go glamping (glamorous camp-

ing) by the temple. We have a butler in a white jacket, cook, driver, tour guide and endless factotums. I could get used to this. I take a shower – the hot water from an African bush-style bag. Then Jeeves serves a great Khmer dinner on a wooden table with silk cloth. Blissfully, our staff have also dotted candles over the nearby temple and lit a fire. Fireflies flit through the air. And we dine to the 'music' of cicadas. When we go to bed, it's in a tent with a double bed, fan and bedside tables.

You've probably had enough of temples. So let's jump now to Hanoi, the political and cultural capital of Vietnam. We reach here after a short flight from Siem Reap. It's a small city with boulevards, lake, colonial French Quarter and Old Quarter – nicknamed 'The 36 Streets' after the 36 merchant guilds once there. 'At Hanoi,' wrote Somerset Maugham, 'I found nothing much to interest me.' I disagree.

We relax by the pool of the Metropole – where Brad and Angelina stayed, and Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene wrote novels. (Perhaps the former in the new Op-

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era Wing with its bold, contemporary look and definitely the latter in the old Metro-pole Wing with its oriental screens and wooden ceiling fans). We're served tropical fruit kebabs and chilled flannels at the poolside – underneath which, there's a bunker, a legacy of the Vietnam war.

Afterwards, dodging traffic, we weave through the lanes of the Old Quarter. We side step the pole carriers selling dragon fruit and custard apples; the stall holders with their mangosteen; and girls squatting beside panniers of dried shrimps. Everyone is buying and selling. In the mid-Eighties, faced with abject poverty, the Communist government shifted to a free-market economy. And, from 2000 to 2007, Vietnam became one of the world's fastest-growing economies. It's easy to see why.

We also visit Vietnam's first university and Confucian temple – the 11th-century Temple of Literature. It has exquisite courtyards, ornamental gateways and pavilions. "This stone tablet commemorate the good students," says our guide. Beside its feet are piles of Vietnamese Dong. "Cash offerings

from students wanting luck in exams."

We relax afterwards, eating street food of poh (beef noodle broth) and beef served over noodles with coriander, onion, garlic and chillies. Everything comes with handfuls of pungent mint, marjoram, coriander and dill. And it all gets dipped in sauces – whether fish, soya, chilli, peanut or sharp prawn sauce.

At our next destination, we try nem – rolls filled with noodles, shrimps and coriander. We eat it in the market in Hue (pronounced Hway) after a one-hour flight. But there's much more than food to discover in Hue. It was the imperial capital during the Nguyen Dynasty and is now a Unesco World Heritage site.

Multiple foreign invasions have left their architectural legacy in Vietnam. We stay at La Residence – an erstwhile annex to the former French governor's home, the original building dates from the 1930s – on the banks of the Perfume River. We overlook the distant towers of the Imperial Citadel, the former seat of the Nguyen dynasty.

Crossing the river on a dragon boat with a



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vivid yellow and red head, we pass shrines to the holy mother of the river. "Animist houses to appease guardian spirits," explains our guide, Huy. He then introduces us to Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism: to temple offerings of fruit, flowers and coffee; red and yellow family tombs in paddy fields; and ancestor worship. "There's ghost money," he adds, "which is sent to ancestors with other useful items made of paper, like TV sets."

Most of Hue's Imperial City was destroyed in the French and American wars. But Huy takes us to the bullet-pocked gates of the Citadel; to tombs and palaces flanked by statues of Mandarin warriors, dynastic bronze funerary urns and ancient bronze cauldrons. And to enchanting pavilions and pagodas with red lacquer and gold-leaf interiors. 'Regulation 3,' reads a notice outside. 'Not to bring in the dynamite poison and weapon.' Huy bandies exotic names such as Emperor Minh Mang and Emperor Tu Doc – who had 500 and 104 concubines, respectively.

Next day we drive 140 kms past piles of

chillis drying at the roadside like red carpets and past women wading in lotus lakes, collecting blossom for salads. Then onto windy mountain roads. We reach the Nam Hai resort near Hoi An: a place high on hedonistic style. There are Aman-like villas with Indochic contemporary décor; some with private infinity pools edging onto the white grains of China Beach, the longest stretch of uninterrupted beach in Vietnam.

Phuong, our butler, unpacks for us, serves us banana blossom salad by our swimming pool and 'dresses' our bed – on a raised platform – with romantic mosquito nets, and lights candles and turns on seductive music. You'd have to be post-partum not to find it sexy. He also accompanies us to some of the hundreds of tailors and shoemaking shops in nearby Hoi An. In Yaly – a Fifties-style emporium – the tailors copy clothes for us from a photograph, making up my dresses in two days. Think Prada-goes-provincial.

In Hoi An – a thriving trading post from the 16th to 18th centuries and another Unesco World Heritage site – there are no

modern buildings. Just a Japanese, covered bridge, ochre-painted houses and narrow roads and Chinese temples. Suddenly the skies open, the monsoon lashes down and my white trousers turn see-through. We shelter in an 18th-century merchant's house. As steam rises from my clothes, we drink lotus-flavoured green tea out of tiny cups. We're sitting amid crab-shelled roofs, mother-of-pearl inlaid furniture and Japanese-style beams.

Back at the Nam Hai, we become sublimely prostrate once again – this time in a spa perched delightfully over a lotus pond. Adrian has an Ayurvedic treatment and I have a four-handed massage followed by a bathing ceremony in water strewn with petals. Then we loll, looking at flames burning in cauldrons along the lake.

We're as chilled as Doãn Perignon by the time we reach our next destination, the Six Senses Hideaway at Ninh Van Bay. It's a remote peninsula accessible only by boat. It's also a location of breathtaking natural beauty overlooking the Hon Heo mountains and with jungle vegetation, rocks and

HÔTEL DE LA PAIX



haute-couture white sands fringed by coral reefs. Robinson Crusoe meets Marc Jacobs.

Its villas are dotted among the hills and on the beach and over rocks. The Presidential Villa – two beds for \$2,800 – is where Prince Andrew stayed. (It boasts a thatched dining area, rock-hewn pool and speedboat taxi). We stay in a beachfront villa, bathe in cinnamon-stick-scented waters in a wooden bath tub and take alfresco showers. The more active windsurf and dive.

Quaintly, time in this resort is set an hour ahead of Hanoi, the better to enjoy daylight. We cycle around the resort twice in the extra hour. Sea eagles hover above as we recover at the poolside bar sipping fresh passion fruit juice. Afterwards inquisitive Duc monkeys watch us as we eat crispy tiger prawns.

We also take a local boat to a deserted beach carpeted with coral. We're looked after by a private staff of two boatmen, one chef and one waiter; and served Vietnamese salads and barbecued lobster at a table set with linen in the shade of a mangosteen tree. Red Lacewing butterflies flit past and the air is thick with dragonflies. We lie afterwards on beach loungers also brought here especially for us.

All desert island idylls come to an end. And so, after another bumpy ride across the waves, and a 55-minute flight, we arrive in Ho Chi Minh City – which everyone still calls Saigon. HCMC is a capitalist centre in a Communist country. An economic powerhouse with trendy bars and cafés. A city of eight million people and four million motorbikes. A place in which they sell fine silk clothes and contemporary art works for international prices.

We stay at the Park Hyatt with its superlative service and 24-hour butlers. (Think French colonial style plus rain showers). The hotel is near the 19th-century post office (still in use) and the late-19th-century Notre Dame Cathedral.

But we're drawn to the War Remnants Building in the former US Information Service building – darkly fascinating with its sinister compliment of formaldehyde-filled jars of foetuses deformed by Agent Orange and bleak war photographs. The Cu Chi tunnels – 25 miles north-west of the city – were an elaborate network of tunnels used by the Viet Cong for guerilla warfare and mounting surprise attacks. Built at different levels, they extended for more than 125 miles.

Visitors are urged to try squeezing into

one – but my West London butt isn't any more obliging than would have been those of any petite American soldiers. Instead, we survey the gruesome booby traps made of bamboo and metal staves. The mannequins of Viet Cong fighters. The shooting range for those who want to fire the shots.

We've covered eight destinations and nearly 7,000 miles in 21 days. Sublime, but tiring. Now we're keen to experience a bit of Thailand... But only in the air with Thai Airways. After 'sawat dii khaa' greetings and traditional 'wai' welcomes, we settle into massage seats with acres of leg-room. It's like a holiday. And sure beats travelling in a tuk-tuk going the wrong way into oncoming traffic... quickly.

Caroline flew with Thai Airways (thaiair.com) and in Cambodia stayed at Raffles (raffles.com), the Hotel de la Paix (hoteldelapaixangkor.com) and camped at Angkor Wat (hnumantourism.com). In Vietnam she stayed with the Metropole (sofitel.com), La Residence Hue (la-residence-hue.com), Nam Hai Resort (thenamhai.com), the Six Senses Hideaway (sixsenses.com) and at the Ho Chi Minh (saigon.park.hyatt.com).