



# The Next Chapter

With bespoke artisan décor, new luxury room categories and a vintage author's theme, the refurbished FCC Angkor enters a new era of style. **Ron Gluckman** gets nostalgic.

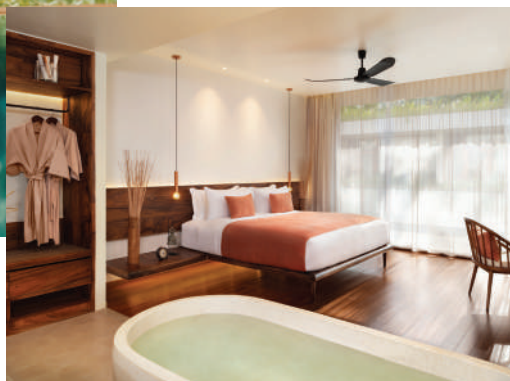
**ANGKOR IS COMMONLY** known as a long haul into Indiana Jones territory. Or worse. When I first visited in 1993, gunfire still ricocheted around the spectacular relics of the grand Khmer empire, which had been heavily mined during decades of civil strife. Few guesthouses were open in gateway Siem Reap, and rare visitors like me raced around the ruins by jeep, with armed guards. But a decade later, I was lounging by the plush pool at the **FCC Angkor** ([fcccollection.com](http://fcccollection.com); from US\$215). It was an incomparable oasis, in an unlikely location.

These days visitors swarm the UNESCO World Heritage Site, explore its majestic stone structures covered in vines and tumbling into jungle,

FROM TOP:  
A Hanuman statue  
welcomes guests  
into The Mansion;  
local art and  
design decorate  
each space.







FROM TOP :  
Downtime in The  
Mansion; a vintage  
author's theme  
permeates the  
hotel; enjoy a  
nostalgic soak in  
the Governor suite;  
one of the hotel's  
two idyllic pools.

and afterwards putt around the floating villages of Tonle Sap Lake and take in the Phare Circus. Their average visit lasts two to three days.

Unless, that is, they wish to laze around an iconic jewel like the FCC, which reopened in July after a 14-month restoration expanded the boutique hotel. It remains a period piece—but stylishly updated, in the same vein but different to the newly revamped Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor. Meanwhile, attractions like the growing art-rich district of Kandal Village make Siem Reap a compelling repeat destination.

FCC stands for Foreign Correspondents' Club, but the property never was one in the mode of (unrelated) FCC journalist clubs in Hong Kong, Tokyo or Seoul. Cambodia's first FCC in Phnom Penh launched as a restaurant and pub in a glorious old mansion on the Tonle Sap River in 1993, just after the United Nations mission to bring peace to this troubled country. A flood of plucky expat entrepreneurs had followed the peacekeepers, and some partnered with journalists to open the FCC that quickly became Phnom Penh's "in" place. A decade later, they expanded to Siem Reap, both properties under the umbrella FCC Collection.





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Good eating at The Mansion; Kandal Village, a stroll from the FCC; al fresco evenings beckon at Scribe Bar.



While the FCC Phnom Penh was a genuine hangout for journalists (disclosure: I became charter member No. 22 during a reporting trip from Hong Kong), it was a grandiose but decidedly funky place, with a handful of creaking wooden hotel rooms. The FCC Angkor, on the other hand, was a different beast, a more upscale escape in a heritage building, with tranquil rooms overlooking a jungle garden with idyllic pool. It was once a police station, with barracks in the detachment guarding the nearby royal residences. For its original transition to hotel, architect Gary Fell, known for his sharp, modern tropical designs around Southeast Asia, transformed the police billets into Zen-like marvels of light wood and glass overlooking ponds and lush greenery.

**The design focus was to be homegrown and eco-friendly. To decorate the resort, indigenous art and textiles were sourced from local collectives**



The latest restoration has maintained that special magic, even while expanding the property, adding a spa and second pool, and boosting the room count from 30 to 80. A new building was erected across the street, connected to The Mansion (the bright all-day dining room) and old barracks via walkways trimmed with verdant rice stalks and flowers. From the spacious Governor suite (66 square meters) overlooking the pool, it seemed exactly as I remembered from my first visit, and I struggled to recall if there had been a second story (there hadn't).

"We wanted to make everything look and feel the way it was," says Malee Whitcraft, a Dutch resident of Bangkok, who with her husband Kevin Whitcraft, took over FCC Collection five years ago. Kevin was born and raised in Thailand, first visited Cambodia in the 1980s and,

COURTESY OF FCC ANGKOR (3)

the following decade, opened a bar near the FCC Phnom Penh, having always loved the place.

Malee oversaw interior design, working with Phnom Penh-based Bloom Architecture. She tracked down local craftsmen at Sam Orn Silver Handicraft, but had them instead tackle copper, hammering out shimmering sinks, shower pipes and fittings in every room. A main focus was to be homegrown and eco-friendly, so they used the leftover copper for room-number markers and clever cutouts of local animals and ancient figures from Cambodia's rich folklore. The place is filled with local materials and sustainable wood—and no plastic. She chose indigenous art and textiles to decorate the resort, sourcing from local collectives. "All the designs have different meanings and stories," she says.

I especially liked her furniture—a mix of wicker and rattan chairs in the restaurant and terraces, and Cambodian deco-style couches and stuffed chairs that recall giant wooden radios from the Golden Age. Everything is unique, yet fits together, like a collection you might find in a friend's tropical estate. "The idea was to make it very homey," Malee says. Additionally, a subtle correspondents theme pervades: in the comfy and uncluttered rooms sit old-fashioned typewriters, phones and notebooks. The main bar, in front of The Mansion, has been zipped up with chrome and glass, and is now the modern Scribe Bar.

Down in the capital, the Whitcrafts have already begun a massive restoration of the Phnom Penh FCC, with reopening planned for 2020. It will take into the fold an early-1900s mansion next door to the FCC that was long vacant and riddled with bullet holes. The refurb will add suites, art galleries and rooftop dining with views over the National Museum and Royal Palace, all the while keeping the property true to its original 1910s form. ☛

## KANDAL VILLAGE

A FIVE-MINUTE MOSEY FROM THE FCC ANGKOR, THIS CLUTCH OF CUTE SHOPS IS YOUR GO-TO FOR CAMBODIAN ART AND HANDICRAFTS, AND GREAT EATS.

Cambodia's coolest neighborhood of cafés, art galleries, boutiques and craft shops conveniently occupies a compact few streets, walking distance from the FCC Angkor, and adjoining the former French Quarter and Old Market. This ever-expanding bohemian district offers more than two-dozen places to shop and plenty of places to dine—here are some of our favorite vendors.

### 1. Little Red Fox

Australian David Stirling is widely credited with kicking off Kandal Village, as he was one of the first to relocate to this then-quiet backwater of atmospheric old shophouses. His popular café offers bountiful breakfasts, yummy smoothie bowls and some of the best coffee in Cambodia, with great local music and art. *thelittleredfoxespresso.com*; 593 Hap Guan St.

### 2. Trunkh

This amazing lifestyle and design shop showcases everything from crafts and clothes to gigantic animals from an old carousel. Everything here is Cambodian-made, apart from Australian owners Philip and Dennis, who originally operated Trunkh in Phnom Penh before relocating to the more serene Siem Reap. Trunkh supports local NGOs and collectives, and ships anywhere. A huge metal horse or rabbit of 20 kilos runs US\$350 plus shipping. *trunkh.com*; 642-644 Hap Guan St.

### 3. Niko's Studio

A renowned artist in Cambodia, Frenchwoman

Niko became an icon in Phnom Penh before moving to the less-stressful Siem Reap. She's a longtime resident who lives above the shop, and creates her signature Buddha statues here in an array of vivid colors. 664 Hup Guan St.

### 4. Maison Sirivan

This chic design showcase offers a nifty blend of Parisian fashion and locally produced clothing for men and women. Cambodian Sirivan Chak-Dumas returned from years abroad studying French fashion to build a collection of her own designs, crafted by local textile workers. *maisonsirivan.com*; 10 Hup Guan St.

### 5. Mademoiselle Thyda

This gourmet spice, tea and deli run by a Siem Reap returnee from Paris showcases high-end, fair-trade local delicacies from famed Kampot pepper and salt to Cambodian rum, organic jam, hibiscus and butterfly-pea tea. The spice racks abound with fragrant Khmer chili, turmeric and amok, and there is a nice selection of US\$5 sample tubes that are easy to take back home. *mademoisellethyda.com*; 670 Hap Guan St.

### 6. Tribe Cambodia Art Gallery

Londoners Nat Di Maggio and Terry McKenny were immersed in the UK street-art scene, and have transported a buzzy ethos to this art gallery/bar in a spillover area of Kandal Village where barbershops and massage stands are rapidly turning into galleries. Tribe promotes a wide array of artists,

including international star Fin Dac, and nurtures local talent, like handicapped protégé Morn Chear, who creates astonishing block prints despite having lost both arms. Tribe has a fantastic vibe, serving great coffee and cocktails, with regular artist showcases and community art projects. 655 Central Market St.

### 7. Khmer 652

Everything about this charming little 12-table eatery shouts simplicity and authenticity. Yet there is nothing subtle about Chef Anna's flavorful Cambodian dishes. "Our food almost disappeared," she says. "I wanted to help bring it back." She chose Kandal for the quiet; the name is the street number. Staples include *samlor korko*, a fragrant fish soup steeped in lemongrass and coconut milk, and beef *lok lok*, tender marinated beef in a tangy sweet-and-sour sauce with to-die-for Kampot-pepper-and-lime dip. *khmer652.com*; 652 Hap Guan St.

### 8. Maybe Later

Mexican food in Asia can be notoriously disappointing, but this top-notch cantina needs no disclaimer. Maybe Later made its mark in Siهانoukville, but the owners tired of the chaos. The coast's loss is Siem Reap's delicious reward. A bulging burrito bowl is US\$5.50, while their scrumptious fish tacos are US\$5.50 for two. And dig the wild Mexican death murals and icy cervezas, as well as the sign: "Mexican Food So Good, Trump Wants to Build a Wall." 713, Street 14 Mondul 1 Village.