


A Cambodian Adventure



A high-angle, aerial photograph of a person kitesurfing on a vast, deep blue ocean. The kitesurfer is positioned in the lower-left quadrant, with their red and white striped kite visible. The water's surface is textured with small, white-capped waves. In the upper-left corner, a patch of lighter blue and green water suggests a reef or submerged rocks. The overall scene conveys a sense of adventure and outdoor recreation.

With travel in Cambodia still touted as an adventure in itself, how do the country's adventure activities fare? Is there more to the country's adventure tourism than hopping on a dirt bike and exploring the countryside? Liz Ledden asks some diverse operators for their thoughts and finds out there's an increasing number of options for the active and intrepid.

THE CARDAMOM MOUNTAINS, Bokor National Park, the islands off Sihanoukville – all evocative sounding locales hinting of rugged terrain and unexplored territory – are but some of Cambodia's hotspots that are ripe for exploration and adventure. Cambodia offers mountains, sea and plenty of flat land (perfect for the obligatory dirt biking), and adventure tourism operators are now taking advantage of this environment and the increasing tourist numbers in the country to offer activities once unheard of in Cambodia.

The very real threat of landmines dotting the countryside has restricted trekking activities

in the past and limited where trekkers could go. With improvements in the situation, this is slowly changing – so says Daniel de Gruiter who heads up Exotissimo's one-year-old adventure tourism department.

The travel company takes groups on trekking, camping, and cycling adventures around Cambodia, providing an opportunity for people to escape the typical tourist traps, see spectacular scenery and interact with local people. For Exotissimo, the emphasis of their adventure activities is on exercise and seeing a side of the country most tourists don't get to see.



Cycling tours A great way to explore Cambodia off the beaten track

■ GET ON YOUR BIKE

Some of the company's most popular adventure tour itineraries include a cycling trip along Cambodia's southern coastline that finishes up in Siem Reap, cycling in Kirirom National Park, trekking and camping around Angkor and exploring the coast's Ream National Park. Another popular adventure links Laos with Cambodia – a cycling journey from Pakse to Siem Reap along the Mekong River, which takes 11 days.

Next on Exotissimo's adventure department's agenda is conquering the Cardamoms, with a possible combination of trekking, mountain biking and kayaking. They are also looking at expanding their repertoire of camping trips, with a Stung Treng to Kratie route and a project designing camping spots in the Cardamoms, in conjunction with WildAid, both in the works.

Perhaps to compete with the country's other adventure options, some dirt bike tour operators offer more extreme variations on traditional touring. An example is Angkor Dirt Bike Tours' upcoming 'Extreme Rally Raid' taking place from Jan. 12.

The 12-day, 2,000km journey involves not only dirt biking but crossing rivers in dugout canoes, sleeping in temple ruins and crossing through jungles as well as visiting Preah Vihear and Angkor Wat. The organisation has been offering such adventurous bike

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tours for over nine years and promises to go “where no other tour companies dare.”

■ ADVENTURE VS A HOLIDAY

But what exactly is adventure tourism? “Adventure means different things to different people,” says Daniel. “It can be anything that is out of the ordinary.” For some, he says, this may be a bird watching expedition, while for others it's something a little more active.

Commercial photographer and photography tour operator, Nathan Horton, says adventure tourism is “any tour that can challenge its participants' personal perceived comfort zone.” Nathan runs weekend photography classes in Phnom Penh that include a walking tour to put theory into practice. He also runs private photography tour itineraries to other locations around Cambodia.

There is a clear difference between adventure tourism and a simple holiday, according to Nathan. The former “suggests that you are will-

ing to challenge yourself to do something new, take the bull by the horns, learn a new skill or risk a new experience that might be a little uncomfortable to begin with,” he says. The latter implies taking some time off and relaxing.

His photography tours often involve meeting and interacting with local people – an important aspect of any adventure. Nathan says he gets his participants to “step beyond where they would normally go with a camera.” He takes them to places where locals are not in the daily firing line of the omnipresent tourist cameras. “I think the challenge and real adventure in visiting a country is in meeting its people, and if done in the right way a camera is a very good excuse for doing this,” he says.

■ BATTLE OF THE SEXES

Gender is no barrier to getting adventurous in Cambodia, according to Daniel. “It's definitely for both sexes,” he says. “We have a lot of women passengers who are stronger than men.” Distances can be a gruelling 100km a day on Exotissimo's cycling trips, though they are broken up with village stops.

“This is part of the adventure too,” emphasises Daniel. “Bus tours alone don't always allow you to interact with them.” He shows me a comment from a recent satisfied passenger, one that he says is typical of the feedback they receive – “we saw a side of Cambodia we would not have seen if we weren't cycling.”

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Not everyone is convinced that the sexes are equally enthralled with certain adventure activities, particularly dirt biking. Expat Murray Heath recently started a Harley Davidson touring company called Harley Cambodia. He's not so sure that dirt biking is equally geared towards women as it is to men, but says that there are plenty of activities for women out there. "A trip on the back of a Harley is definitely one of them," he says.

If his customers don't already have experience riding large dirt bikes, preferably Harleys, Murray explains that they have to ride pillion. Trips are customised to suit individual passengers needs, and even something as short as a one-hour birthday ride can be accommodated.

So why Harleys? Aside from being a unique venture in Cambodia, Murray's attraction is clearly physical. "I got married in my mid 40s and my only previous long-term



Adventure tourism *Learning a new skill*

love affair was with my Heritage Softail Classic," he says.

Aside from his obvious passion for the bike, the main benefit of touring Cambodia by Harley as opposed to another type of bike is "the comfort factor," according to him. They are also comparably safe. Murray's

service includes an escort vehicle and spare bike provided for groups of two or more.

COASTAL ADVENTURES

Cambodia's coastline also offers a multitude of adventurous activities, from scuba diving around Sihanoukville and its islands to less mainstream watersports. Stephane Arrii of Kep's Knai Bang Chatt Resort is an advocate of many of these. He says the wind conditions in Kep are ideal for windsurfing, kitesurfing and getting out on a hobie cat.

"Kep is well winded during the monsoon from July to October," explains Stephane, "Then there's dry cold wind from the north in the cool season from November until January, and a thermal wind from the south west starting with the heat in March through to May." He believes the best wind conditions, though, are during a full moon.

While he says kitesurfing is more for the experienced, "a hobie cat is the best to practice on, with good conditions without big waves and a sustainable wind of 5 to 15 knots all around the year on the Cambodian coast."

Canoeing and kayaking are other good options to explore either the Kampot River or the mangroves of Kep, according to Stephane.

"Teuk Chou in Kampot offers a wonderful spot for kayaking during the rainy season,



Getting close to locals *An essential element of adventure tourism*



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Para Cambodia: Offers a unique vantage point of the Cambodian landscape

with strong water movement and turbulence,” he says.

Trekking up Bokor Mountain with a ranger from WildAid is another adventurous option, adds Stephane. There are also limestone outcrops in the region offering rock climbing possibilities.

Another activity now available on Cambodia’s coast is through Sihanoukville’s Para Cambodia. A real passion for the sport led Simon Oliver to establish his powered paragliding business – that and the great conditions for paragliding in Cambodia.

“Sihanoukville and Cambodia’s southern coast offers some of the safest and most stunning flying for paramotor pilots in the region,” he says.

For him adventure tourism is certainly on the way up. “At the moment, many visitors to southeast Asia want more out of a holiday than simply sitting on a beach or touring temples,” he says.

■ WHY CAMBODIA?

Murray agrees. “Adventure tourism in Cambodia is definitely evolving,” he claims. “Five years ago, just being in Cambodia made you an adventure tourist.”

Improvements to the country’s infrastructure are undoubtedly helping, as travel times are reduced. While adventure purists may beg to differ, it does mean that places once considered too far or obscure are now easier to access.

“We now have sealed roads joining most major towns throughout the Kingdom,” says Murray. “I’m looking forward to a trip to Strung Treng on a Harley in early January, sealed roads the entire way.”

Simon of Para Cambodia believes that an added attraction could be the low cost of

some adventure activities in Cambodia compared to prices in some western countries.

“We offer very competitive course prices – you can learn how to fly a paramotor in Cambodia for US\$650, whereas similar courses in the U.S. or U.K. would cost between US\$1,500 and US\$2,200.”

Another attraction of Cambodia is its comparatively unexplored nature compared to neighbouring countries.

“Cambodia is relatively unknown,” says Daniel de Gruiter, “while Thailand is pretty much discovered.”

This bodes well for the future of adventure tourism here. “The more unexplored a place is the faster people want to explore it,” he says.

■ BEYOND THE BIKE

While dirt biking has become established as an integral part of the Cambodian adventure experience, it’s by no means the only way to get off the beaten track. Aside from the multitude of other activities opening up, from watersports to hiking, most agree that meeting local people, particularly in a rural setting, is the real key to a rewarding Cambodian adventure.

“Cambodia’s rural provinces not only have many varied landscapes, but their largely unvisited villages often have charm oozing out of every nook and cranny – largely because of the people who live there,” says Nathan.

Variety is also important, and while dirt biking is still going strong, some more experienced expats are getting a trifle saddle sore. “After riding motos for years, we are looking for different adventures and sports,” says Stephane.

However good dirt bikes are for accessing the most undiscovered parts of Cambodia,

at least according to Nathan, it’s getting off rather than on your bike that is important.

“Eventually if you really want to appreciate Cambodia’s real beauty and its charming people you’re going to have to get off your bike and go for a walk, regardless of whether you have a camera hanging around your neck or not.”

■ INFORMATION:

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Harley Cambodia

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Knai Bang Chatt Resort

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