



The Robin Hood Effect

Review and pictures by Jane Batchelor

Few hotels can claim to cater to the well-heeled traveller whilst simultaneously working with a city's most under-privileged youths: Shinta Mani can and does; standing on a pedestal for its achievements in pro-poor relief in Siem Reap.

Mony, a 24-year-old student beams exuberantly over his dish of freshly cooked roasted vegetables while his teacher grades his culinary skills. The partially blind trainee has every reason to smile; within the past few months Mony's future has taken a drastic step forward towards attaining his dreams of becoming a chef.

At Shinta Mani's Hospitality School, young Cambodians considered at risk and with a bleak future are selected to study on a nine-month culinary course with the hotel's resident chef. The school, which is attached to the hotel, provides 16 students with uniforms, a basic income, stationery and four kilograms of rice per week - for their families. They study five days a week, both theoretical and practical lessons about the hospitality industry in Khmer and English and embrace the hotel's philosophy of building a local community.

Since the school opened in June 2004, the first graduates have all found full-time employment in hotels in Siem Reap, including at Shinta Mani itself. Several of the courteous staff in the hotel's small but delicious restaurant are past students.

Guests at this 18-room boutique hotel are encouraged to participate in the scheme and are welcome to observe the students at work in the open-sided classroom. The hospitality school is only part of the Shinta Mani's services. The hotel itself provides the luxuries that a well-groomed visitor would expect from a boutique hotel.

The cosy spa was the first to open in Siem Reap and entire day packages for both individuals and couples are one of its unique aspects. Body wraps, facials and traditional aromatherapy massages can all be indulged in at the three-room facility.



But, a relaxing Khmer-style massage is best enjoyed whilst relaxing near the hotel's cute swimming pool.

In a former life, this building was a post office. It has now been transformed into a blend of contemporary Asia and a more traditional aesthetic. An old wooden staircase leads from the reception, where unconventional black and white tained pictures adorn the walls. Upstairs, the library is an ideal place to chill out whilst gazing at the rickshaw men as they pedal by.

Employees also engage in twice-weekly dance performances with local children from a nearby orphanage, but a stay at the Shinta Mani will provide its very own cultural experience - a glimpse into a world of youths who have been fortunate enough to pursue their dreams in a city where so many are forgotten.



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French Colonial Comfort

Review by Jane Batchelor

Le Méridien Angkor offers an all-pampering, all-dancing, Khmer experience.

Situated six kilometres from the magnificent Angkor Wat, Le Méridien attempts to emulate the impressive temple's design with replica towers and an exact-sized moat, while also offering some of the best pampering in town.

The close-by temple complex is as mystical as it is majestic and has been the inspiration for the newest international hotel in Siem Reap. A certain essence of Angkor has been captured here, with imitations of stone carvings, an internal courtyard, lily ponds and expansive gardens that encompass the hotel. Fringed by softly-lit palm trees, the lawns are an idyllic environment for soirées on special occasions, including the annual Songkran New Year celebrations.

The hotel's exterior, which to a certain degree resembles the namesake temple in layout, endeavours to recreate a modern Angkor Wat where guests can soak up Khmer culture in a up-to-the-minute setting.

The swimming pool and ponds are central features; whittled pillars criss-cross in the water, an afternoon dip in the pool or a break in the Jacuzzi may succeed in invigorating guests whose trip to the temples may have left them somewhat weary.



If that fails, however, Le Méridien's must-have spa treatments will revive even the most fatigued visitors. The quaint spa includes a roofless room where a melting massage will soothe away any aches and pains. The entrance to the spa represents stepping into the inner chambers of Angkor Wat, and treatments range from an ancient Angkor massage to a hot stone facial. Both have been passed down amongst the Khmer people for thousands of years and the facial claims to have the properties of a mini face-lift.

Throughout the spacious hotel, the quirky idea of philosophical quotes add a touch of originality. Beer mats claim: 'I'm as sober as a judge,' while bedroom stationery offers more insightful remarks: 'The world is a book and those who do not travel need only one page - Saint Augustine.' A citation from Matthew Arnold that states 'culture is properly described as the love of perfection' rings throughout the hotel, as both the design and ambience here attempt to embody the quixotic sense of Khmer culture and hospitality.



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