

## Capoeira: more than your typical Martial Art

Although Capoeira may have taken many parts of the globe by storm, **Liz Ledden** finds that Phnom Penh has a small but dedicated group of capoeiristas keen for others to join the fold.

To the rhythmic sounds of a Brazilian beat, pairs of sweaty bodies take turns to perform an almost slow motion, simulated dual. They dodge each other with one-handed cartwheels or duck under kicks with a swaying motion in time with the music. The odd break-dance type move is thrown in with long-held handstands looking as though their purpose is to provoke the other or display greater prowess. Part yoga, part martial art, part tribal dance, this is capoeira.

### ■ AFRO-BRAZILIAN MARTIAL ART

Created by slaves in Brazil as they prepared to fight while hiding in the jungle, they would incorporate song and dance to disguise what they were doing. Capoeira has emerged as more than just a fighting technique, according to

regular capoeirista Stephane Arii.

"It trains your body to be acrobatic, flexible and very reactive," he says. "It's a non-violent activity which is built on respect." He emphasizes that capoeira is about dance, music and ritual as much as it is about martial art.

A typical class consists of half an hour of stretching followed by one hour of training including kicking and escape

techniques. At the end a circle known as a 'roda' is formed and the group sings haunting Brazilian melodies to musical instruments. The roda is an integral part of keeping the traditional essence of capoeira alive.

Practiced by millions around the world, there is a real capoeira trend taking off in other parts of Asia including Thailand, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and the Philippines. However the Afro-Brazilian martial art that has emerged in Cambodia is somewhat more graceful.

### ■ CAPOEIRA KAMPUCHEA

Phnom Penh's capoeira scene was pioneered by former French

expat Joss Amalfi four years ago. He established a group of around 20 people and such was his dedication to capoeira that he started teaching for free.

Fellow enthusiast Gordon Candelin, who has also been on the scene for four years, says the group has fluctuated in numbers due to the inevitable migratory pattern of expats. There is, though, a core group of dedicated people – Capoeira Kampuchea – trying to keep the momentum going.

“The capoeirista should be talented in a few different fields – one should be wise and attentive, athletic and acrobatic, but also a musician and a bit of an actor”

Predominantly consisting of expats, as it is difficult to get adult Khmers interested, local children have taken a shine to it according to Gordon.

"Local Khmer kids, particularly the more disadvantaged ones, take to capoeira really well," he says. Previous workshops and

demonstrations at venues like Sovanna Phum and the Olympic Stadium have attracted enthusiastic groups of local kids and many have shown a penchant for its free flowing moves.

The group has encountered problems in finding a permanent space for classes and workshops. Over the last four years

it has moved to several different locations and is looking for a larger venue than its current base at Gasolina.

### ■ GETTING INVOLVED

Xavier Riblet, one of the group's two instructors, advises anyone interested in learning not to be intimidated.

"Capoeira is supposed to be fun, it's like a game," he says. "Some people will be more physical with it than others. However, the real purpose is to join in the spirit of the group." The more established participants aim to make everyone feel welcome.

While in many countries capoeira has a macho reputation and is dominated by men, this is not the case in Cambodia, and women often outnumber the men in the classes.

It takes about two or three months of practice to build enough knowledge and skill to really enjoy it, according to the group's other instructor, Michel Ghigo. "If you have a background in dance or a martial art, or are very flexible, you will adapt to capoeira faster," he adds.

"For young expats here, capoeira should be as popular as it is around the world," Michel says. "Many just don't know that there's a club here." ■

### Sessions

Sessions (US\$2) are every Tuesday and Thursday from 6.30pm to 8pm at Gasolina, 56/58 Street 57.

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