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Where to eat at Phnom Penh?

Many small restaurants serving Khmer, Thai and Indian cuisine are found near Sisaworth Quay in Phnom Penh. Steamed beansprouts with flat rice noodles and Chinese Spinach garnished with celery is a local dish which is good to taste and nutritious. Fresh tropical fruits including papayas, pineapples and watermelons are available at the local market. Siam City Hotel's buffet breakfast has a selection of fresh fruits, water-melon juice, orange juice, fresh vegetable salad and rice soup for vegans who don't consume any product of animal origin. Shere-Punjab is tiny restaurant serving Indian cuisine and the Indian chefs are happy to whip up pure vegetarian meals on request.

SPOTTING IRRAWADY DOLPHINS ON THE MEKONG RIVER

Z There were about 1000 Irrawady river dolphins at Kratie a few decades ago but due to the exploitation of natural resources of Cambodia by unscrupulous Chinese, the dolphin population of Kratie and neighbouring Steung Trean has plummeted to less than a hundred. The local people of Kampi are extremely protective about the river dolphin and are making an all-out effort to protect these gentle delicate creatures who show an almost human like intelligence. Spotting the river dolphin along the banks of the Mekong in Kampi is as exciting as a jungle safari in the wilds of Africa. One must visit Cambodia and experience the magic of spotting the river dolphin as it is a soul stirring journey.

The 15 km-drive from Kratie to Kampi on a motorcycle takes 30 minutes as some parts of the village roads are rough and bumpy. The road winds its way along the western bank of the Mekong, and offers spectacular views of the river and the lush greenery surrounding the opposite bank. The wide expanse of the river at Kratie, almost makes it resemble an

inland sea with the waters stretching from horizon to horizon.

At the entrance of the boat pier, you pay the mandatory fee make your way to the slow boats that are parked on the banks of the river. These boats are equipped with diesel engines to cross the fast flowing river, but on reaching the dolphin spotting areas, the engines are switched off and the boat is anchored by a rope to the mangroves that are scattered on the eastern banks of the river. Thus begins your wait for the Irrawady dolphins.

The boat cruise to the dolphin spotting areas takes about an hour and the breeze blowing across the river makes you feel cold in the afternoon peak. Watching the flowing waters of

South East Asia's longest river which starts off as a tiny stream from the divine lake Mansarovar in Tibet and makes its way down through Thailand and Laos, before entering Cambodia and finally meeting the sea at Vietnam is a hypnotic experience.

Dolphins are extremely sensitive to the sounds and the best chance of allowing a dolphin to approach one's boat is to anchor the boat in the middle of the river and wait in pin drop silence for these creatures to make their surface at regular intervals to breathe. The appearance of the dolphin is preceded by a special sound which is the cue one needs to start clicking the camera to get a good photograph before they dunk beneath

How to get to Phnom Penh?

Phnom Penh is connected by direct flights from Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Hong Kong, Singapore and Hanoi. It is advisable to stay overnight at Phnom Penh before making the long bus journey to Kratie. From Kratie one has to travel 15 km to Kampi to watch the dolphins. This journey can be made by a motor-bike taxi for AUD4 (includes pickup from one's hotel to drop back and waiting charges). The entrance fee to the Dolphin Conservation Area is AUD8, which includes a three-hour chartered boat cruise along with a boatman who also doubles as a guide.

the waters.

Capturing a river dolphin on the camera needs quick reflexes, a sharp eye and a keen sense of hearing. First, you hear the sound of the dolphin as it surfaces to breathe. Next, the dorsal fin protrudes out of the water resembling a small rock. A second later you can see its greyish body for a fraction of a second before it plunges into the river only to surface again a few metres away before disappearing again. Dolphins always travel in groups and more often than not they move in pairs and it does get tricky when two dolphins surface at the same time! You soon become an expert trying to spot the fins of the dolphin or watching the trail of surf that could indicate its location.

However, the swirling waters of the river, the gently bobbing boat, the mild sunshine and the cold breeze coupled with the patient wait on the boat, makes dolphin spotting an ideal experience.

The river dolphin is extremely supple and swift and can disappear and appear in a split second. Even capturing them on a video camera is difficult as appear and vanish very quickly! However, if you concentrate and keep your attention in the present it is possible to get some amazing pictures of these river dolphins. Often a pursuit of these dolphins is an exercise in futility as they have an acute sense of sound and race away at the slightest sound of the boat's engine.

Also, dolphins have an aversion to any humming sound. So trying to get good pictures is no easy task. It involves hours of waiting and watching. When they do surface, they



Where to stay at Kratie?

Riverside Hotel offers basic fan-rooms at US\$5 per night. No hot water showers are provided. It is ideal for an overnight stay. There are a few high-end hotels at Kratie offering air-conditioned rooms with hot showers for US\$15 per night for those who wish to stay longer at Kratie.

Where to stay at Phnom Penh?

Cambodiana Hotel, located on the banks of the Tonle Sap River is the most convenient location to stay, as almost all tourist attractions including Grand Palace, Museum and Silver Pagoda are easy to reach. Also the hotel is itself located on the banks of the Tonle Sap river offering spectacular views if one can manage a river facing room by booking well in advance. The average room tariff at Cambodiana inclusive of taxes and buffet breakfast ranges from US\$80 to US\$100 per night during the low season (Aug-Oct).

keep a safe distance from the boat. The return to the pier is a journey in serenity, calmness and peace, having

successfully completed one's tryst with the Irrawady river dolphin.

