

ESSAY

Phnom Penh: The Soul of the City

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Figure 1: The National Sports Complex is an extremely popular public place

From the hundreds of Tuk-Tuks to the thousands of Lexus crisscrossing the busy streets of the capital, Phnom Penh is a fast-changing city, which rarely fails to charm. Whether it's being stopped at every corner by street vendors, being stared at by random strangers, watching the locals driving or five people riding on a motorbike, all these characteristics are deeply anchored in the culture of this city.

While Phnom Penh still features numerous structures related to its history, seen in the ancient buildings and French colonial architecture such as the post-office, the Central Market, the old railways station or the National Sports Complex by famous architect



Figure 2: Tuk tuk transportation is a unique feature of Phnom Penh



Source of all pictures: Paulette Chheav.

Figure 3: The Mekong River plays a large role in people's daily life

H.E Vann Molyvann, the face of the city is constantly changing. There is an emerging side, more young and modern, which mixes into the soul of the city, making it more unique than ever

The development of the city also integrates the emergence of a new world, sometimes in contradiction with the cultural and traditional aspects of the city: high-rise buildings, luxurious cars, modern clubs, bars, restaurants and coffee shops in a western-style.

Additional components that add to the soul of the city are the Mekong River and the Tonle Sap Lake, Boeung Kak district, formerly the largest urban lake in Phnom Penh but now filled in, Koh Dach (Silk Island), well-known for its silk weavers and more recently Koh Pich (Diamond Island), that links Phnom Penh with a bridge

to a modern and rich island in which real estate investors tried to make a paradise for wealthy people.

The true soul of Phnom Penh is a mix of various elements incorporating cultural and economical aspects but also a historical legacy that takes into account the tragedy of the Khmer Rouge regime and the scars it has left on a whole population in the past century. Tuol Sleng prison and the Killing Fields are touristic activities both locals and travellers still visit in remembrance of the atrocities committed to the Khmer people not so long ago.

The charm of Phnom Penh does not only lie in the aesthetic beauty of its cultural monuments, museums, colonial buildings or smiling people but embraces everything one can witness every day which is truly

unique and authentic: women walking in the markets wearing pyjamas, bikes transporting hundreds of boxes on the back of their vehicles, men and women holding hands when crossing the busy streets, old people exercising and dancing with funny postures at the Olympic stadiums early in the morning or lovers kissing each other on their motorbike parked by the riverside.

Acknowledgement

This essay has first been published at the following publication:

Waibel, M. (ed.) (2017) Phnom Penh: Capital City. Book series PAZIFIK FORUM of the Association of Pacific Studies; Volume 19, APSA Publishing House, Phnom Penh / Cambodia, 208 pages. ISBN: 978-9924-9151-0-2.

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