


Beyond Angkor Wat: The Other Side of Siem Reap, Cambodia



Ann Abel Contributor 
Travel

I know the difference between expensive travel and the truly luxurious



The pool at the FCC Avani AVANI HOTELS

The last time I visited Siem Reap, about ten years ago, there was pretty much one thing to do: the famous temples of Angkor Wat (which were even then feeling the strain of overtourism). I went for a few hours each morning, spent afternoons by the hotel pool, and one evening went out on a very brief tour with a local guide to see the “real city,” which I remember as being just a few streets. It was probably bigger, but luxury tourism seemed to be oriented around the temples.

What a difference a decade makes. Now the Cambodian city is alive with creativity and hope. There’s a thoughtful international community, and all sorts of innovative and artistic projects. Angkor Wat is still a magnificent sight, but for someone who has already been, there are many more interesting ways to spend a few days.

One example of that new energy is the [FCC Angkor](#). Once the summer mansion of the French colonial governor and then the city’s first foreign correspondents club in the ’90s, the hotel (which was added in the 2000s) reopened a few weeks ago as a luxury hotel managed by the Avani group. The \$7 million renovation was overseen by Bangkok-based designer Malee Whitcraft and Phnom Penh firm [Bloom Architecture](#), with the aim of reinforcing the vision of the hotel’s original architect, [Gary Fell](#).

Today In: Lifestyle 



The restaurant at FCC Avani AVANI HOTELS

As the actual foreign correspondents club, it was a popular meeting point for international journalists, celebrities and historical figures. As a hotel, it kept the tropical clubhouse feel in the Scribe bar and dining room, and played with its history in the 51 rooms (and soon 29 suites), decorating them with framed front pages of old regional newspapers, rotary phones and vintage typewriters. The welcome letter appears to be typewritten and is still halfway in the machine. Obviously this is catnip for journalists like me who are hosted by the hotel, but it's unlikely to annoy others who just want large, modern, light-filled rooms.

With its tropical gardens, inviting pool and rooftop bar, you could easily use the FCC as a base to chill after temple sunrises. But the hotel makes a point of encouraging guests to get into the city.

In one day, all at their recommendation, I went to have lunch in the chilled-out garden at [Haven](#). Apparently the banana flower salad is a huge hit on the Chinese equivalent of TripAdvisor. I liked it too. And the papaya salad and lemon pasta that I tasted. The menu is full of vegetarian and vegan options, as well as Western food.



Tribe Urban Art Gallery TRIBE

I had my post-lunch coffee at [Tribe Urban Art Gallery](#), which is filled with contemporary and playful works. Many of them are by some seriously big names. [Pure Evil](#) and [Carne Griffiths](#) are among the London artists who British art dealers Nat Di Maggio and Terry McKenny invite to Siem Reap to produce Cambodian-inspired work. These hang next to appealing works from established (as much as anyone is) and emerging Khmer artists. In the alleyway outside, there's a growing collection of street art, anchored by a gorgeous mythological figure by Irish street artist [Fin DAC](#).



Fin DAC's street art ANN ABEL

In the evening, I probably stared open-mouthed for 90 minutes while I watched the artistic athletes and acrobats of [Phare Cambodian Circus](#). One rode a unicycle on a tightrope while juggling. Others built elaborate human towers. They climbed silks and hoops and catapulted one another off a giant teeter-totter. (I was mildly bummed I didn't get to see the show *Khmer Metal*, which depicts modern nightclub life and has a Cambodian rock band, but I got over it.) I wasn't surprised to learn that they've toured the world, and one member of the troupe went on to Cirque du Soleil.



Phare Cambodian Circus TIMOTHY GIBSON

This may have been my favorite day ever in Southeast Asia. It would have been even if I hadn't known the backstory.

Part of the story is that Cambodia has an incomprehensibly sad recent history. There's a saying that there are not many old men in the country, because so much of the population was lost to war. Often working and living conditions aren't safe. You can see

the missing limbs, but you can't see the emotional scars. Plus, it's not exactly a wealthy country.

Haven was started 11 years ago by Paul and Sara Wallimann, a couple from Switzerland who had spent some time volunteering in Cambodian orphanages during what they call their "Eat, Pray, Love" trip. They realized that the real problem was adolescence—what happens when the kids turn 16 or 18 and have to fend for themselves? Their answer was to bring the Swiss style of apprenticeship to Cambodia.

The head chef at Haven is a professional who came from the old FCC; his grandmother had been a cook in an orphanage and he felt a kinship. Nearly everyone else in the kitchen and in the dining room is a graduate of an orphanage. They receive 12 months of training here, along with housing, English education and life skills, then are placed in four- and five-star hotels (including the FCC) for internships.



Cooks at Haven HAVEN

"Everything related to education in Cambodia requires money," says Paul Wallimann. "This is an opportunity to change that a little."

Many go on to good jobs in luxury restaurants and hotels. Seventy students have gone through the program so far.

It was a similar idea behind Tribe. The high-profile residencies are a way to keep the gallery going so that it can be a home for Cambodian artists. The day I visited was the first day there for [Open Studio Cambodia](#), a top-floor workspace and collaborative project between resident American artist [Lauren Iida](#) and Khmer artists [Long Lavy](#), [Morn Chear](#) and [Chan Phoun](#). Because of factory accidents and the like, some of them are missing arms. This wasn't by design; it just mirrors the population. Without Tribe and Open Studio, their lives now would be very different.

And Phare is one of the businesses operating under the Phare Performing Social Enterprise. Since 2013, its mission has been to create job opportunities for graduates of the circus, music and visual art programs—which started as a sort of art therapy for childhood survivors of trauma—at the nonprofit [Phare Ponleu Selpak](#) school in the village of Battambang.

The troupe writes its own shows, which can be about folklore, modern urban living, cultural differences and other light topics, or which may touch on war, discrimination, poverty and ghosts, albeit with delightful circus stunts and the requisite clown. It tells stories that should be told, but it's never a downer. It puts 75% of its profit toward supporting the school's programming.



Phare Cambodian Circus's Khmer Metal show RANUTH

The artist-athletes ended the performance grinning even more broadly than I was. I'm sure they're grateful to have good salaries, insurance and savings plans, but to me, what they looked like was skilled performers who are rightly proud of their accomplishments. The fact that those smiles came after whatever had come before only made them sweeter. And as Phare's marketing director, Craig Dodge, says, if not for the circus, "Their entire reality may have been a small rice field."

A lot of what I saw in Siem Reap could have been heartbreaking. But I was too busy being awed by the talent I saw—in the kitchen, on the canvas, in the air—to feel sad.

After the circus, I had a nightcap at [Miss Wong](#), an oasis of cool and calm near the tacky Pub Street (Siem Reap's answer to Bangkok's Koh Sang Road). There, I met John Ganshaw, an American who runs a charming little boutique hotel called [the Butterfly Pea](#), which is built around paying locals fair wages and taking an active role in community work. Some of the hotel's profits support the initiatives of the [Butterfly Pea Charitable Foundation](#) in remote villages, which make it easier for children to receive an education.

But people stay at Butterfly Pea because it's a nice place to stay. None of these are places you visit or things you do because they're a good cause. They are appealing simply because they are awesome. (To be sure, there are social enterprises that are led by Cambodians; I just happened to encounter some that are run by foreigners.) The fact that the proprietors are social entrepreneurs is merely the cherry on top.

PS: I did see some of the Angkor complex after all. The FCC works with local professional photojournalist [Régis Binard](#), who is from France but has lived here many years (and offers his photography services to several of these social businesses). He takes guests to some of the few remaining uncrowded spots in the temple for informal photography workshops. So I do have some of the expected trees-growing-out-of-stone photos after all—better ones than I would have taken on my own—after all. But I also saw that Siem Reap is so much more.

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Ann Abel

I've been a travel writer and editor for 15 years – including several as a senior editor at ForbesLife – and I've written about more than 600 luxury destinations and ho... [Read More](#)