



Riverbank in Phnom Penh.

**W**e need to look at a map so our tuk-tuk driver jerks to a halt, and together we locate Street 152. Jumping back on his seat, he makes yet another U-turn in a one-way street. Motorbikes, taxis, cycle rickshaws and cars head straight towards us but our driver doesn't flinch—and they part like

the waters of the Red Sea at the sight of our auto rickshaw. Welcome to Phnom Penh, Cambodia's beguiling, chaotic capital.

### [ Waterfront ]

**B**ut forget the traffic, this is also a city of trees, open spaces and lakes. Children dive into

the brown soupy **Mekong River**, while fishermen haul in their nets before heading home at sunset. If you sail past the floating village of houseboats and bamboo houses on stilts, draped in laundry, you reach the confluence where the Mekong, Bassac and Tonlé Sap rivers meet to form an "X" shape. When the wet season begins in June, the swelling Mekong forces the Sap to reverse its flow, some

60 miles upstream to engorge the Tonlé Sap Lake, which transforms seasonally into the largest freshwater lake in south-east Asia.

The Mekong is the stuff of legend but it's the Sap which flows closest to the city and gives it a particular charm. The riverside park is the place to stroll and enjoy the views—the rainbow-coloured fishing craft, the houseboats, the fast ferry to Siem Rap, cargo vessels, sampans, and the usually deserted fleet of tourist boats hoping to be chartered for a sunset cruise.

Foreigners are rare and locals are happy to sit and stare, especially in the cool breeze of early evening. You see friends holding hands, families sharing picnics, and hawkers selling incense sticks and lotus bloom for the shrines. Along **Sisowath Quay**, outdoor cafés with rattan chairs and plush cushions add an air of French colonial charm. Restaurants serve baguettes, pizzas, sticky rice, grilled Mekong fish with peanut sauce and Angkor beer. Try the Friends Restaurant which trains children rescued from the streets ([www.streetfriends.org](http://www.streetfriends.org)) or the Foreign Correspondents Club for a meal (or a room) with a view ([www.fcccambodia.com](http://www.fcccambodia.com)).

### [ Sights ]

**T**he city's main sights are close to the waterfront. Many were destroyed during the Pol Pot years, but those that survived, or were restored, are worth seeking out. Built early in the French protectorate in 1866, the **Royal Palace** is a spacious oasis of lawns and trees, dotted with marvelous flourishes of Khmer architecture, with its colonnades, spires and overlapping roofs. The impressive **Pavilion of Napoleon III** was donated by the