TRUTH IN TRAVEL

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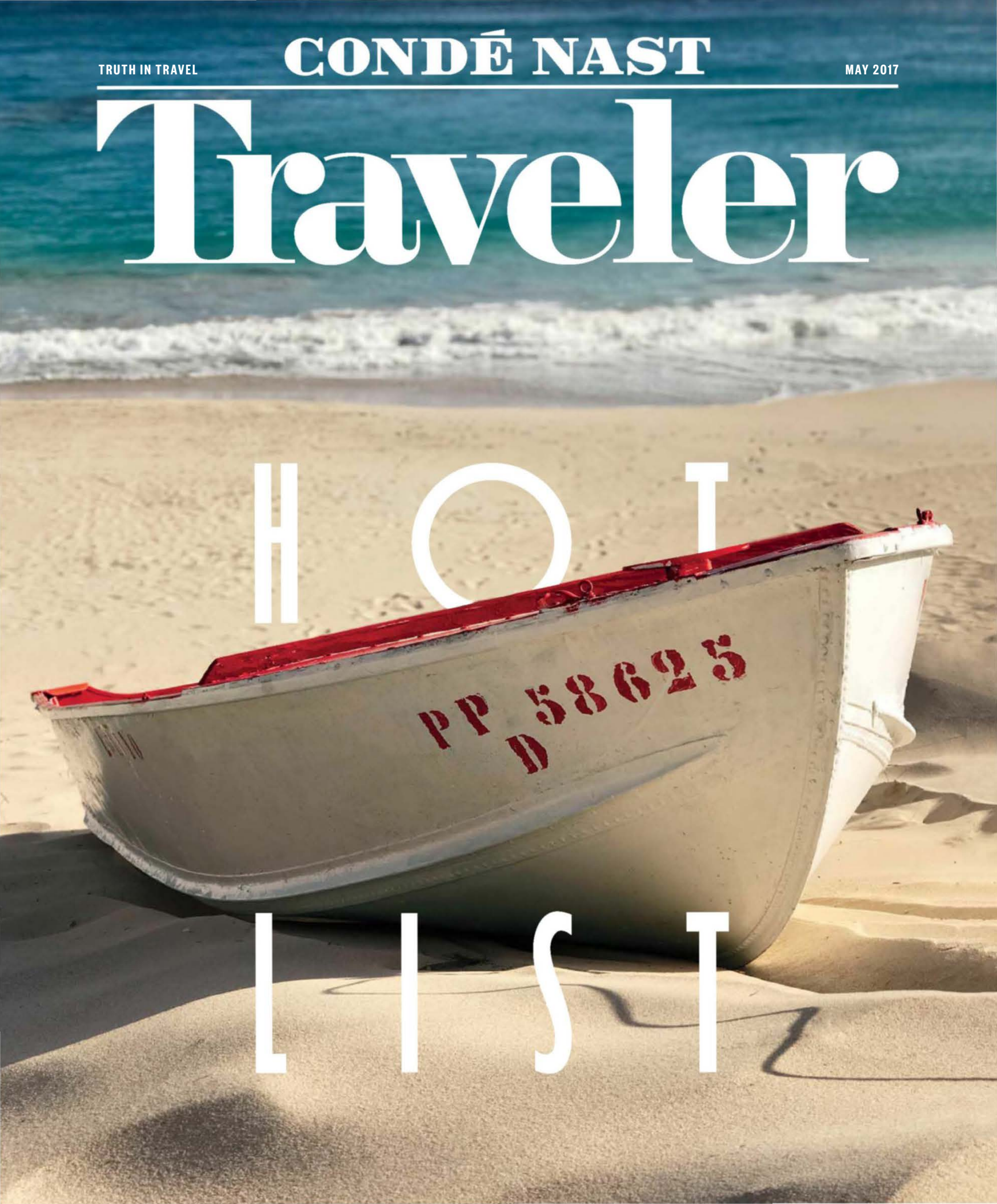
Traveler



RIPPLE EFFECT

IN MYANMAR AND CAMBODIA—
COUSINS IN SUFFERING AND RECOVERY—
A RENAISSANCE OF ARTISTIC
CRAFTSMANSHIP IS PUSHING
OUT NEW SIGNS OF GROWTH

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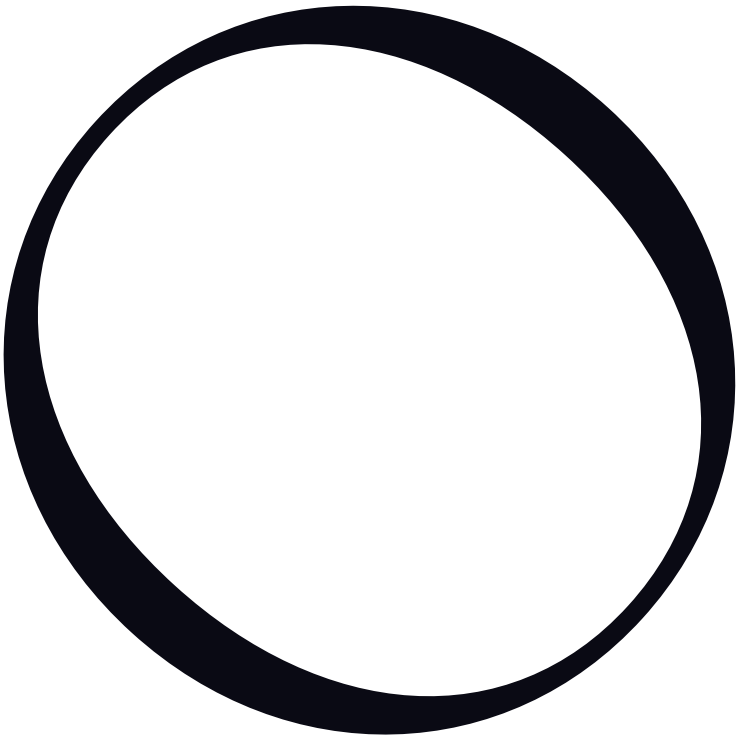

Of all the regions in the world a traveler might venture, Southeast Asia must be the easiest to love: The food is delicious. The transportation is cheap. The hotels are plentiful. The streets are fragrant with temple offerings—crushed tuberose and sun-warmed marigolds. Everywhere you look, there's a wall heaped with fuchsia bougainvillea, or a flowering orchid that's cleaved itself to the trunk of a jacaranda tree. And best of all, despite the ubiquitous and at times discomfiting presence of the digital age—the monks tucking their cell phones into their saffron robes; the battered rubber-and-wood floating house on the Mekong with its gleaming satellite dish—it is still a place where artisans and their work can be found in abundance.

As a traveler, my happiest discoveries always involve something handcrafted, made more precious as the experience of encountering them becomes rarer. Every decade brings a diminishment of places where you can find people who are still creating, by hand, things that their families have been making for generations, for centuries. Sometimes an old method is enhanced with technology; sometimes not. What's certain is that these crafts and traditions stay alive only as long as there are customers and people to appreciate them.

A tradition of artisanship often survives modernity because of economics, because it's still cheaper to have it made than to buy it. But this isn't always true: One need only look at Japan, for example, to realize that a culture needn't be poor to value the painstakingly fashioned, the object that's been made by a human, not a machine. There, the traditions endure because they are central to the identity of the culture: Japan, like India, like Morocco, like Mexico, has always been a nation of makers and of markets—to create something, and then to have it bought by someone who understands that creation, is an essential part of these countries' national identities.

And so, too, in Myanmar and Cambodia, both countries with their own distinct craft traditions and whose modern histories have in many ways eclipsed what they were always known for: their carvings, their weavings, their lacquerwork. Both are continuing their emergence from decades of violence and oppression: in Myanmar (known interchangeably by its colonial name, Burma), the restrictions and privations of a military junta, which remained in place from 1962 until the country became a nominal democracy in 2011; in Cambodia, the horrors of the Khmer Rouge regime, which murdered an estimated two million people in the 1970s. These two countries will have to decide (insofar as any country gets to decide) how much of the old ways they'll want to discard or abandon in favor of technology and globalism.

For many travelers, a trip to either of them becomes, inevitably, about box-ticking, and rightly so. How can you go to Cambodia and not visit Angkor Wat? Or to Myanmar and not see the glorious temples of Bagan, or Yangon's dazzling Shwedagon Pagoda? The following itineraries don't include these icons, but that doesn't mean you should skip them (in fact, you'd be remiss if you did). Instead, I've focused on where you should go after you've experienced what you've come to see. That is, the places where you can not only meet the people who are giving new life to their communities, but also find and buy local crafts at their most sophisticated—a reminder that sometimes, the truest, most intimate connection to a place is one you make through its material culture.

Previous spread, from left: A fisherman on Inle Lake; silk with hand-crocheted cotton flowers at the Eric Raisina shop in Siem Reap. Opposite: A girl holding a handmade umbrella at Inle Lake.

MYANMAR

All trips to Myanmar begin in its former capital, Yangon, which embodies perfectly—and at times jarringly—the money and development that's flooded into the country over the past six-odd years. The nine-mile drive to your hotel, for example—the defiantly romantic, determinedly colonial Belmond Governor's Residence—which took 30 minutes when I visited in 2013, now takes almost an hour, a crawl that leads you past the country's first Mercedes-Benz dealership. (One undeniable upside of all the development? A choice of very good hotels. Along with Governor's, there's also the centrally located Sule Shangri-La and the grand, just-renovated Strand hotel, the pride of British-occupied Myanmar and the perfect place to stop for a cup of tea.) Most tours will begin at Bogyoke Aung San Market (also known as Scott Market), a sort of mini–Grand Bazaar where you'll find locals shopping for everyday things (clothes, fabric, shoes) and fancier items as well—specifically, wedding gold and jewelry. Myanmar may be known for its "pigeon's blood rubies"—so named for the depth and brilliance of their color, and for years considered too unethical to purchase in the West—but don't buy any here. Unless you're a gemologist, it's simply too risky.

Anyway, you have other things to see. A short car ride will take you to the center of the city. These days, ugly, hastily constructed blue-glass-and-steel skyscrapers tower over the early-20th-century buildings—grand-yet-delicate civic structures as well as narrow, colonnaded houses. Recently, NGOs and preservation groups have begun making real efforts to save these buildings. One of these concerns is Turquoise Mountain, a British foundation started in 2006 to preserve the native crafts of Afghanistan by partnering artisans with Western-based companies. The Burmese chapter of the organization is housed in a century-old ochre-and-turquoise town house. The ground

The Buddhist Thaung Tho temple at Inle Lake.

Clockwise from top left: The Sanctum Inle Resort pool; lotus-flower fabric made by women artisans at Inle Lake; a young monk at a monastery at Inle Lake; Angkor Wat, in Siem Reap.

floor is an atelier, where a small number of goldsmiths from the countryside (who live in quarters upstairs) make charms, rings, and delicate chains—the gold so pure and well-beaten that it's irresistibly warm and soft to the touch—for British jeweler Pippa Small, known for her sustainably sourced metals and gems. Turquoise Mountain Myanmar's next project is a restoration of the colonial-era Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, which they plan to convert into a multiuse food hall/urban-design hall/rooftop restaurant, projected to open in 2019. Next, it's off again for a stop by Augustine's Antiques, a two-building emporium containing what must be every kind of Burmese native craft from the last century: Here you'll find a set of eight woven-silver nesting jars (supple and lightweight and $2,000), carved wooden figurines representing different ethnic groups (about $60), Buddhas of all sizes and materials, and lacquered bamboo snuff pouches (about $20). Mark U Wunna, Augustine's proprietor, can explain virtually any traditional artistic technique, from lacquering to carving to silversmithing to metalworking; he currently concentrates on decorative art and homewares, but he'll begin selling jewelry this year.

A 90-minute flight the next morning will take you north to Inle Lake, a 45-square-mile lake in the middle of Shan State. The area is known for its high density of various ethnic groups, including the Intha, a small minority who live around (and, in some cases, on) the lake. You'll spend the next two nights on Inle, but before you go, stop by the weekly Heho Market. Here you'll find food—shallow straw baskets heaped with kaffir limes; mandalas of glossy betel leaves; pretty arrangements of small silver river fish—but the thing to look for is the vendor selling stiff, voluminous tote bags made from multicolored strips of woven plastic; they're sturdy, ubiquitous, and cost about $3.

After this, you'll continue to the lake itself, where an hour-long boat ride—in a long, skinny motorized outrigger—will take you to Inle Heritage, a hotel–cum–restaurant–cum–Burmese cat sanctuary–cum–hospitality school. Even the boat-phobic will love this journey: Yes, the air smells faintly of diesel, and the growl of the engine makes talking impossible, but the slap of the water is thrilling, and the sights you'll pass—Intha fishermen in their canoes, their heads wrapped with lengths of cotton in sun-bleached shades of marigold and burgundy; floating gardens of corn and squash and cucumbers; bobbing schools of ducks; and, of course, dozens of other boats, filled with both tourists and locals—are mesmerizing. Here, all of life is lived on the water: There are floating temples and schoolhouses, houses perched on stilts, and fields of lotus blossoms seemingly every few yards.

The lake is in fact a web of small villages, one of which you'll pass on your way. At Kyaing Khan village, you'll make a stop at the Aung Sakkyar Lotus Robe Co-Operative, where, in a uniquely Burmese tradition, fabric is woven from the dried fibers harvested from lotus stems. The Buddhists consider the lotus holy, and Burmese monks' robes—dyed a bright saffron that fades to a warm mustard hue—have been made from the flower for a century; the fabric (fashioned into pouches, sarongs, and scarves) is porous and rustic, like linen, and surprisingly durable.

But what you're really here for is Inle Heritage, a series of vernacular wooden houses connected by stilted footpaths. It was founded by the owner of your pretty, jungly hotel, The Inle Princess Resort, and feels more like a utopian commune than a school. Have a snack in its restaurant, which serves excellent home cooking (the tempura-fried greens are particularly good) before visiting the famous cat sanctuary. Burmese cats are typically sleek, quiet, and well behaved, and yet had almost disappeared from the country; their revival is one of the foundation's missions. The 30-odd resident cats sleep on velvet cushions, climb trees, flit in and out of cat-size pagodas, and bask in the sun, completely content. And why not? If you lived here, you'd feel the same way.

CAMBODIA

For many years, Siem Reap meant just one thing: a visit to Angkor Wat, the spectacular 12th-century temple complex in the adjacent jungle. You'd arrive, see the temples once at sunset and again the next morning at sunrise, and then you'd be off to your next destination. These days, even with the crowds—denser than ever, thanks in part to the large groups of Chinese and Korean tourists—you'll still come to see the temples. But Siem Reap itself is no longer just an overnight destination; the last few years have seen a mushrooming of bars, restaurants, galleries, and especially boutiques run by locals, expats, and repatriated Khmers. Now, you'll find plenty to justify a three-to-four-night stay.

The shopping and sightseeing aside, you'll want to linger as long as possible if it means staying at Amansara, an exceptionally serene and elegant cement-and-glass structure that feels like a piece of Palm Springs modernism in Southeast Asia. Siem Reap isn't a large town, but you still shouldn't try to see everything in a single day, mostly because of the heat, which is oppressive, even during the relatively cool months of October through February.

Start your day at Kandal Village, a walkable gentrified enclave south of the old French quarter that's home to some of the city's better boutiques, spas, and bars. The ones to concentrate on are Sirivan, which sells leather wear and cotton tunics for men and women; Sramay, which has beautiful (and affordable) woven palm-frond clutches; and, especially, Louise Loubatieres and Trunkh. The former is owned by a lovely young French-Cambodian woman who designs most of the products in her bright, airy boutique. There are cotton diamond-patterned blankets in shades of jade, turquoise, scarlet, and rose; celadon-glazed plates and cups; silk *shibori* scarves; and gorgeous bowls made from coconut shells and shellacked with a traditional lacquer. Three doors down at Trunkh, co-owner (and American expat) Doug Gordon hand-selects a variety of vernacular arts and crafts from around Cambodia: I particularly loved the handmade terra-cotta animal figurines and the paintings of Chinese zodiac symbols on small, rough-hewn boards.

After Kandal Village, stop by FCC Angkor, a minicomplex of shops and restaurants (as well as a laid-back hotel that's a popular expat hangout)

Opposite: A woman at Angkor Wat, in Siem Reap.

before heading to Eric Raisina. The gracious, Madagascaran-born Raisina was making textiles for Yves Saint Laurent and Christian Lacroix in Paris before visiting—and falling in love with—Siem Reap a decade ago. He now has his own label with boutiques in both Paris and Siem Reap, from which he sells his dresses, skirts, and tunics, most in candy-bright shades (serpent greens, fuchsias, and indigos), and all made from Khmer silk. Raisina's signature piece is a large, cosseting shawl fashioned from silk so finely woven that it feels velveteen. Up next is The 1961. This multifloor, multiroom artists collective, housed in a midcentury Khmer building, is the kind of space you might find in Portland or Lisbon—part gallery, part boutique, part artists' studios, part coffeehouse—but in Siem Reap, it's the first of its kind, and it sparks with energy from its constantly refreshing population of local and visiting artists, who spend their days here writing, drawing, and taking photographs. Don't leave without buying something from the boutique, which carries pieces from around the country as well as original works: inventive costume jewelry inspired by traditional headdresses, for example, or Buddhas rendered in reclaimed wood or stone.

Finally, there's one more reason to stay at Amansara: They can arrange a meeting with Darryl Collins, a former adviser at the Phnom Penh National Museum, and his colleague, the architect Hok Sokol. Together, the two have been rescuing, relocating, and restoring early-20th-century vernacular houses. Built on stilts, these wooden structures (which originally stood on islands in one of the area's many lakes) have fallen out of fashion in favor of more modern concrete structures, but a visit to Collins and Hok's compound—they've so far restored three units—will make you appreciate not only the durability of these houses' design but their beauty as well. Most of the work is done by joinery, and Hok has paid great attention to the details, saving as much of the original wood and fixtures as he could.

Your next stop in Cambodia is Battambang, a river town some three hours away by car. Here you'll be staying at another one of the glorious hybrids Cambodia now does so well: Bric-á-Brac. An eclectically decorated three-room B&B founded by an expat couple (Morrison, a textile artist, is Australian; Robert, a chef, is American), it's also a bar (with excellent $5 Negronis, a rarity here) and an exuberantly curated shop stocked with textiles, ceramics, and ephemera (of note, the $5 wax Thai voodoo doll) sourced from across Southeast Asia. Like Louise Loubatieres, Bric-á-Brac will ship, so you can fill up on papier-mâché monkey masks, heavy silver tribal necklaces, and vintage Khmer silk.

Robert and Morrison are also passionate advocates for the embryonic local art scene. Art has always been an essential part of Battambang, a quiet, picturesque town that's retained much of its French colonial architecture and multicolored cement-tile floors, and which is in fact being considered for UNESCO World Heritage status. Most seem to agree it's because the townspeople, located in the country's agriculturally fecund northwest, have long had the luxury to think about art in the first place: One popularly held theory is there was always plenty to eat, even during the worst years of Cambodia's recent history, and therefore they were able to make art (its pursuit, its presence) part of their daily lives. These days, Battambang is still a hub for young artists, though anyone expecting a European-style contemporary-art scene will be disappointed—most of the work being produced is of the decorative sort. Still, its very presence—and the young artists' determination—is remarkable considering that it was only a generation ago that the country was emerging from one of the worst genocides in modern history.

You'll see some of that determination on display at Romcheik 5 Artspace, where four twenty-something artists live and show their work. The standout is 26-year-old Seyha Hour, whose highly detailed, overtly political acrylics of an imagined village recall Bosch in their sometimes discomfiting surrealism. All of the artists, though, have turned to art after exceptionally difficult childhoods, in which they were bonded as underage workers in Thailand—sold, in effect, by their families to lives of hard labor. Another project intended to make art not a luxury but a necessity in young Cambodians' lives is Phare Ponleu Selpak. Primarily an art and music school, the foundation trains students from kindergarteners to people in their twenties; many of its instructors are alumni. Touring the grounds is an infectiously gleeful experience: You'll hear traditional Khmer music blasting from one hut; see young animators at work in the computer room; and, best of all, get to watch the performers in the school's famous acrobatic circus program practice in the gym. Witnessing them at work and play is a moving lesson that the right to beauty—to seeing it, to creating it—is not only integral to history, but to life itself. ◆

HOW TO SEE IT ALL

These sites are distilled from a longer trip arranged by the planners Cazenove+Loyd, which can be adapted to suit your interests. The full-length itinerary begins with a night in Yangon, followed by a flight to Bagan, where you board the Belmond Road to Mandalay boat for a three-night cruise. After a night in Mandalay, take a flight to Inle Lake (for two nights) and another flight to Yangon for a final night in Myanmar. Finally it's off to Siem Reap in Cambodia for three nights and then a three-hour drive to Battambang for two nights. (Air travel in Myanmar is nowhere near as reliable as in the rest of the region, and you should expect frequent delays, oversold flights, and inexplicable cancellations. Unfortunately, long distances make driving impossible.) This route allows you to experience all the iconic sights of these two countries—the 13th-century Buddhist Mahabodhi temple complex of Bagan and Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar; Angkor Wat in Cambodia—at a leisurely pace.

Keep in mind that the best time of year to go is during the dry season, from mid-October through the end of March. H.Y.