

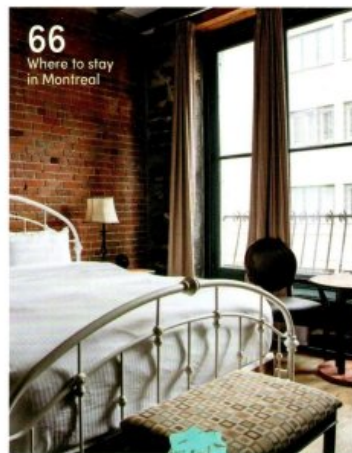
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Photographed by Athul Prasad in Goa

PHOTO: NANCY NEIL

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FIRST REVIEW

# FCC ANGKOR

*by Avani*

In Cambodia's city of temples, RHEA SARAN finds a new boutique hotel offering authentic Siem Reap experiences

There's a hazard of popular tourist destinations that I worry about: that the influx of travellers over time has changed its essence, its soul. I've experienced it on occasion before, where I've gone in with great expectations having read and dreamed about visiting for years, only to find that the destination's defining factors have either faded out so much it's almost interchangeable with several other places, or those unique aspects have been commercialised to the point of cringing.

That is *not* how I felt in Siem Reap. No, in Siem Reap it felt like I was constantly discovering amazing aspects of the town's heritage, its legacy – and its soul. And I'm not just talking about the obvious spirituality of the temple complex – though, it has to be said that although you're surrounded by a crowd of strangers while watching dawn break over Angkor Wat, there is still a quiet, even soulful majesty about the moment. Yet what truly left an impression were



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the people I met who drew me a little further into local lives and culture. There was lunch at charming restaurant HAVEN, with excellent food (banana flower salad, Khmer beef *lok lak*) and a policy of only employing and training at-risk Cambodian youth, giving them a chance to learn skills that will lead to future employment. There was the evening spent at the Cambodian "circus", Phare, eating buttered popcorn and watching talented artistes weave an original local story using theatre, music, dance, fine art and circus performances; profits from the night support arts education at a centre in Battambang. Another day, I chatted with a British couple running an art gallery-café-bar exhibiting contemporary works by Cambodian artists, many of whom are handicapped (landmines are one of the gravest dangers through large parts of the country – and I visited yet another spot, Sister Srey Café, where earnings from your meal go to support humanitarian landmine clearance among other things).

Anyone can find this side of Siem Reap, a side that builds on the heritage you discover at the temples. But I was lucky to be guided toward these authentic experiences by the experts at my hotel, which prides itself on immersing its guests in local culture. The FCC Angkor was originally built as the mansion residence of the French governor when Cambodia was still a French protectorate, and played this role for many years before becoming the Foreign Correspondents' Club, a spot at the heart of the city where international journalists and personalities convened, telling stories of and from Siem Reap. This year, after a complete fit-out, it reopened as a boutique hotel, managed by Avani Hotels & Resorts.

**"WANDER INTO THE MAIN HEART OF THE HOTEL AND IT FEELS LIKE HAPPENING UPON A TREE-FILLED SECRET GARDEN"**

It's hard to beat the FCC Angkor's location, situated around the corner from the Royal Residence, used by Cambodia's monarch when in town. It's also right across from the Siem Reap River, along which, if you're having a drink at the open-air Scribe bar, you can observe residents going on their daily constitutions. I'd suggest starting any evening at Scribe with one of its signature cocktails; there's also a dedicated menu of juniper-berry drinks, some using a locally distilled version of the spirit. Scribe has a menu of light eats, some with Khmer influences, but my favourite Cambodian dish is to be found at The Mansion, the more formal dining restaurant overseen by a talented French executive chef whose understanding of local flavours is impressive. The fish *amok* I fell in love with is creamy, mildly spiced and delicious eaten over rice. Also worth ordering here is the Cambodian-beef salad – the meat tender and succulent – and Khmer-style chicken wings. The colonial-inspired Mansion, with tiled floors, wicker chairs and ceiling fans, is also where breakfast is served; there's not a bad dish, though I highly recommend the typical Cambodian morning dishes on offer: one a local version of *congee* (rice porridge), the other a comforting rice-noodle soup with minced meat (it hits the spot after a dawn visit to Angkor Wat and fuels you up for further sightseeing).



**CNT EXCLUSIVE**



**From top:** Governor Suite bedroom; copper accents in the bathroom; the tropical pool. **Opposite, from top:** Lobby entrance; at Angkor Wat; rice-noodle soup breakfast; Scribe bar

Wander into the main heart of the hotel and it feels like happening upon a tree-filled secret garden, in the middle of which is a swimming pool. Some of the rooms, set in a two-storey whitewashed building, look or open out on to this central garden. Rooms on the higher first floor have the feel of living in a tree house, with green leafy views. Modern yet with local touches, the rooms are charming – there's a vintage-luxe vibe with copper accents, patterned tiling, potted palms and details like an old-timey radio, a rotary phone (that you can use) and a typewriter – a fitting nod to its FCC past. (Even more charming: the GM's welcome note is presented as a typewritten page spilling out of the machine.) This being spiritual Siem Reap, there are also words of wisdom stencilled on to the wall. Mine said: Negligence leads to loss; attention preserves. Hashtag truth. The largest accommodation, the Governor Suite, is 68sqm and includes a separate living room, which can accommodate another king-size or twin beds, in addition to the master bedroom with a bathtub.

Along with transforming the ex-mansion and club, the FCC Angkor includes a new build across a quiet little bylane. This part of the hotel, when open, will in addition to more rooms (to make 80 in total) add a spa to the hotel's facilities, which already include a gym, a library/meeting space and an art gallery displaying Cambodian art that can be hired for private events.

In a city with so much soul, it's important that where you stay reflects that. With its history inextricably linked to that of Siem Reap, and its commitment to taking guests beyond the obvious, FCC Angkor is the local expert today's traveller wants to meet. 📍

*Doubles from AED 514; 00855-6376 0280, [avanihotels.com](http://avanihotels.com)*