

# Time Out

## Hong Kong

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BRACE YOUR  
WAIST: IT'S  
MOONCAKE  
p.44 TIME

WHAT'S OUR  
GOVERNMENT  
GOT AGAINST  
p.12 BIKES?

*The Style Issue.*

WILD NEW  
SEASON LOOKS  
THE A-Z OF AUTUMN  
CELEB FASHION MUSES  
WHAT HONG KONG  
STYLE ARE YOU?

**EXCLUSIVE**

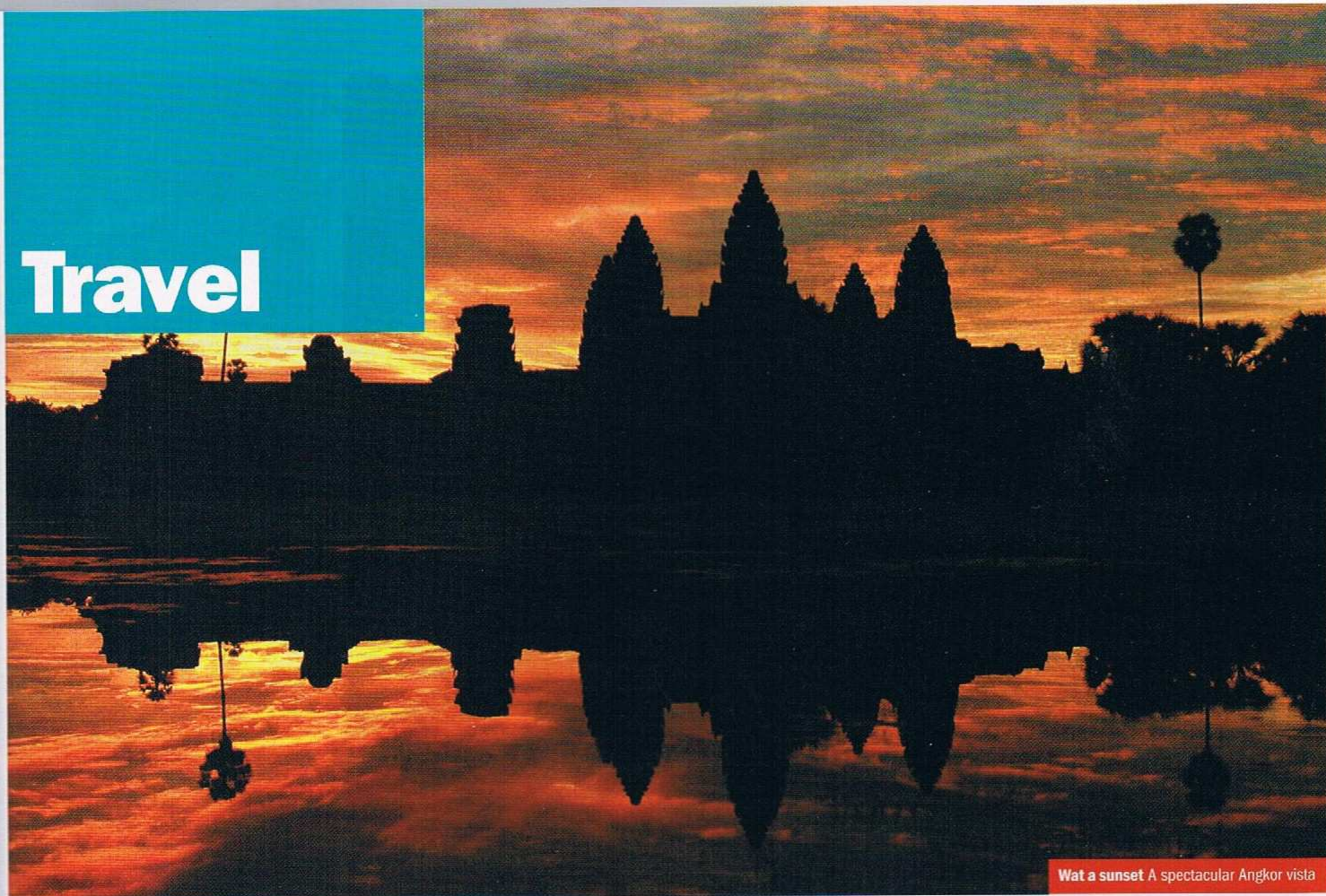
DARING FASHION ICON

**KAREN  
MOK**

on why  
**INDIVIDUALITY  
is SEXY**







Wat a sunset A spectacular Angkor vista

## Raising Angkor

**Cynthia Rosenfeld** experiences Cambodia's legendary temple city, Angkor Wat, the philanthropic way... and gets away from the crowds

**G**enerally speaking, my idea of the perfect day definitely does not start before sunrise. But today, having relinquished responsibility for navigating the 300-plus temples of Cambodia's Angkor Wat temple complex to an innovative Siem Reap-based tour operator, I don't have much of a say in the matter. The subtle light that greets most days in these parts has barely started to seep and, already, ABOUTAsia's representative – scarily cheerful for this time of the morn – is waiting downstairs to lead me on their signature one-day best-of-Angkor tour.

Despite my aversion to such early mornings, I've convinced myself this will be worth it. ABOUTAsia – founded by Andrew Booth, formerly the head of Special Situations Trading for ABN AMRO – is committed to showing guests around Cambodia's top attraction without crowds but that's not their only USP. ABOUTAsia is also one of Cambodia's key innovators in the field of philanthropic travel, donating 100 percent of its net

profits to an education company that currently supports 51,000 Khmer kids.

While on a global gallivant with his young family in 2003, Booth realised Cambodia offered a meaningful opportunity to fulfill a promise he'd made to himself upon acceptance to study physics at Oxford University: that he would some day create life-changing educational opportunities for others. Booth subsequently left finance, moved to Cambodia and, in 2007, established ABOUTAsia ([aboutasiatravel.com](http://aboutasiatravel.com)), recruiting a handful of scholars and scientists like himself to apply their elite skills to reimagining the increasingly congested, cookie-cutter tour of the 400sq km of monumental ruins.

This is not my first visit to Angkor Wat, the ancient capital which literally translates to 'temple city'.

That first trip was in 1996, only 16 years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge but before the mass arrival of camera-toting tour groups, and involved me jumping in fright at each hopping frog that I mistook for an exploding landmine. In the years

since, I have returned more than a dozen times to climb around Siem Reap's now landmine-free ruins. However, it's been more than four years since my last visit, when my frustration at the maddening crowds and tour bus traffic led me to swear my Angkor

Wat temple touring days were over. But then, ABOUTAsia's Twitter moniker @WithoutCrowds and a growing buzz about the company sparked my curiosity. I wanted to know, 152 years after Henri Mouhot happened upon Angkor's crumbling remains, whether it was possible to experience something of the French explorer's sense of discovery.



**Is it still possible to experience some of Henri Mouhot's sense of discovery?**

So, off into the darkness we go, with my already animated guide, Bunchay, offering a historical overview of Angkor for my two travelmates, Wolfgang and Alexis, an Austrian-American couple living in Bangkok. My eyes adjust to the creeping daylight as the guide dates the birth of Angkor civilisation to 802AD. He explains in flawless English how the capital of the Khmer Empire became the largest urban centre in history prior to the Industrial Revolution, extending beyond Cambodia into present day Laos, Vietnam and Thailand.

Even after more than a dozen visits to Angkor, the sheer number of temples and syllables comprising ancient Khmer names still fills me with a sense of awe. The last great Khmer king, Jayavarman VII (1181-1220), who undertook the empire's largest construction projects, built hundreds of temples, including Preah Khan, Bayon and Ta Prohm. And before we head to the latter (in ABOUTAsia's swanky Mercedes van), Bunchay, as informative as ever, tells us that, after Jayavarman



Enough to give you goosebumps...  
The temple Bayon (clockwise from  
left), more boats, Miss Wong's bar  
and a place for contemplation



VII's death, the Angkorian empire began to decline until the 1431 final siege, where Thai invaders finally brought about the end of the Angkor civilisation.

Ours is the only car to stop in front of Ta Prohm, one of Angkor's 'greatest hits' for its dramatic silk cotton tree roots wrapped around 12th century stones. Bunchay explains that, although we're approaching the hour when tour buses descend upon the temples, he's brought us in before the crowds, allowing Alexis, the photographer among us, time to snap the interplay between nature and the manmade, as well as the temple's carvings of dancing deities and meditating monks.

Booth's team studied other travel companies' itineraries to deliver as private experience as possible to their guests. They use Google Earth and NASA photographs to identify alternative paths, like a narrow forest pathway we later access by tuk tuk to Ta Nei, a less visited but charming temple. While we roam around the ruins, Bunchay and an invisible team of helpers set up breakfast of hot coffee, fresh fruit and flaky croissants from the bakery at our hotel, Shinta Mani. I greedily reach for more as another tourist walks towards Ta Nei, as surprised to come upon us as we are to see

her in this serendipitously private jungle setting.

Back in the van, I count buses heading towards us. When the figure quickly exceeds my fingers, I feel grateful for our early start. We stop at the Victory Gate of Angkor Thom to gawk at its colossal heads of gods and demons and then walk along the 8m-high laterite wall to the East Gate. Fluttering butterflies in white, blue and black hues surround us as Bunchay tells us this is sometimes called the Gate of Death because, during Angkorian times, executions took place here and the bodies were cremated nearby. As the day progresses, his wealth of knowledge seems almost as vast as the temple complex.

In days before, Booth had explained to me that, while all guides must complete a three-month nationally-approved training course to lead visitors around these temples, ABOUTAsia's receive incentives to dedicate time to further research on Khmer history, culture, environment and other areas of interest to visitors. Picking up a fallen stick and using the tip to draw a detailed map of the complex, he starts telling us about how historians are investigating whether the alignment among early Angkorian temples (like Phnom Bakheng and the 10th century Phimeanakas, with

its hidden bathing pools) suggest an even earlier sprawling city on these grounds. The idea of ancient, yet-to-be-revealed secrets is a great distraction from the searing, Cambodian midday heat.

After lunch, we pass the Terrace of the Elephants, a 300m-long succession of elephants carved in battle alongside lion-headed warriors, garudas and seven-headed horses, where Alexis stops to photograph saffron-robed monks strolling past. We continue to Jayavarman VII's state temple of Bayon at the centre of the ancient city of Angkor Thom and explore its 37 towers carved with enigmatic smiles.

And then we climb aboard one of the elaborately painted (and beautifully air-conditioned) boats that have recently started cruising the Angkor Thom moat. Ours is the only pleasure vessel among a handful of fishing boats. A lone fisherman waist deep in water sings hauntingly as our charming boatman rows us past. Bunchay turns out to mix a mean G&T and hands around sunset-coloured sweet potato chips as the real orb sinks into the surrounding coconut foliage. It just confirms my thoughts from the day: 152 years after Henri Mouhot happened upon Angkor's crumbling remains, this is the way to see the temple city.



## Get packing

### Where to stay



Recently redesigned by 'starchitect' Bill Bensley, **Shinta Mani** (doubles from US\$250 per night; +855 63 761 998; [shintamani.com](http://shintamani.com)) balances creature comforts with support for the hotel's in-house hospitality school, where young Cambodians learn how to bake mouthwatering croissants. For those who prefer something more intimate, the five-suite **Maison Polanka** (suites from US\$120 per night; +855 12 499 810; [maisonpolanka.com](http://maisonpolanka.com)) in two traditional Khmer stilted houses among tropical foliage doubles as Siem Reap's first villa rental.

### Where to eat and drink

#### Le Jardin des Délices

([ecolepauldubrule.org](http://ecolepauldubrule.org)) offers fine French cuisine and Khmer specialties. Take an afternoon TWG tea break with Cambodia's tastiest chocolate cake at **Upstairs Café** (Wat Bo Rd; +855 97 304 3600) but save room for authentic, inexpensive curries at **Snappy** (+855 977 179 790; [facebook.com/snappy.siemreap](http://facebook.com/snappy.siemreap)) behind the Angkor Riviera Hotel (828 Porkombor St, Mondul1, Svaydangkum, [angkorriviera.com](http://angkorriviera.com)). End at **Miss Wong** (The Lane, +855 92 428 332; [facebook.com/misswongcocktailbar](http://facebook.com/misswongcocktailbar)), a 1930s Shanghai inspired lounge.

### Seeing Angkor Wat

If you're interested in a philanthropic way to avoid the crowds, contact **ABOUTAsia Travel** ([aboutasiatravel.com](http://aboutasiatravel.com); +855 6376 0190).

### How to get there

**Dragonair** ([dragonair.com](http://dragonair.com)) flies daily to Phnom Penh with five daily connections on Cambodia Angkor Air to Siem Reap. On October 29, **Vietnam Airlines** ([vietnamairlines.com](http://vietnamairlines.com)) launches same day service to Siem Reap via Hanoi from \$4,577 return (including taxes and service charges).