



bike saddle for a 20km pedal with social enterprise company Soksabike. A student joins us to practise English, but while keen to help I don't have one polite word for the stench at Phsar Prohok, a fish-paste factory.

It doesn't help that I drop my phone into one of their vats. The stinky bowl is empty(ish), but still, it will take hypnosis for me to use fish sauce again. Or take a phone call.

The next stop, the open kitchen in Sot Chab's backyard, is a fresh breath of steamy air. Sot and his wife make rice paper from scratch. Every day they soak rice, pound it to a paste, roll it, steam it and hang the finished circles on racks to dry in the sun. They make two thousand a day and earn \$40 for the mighty effort.

Rice wine spices up the next leg of the bike ride. I'm told it is classified as 'medicine' so the producers don't have to pay liquor taxes. The fringe benefits are great, too. Byproducts go to the family pigs; the pigs get tipsy and the pork tastes great. That may be a 'tour story' from Bong Fila, but possibly not. The wine is unremarkable, but I have 10 more kilometres to cycle, so I take a second glass.

TOMB RAIDER

I'm sitting on Angelina Jolie's bed. Well, the bed she slept in (with Brad Pitt) while on location filming *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. The resort is Maisons Wat Kor, Battambang's luxury boutique hotel where traditional wooden homes on stilts look over a lotus pond. There's an outdoor day spa on the water's edge, draped with sheer curtains which possibly didn't bother Jolie. Just mentioning in case you're the shy type. I choose pond-side, fully clothed, with a Mai Tai.

"Hello everybong! How is everybong today?"

It is Sam and Bong Fila has superhero energy. In Siem Reap, it's an early start to visit the temple of Angkor Wat, the largest religious monument in the world, sprawled over 163 hectares. It is a UNESCO World Heritage site and known as the eighth wonder of the world for its architectural brilliance.

The sun plays peek-a-boo in the clouds but shows its face for the golden shot that we're poised to post. We, being thousands of people.

This is not an intimate dawn experience. And no one has had coffee yet, which adds a tension Khmer King

Clockwise from left: Angkor Wat is an important archaeological site; Siem Reap by tuk tuk; Fish curry cooked in banana leaves is a national dish; Cambodia is a must-visit for the delicious food alone; A young boy helps out in the family business; Tastebuds are tantalised at breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Suryavarman II didn't have to deal with in the 12th century when he commissioned the build.

Ta Prohm temple is like a caffeine hit. This is *Tomb Raider* territory, and it's magical.

Designed to merge with the jungle, but not be part of it, 838 years on the jungle is definitely boss. Massive silk cotton trees embrace the buildings, roots snake through stonework into once-forbidden spaces, and their canopies shroud the stony, twisted tangle. I love how nature rubs its green face in the monuments of human endeavour. When no one is watching, I take a *Tomb Raider* selfie.

NOODLES, PORK & CAKE

Suckling pigs spin in the scorching sun. The porky beacons line the main street of Preah Dak, a village half an hour from Siem Reap and, like the rats of Battambang, they're splayed, basted and roasted over coals, the sun's rays sharing the workload. Tourists and locals scoff plates of it, topped with Kampot pepper sauce and pickled green papaya. It's a juicy, fatty, delicious meal, the surprise 'tang' being sprinkles of red tree ants added to one of the sauces. I'm not anti-ant, but ain't sure they're worth the effort of harvesting.

It's the palm cakes you need to stop for. They are the signature dish of this little village. Fruit from local palms is grated, mashed with ground rice and palm sugar and then steamed in banana leaves for a tiny muffin-sized cake that's crispy on the outside and moist inside. It's a Cambodian delicacy that, like Kampot pepper, you have to try before leaving town.

This wee village also has oodles of noodles, made from scratch in traditional Khmer homes.

It's a mesmerising hour watching one family make the noodles from scratch, then serving them in a broth with heaps of herbs, chilli and banana flower for an exquisite breakfast called Num Banh Chock. So good. Will I ever get out of this village?

Reluctantly I do, and at Siem Reap's Riverside Market try Nompang, a crusty baguette packed with pickled



RICE PAPER

A vital ingredient, rice paper made from scratch is a labour-intensive job. First the rice is soaked, then pounded into a paste, rolled into circles, steamed and then hung out on racks in the sun to dry.

Again, I smell a rat. This one is in my arms, cradled like a hero.

It's officially a 'Hero Rat', one of the team at APOPO in Siem Reap, an organisation that trains African giant pouched rats to sniff out landmines.

They are strapped into harnesses and handlers lead them across rural properties to sniff out dynamite planted by enemies over decades of war. What rats find in an hour would take humans days to detect.

These rodents are saving lives and returning peace to families who are scared to walk their own land. My hero rat, Ronin, is so sweet. No marinade required. intrepidtravel.com

I smell a rat. Medium to well done, just the way I like it. I'm roadside at a Cambodian barbecue shack, a stop many guides would politely suggest you skip. But on the highway from Siem Reap to Battambang, rats stop traffic. Who could drive past their tiny butterflyed frames, golden and sticky with marinade, crispy tails curled, dangling over glowing charcoal? It's a meat treat worth pulling over for.

"You like it, bong?"

I am "bong". It's the respectful Cambodian way to address someone and is tossed around as frequently as Aussie "mate" or Kiwi "bro". Similarly, it's the go-to when you can't remember someone's name. So "bong" I am.

Bong Fila is asking. He is my guide on a food adventure tour with Intrepid. Even before this roadside rat-stop, my tummy is gurgling with water beetles, fried crickets and chewy larvae – snacks from Puok Market on the outskirts of Siem Reap. Still, there's room for a couple of rat drumsticks. No, they don't taste like chicken. Or pork, beef or rabbit. Rat tastes like their delicious marinade, the skin salty, like a supermarket chook, countered by Cambodia's

FOODIE'S DELIGHT

A food adventure tour through enchanting Cambodia leaves a tang on your tongue and a warmth in your heart. It's utterly magical.

WORDS BY SUSAN ELLIOTT

favourite dipping sauce of Kampot pepper, lime juice, palm sugar and salt. Pepper is Cambodia's chilli – you won't leave the country without its tang on your tongue.

A tip for first-time highway rat snackers – mind-block any movie you've seen with dimly lit sewers and the film *Ratatouille*.

This is not Chef Remy in your mouth. *Rattus argentiventer* are rural rodents that free-range in the rice fields here, living their best lives on a tasty organic diet with the degustation finale in traps set by farmers, saving their crops while catching food and boosting profits. In Battambang, Cambodia's third-biggest city, I'm out of the bus seat and into a



SNACK AT THE SHACK

A lot of tourists stop at one of the many roadside shacks in Cambodia for some marinated, barbecued rat. It's a tasty treat that saves farmers' rice fields and also brings in extra income.

PHOTOS: SUSAN ELLIOTT, INTREPID TRAVEL