

Pampered in Siem Reap

From getting pampered in polished surrounds to being pummelled by a blind masseuse, Siem Reap's massage options run the gamut from luxury to budget. Avoiding the five-star hotels, **Liz Ledden** samples what's on offer in the Old Market area.

Frangipani:
Popular with expats

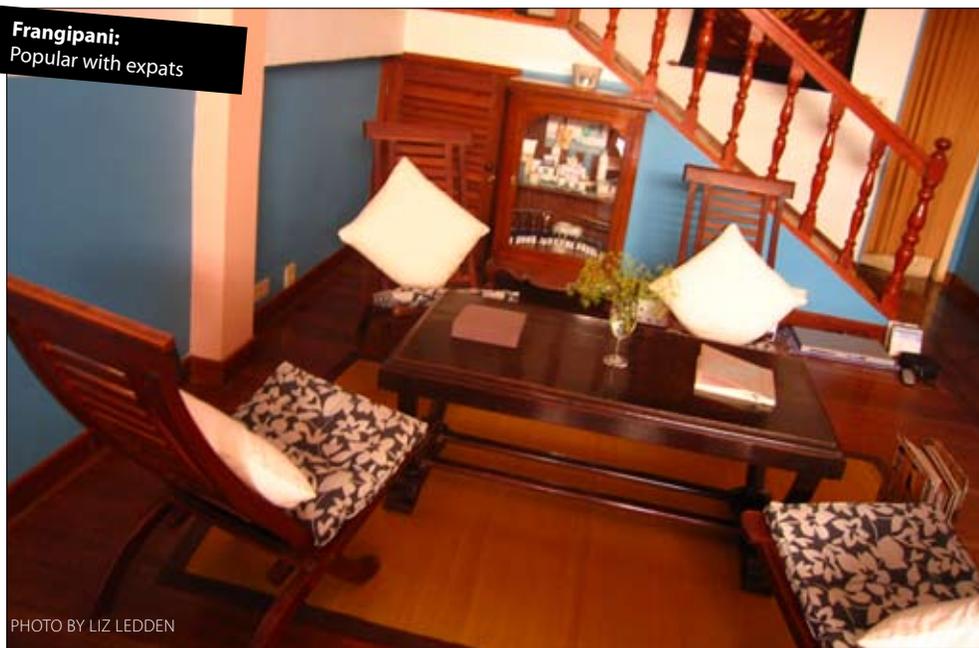


PHOTO BY LIZ LEDDEN

■ FRANGIPANI

Tucked away down the alley behind Pub Street, **Frangipani** is a small boutique style spa offering a to-die-for range of massages and luxurious facials and body treatments. Starting at US\$18 an hour, the prices are very reasonable for the high level of quality, professionalism and ambience. It is one of the few places apart from the hotels offering body treatments in addition to massage, making it extremely popular with expats, so advance booking is recommended.

Thai owner Ning says she opened Frangipani with her sister Cherry seven years ago because the only places to get a decent massage in Siem Reap were in the five-star hotels. "Now we get lots of customers from hotels who have tried a massage there and did not like it," she says. She feels that keeping the establishment small helps to maintain the quality of their service. "When we need money, we'll open a bigger one," she adds laughing.

Options include a tropical massage consisting of stretching and Thai techniques (US\$18 for

an hour, US\$33 for two hours), one-hour body scrubs such as the Khmer coffee scrub or the Brittany salt scrub (US\$22 each for one hour), and an hour's aromatic facial treatment for US\$28. There are also some enticing packages such as the 'Frangipani Slimming' package – a three-hour experience for US\$75 – including a cocoa and coffee body treatment and an anti-cellulite massage.

Treatments include a refreshing, icy lemongrass flavoured drink and a very luxurious footbath filled with fragrant frangipanis and pink blossoms. The massages take place upstairs in an undercover treatment bed on a balcony with an outdoor shower and small bathroom, but with high walls to guarantee seclusion. The masseurs are extremely courteous and professional, explaining what they are about to do and giving clear instructions where to position yourself and what to wear (or rather what not to wear!).

Frangipani also has a range of body treatments, some incorporating Khmer ingredients, such as the Kampot pepper body

scrub (US\$18 for an hour). The treatment supposedly helps firm the skin and reduce cellulite. This treatment may not be for the faint of heart – the burning sensation intensifies the longer the scrub is left on – but will appeal to fans of tiger balm.

■ BODYTUNE

The river-facing **BODYtune**, a Thai chain established ten years ago, that also has two outlets in Bangkok, is one of the newest and best establishments in town. Set in a renovated colonial building, BODYtune's entire front is open to the street creating a spacious, airy feel. Its floor and walls consist of cooling polished concrete with modern Asian décor reminiscent of a Thai resort spa. The ground level has sunken footbaths and a separate room with partitioned off massage beds for full body massages. Upstairs is an open loft with foot massage beds, a balcony and funky white chandeliers for decoration.

Although BODYtune uses local Khmer masseurs, they all receive up to six months training from a Thai masseuse

in Thai techniques, the precise amount depending on the level of their expertise.

BODYtune offers five types of massage. You can choose from a hands, arm, shoulder and head massage (US\$12 an hour), a foot massage (US\$12 an hour), traditional Thai massage (US\$14 an hour), a Thai-Swedish style oil massage (US\$18) and an aromatic oil massage with a choice of essential oil added.

The foot massage has four phases. A pressure point massage on your feet using tiger-balm scented cream is followed by a kneading-type massage on your legs. After some further work on pressure points using a stick ground into the soles of your feet the massage concludes with Thai-style massage with the masseuse using her knees and elbows to work into your calf muscles.

The service and ambience provide excellent value for money offering a resort like spa experience at mid-range prices.

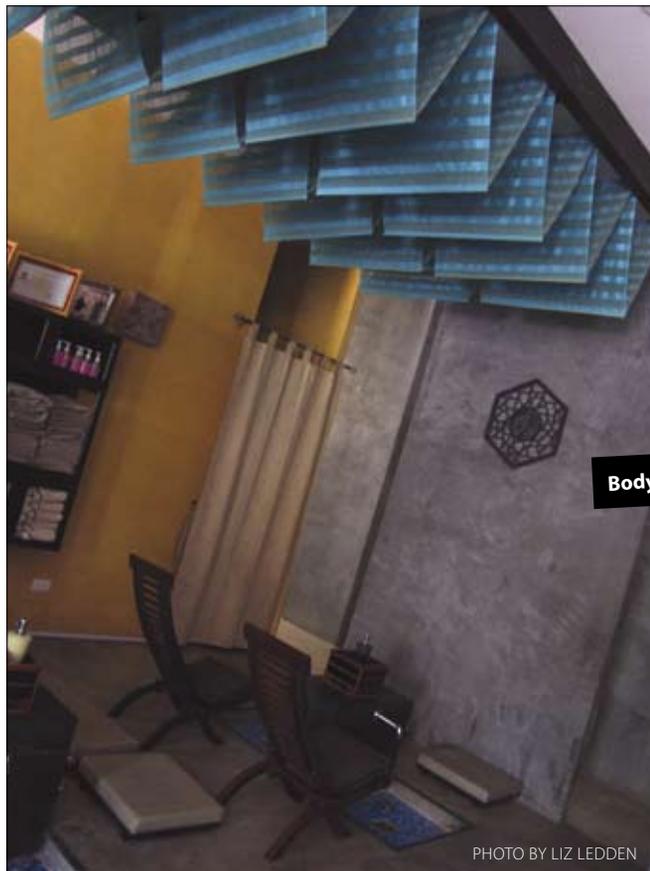
■ BUDGET & BLIND MESSAGE

The vast majority of massage outlets are of the US\$6 run-of-the-mill kind. Don't be deceived

Opanissai:
Yantra candle



PHOTO BY MARK JACKSON



BodyTune

PHOTO BY LIZ LEDDEN

by the hordes of massage girls hawking their services on the pavement outside their business – these massages are all legitimate and mostly reliable. They don't tend to differentiate too much in quality, service or ambience.

The main differences between these and the more expensive establishments are the décor, environment and service. There are no flower-filled footbaths here. While the experienced masseuse at places like Frangipani and Bodytune has undergone professional training, most of the young masseuse here look as though their main training programme was giving their mother a quick back-rub after school. Their counterparts in the pricier outlets have a higher attuned sense of privacy and a more professional standard of customer service.

Recently there has been a surge in the number of bargain massage parlours in Siem Reap, so it's safer to opt for one of the more long-running places. **Islands Massage**, **Be VIP Khmer Massage** and **Blue 7 Massage** are all centrally located near the Old Market and have been around for longer than most.

Offering four-hands massage for US\$10 an hour, **Islands Massage** has a dimly lit, air-conditioned room upstairs with relaxing music, offering a nice ambience for a full body massage. The foot massages conducted on the ground floor amongst a row of massage chairs are a good therapy for too much temple trudging.

Seeing Hands is an organization providing training and employment to the blind. At only US\$4 an hour for a foot or body massage at several branches around town, the price certainly can't be beaten. The masseuses are generally well-trained and are intuitive to the body's tight muscles and knots – often attributed to their heightened sense of touch.

■ OPANISSAI

Located directly opposite Frangipani, **Opanissai Salon** was established two-and-a-half years ago by two French women, Sylvine Devaux and Diane Caroen, who wanted to let people “discover another face to Cambodia.”

Using only natural products the salon provides a unique range of traditional facials and body preparations, such as Shpong (US\$15), a Khmer herbal



PHOTO BY LIZ LEDDEN

steam bath, body scrub and massage that detoxifies the body and exfoliates the skin. “We do traditional Khmer body treatment,” Sylvine says. “The other places do good body treatment but this is normally imported from outside.”

Manicures and pedicures are given downstairs in a beautiful room filled with jars of old spices and candles decorated with Khmer yantra (US\$4 to US\$5.50). Based on Buddhist mantra, the yantra are geometric symbols normally tattooed on the skin. These symbols have special charms giving the beholder good luck in various aspects of life, such as love or gambling.

The beauty treatments are given upstairs in a small room, alongside fortune telling by a traditional ‘kru’ who has the power to predict the future. This has to be booked in advance and costs US\$8, or US\$5 if you can understand Khmer. ❏

Information

Be VIP Khmer Massage

Old Market area
Tel: 063 760 841

Blue 7 Massage

Old Market area
Tel: 011 455 567

BODYtune

293-296 Pokambor Avenue
(riverfront)
Tel: 063 764 141

Frangipani

Alley behind Pub Street
Tel: 063 964 391
or 012 982 062

Islands Massage

Old Market area
Tel: 012 757 120

Opanissai Salon

Alley behind Pub Street

Seeing Hands 4

Alley behind Pub Street
Tel: 012 992 482

Body Tune:
Thai-run spa

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