



**A history of hospitality...**  
**Raffles Hotel Le Royal, Phnom Penh**  
*Inaugural opening November 1929*  
*Reopened November 1997*

## **Origins**

In late 1923 and early 1924, the construction of a 55-room hotel in Phnom Penh was proposed, with Ernest Hébrard as architect. A visionary planner, he was in part responsible for turning a small, Cambodian-French colonial city into a bustling well-planned metropolis.

The proposal also outlined construction of 40-room hotels in Siem Reap and Hué and 12 and 8-room bungalows in Phanthiet and Djiring, respectively. The tourist potential of the Angkor ruins did not pass unnoticed. Included in the proposal were preliminary estimates for buildings and furnishings for the five sites. Costs were presented in the currency of Indochina (piastres). It is evident that the highest priority was given to the future hotel for Phnom Penh.

An integral part of Hébrard's plan was to partially fill in a canal that encircled Phnom Penh's European Quarter, plant extensive gardens, extend the city to the other side of the Tonle Sap River, create a new central market for the city and construct a new hotel to be managed by the Society for Grand Hotels of Indochina.

## **Architecture & Civic Plan**

The hotel was to be situated in the fashionable European quarter, the triangular parcel of land bordered by a canal on three sides and the Tonle Sap River on the fourth, with Wat Phnom the focus of the area. Today the canal is no longer evident as it was filled in by the late 1920s. It was in this quarter that military barracks, hospitals, schools, banks and residences of the foreign community were located.

The tree-lined, grassed avenue immediately in front of the hotel, with the vista of Wat Phnom rising majestically on the skyline at the opposite end to the hotel is the enduring legacy of the hotel's architect and town planner, Ernest Hébrard. This streetscape is arguably one of the most beautiful in Phnom Penh.

A City works map of 1928-1929 indicates areas throughout the northern sector to be in-filled for later construction. Clearly shown among these areas are the sites for the Le Royal, on the corner of avenue du Maréchal Joffre, the canal and the large site to the south where later Psah Thmei, the extraordinary Art Deco-style market was to be constructed only a few after the completion of the hotel.

Phnom Penh is a 'water-city' situated on a junction of four major waterways - the upper and lower Mekong, the Tonle Sap and the Bassac River. The city is built on low-lying land. In a similar way to some other Southeast Asian cities, it is subject to periodic flooding and has problems with drainage. The site for Le Royal required filling, and photographs taken during

the hotel's construction show huge pipes were employed to discharge water with alluvial soil pumped from the Tonle Sap River.

At the time of construction of the hotel, the city had already witnessed the construction of the then Musée Albert Sarraut (1917-20), designed by Georges Groslier (1887-1945) that harmoniously blended traditional Khmer with elements of local Buddhist architecture. Rising to four storeys, Le Royal was one of the tallest building in the city (with the exception of Wat Phnom) and probably the grandest in floor plan area for a single structure.

Hébrard consciously rejected traditional Khmer models in favour of the newer, French colonial style that he tempered by utilizing aspects of traditional architecture. The original hotel building featured sloping tiled roofs punctuated by triangular dormer windows, airy uncluttered corridors, shuttered windows and covered walkways that echo locally adaptive architecture, in keeping with the tropical climate. Le Royal was originally designed with 54 rooms, 41 with private bathrooms, 13 with showers only, and 4 with communal bathrooms.

### **1929: A royal opening**

The official opening, attended by His Majesty Sisowath Monivong (reigned 1927-1941) and a host of expatriate guests took place on the evening of 20 November. The opening party included a lavish buffet, dancing, and performances by an orchestra brought especially from Saigon for the occasion. The Director of the hotel between 1929 and 1931 was M.L.F. de la Pousardière. On 22 December 1931, L'Echo du Cambodge announced the departure of M La Pousardière and a new direction for Le Royal under the supervision of M. Jean Baluteig.

Today, the street immediately alongside the hotel bears the name of the King, boulevard Preah Monivong. The original name of the street in front of the hotel has changed several times through the course of years. Originally avenue du Maréchal Joffre, it became Pologne Street (street 92) and is now known as Rukhak Vithei Daun Penh. The hotel itself has had several name changes. From its inception in 1929 it was named '**Le Royal**', and during 1970 to 1975 (the Lon Nol period), it was known simply as '**Le Phnom**'. In 1979, the hotel reopened after the Pol Pot régime as '**Hotel Samakki**' (Solidarity Hotel). This name was used until Norodom Sihanouk was reinstalled as king in 1993 when the hotel reverted to '**Hotel Le Royal**' once again.

### **1930s to 1960s: The heyday of a great hotel**

Le Royal was literally at the crossroads of Southeast Asia and French Indochina, and Phnom Penh was considered the obvious starting point for excursions to Angkor.

During this period, tourists were able to travel to Phnom Penh by ship from Singapore via Bangkok followed by a car journey, or alternatively, could travel overland from Bangkok by rail or car. There was also a bus service from Saigon, or for wealthier tourists, the option of hiring a chauffeur-driven car.

The matinee idol Charlie Chaplin, accompanied by his co-star of 'Modern Times' Ms. Paulette Goddard, visited Phnom Penh in April 1936 on their way to Angkor. They stayed at the Le Royal with an entourage that included Paulette's mother, Mrs. Goddard, and a Japanese valet and secretary.

During the 1930s with M. J. Menguy as Manager, rooms could be had for 3-4 Indochinese piastres a day (room only), 5-10 piastres a day (room & board), or if one preferred, a monthly rate of 60-100 piastres (room) and 120-180 piastres (room & board). Breakfast cost 1 piastre, with lunch and dinner at 1.50. A piastre (or Indochinese dollar) the guidebook explained, was calculated at the rate of 1 piastre to 10 French francs. The piastre was divided into 100 cents. During this time the piastre was equivalent to approximately US\$0.40 cents.

In 1930, it was proposed that a boutique in the hotel that would market and promote traditional Khmer handicrafts. The museum at this time actively functioned in the training, support and marketing of traditional Cambodian fine and decorative arts. It is refreshing to read in Fables (1998, vol.3), a Raffles International publication, in a feature article titled 'Fragile Fine Arts', that the hotel sought to restore this link with artists from this very institution, now known as the Royal University of Fine Arts.

From the mid 1950s the Sangkum Reastr Nyum (People's Socialist Community) régime saw the rise and successful implementation of government projects or those initiated by His Majesty, King Sihanouk himself. Cambodia saw an unprecedented increase in the construction of public facilities as a wave of euphoric internationalism swept the country.

In addition to the rooms on the upper floors of the main building there were some 30 bungalow rooms and 6 studios available. The bungalows were arranged to the sides and grouped across the rear of the property. Architect Henri Chatel was responsible for the extensions and improvements to the hotel between 1957 and 1958.

He added the studio-bungalows; an outdoor restaurant called 'Le Cyrène' (The Water Nymph), swimming pool and

terrace, and transformed the entrance hall and furnishings. The studio suites were 2-storey groups of rooms to the west and east of the main foyer (now Restaurant Le Royal and an arcade of hotel shops).

At the end of 1965, Le Royal offered single air-conditioned rooms with bath for 465 Riels (the rates of exchange in April 1966 were one US\$ to 35 Riels, or one French Franc to 10 Riels). However, special rates of exchange operated for the Hotel Le Royal, Phnom Penh and the Grand Hotel d'Angkor, Siem Reap and other select hotels. These favourable rates made the hotels more competitive by effectively lowering their cost.

### **The story of Svay Ken – a long serving former employee**

Svay Ken (born 1933), now a successful self-taught artist, was an employee at Le Royal for almost forty years from 1955 to 1995, excluding the Khmer Rouge interval (1975-1979). He spoke to the author about his working life at the hotel. Ken commenced in a menial position as a luggage 'coolie' - a job that others with higher education were not interested in, he recalled. He was 22 years old. He was upgraded to 'boy', then after ten or so years, to a position that included cleaning corridors and responsibility for a group of seven rooms and the resident guests. This would equate to a room valet cum service and cleaning position in today's hotel. He remembers with a smile how, as there were no internal telephones, the valets stationed on the various floors would call their food and drink orders down the central light well to staff below. He vividly remembers sweeping and waxing the tiled corridors and polishing the central wooden staircase. The staff (almost without exception, male,) wore spotless, white cotton uniforms consisting of trousers and a jacket with high starched collar buttoned to the neck.

From the 1950s, Svay Ken recalled that inevitably the hotel was under European (often French) management, with one brief exception in the early 1980s when there was a Vietnamese manager. From the 1950s to 1960s, M.R. & Mme L. Neckitch managed the hotel. In 1961, His Majesty King Norodom Sihanouk through an initiative that involved the Ministry of Tourism brought a group of German trainers to improve protocol within the hotel and to upgrade the staff and management.

Svay Ken entered service as a lowly coolie, rose through the ranks of 'boy', and after training and selection, to room service on the second floor. In 1995 when he retired due to closure of the hotel for renovation, he received a termination sum of \$500 as a life payment for his years of service.

### **1970s to 1980s: A turbulent time**

Buoyed by the Sihanoukist years, the early 1970s saw a boom in tourism that ended abruptly with the Lon Nol period (1970-75) and subsequent Pol Pot régime that came to power in April 1975 and ended in January 1979 after a three-year, eight-month and twenty-day period of mass evacuations and genocide. During this time Phnom Penh was forcibly emptied of its inhabitants and remained virtually unoccupied.

With M. Loup as Manager in 1970-71, room prices were quoted in US dollars. 'Superior category' rooms were available for between \$5.70 and \$9.10 (per person), with full board offered between \$14.55 and \$17.95. An 'English breakfast' cost \$1.45 and lunch and dinner were \$3.70. Agence France-Presse journalist, Jon Swain details the last days of the hotel prior to the fall of Phnom Penh in his book, *River of Time*. He had arrived in Phnom Penh in 1970: "My home was Studio Six, a two-bedroom duplex with ceiling fans on the ground floor of the Hôtel Le Royal." By 1974 he recalls, "Only at the Hotel Le Phnom was there still something of the lazy charm of the prewar days.

But with a difference: most of the French community had deserted the city after the Khmer Rouge shelled it with artillery, hitting the Lycée Descartes." Then later, "The bombardments were so intense that journalists abandoned their rooms at the top of Le Phnom, which were fully exposed to rocket and artillery fire, for those on the lower floors". The higher rooms were available at the bargain price of \$5 but there were few takers!

During the last days of Phnom Penh, the façade of the old hotel "was bedecked with giant white flags and red crosses and surrounded with barbed-wire barricades. It had been declared a 'neutral zone' by the Red Cross". A Scottish medical team set up an operating theatre inside one of the bungalows (now demolished) in the hotel grounds. The hotel ceased to function as an "exclusive hangout of foreigners and rich Cambodians, being converted into a refugee camp." Soon the hotel was to be abandoned completely with everyone forced to leave. Most foreigners moved to the former French Embassy compound before being trucked to the Thai border by the Khmer Rouge.

Journalists, war correspondents and embassy personnel recall the last days of the hotel prior the fall of Phnom Penh with a mixture of sadness and fondness. It was the end of an era. Phnom Penh fell to Khmer Rouge forces on 17 April 1975.

According to a former member of Khmer Rouge Battalion 310, this group of military cadres was in charge of the hotel between 1975 and 1979. To the west of the main building was the underground food storage where rice, local wine and dried fish were stored. The cadres occupied the main building as office and residential quarters. It is said that the building

to the eastern side was rented by the Philippines as an embassy. To the rear (north side), were cafeteria and kitchen facilities. Other sources suggest Chinese advisers to the Pol Pot régime occupied the hotel.

Sway Ken returned to the hotel in October 1979 and immediately recommenced work. When asked about the state of the hotel following the forced evacuation of Phnom Penh (1975-1979), he replied philosophically, "Some of the furniture had gone, most remained...the hotel looked much the same...there was cleaning to be done after the intervening years." During 1980, the hotel was known as the Samakki and was taken over by international aid agencies. In much the same manner UNTAC personnel, during the United Nation's presence in Cambodia, occupied it in the early 1990s.

### **1990s to the present day: A new lease of life**

Ken began his 'new life' as a self-taught painter in 1994, when whilst occupying a bungalow at the rear of the hotel someone bought one of his paintings for ten dollars.

The hotel regained a new lease of life when renovations began in May 1996 under the supervision of Raffles International Limited. All bungalows surrounding the hotel were demolished and replaced by three new, more substantial wings. The main building was left intact and completely refurbished. The capacity and functions of the hotel were greatly increased and improved - a necessity for a premier hotel.

Considerable care was taken to trace and identify as many of the original fittings and furnishings as possible, however, little remained. The hotel commissioned local traditional Khmer artist studio to create painted ceilings, decorative beaten copper crests and outdoor sculptures. The original floor plan of the main building and the studio differs slightly from the hotel today. However, the configuration of guestrooms remains intact. Some walls, entrance doorways and areas have been changed to accommodate new features. The Conservatory, the elegant arched lobby area has, however, been carefully restored, rescued from lowered ceilings, bricked-in spaces and false partitions. Similar, two symmetrical octagonal 'rotundas' - north and south of the lobby, have been returned to their original understated domed splendour. Koh Say Wee, architect for the restoration uses term such as 'architectural layering' to describe the methodical process of slowly stripping away later modifications to the building.

In the west wing on the ground of the main building, a small bar was located in the octagonal rotunda immediately in front of the present restaurant and the original director's office and reception area located to the rear of the lobby space (now the Conservatory). An old-fashioned openwork metal-cage lift is said to have operated in the same location as the present elevator - a 1931 advertisement mentions 'ascenseurs', presumably similar to the restored lift at Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor.

In the east wing on the ground floor, a door (now invisible behind a decorative cabinet) in the vicinity of the present reception desk led directly into a dining area - the 'Elephant Bar' of today. Following the construction of the three new courtyard wings, the hotel now boasts a total of 175 guestrooms and suites, almost four times the original capacity. The new wings approximate the now demolished bungalows, albeit on a much grander scale.

Inside the original building, black and white corridor floor tiles were faithfully copied and re-laid in the same configurations. A number of original claw-footed bathtubs were completely restored and incorporated with modern fittings. The glazed light well over the central entrance foyer was retained (originally illuminated by indirect light from a series of dormer windows, it has been partially covered by the present roofline and artificially lit). The grand wooden staircase was restored and remains much as it must have been when the hotel was first opened.

Landscape architects Belt Collins International are responsible for the magnificent garden that has carefully incorporated mature, existing native and ornamental trees and been extravagantly replanted to soften the horizontality of the main building and the enclosing courtyard wings. Two large trees at either end of the extensive rear garden, mature palms situated close to the hotel entrance and large decorative frangipanis are part of the original planting.

The hotel reopened after extensive renovations on 24 November 1997 as 'Raffles Hotel Le Royal', and is today going from strength to strength as Phnom Penh's most prestigious hotel property.

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#### **Further information:**

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### **RAFFLES HOTEL LE ROYAL, PHNOM PENH**

Phnom Penh is the capital of Cambodia and must-see attractions include the Royal Palace, National Museum, Wat Phnom and, of course, the views of the legendary Mekong river and Tonle Sap that flow through the city. Raffles Hotel Le Royal is another landmark historic hotel of Indochina having welcomed travelers since 1929. It is set in lush tropical gardens and built around two inviting swimming pools. It is an oasis in the heart of the bustling city. Accommodation includes colonial style rooms and suites, for the ultimate luxury stay in the Le Royal Suite where many global leaders and celebrities have stayed over the years. The Elephant Bar is the favoured watering hole for locals and visitors coming to the city and don't miss the Femme Fatale, the signature cocktail concocted for Jacqueline Kennedy on her trip to Cambodia. For bookings, either contact us or Raffles Hotel Le Royal directly at [bookus.phnompenh@raffles.com](mailto:bookus.phnompenh@raffles.com)

### **Know more about our sister hotel**

#### **RAFFLES GRAND HOTEL D'ANGKOR**

Grand Hotel d'Angkor, is another landmark historic hotel of IndoChina having welcomed travelers since 1932. With 15 acres of gardens, Cambodia's largest swimming pool and original features like the original cage-elevator it is an ideal place to stay when visiting the UNESCO World Heritage Angkor temples site. There is also several world-class golf course including the Nick Faldo designed Angkor Golf Resort. Accommodation includes colonial style rooms and suites for the ultimate luxury Two Bedroom Villas located adjacent to the pool. The Apsara Terrace dinner and Cambodia cultural show in the hotel gardens is the best in town. For accommodation or restaurant bookings either contact us or Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor direct [bookus.siemreap@raffles.com](mailto:bookus.siemreap@raffles.com)

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