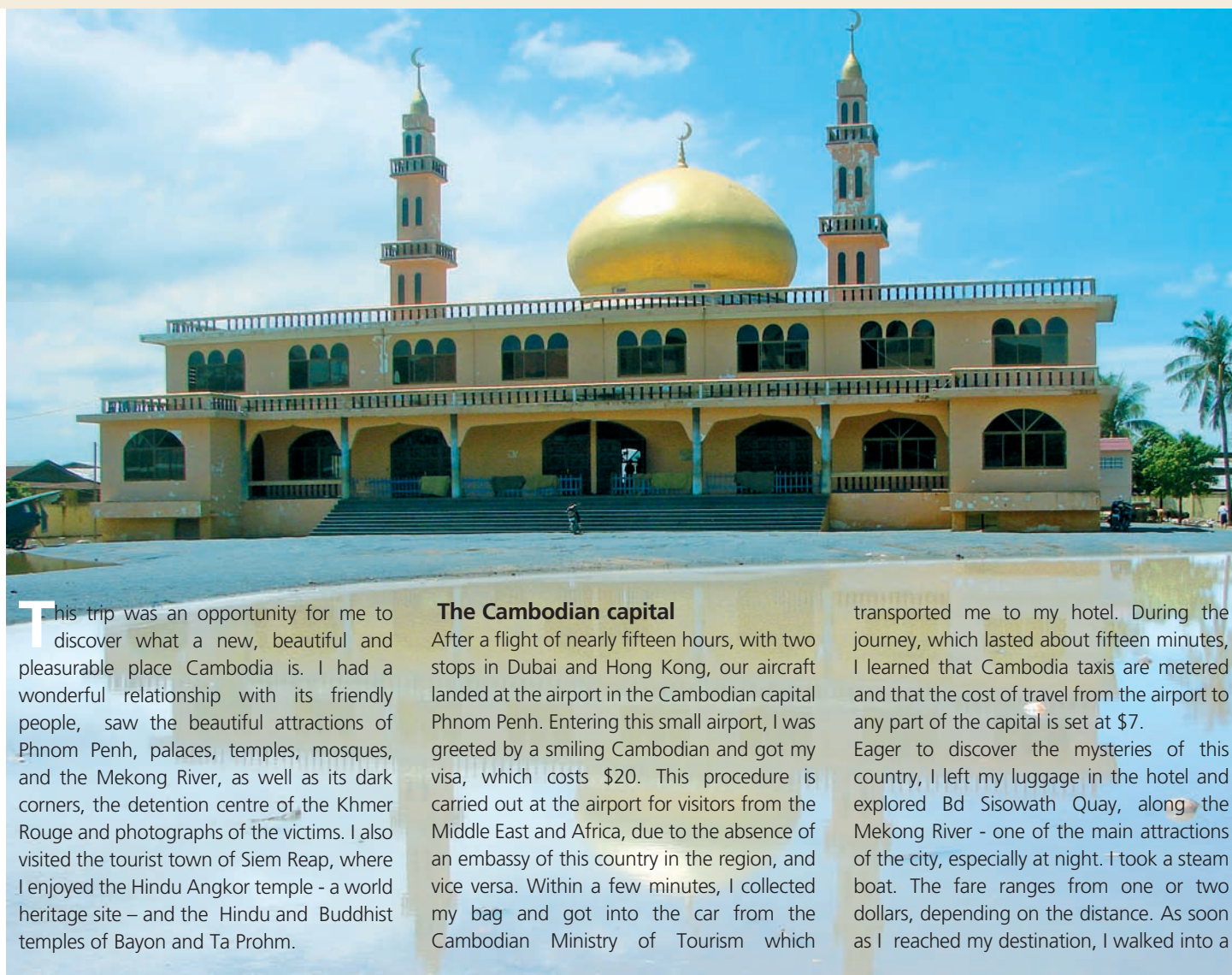


# Cambodia:

## A trip to the wonders of the unknown

> Phnom Penh -  
Mounir El-Fishawy

When I was preparing my trip to Cambodia, many questions surfaced into my imagination about this reclusive country of Indochina. I only heard that it was the scene of extreme and harsh stories of imprisonment, torture, and repression that characterized the Khmer Rouge regime. This nightmare ended in 1979, following the uprising of the Cambodian people, supported by the Vietnamese army.



This trip was an opportunity for me to discover what a new, beautiful and pleasurable place Cambodia is. I had a wonderful relationship with its friendly people, saw the beautiful attractions of Phnom Penh, palaces, temples, mosques, and the Mekong River, as well as its dark corners, the detention centre of the Khmer Rouge and photographs of the victims. I also visited the tourist town of Siem Reap, where I enjoyed the Hindu Angkor temple - a world heritage site – and the Hindu and Buddhist temples of Bayon and Ta Prohm.

### The Cambodian capital

After a flight of nearly fifteen hours, with two stops in Dubai and Hong Kong, our aircraft landed at the airport in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh. Entering this small airport, I was greeted by a smiling Cambodian and got my visa, which costs \$20. This procedure is carried out at the airport for visitors from the Middle East and Africa, due to the absence of an embassy of this country in the region, and vice versa. Within a few minutes, I collected my bag and got into the car from the Cambodian Ministry of Tourism which

transported me to my hotel. During the journey, which lasted about fifteen minutes, I learned that Cambodia taxis are metered and that the cost of travel from the airport to any part of the capital is set at \$7.

Eager to discover the mysteries of this country, I left my luggage in the hotel and explored Bd Sisowath Quay, along the Mekong River - one of the main attractions of the city, especially at night. I took a steam boat. The fare ranges from one or two dollars, depending on the distance. As soon as I reached my destination, I walked into a

Dubai-Phnom Penh Mosque

مسجد "دبي - بنوم بنه"





The writer at Bayon

مندوب المجلة في بايون



مقبرة لبعض الضحايا بحديقة متحف تيول سلنغ  
Graveyard of some of the victims in the gardens of Tuol Sleng Museum



Photos of some of the victims

صور الضحايا

boulevard where life carries on well after midnight and which is full of restaurants, internet cafes, shops, hotels and business, as well as a number of massage centres. I advise tourists to keep the words "No, thank you", ready for the Cambodians, - the proprietors of the massage parlours are very persistent.

**The painful past**

Tuol Sleng was the first tourist attraction I visited in the Cambodian capital. This is a school that the Khmer Rouge turned into a prison. During the time of Pol Pot intellectuals languished here. All that remains are hundreds of photos as well as tombs, traces of blood on the walls of torture rooms, and dozens of skulls and bones displayed in glass cases in this building which has become known as the "Museum of Genocide". Most of the survivors carry the scars of the atrocities they were subjected to. You can meet some of them in the streets of major cities, playing music to collect coins from the passers by.

**Sites of civilization**

It's painful past aside, the city of Phnom Penh is full of tourist sites. The royal palace is one of the main attractions of the Cambodian capital. This palace, where the deposed king, Norodom Sihanouk, once resided, is open to the public. It has a splendid architecture, imitated by parliament and a few luxurious hotels in the capital.

Tourists spend their time visiting these attractions and then travel by steam boats or other types of river boats, on the Mekong River (\$10 an hour). Some tourists go on foot along the Boulevard or Sisowhat Quay overlooking the river, or visit the traditional market Kandal, which sells all kinds of products: food, clothes, gifts and so on. Tourists also buy exotic fruits such as pineapples, rampotan, dorian, litchi, mango, dragon, etc. The restaurants are the place to taste the dozens of famous soups of Indochina, and the meat of the kangaroo and crocodile. Kangaroo meat is similar to rabbit

meat and crocodile meat is similar to fish. I had a great desire to taste crocodile meat in 'revenge' for the meals crocodiles had made of human beings.

**Siem Reap and the wonders of the world**

I left the capital to Siem Reap, located 314 km away. Its a four to five hour car journey costing \$10.

At the main stopover in the province of Kampong Thom, I saw vendors carrying trays full of grilled spiders, grasshoppers and butterflies that the Cambodian bought and ate with great zest.

You can also go to the city by plane from the capital (40 minutes), or other capitals of neighbouring countries, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, Myanmar and Vietnam (Saigon), with an average of 10 flights a day, which could be increased soon. It is also possible to travel on the river via Lake Tonle Sap, from Phnom Penh and Battambang Province. ▶





Angkor Thom

نزهة في أنكور توم

Siem Reap is seen by tourists who are interested in culture and history as the main reason for their trip to Cambodia. This city has many splendid Buddhist and Hindu temples, such as the temples of Angkor Wat and Baphuon. The first temple is considered by the Cambodians – or so their tourist brochures tell us – as one of the “Seven Wonders of the World.”

The temple of Angkor Wat is regarded as the largest in the world, with an area of 200 ha. The building looks like a gigantic rock emerging from the middle of vegetation. Founded by King Suryavaman at the beginning of the 12th century, its construction lasted for about thirty years. The temple is made up of many courts connected by long patios of green spaces separated by two short surrounding walls decorated by various statues and frescoes relating different stories of how the Angkor empire was formed and how the king and his

military leaders led and directed the fighting. The second refers to the Hindu religion. The third expresses how Fichino protected the kingdom and its people. The fourth wall, describes how the people worshipped and glorified their king.

### Bayon Temple

The Buddhist temple of Bayon is located in the city of Angkor Thom. Founded by King Jayvarman VII in the 12th century, the temple is made up of 54 towers and each of its four sides is decorated with a sculpture projecting human faces.

The city of Angkor Thom is regarded as the city of temples. It houses, among others, the temple of Ta Prohm, Baphuon, Phimeanakas. The Bayon Temple, and others are characterized by wonderful carvings on their walls, which take your breath away and give the impression of listening to a story or a historical myth, ▶



Elephant rides

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Bayon

معبد بايون

narrated loudly by the walls, despite the silence of the place.

Parks surrounding Angkor Thom are very diverse. Some are spread out on flat areas, where tourists can enjoy an elephant ride near the giant trees, whose roots are splendidly intertwined. There are also folk groups with their finest traditional dress performing for visitors in and around the temples. Tourists have their pictures taken with them.

In the evening, the centre of Siem Reap fills with life until well after midnight, in cafes, restaurants and hotels, offering a variety of folk performances.

### Muslims in Cambodia

At the end of my trip I visited the largest mosque in Cambodia, which is called Dubai Mosque Phnom Penh, thanks to the donation of some Dubai citizens made in 1969. I asked for the imam of the mosque, and his youngest son, Mohamed Younis, told me that his father went to an engagement ceremony. I was invited to the festivities. We took our shoes off and were welcomed by the people, men and women of all ages. They were sitting in circles around tables filled with rice dishes, meat and chicken as well as fruit and cakes. They invited me to share their meal. This was the first time I ate a halal meal in Cambodia.

I spent about an hour and a half in this wonderful Muslim gathering, chatting with people, as well as the would be bride and groom who were very shy. Afterwards, I returned to the mosque accompanied by the imam, Sheikh Mohamed Hassan and his son. ▶



Bayon Temple

معبد بايون



Angkor Wat Temple

معبد أنكور وات





Dubai-Pnom Penh Mosque

مسجد "دبي- بنوم بنه"



Islamic wedding party- Pnom Penh

حفل خطوبة إسلامي بأحد بيوت بنوم بنه

In flawless Arabic, the Imam shared his memories of Egypt, where he studied at Al Azhar University until 1969. He also informed me that there are about one hundred Muslim families in the capital Phnom Penh, and half a million Muslims in Cambodia. The country is home to an estimated 330 main mosques, and a few smaller ones. The Imam stressed, moreover, that the Muslims do not encounter problems, as freedom of religion is respected. However, the grants allocated to the mosques and the donations are insignificantly small, and do not even provide for their repairs.

After visiting the mosque, the son of the Sheikh accompanied me to a small village called Mekong or "floating village", composed of several dozen wooden houses and covered boats, including the mosque on the Mekong River. Its residents the fishermen, are Muslims from the Cham tribe or ethnic group. They are simple people. My attention was particularly drawn to the large number of children, practically naked, playing in the water, where they spend most of their time.

### Farewell Cambodia

As we approached the end of my visit to the wonders of Cambodia, I was assured that it has diversified assets which put it in a position to be one of the most important tourist destinations in the world. It has an area of 181,035 sq km which is rich in cultural, historical and entertainment attractions, as well as geographic, climate and religious diversity.

The tourist finds in the country more than 12 million people - the country's total population – at his service. He will also note that the ordinary people, despite their simple way of life, have a high consciousness of the vitality of tourism. They radiate warmth, sincerity, serenity and peace. Ninety percent of the population are Buddhist, 4% Muslims, and 2% Christian extremism is unknown. The tourist will not recognise the ethnic differences: 90% are Khmer and the rest include various ethnic groups. All of these elements have merged in Cambodia, all are aware of the importance of tourism to the country's economic development, improving the living standard of its citizens and the fight against unemployment and poverty. The national language is Khmer but most people speak English, with varying degrees of proficiency. The old also speak French. Please do not include the

cinema in your program: there is only one cinema in the country, the Lux Cinema. You have to keep \$25 or 100 thousand Cambodian Riels as a departure tax. The rainy season lasts from May to October. The rest of the year is dry. It is cold in December and January: the average temperature throughout the year is 27 °C, with high humidity.

Cambodia has an opening into the Bay of Thailand and the tourist has the opportunity to enjoy the seaside resorts of the south, including Sihanouk city. Similarly, the country's land borders with Laos to the north, Thailand to the west and Vietnam to the east, offer the chance to visit these countries at affordable prices. A trip by air-conditioned car from Phnom Penh to Saigon (Hochi Minh City) in Vietnam costs only \$11, lunch included! I seized the opportunity, made it and wrote about it for future issues of Islamic Tourism. ■



Sisowhat Quay Boulevard

شارع سيسوات كواي المطل على كورنيش