

The Australian — Travel & Indulgence

Beyond the temples

Stephanie Clifford-Smith uncovers three experiences in Cambodia's Siem Reap that really benefit the locals

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Grim memorial: Aki Ra, landmine victim and removalist, with some of the exhibits in his museum. Picture: Stephanie Clifford-Smith

CAMBODIA has had a rough trot during the past 40 years and although tourism is bringing in much-needed cash, corruption means much of it goes to the already wealthy. Stay in an international hotel chain and you're helping Americans or Singaporean corporations more than Cambodians. Visit the temples at Angkor Wat and you're lining the pockets of a Vietnamese petroleum baron who leases the temples and is a pal of the Cambodian Prime Minister, Hun Sen.

In Siem Reap, you're there for the temples of Angkor Wat and you'd be mad to miss it. But there are things you can do when you've had enough of the temples that are fun, fascinating and make you feel good because you'll be helping the locals at the same time.

CELLO CONCERT

SWISS pediatrician and accomplished cellist Beat Richner performs every Saturday night at a modern auditorium next to the Kantha Bopha children's hospital. He established the hospital in 1999 and, unlike ordinary Cambodian hospitals where patients have to front up with the cash before medical attention, this hospital and two others Richner started in Phnom Penh provide free treatment to everyone.

Richner's performance includes various pieces by Bach interspersed with him talking about the health crisis in Cambodia and providing commentary on videos about the work at Kantha Bopha hospital.

Many of the children coming in are in shock from dengue fever, which affects them more severely because they have dormant tuberculosis. They need blood transfusions to survive but local donors have high rates of HIV and hepatitis. The First World clinical standards Richner insists upon have raised the ire of many aid agency workers, who believe they're unrealistic for such a poor country. He points out the average five-day hospital stay at Kantha Bopha costs less than one night's hotel accommodation for an agency representative. Richner is a compelling speaker who urges young audience members to give blood, older ones to give

money and those in the middle to give both. The Kantha Bopha hospitals are 80 per cent funded by private donations.

- Hospital Jayavarman VII, Stung Siem Reap Street; www.beatocello.com.

LANDMINE MUSEUM

NOT far from Angkor Wat, in an area once heavily mined, is a museum started by an extraordinary local man, Aki Ra. After the Khmer Rouge killed his parents when he was about five, he was recruited and made to walk through minefields ahead of senior soldiers, taught gunmanship, bomb-making and how to set and detonate mines.

At 14, he was captured at gunpoint by the Vietnamese when they found him hiding in the jungle and ended up fighting against the Khmer Rouge. When the Vietnamese withdrew from the country, he was conscripted into the Cambodian army and later cleared landmines for the UN for three years until it too pulled out.

Today, without the support of the UN and its hi-tech metal detectors and safety equipment, Aki Ra works independently, going out in thongs with a knife tied to the end of a stick to deactivate mines, far more quickly (and dangerously) than he did using UN-sanctioned methods. He estimates he's done about 30,000; about three million remain.

He relies heavily on donations to continue his work, which includes supporting about 20 teenage landmine victims, many of whom are orphans. They live with him and his wife and two sons (named Amatak and, bizarrely, Mine) and are taught how to live independently with their disabilities when they become adults.

The museum displays all kinds of mines, rocket launchers, guns, bombs and grenades that Aki Ra has collected during his work and explains how they work and the damage they can do. Lots of Aki Ra's adopted children help out at the museum and if their English is up to it, will chat about whatever you please. There's a shop selling a good range of T-shirts, silk scarves, placemats and handbags, the proceeds of which go to support Aki Ra's work. The museum is 2km south of Siem Reap on the Angkor Wat road.

- Free entry; www.akiramineaction.com.

FEEL-GOOD MASSAGES

SIEM Reap is full of places offering cheap massages, some in quite swank salons, but choose one that trains and employs blind masseurs and you will experience the deepest tissue kneading of your life.

Located behind a construction site, the Seeing Hands massage room has five tables lined up (with no dividing curtains). A woman in her 30s, being led by a three-

year-old child, approaches me, takes me by the hand to a cupboard where she hands me loose cotton trousers and a baggy cotton top to change into behind a curtain.

There is nothing namby-pamby about the Seeing Hands approach to massage. Clients are asked if they have any medical problems and if a soft, medium or hard treatment is preferred. I play it safe and asked for medium. I lie face down and fully clothed throughout but every muscle is pummelled: the scalp gets a full workout (I think I lose a few hairs during that experience), there is all the usual back and shoulder stuff, as well as buttocks, half-Nelson style arm-twisting behind the back and gentle shaking of fingers and toes, followed by yanking.

And, yes, some of it hurts and I am grateful I didn't ask for hard, but I am floating by the end of the session.

Yet I am horrified when I hear an Englishwoman come in and haggle over the price. There's a time and place for bargaining but when the asking price is \$US4 per hour and it's supporting skilled masseurs with no other means of support, this just isn't it.

- Located just off Ph Sivatha; ask locals for directions.