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This newly revamped luxury hotel is the best reason to visit Siem Reap

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Ed. note: This story was reported, written, and edited prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“One of these temples...erected by some ancient Michelangelo might take an honorable place beside our most beautiful buildings. It is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome.” So wrote the French explorer and naturalist Henri Mouhot of the staggering majesty of northern Cambodia’s Angkor—the world’s largest religious complex (at over 400 acres) and the seat of the Khmer kingdom from the ninth to 15th centuries.

Having explored the ruins beginning in 1859, Mouhot is credited with alerting the West to Angkor’s existence, spurring a new wave of visitors and leading the French to play a pivotal role in its preservation. Yet guests of the [Raffles Grand Hotel d’Angkor](#) might never know of him if not for a characteristically exceptional amenity delivered to their rooms: a delicate chocolate bird’s nest—a nod to his avid interest in ornithology—accompanied

by a magnifying glass, signifying his exacting attention to detail in his exquisite, photo-like sketches of the temples.



The Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor first opened in 1932 to serve the growing wave of luxury travelers bound for the enchanting ruins of Angkor.

Courtesy of Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor

A temple of luxury

Such singular gestures are the norm at Siem Reap's most luxurious hotel, primarily positioned just five miles from the Unesco-inscribed [Angkor Archaeological Park](#). Having debuted in 1932, the 119-room resort reopened in October following a meticulous, six-month renovation that cemented its standing as northern Cambodia's grande dame of hospitality.

The refurbishment seamlessly marries the Raffles's storied history with chic modern updates. Carefully preserved elements like its original teak-and-wrought-iron birdcage elevator, floral-motif Art Deco railings—their intricate metalwork painstakingly restored—and black-and-white marble floors underscore the hotel's enduring French Art Deco flavor. Au courant improvements to guest rooms include bathrooms redesigned with rain showers and Italian tiling, new hardwood floors, and Simmons pillow-top mattresses. Lighter, brighter common areas teem with oversize flower arrangements, richly patterned rugs, and chinoiserie accents, while the iconic swimming pool—Cambodia's largest—and 15 acres of gardens provide a revitalizing respite after long hours hiking the temples.



The hotel's 119 rooms boast lighter, brighter interiors, refurbished wood floors, and wholly redesigned bathrooms following the recent six-month renovation.

Courtesy of Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor

Initially conceived in response to the dearth of accommodations for wealthy travelers bound for Angkor's architectural marvels, the Raffles quickly lured the global cognoscenti with its soigné charm and world-class service. Charlie Chaplin and actress Paulette Goddard visited together in 1936—the same year British author H.W. Ponder described the hotel in her book, *Cambodian Glory*, as an “immense and dazzling white concrete palace that would look far more at home on the Côte d'Azur.”

Unparalleled adventures

These days, Raffles's renowned hospitality partly manifests in a range of exclusive guest experiences. Jet-lagged or not, it's worth rising at 4 a.m. for a sunrise tour of the sprawling stone city of Angkor by chauffeured Vespa scooter, the hotel's most memorable adventure. Beginning with entry to Angkor Wat via secret passage well before dawn—when you'll have the astounding monument virtually all to yourself—the exhilarating sojourn offers access to parts of the complex otherwise difficult to reach.

You won't soon forget the spectacular sunrise over Angkor Wat—its sandstone towers silhouetted against a sky fading from amethyst to coral at daybreak—nor zipping through the dense jungle, wind in your hair, en route to [Ta Prohm](#). Here, massive roots of aptly named strangler fig and banyan trees reach through temple walls and cascade over roofs like colossal streams of petrified lava, creating an almost surreal fusion of architecture and nature, while their soaring trunks and branches form a leafy canopy above the astonishing landscape.



The city of Angkor served as the seat of the Khmer kingdom—one of the largest and most sophisticated in the history of Southeast Asia—from the ninth to 15th centuries.

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Later, after wandering the labyrinthine halls of the 12th century Bayon temple—its 216 huge, beatific faces of Avalokiteshvara, the Buddhist “lord who gazes down with compassion,” doing just that—you’ll jump back on your Vespa amid dragonflies dancing in the sunlight, the temple’s many eyes meeting yours during one last backward glance before returning to town.

To sample Siem Reap’s burgeoning culinary scene in sublime style, book the hotel’s Khmer culinary journey. The progressive dining experience begins with a drink at the Raffles’s atmospheric Elephant Bar, whose signature

cocktail, Airavata—a fruity rum-and-coconut concoction—is named for the mythical white elephant ridden by Indra, the Hindu king of gods. From there, you'll travel by tuk-tuk—armed in inimitable Raffles fashion with a chic rattan carryall from the concierge bearing bug repellent and a rechargeable fan—to three top-tier restaurants for a meal that celebrates the town's slew of enticing dining options.



Raffles guests can explore the sprawling Angkor ruins by chauffeured Vespa as one of the hotel's exclusive curated journeys.

Courtesy of Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor

At [Haven](#), a training restaurant for disadvantaged young Cambodians, you'll enjoy a first course prepared by students enrolled in its free, 16-month work and life-skills program—complete with room, board, and medical care—after which they seek meaningful employment with the help of Haven's founders. Tucking into tender chicken satays and fresh vegetable spring rolls in its low-lit tropical garden, you'll relish how supporting a life-changing cause never tasted so delicious.

Next, at [The Sugar Palm](#), an airy jewel box of an eatery fronted by lush greenery bedecked with hanging lanterns, “fish amok”—a Cambodian specialty of freshwater fish, spices, and coconut cream, blended and steamed to velvety perfection—wows, as does tender grilled eggplant topped with garlicky minced pork. Addictive black sticky rice pudding served on the elegant grass terrace at [Mahob Khmer Cuisine](#) rounds out a scrumptious evening.



A signature feature of the hotel, the heritage building's original teak-and-wrought-iron birdcage elevator has been ferrying guests between floors since 1932.

Courtesy of Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor

Artisanal traditions

A visit to Siem Reap is remiss without an amble through its bustling markets and ateliers, where you can often observe Cambodia's gifted artisans at work. Standouts include the famous Old Market—whose stalls are crammed with stacks of colorful *kramas*—the country's ubiquitous checkered cotton scarves—Buddha and Vishnu sculptures, and hand-painted postcards depicting Angkor's wonders.

Meanwhile, the [Made in Cambodia](#) market showcases an array of beautifully made local goods like handwoven blankets, semiprecious-stone jewelry, and baby clothes. Located steps from the town's eponymous river, the market's raison d'être is to provide much-needed local jobs.



Artisans Angkor, a social enterprise that provides vocational training to young Cambodians in traditional arts and crafts like silk weaving and stone carving, employs 800 artisans across Siem Reap province.

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[Artisans Angkor](#), which offers vocational training in traditional arts and crafts to Cambodian young people, exemplifies another visionary social enterprise creating employment opportunities in a country where almost one-third of the population lives at near-poverty levels. Launched as an educational project in the late 1990s and

now the largest employer in Siem Reap province, it teaches age-old skills including silk weaving and wood and stone carving to Cambodians ages 18 to 25, employing 800 artisans in 48 workshops.

At its inviting campus in the town center, you can take a free guided tour of its studios before heading to the sprawling-store-meets-gallery, where sumptuous silk scarves, delicate ceramics, and shiny lacquerware line the shelves. With shopping bags full of hand-hewn keepsakes (every \$100 spent contributes over \$21 to the Cambodian economy), you'll then return to the Raffles' rarefied embrace, where a lotus-flower-folding class and afternoon tea await.

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