

Lifestyle

Siem Reap foodie forays give tourists taste of Cambodia

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FOOD and culture have always been intimately connected and the rich flavours of Cambodian food are accompanied by a fascinating array of stories and traditions that go back centuries. A nation's cuisine is more than just its daily sustenance in the form of meals. It's a reflection of its people's identity and self-image.

Given its proximity to Angkor Wat and other ancient sites, Siem Reap has always been Cambodia's primary tourism destination.

However, one of the best ways to explore Siem Reap has nothing at all to do with the nearby temples or the traditional site-seeing destinations. Experiencing the wealth of local Cambodian foods on offer there is a great way for tourists to supplement their trips to the area's awe-inspiring ancient ruins with another important aspect of the Kingdom's culture.

Siem Reap Food Tours was founded in 2014 with the goal of providing these authentic Cambodian culinary experiences to tourists with tours starting in the morning and lasting about a half-day as well as evening tours for those who prefer to dine after dark.

"Cambodian cuisine is rooted in the idea of terroir and local ingredients: fish from the Tonle Sap, noodles made from rice grown here in Siem Reap, Kampot pepper and freshly foraged herbs. This means that the best place to try classic Cambodian dishes is here in the Kingdom – it will never taste quite the same anywhere else, and every dish reflects the rich history and diverse influences of the country," Steven Halcrow, co-founder of Siem Reap Food Tours, tells *The Post*.

There are plenty of tour guides and tourist agencies located in Siem Reap that are focused squarely upon the Angkor Wat experience, but Siem Reap Food Tours is unique in that they focus on providing tourists with experiences that have true cultural depth by bringing them out to small villages where they can get a glimpse of what life in rural Cambodia is like and taste authentic local fare.

"I was a chef for 10 years and I had been working at a two-Michelin star restaurant in Scotland before I came to Cambodia – where I met my partner Lina [Goldberg – the author of the *Move to Cambodia* guidebook and website].

"We got the idea to create a tour where we introduced visitors to Cambodia to its cuisine. Most tourists know very little about Cambodian food, or were afraid to try prahok, and we wanted to share our love of Cambodian food with them – it really is a cuisine that deserves more attention worldwide," Halcrow explains.

If you're looking for a fancy upscale experience, you should probably look elsewhere. This isn't like ordering the tasting menu at a five-star French-Khmer eatery with a celebrity chef. An experience like that also has its merits, but it's never going to be an accurate reflection of what actual Cambodians eat on a daily basis.

Siem Reap Food Tours provides foodies with personal guided expeditions in both mornings and evenings tailored for small groups of adventurous eaters that take them through the heart of Siem Reap and provide a unique opportunity to learn about Cambodian life and culture.

Tourists will sample authentic Khmer dishes in a variety of off-the-beaten-path settings from street-side food stalls to busy local markets. They'll be introduced to popular Khmer market specialties and street snacks along with a few of Cambodia's more exotic tropical fruits.

The morning tour – guided by "expert eater" Jared Cahners, who has lived in Cambodia for more than a decade, – starts at 8am and wraps up between noon and 1pm.

"Our tours cost \$75 USD per person but that price includes all of the food, drinks and transportation for the whole duration," Cahners explains.

Cahners spends the morning taking tourists to sample some of Cambodia's most popular breakfast dishes, and to a local market, to learn about Cambodian in-

gredients. Then they head out into the rice paddies into the countryside to a village known for making num banh chok, where they see how the noodles are made, and learn about how it has long been a part of Khmer folklore.

While at the village, the group will also visit traditional rice wine makers and other food producers before a scenic drive back to Siem Reap. It's an entertaining and informative journey that takes visitors straight to the heart of Cambodian culture.

The evening tours start at 5pm and run until around 9pm. Cahners guides hungry tourist groups around Siem Reap to sample delicious Cambodian dishes at several different locations, from small family-run and local-specialty restaurants to street-food stands at a busy night market just outside of town.

The evening tour has everything from the family-style barbecue that is a universal Cambodian obsession to rarities like frogs stuffed with kroeng – a fragrant curry paste that is one of the defining ingredients of Khmer cuisine.

Those taking the evening tour are, of course, also welcome to toss back a few of the local Cambodian beers to create a more convivial cultural experience if they're so inclined.

Halcrow says their overall goal is to introduce visitors to real Cambodian food: The ingredients, the dishes and the people who make them. If one of their guests has a specific dietary requirement or allergies they can cater to that if given some advance notice.

They try to make things dynamic and interesting for the guests, Halcrow says, and that they're always on the lookout for new food stalls or restaurants serving great food in the area, something both Halcrow, and Cahners, who has a



Those taking the food tour will get a chance to sample a variety of authentic Cambodian dishes. SUPPLIED



Learning how num banh chok is made is a popular tour activity. SUPPLIED

master's degree in Southeast Asian studies and studied anthropology in Cambodia, are well-equipped to do as Khmer-speakers.

"It's absolutely cheaper to just go to the market and try a bunch of dishes on your own, and if you're on a budget, go for it! We have spent years building strong relationships with food producers and vendors, and researching the best dishes in Siem Reap, and we make a point of going to places that are not easily accessible to tourists who don't speak the language. We think this allows us to offer an authentic experience to visitors that they wouldn't be able to get on their own," Halcrow says.

Cahners says that tourists not only value the experience of trying all of the various foods, they also enjoy the opportuni-

ty to meet regular Cambodians living their lives away from the regular tourist circuit.

"The local businesses that we visit are integral to what we're doing, and making sure that we introduce visitors to Cambodian food and people in a respectful way, and that everyone is fairly compensated, is important to us. Businesses are always very welcoming and are happy to have foreigners who appreciate their cooking," Cahners says.

Halcrow says that over the years they've had the opportunity to give tours to groups of Cambodians who grew up in places like the US, Canada or Australia and were familiar with Cambodian food, but only their own family's recipes.

"[Cambodians from abroad] are always very interested to find out more about how the

food is prepared here at the source. We were really excited when we got to host Nite Yun – who runs Nyum Bai – California's most famous Cambodian restaurant.

"She is Cambodian and speaks Khmer and she was travelling around sampling dishes all over the country and it was an honour to have her take our tour. Lina actually got to try her restaurant in Oakland, California, and it was fantastic."

Halcrow says that, pre-pandemic, despite being a small business, their tours were the top-rated food activity in Siem Reap because of their reputation and positive word-of-mouth among travellers.

Like most businesses dependent on tourism, Covid-19 completely shut them down for a long period of time and unfortunately their capital branch – Phnom Penh Food Tours – has now been closed since the start of the pandemic. "It's not just us," Halcrow says. "It has been a difficult time for all small businesses, and we have been worried about the restaurants, tuk tuk drivers, and others who depend on tourism."

Now, however, with visitors from abroad beginning to trickle back into the Kingdom and bookings for future trips on the rise, things are looking up for the many small businesses and residents of Siem Reap who need tourist dollars to earn a living.

Halcrow says that they have remained mindful of the pandemic and taken added precautions during their tours to make sure they are safe for everyone involved, both tourists and Cambodian hosts, and he recommends people check out their website or message them for safety details.

"I'd just like to let people know that we're open! We've been doing tours for a modest number of guests in Siem Reap so far and we hope this is a sign that tourists will be returning to Cambodia in large numbers."

For more information on Siem Reap Food Tours, visit their website:

siemreapfoodtours.com ■



Cahners taking a tour group through one of the local markets. SUPPLIED



He is a fluent Khmer-speaker and a long-time resident. SUPPLIED