

# Radar

A regal entrance  
to Preah Khan.

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MY TOWN

## CAPTURING OLD KHMER

John McDermott has seen the once-sleepy Siem Reap boom into a tourist hot spot. **Ashley Niedringhaus** finds out his favorite places, both new and old, in town. →





**Clockwise from top left:** John McDermott; crafts at the atmospheric Old Market; inside the crumbling Preah Khan temple; Cuisine Wat Damnak's marinated quail salad with lotus root and seeds; an ornate bracelet from Garden of Desire; the courtyard of Theam's House.



The juxtaposition between the surrounding ancient temples of Angkor and the luxe shopping and vibrant nightlife within Siem Reap makes the city feel like bit of a paradox. Wedged in between the past and present is American photographer John McDermott, who has spent decades behind the lens capturing the history while embracing the evolving culture.

**Eat+Drink** For authentic Khmer food, no place is better than **Cuisine Wat Damnak** (*Wat Damnak Market Street; 885-77/347-762; cuisinewatdamnak.com; five-course tasting menu US\$24*). The dishes focus on back roads recipes served within a Western-style tasting menu. I've been almost a dozen times and never had a repeat dish.

Cambodia's best-known dish is *amok*—a fish curry with coconut milk—and my favorite place to get it is **Sugar Palm** (*Taphul Road; 855-63/636-2060; thesugarpalm.com; dinner for two US\$26*). If I'm out at night, you'll likely find me soaking up the old-Shanghai vibe at **Miss Wong** (*The Lane; 855-92/428-332; misswong.net; drinks for two US\$10*). I wash down their dim sum with a martini.

**Shop** Most of my shopping is done in Bangkok, but I buy necklaces and earrings for my wife from Ly Pisith, the French-Khmer owner of **Garden of Desire** (*The Passage Pub Street Alley; 855-12/319-116; gardenofdesire-asia.com*). He makes exquisite, custom pieces with silver and stones that are indigenous to Cambodia. For

people who are looking for clothing that is completely different from standardized options, I recommend the colorful silks of **Eric Raisina** (*ericraisina.com*), one of Cambodia's best-known designers. The best place for souvenirs is **Theam's House** (*25 Veal Village, Khum Kokchack; 855-78/208-161; theamshouse.com*), which supports the work of local artists, but I go to the **Old Market**, just like everyone else for knick-knacks and small goods.

**Do** Seeing **Angkor Wat** at sunrise is a rite of passage, but for me dawn is the best time to be there. The key is to stay just past sunrise when the flocks of tourists depart and give you no competition for the best views and photos. Those few peaceful

hours before the first wave of post-sunrise visitors arrive are magical. Unfortunately, **Ta Prohm** is too overrun with construction and sightseers for it to be enjoyable, but the giant tree roots, temple carvings and architecture at **Preah Khan** make it a more-than-suitable replacement—and with less foot traffic. It's one of my favorite spots to shoot because I can still weave in and out and find hideaways to myself. When I arrived here in 1999, the temples and Siem Reap were on the cusp of an international explosion. Every now and then, I'm hit with a wave of nostalgia for the old days, and the cure is to take my motorbike out to **Beng Mealea** and explore this beautiful and mostly unrestored lost temple in the jungle. +

QUAIL: COURTESY OF CUISINE WAT DAMNAK; BRACELET: COURTESY OF GARDEN OF DESIRE; COURTYARD: COURTESY OF THEAM'S HOUSE