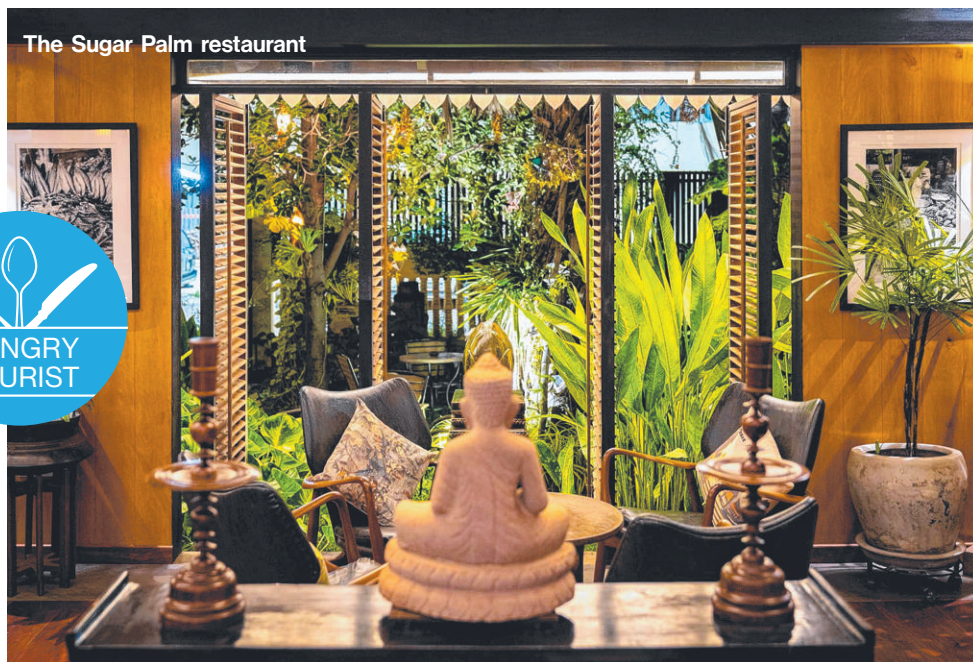


The Cambodian town of Siem Reap sits, as it were, under the shadow of Angkor Wat, but not in any forgotten sense. It's just a matter of perception. Visitors zoom in, tick off those fabled temples, and rapidly move on, probably to Phnom Penh to hop aboard a Mekong River cruise. All of which is fine, but this destination has finally emerged as a lively place to dine and dawdle. A recent visit has re-confirmed for me that Siem Reap is a Southeast Asian culinary hotspot, ranking up there with Ubud, Bali; George Town, Penang; and Laos's charming Luang Prabang.

The common features between the quartet are the compact size of the main precincts; the presence of excellent chefs, both local and expatriate, who are stretching boundaries; and the creativity behind restaurant design and fit-outs. My recent sojourn is short, sharp and shiny, and it's Evi-Elli La Valle, Asia travel specialist and founder of Taste Siem Reap, a specialist food touring company, to my rescue. Itineraries vary but ours swings from pre-dinner drinks with tapas to a chic laneway bar via a substantial main course of share plates and a sampling of Khmer desserts. Transport between the four venues is courtesy of driver Sothol's smart white open-sided tuktuk, comfortably customised for Taste Siem Reap. I like to think of this as a tucker tour by tuktuk. Sothol is from Battambang and by day runs his own touring company; he's a driver par excellence, adept at anticipating the flow of the traffic and weaving masterfully around any stoppages.

Cocktails and tapas kick off at the balconied Bensley's Bar on the second floor of the smart Shinta Mani Angkor hotel, across from architect and designer Bill Bensley's top-drawer villa compound, all part of the Shinta Mani accommodation collection. Bensley is a chap with eclectic tastes in decor but the bar



The Sugar Palm restaurant



Table hopping in Siem Reap

SUSAN KUROSAWA

is positively serene, in shades of grey, with tiled floors and ceiling fans, where the best cocktails are concocted with Seekers "dry Mekong" gin, distilled in Cambodia and infused with 11 local botanicals, including pandan leaf.

For main course, we are in the famously capable hands of Kethana Dunnet, who runs

The Sugar Palm with her New Zealand husband, Bruce. Last time we met, it was at the original Sugar Palm, located on the upstairs level of a traditional galleried wooden house.

Kethana's mission has been to revive many of the family and village recipes lost during the rule of the Khmer Rouge, and she's been filmed with the likes of Gordon Ramsay and Luke Nguyen. My favourites on her menus include pomelo salad topped with handfuls of mint and strips of toasted coconut; deep-fried

IN THE KNOW

Taste Siem Reap tours cover four itineraries, including options centred on cocktail bars and galleries or "good cause" community-run restaurants, and start at \$US59 (\$85) a person, based on two adults, including tuktuk transport, food, and one drink per venue. Bespoke tours available.

■ tastesiemreap.com
■ bensleycollection.com

freshwater shrimp fritters ready to be dipped into a lime, salt and pepper sauce; and fish amok laced richly with coconut cream. The new Sugar Palm is at street level, open and airy, like a transplanted plantation house.

For dessert, we pitch up at two-storey Malis, where a platter of sweet treats awaits. Kampot pepper creme brulee with jasmine-flavoured ice cream is so delicious I would even trust chef Luu Meng to do something vaguely tolerable with durian. As at all venues, our table is waiting and pre-ordered dishes arrive swiftly. Dietary allergies or intolerances should be advised in advance and there's one drink included per person, with further orders at personal cost.

Did someone mention drinks? Sothol propels Evi-Elli and me to Miss Wong, a scarlet-coloured joint with the feel of an opium den, all fringed lanterns, secretive nooks and martinis enlivened with lemongrass, ginger or kaffir lime. It's not a late finish and the temptation is to stay and order something mad and frothy or return to Bensley's Bar, which closes at 10.30pm. Choices, choices.

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Bensley Collection — Shinta Mani Siem Reap.



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Emily Bay

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Not merely an idyllic Pacific beach, Emily Bay has been the arena of great historical milestones. All four settlements on Norfolk Island have left their mark on this beautiful bay, from the convict-built Salhouse perched on one arm, to the area known as Lone Pine on the other. Beneath the huddle of pines lie the remains of a Polynesian village, covered by sand that once housed countless sea turtle eggs. She is a bay of shelter and stories.

Today, Emily Bay retains that historical magic; yet there is a new centrepiece in the eyes of the younger generation. The yellow, white and green pontoon, floating luxuriously in the centre of the bay, is so much part of the modern scenery that Emily seems naked without it. She is a bay of self-indulgence and serenity.

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