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Chi Phat

An idyllic Cambodian village between a mountain and a river offers a relaxed, welcoming base from which to explore a special part of the world. Tucked into the southeastern front of the Cardamom Mountain range, Chi Phat is a pretty, prosperous two-street village. Dusty red roads are flanked by palms and sandalwood trees, handsome wooden houses perch on stilts and there’s a thriving community-based ecotourism (CBET) operation, established by conservation NGO Wildlife Alliance.

For a long time conservationists worked on the basis that the best way to protect the environment was to get people, and their bad habits, as far away from the areas sought to be protected as possible. That thinking started to change in the 1980s and ‘90s, and the idea has since taken root that actually the people who have long lived on and worked and intimately known the land may in fact be its best stewards. However, they needed something to replace the livelihoods that they derived from practices such as hunting, poaching, logging, resin-tapping and non-sustainable agricultural practices. Thus the idea for CBET was found.

Adopting the principle of “poacher turned gamekeeper” through CBET programmes not only gives people a replacement for incomes lost, but gives them a deeper incentive to protect the areas around them, and dependent wildlife, as their own wellbeing becomes entwined with that of their furry and feathered neighbours.
Community members benefit from CBET initiatives in a number of ways. Whether they’re hosts in homestays and guesthouses, waiters, guides, trip organisers, handicrafts manufacturers, offering culturally-based experiences or shopkeepers, the opportunities can be found. This not only helps to spread the benefits brought by tourism, but it also enhances visitors’ experiences as they are brought into closer, more genuine contact with the community.

It should be noted that real ecotourism is always linked with conservation goals. It has become something of an empty cliche within the travel industry as operatives have realised that tourists do care about the impacts they have when they travel. Thus any nature-based excursion is dragged under its banner. But operations like the one established at Chi Phat offer a genuine opportunity for travellers to support communities who are working to protect their environment.

Take a stroll.

Chi Phat is home to almost 40 homestays and guesthouses plus another small group of eco-chalets built in 2014 beside the wildlife release station. If that all seems too structured for you, then you can also camp in the forest. There is a handful of restaurants in the village, including at the CBET centre, which also has a bar. Just a few kilometres up the road, a winding tributary to the Preak Piphot River runs into rapids and waterfalls as it wends its way down the mountain.

Whether you’re seeking relaxation, adventure, or a chance to come into closer contact with Cambodian culture than you’ll find at the big tourist centres of Siem Reap or Phnom Penh, Chi Phat has something. Hiking and cycling trips into the mountains can be done at your level. Real adventurers can trek for several days into the forests, camping beside rivers, crossing wild elephant trails and hopefully catching a glimpse of some of the beautiful birds and animals that call this part of the Cardamoms home. Pro tip: when they say the trip is hard, they’re not kidding. We did the Trick or Treat trek, which is 44 kilometres into the hills and takes in bat caves and an ancient burial site. Despite being sick, we’re still generally strong and fit, but were definitely feeling it the next day. Things that are perfectly doable back home take on a different hue when it’s 35 degrees, and the humidity is hovering around 90%. Canoeing and river cruises let you enjoy the rivers at your pace. Through all these excursions you can take in birdwatching, or sites with ancient burial jars, bat caves, a forest regeneration programme or a fascinating wildlife release station where rescued animals are prepared for re-release back into the forest.
If adventure isn’t your thing, but you still want to get hands on, you could try the volunteer gardening programme, or perhaps learn more about Cambodian food with a cooking class. And if even that seems a little sportive, there’s a **massage parlour** where you may want to ease out tired post-trek muscles. The delivery is somewhat eccentric (we’re being polite here), and it may be the least private massage you’ll ever have, but if you don’t believe us about the hikes being hard when they say they’re hard, then you’re seriously not going to care about any of that. It’s the only one in town. The parlour is a few doors up from the CBET Centre in the middle of the village main strip, and a one-hour aromatherapy massage is $10.

The community also offers plenty of opportunities to explore what the project is about, whether it’s the reforestation programme or, fascinatingly, the wildlife release station to which you can take a dedicated tour, overnighting at purpose-built eco-chalets. We didn’t have time to do that this time, but will certainly be making a return trip so that we can.

For something more leisurely, a lot of guesthouses hire out simple bicycles for $4 a day. Take a chance to explore, in any direction, and you won’t be disappointed. We rode straight out of the village towards the mountain, taking a diversion on to the prettiest road which runs parallel to the main drag, flanked by more handsome wooden houses and beauteous blooms of bougainvillea. On the other side of the village, we found ourselves on a deserted “moor” with a small lake, and were lucky enough to witness the evening fall as the water birds took flight to return to their nests.
Chi Phat village sits in the middle of Chi Phat commune, which is home to four villages and about 3,000 people. The area was once a hotbed of illegal logging and poaching, and it is also within sight of economic land concessions granted to companies belonging to Cambodian tycoon and senator Ly Yong Phat, in partnership with Thai and Taiwanese companies.

Economic land concessions are the legal mechanism under which thousands of Cambodian families have been thrown off their own land, their legitimate rights and livelihoods swept aside, often quite literally torched, all in the name of “development”. More than 10% of Cambodia’s land has been parcelled off and handed out as concessions that are frequently just a legalistic cover for illegal loggers to continue their decimation of Cambodia’s ever-dwindling forests.

In theory the concessions are granted so the land can be converted to agricultural use. Thus trees are permitted to be logged and sold from within the ELCs. However trees logged in other, off-limits, areas are frequently shipped in and sold as “legal” timber. Moreover, the rights-holders very often have no intention to convert the land, and hundreds of thousands of hectares that once sustained families, forests and wildlife are left bare, lifelessly baking under the hot sun.

Where agricultural operations are developed — Sre Ambel and Botum Sakor produce sugar for the European market — land that once marginally sustained thousands of families becomes a cash machine flooding the accounts of a tiny, venal minority of well-connected Cambodians and foreigners.

The existence of community-driven operations such as the one at Chi Phat helps to provide a small bulwark against the blind rapaciousness that defines so many Cambodian political calculations. And for that reason alone, it’s important. It’s also huge fun.

**Orientation**

The journey from Route 48 to the village is as much a part of the experience as your adventures when you get there. Whether you’re dropped off at Andoung Teuk, about 3.5 kilometres from the turn-off for Chi Phat, or at the turn-off itself, the dusty, sandy spur takes you off on a 19 kilometre ride through cashew plantations, vast fields of crops, and an occasionally bleak landscape marred by clearance fires and thin bursts of skinny blackened trees, before the forest starts to gradually creep in to your horizon. Parts of it are lovely, even where the edges of the forests have been singed in sepia tones by fires that came too close.
At Andoung Teuk, you need to go to the restaurant on the south side of the road with a green net awning and wooden pillars. There is a big sign for Chi Phat Community Based Ecotourism. The moto from there, or from the turn-off to Chi Phat, will cost $7. If you have already organised transport through the CBET centre at Chi Phat, you don’t pay the driver, but the centre. If you hire an independent driver, you pay them the $7.

The motorcycle ride (or minivan trip if that is your transport from Phnom Penh) comes to the end when you reach the river. Here you hop on to a “ferry” that takes you straight across the village to Chi Phat itself. The village is quite small, but long. You alight from the ferry on a small hook at the bottom of a two-kilometre road strung with wooden houses on stilts that are remarkably well-kept. In fact, the whole village is remarkably well kept. In general, Cambodian villages are, sadly, more commonly lined with great, stinking, dangerous drifts of plastic bags, food containers, broken glass and drinks cans. It’s utterly depressing to see the complete lack of care and concern for the environment — not only geographical, but also personal — that persists here.

Chi Phat is different. And it’s not just in appearances. The people are almost unfailingly friendly (so far, so normal), and someone will almost invariably step forward to ask, “May I help you?” the moment you may look slightly lost or puzzled by something as you wander down the street. That is unusual. And a little bit delightful.

The CBET centre is not even 300 metres into the village, and that’s where you need to go first, to register, sort out your accommodation, whether you’ve booked it in advance or not, and start organising your adventures.

We were impressed at how well run the whole programme appeared to be. We’ve seen first-hand how CBET programmes can become bogged down by resistance to change, jealousy and cronism. The visitor will never see any of that of course, but they will unconsciously feel it in the attitudes of the people they encounter. We only had one moment of pause throughout the four days we spent there. And we were hugely impressed with the staff at the CBET centre, who were helpful, engaging and friendly.

You will need to bring your money with you as Chi Phat has no banks. There is a Wing office about 50 metres below the CBET centre. Wing allows money to be sent anywhere within Cambodia swiftly, safely and cheaply. Transfers cost just $1.50. If you run out of cash, then you need to start contacting friends.
There is a small **medical centre** in the village, just down the road towards the Sun Bear Bungalows, about 100 metres past the CBET centre. There is also a **pharmacy** where one of the staff members speaks English about 100 metres below the CBET centre (going towards the river). You will need to know what you’re looking for in advance. If you have had a serious accident, or are seriously ill, you need to get to Phnom Penh immediately. Speak to the team at the CBET centre; they are very competent and will be able to organise your transfer to Phnom Penh if necessary or help you to communicate with the local medical centre if necessary.

Indispensable items that you will need include **wet wipes, long socks, a small torch, sunscreen and mosquito spray**. You can get mosquito spray in the village, as well as long socks. The latter are necessary, because of leeches. Lots and lots of leeches. And do not under any circumstances forget about sunscreen — if you go on a trek, you will spend a lot of time on open plains and meadows. You can buy it in the village, but it may not be strong enough, or fresh enough. Sunscreen loses efficacy over time. You can also buy hats, scarves, flip flops, basic toiletries and other clothing.

Most of the places you stay at will **not have WiFi**. Or **electricity for much of the day**. Electricity in the village goes on from 05:00 to 09:00 and then from 17:00 to 22:00. That is when you can charge your phone and pick up the WiFi at the CBET centre if you need to catch up with the rest of the world. But do you really, really want to?
About this guide

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Got an idea on how to improve this guide? See something that is incorrect or out of date? Please let us know by emailing stuartmcdonald@travelfish.org or sambrown@travelfish.org.

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All Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors, Mapbox.

Good travels,

Sam and Stuart
The above map is intended to give you the general lay of the land. Many individual listings in this guide each have their own map showing you where they are. Open this map in Apple or Google maps.
Accommodation

Chi Phat

Chi Phat offers more than 40 accommodation options, with a range of homestays, guesthouses, bungalows and eco-chalets to choose from. Then, of course, there are the forest camps, and a night in one of those is highly recommended for adventurous types. Most accommodation is centred around the village, though some is much further out. You will not find anything luxurious, but that will simply make you appreciate it all the more later on.

A general note on accommodation in Chi Phat

As most Cambodians live in stilted, wooden houses, this is what most of the homestays look like. They tend to be simpler but, of the ones that we viewed, we actually found them more charming than the guesthouses, where the stark brick walls can seem a little oppressive. On the other hand, those stark rooms were frequently significantly cooler depending on their orientation. The quality varies from very, very basic to solid, comfortable Cambodian wooden homes. The welcomes always seem to be warm and kind though, and we’re not just saying that.

The team at the CBET centre says they will be working with hosts — whether of homestays or guesthouse — to bring up standards in the future. However, compared to many other places we’ve stayed in Cambodia, we found standards here to be pretty good on average. There is no air-con, and electricity is limited, which means no fan after 22:00. All the beds have mosquito nets, and they all seemed to provide towels, water and clean bed linen. There is no hot water, and while we are generally enormous fans of cold showers, on chilly, dry season mornings this can be a tough way to wake up. You will be awake though, that we promise. Some bathrooms are squat toilet. If you’ve never used one before, it’s good to remember that they’re actually much better for you than Western-style seated toilets. It’s good for your thighs too!

The principles of CBET would normally preclude expressing a preference for any particular accommodation. The point of the project is to spread the benefits so that all individuals are not tempted to fall back into harmful practices. As soon as one card falls, it’s only a matter of time before the whole fragile, valuable deck collapses. You can choose for CBET to randomly allocate a property -- contact them in advance or once you arrive -- to you based on whether you prefer a homestay, guesthouse or bungalow. Check out the properties below for a general idea of what to expect. While you can book online via booking.com, it is probably a better idea for the community to ask to be randomly allocated a place.

Even if you book directly with the property, you still need to register at the CBET centre, and they can help you find your way to your accommodation, or contact the owner who will come to collect you. Very often the owners do not speak English, or have a bare grasp of the language. Attempting to communicate by email or phone before you arrive may create more confusion than enlightenment.

We randomly visited a number of properties, and details are given below to give you an idea
of what to expect and how the properties can vary. In our view, even those properties that
might not be as “polished” as others are just as valuable and comfortable once you’re tucked
up in bed. And, as we said above, you’re not here for the thread counts on the bed linen.

All of the properties are named after one of the animals that calls the Cardamoms home. One
slightly confusing element is that the houses are identified publicly by the English-language
name, but when you get there, the names are Khmer.

**BEAR CAT (KOY LAY) HOMESTAY**

*Chill out*

*Chi Phat*

Under USD 10 (Backpacker )
Check online rates: [Booking ]

A very comfortable option just a few minutes’ walk from the CBET
centre, Bear Cat has six rooms in the upstairs part of their large wooden
home.

The rooms are simple, but spotlessly clean, with mid-size beds, and
they also include some furniture for keeping your stuff off the floor,
which is always a good thing in Cambodia (lest you find a nasty surprise
stowed away). The bathroom is a wet room with squat toilet and a
bucket shower. It too was scrupulously clean. If you want to relax away
from the CBET centre, they have a spacious balcony with table and
chairs to chill out on.

We have to say, the dogs here are the friendliest, happiest we’ve met for a very long time,
and yes we do judge people by how they treat animals.

**Room rates**

*Standard - Double: US$5*

[Click here or on the map above to see the location in Apple or Google maps.](#)

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**Cardamom Cottages**

*Airy and comfortable*

*Chi Phat*

*T: (092) 277 313*

Under USD 10 (Backpacker )

Cardamom Cottages offer a comfortable, airy space from which to explore the world around you. With three individual bungalows, each en-suite with Western-style toilets, they benefit from a shady space in the grounds behind Danatra Kitchen.

Made from wood and bamboo, there’s plenty of fresh air circulating to help keep things cool as well. The owners, same as for Danatra Kitchen, speak perfect English, and are very helpful and friendly. Unusually, you can also get WiFi here, subject to electricity hours. This is also very close to the CBET centre and the hearth of the village. Danatra Kitchen next door serves up some great food and a congenial atmosphere. They also do laundry. Cardamom is very similar conceptually to the nearby Sun Bear Bungalows.

**Room rates**

*Standard - Double: US$10*

![Map of Cardamom Cottages](https://www.travelfish.org/travelguide/chiphat/map_cardamom_cottages.png)

Click here or on the map above to see the location in Apple or Google maps.

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**Chhay Kpos Bungalows**

*Quiet and riverside*

*Chi Phat*

Under USD 10 (Backpacker )

![Map of Chhay Kpos Bungalows](https://www.travelfish.org/travelguide/chiphat/map_chhay_kpos_bungalows.png)

Click here or on the map above to see the location in Apple or Google maps.

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A good three kilometres away from the CBET centre, Chhay Kpos is a quiet, riverside retreat with four small wood-frame bungalows.

Right beside the Chhay Kpous waterfall, the property also has a covered bar and restaurant area, as well as riverside platforms tucked into the trees, on which to while away some easy hours over a picnic or a few beers. The family were very friendly and helpful as they could be, though spoke very little English. They even freely offered bananas to this tired traveller. This is a great spot if you want more quiet than you can get in the village, or just a little rural isolation. The ensuite rooms are clean, though a little bit tired, but benefit from the situation among some covering tree shade, which will help to keep them cool.

The road in and out is perfectly flat, and doable in a leisurely 15 minutes on a bicycle. If you know you want to stay here, we suggest packing a head torch.

**Room rates**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Rate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Standard - Single</td>
<td>US$10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard - Double</td>
<td>US$10</td>
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Click here or on the map above to see the location in Apple or Google maps.

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**Mongoose (Chi Va) Guesthouse**

*Chi Phat*

*T: (092) 277 313*

[yanveasna@gmail.com](mailto:yanveasna@gmail.com)

Under USD 10 (Backpacker)

Check online rates: [Booking]
Pretty much in the middle of Chi Phat village (which is long not round), Mongoose has two buildings of simple but comfortable bamboo built rooms, some of which are ensuite.

The airy (bamboo doesn't meet up after all) rooms are set in a slightly rough and ready garden that stores a collection of very well-maintained bicycles that you can hire for $4 a day. The rooms are perfectly maintained as well, as are the bathrooms, which have Western toilets.

There is a small terrace for hanging out on, or on the other side of the road, Danatra Kitchen belongs to the same owners, and there you’ll find some of the best food in the village. There is also a small shop with toiletries, snacks and various useful odds and ends. The owners are very friendly, professional and speak excellent English. They seem to work tirelessly from day break to the day’s end. You could not find more helpful people if you tried.

**Room rates**

* Sgl fan share b'room: US$6
* Dbl fan share b'room: US$6
* Sgl fan private b'room: US$7
* Dbl fan private b'room: US$7

Click here or on the map above to see the location in Apple or Google maps.

**Sun Bear Bungalows**

A smart option

Chi Phat

T: (015) 815 141

USD 10 to 35 (Flashpacker)

Check online rates: [Booking]
With five independent bungalows set among sandalwood and jackfruit trees, in a pretty setting that backs on to a thickly wooded area, Sun Bear is one of the smarter options close to the middle of the village.

Sun Bear is a five-minute walk from the CBET centre. We were told you can sometimes hear gibbons here but the bird song is lovely whether or not you’re lucky enough to hear a gibbon’s siren call. The bungalows are made from bamboo and have a small bedroom area and bathroom. We kept the windows open to keep the air circulating so that that mosquito net is wholly necessary. The mattress was the most comfortable we enjoyed in the whole week, which was very welcome. The bathroom is a simple wet bathroom — as will be most of the bathrooms you see — but had a western toilet. The water is cold, as pretty much everywhere else, which can make the mornings in December, January and February a little hard to face. Call it character building. The owner was very helpful and spoke excellent English. A small bar/restaurant in the middle of the gardens that make up the greater part of the property serves drinks which you can consume there or on your balcony overlooking the forest behind. A beautiful way to wind down your day.

**Room rates**

*Standard - Double: US$15*

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**Banded Kingfisher (Ou Sokha) Homestay**

*Spotless*
*Chi Phat*
Under USD 10 (Backpacker)
Check online rates: [Booking]
One of the simpler properties we came across, Banded Kingfisher (Ou Sokha) Homestay is almost as central as you could wish for. The wood and bamboo home has two homestay rooms, which are sparsely and simply decorated with a bed, some shelves and mosquito net.

The owner didn't seem to speak English, but she was very warm and gracious as she showed us around her small, spotless property. They have a Western-style toilet and bucket shower. At the front of the building, a small terrace looks out on to the main street, and seems a very pleasant place to while away an evening after a long day of adventure. They are right beside Danatra Kitchen, and within two minutes' walk of the CBET centre.

**Room rates**
*Standard - Double*: US$5

Click here or on the map above to see the location in Apple or Google maps.

**Black Bear (Sok Srei Mom) Guesthouse**

*Well maintained*

*Chi Phat*

Under USD 10 (Backpacker )

Check online rates: [Booking ]

A little further out of town, Black Bear Guesthouse offers a mix of wooden and brick rooms in a large typically modern-style Khmer house. Thus there is a brick ground floor and a wooden upstairs.

The rooms are all clean and tended to be a little larger than others that we saw, though any attempts at cat-swinging would still likely result in damage all-round. We weren’t able to meet the owner when we visited as only some workmen were there. Of note, the guesthouse is off the main drag, so will be quieter in the evenings, but is beside a school so will be noisier in the mornings. We found the property to be clean and
well-maintained. As usual, the brick rooms were generally cooler than the rooms upstairs, though in the evenings a breeze from the right direction would go some way towards addressing that. Bear (Sok Srei Mom) Guesthouse

**Room rates**
*Standard - Double: US$8*

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**DUN BUNLENG GUESTHOUSE**

*Near the water*

*Chi Phat*
*T: (012) 500 094*

Under USD 10 (Backpacker )

Set right on the Preak Piphot River, Dun Bunleng has a couple of brick, ensuite rooms that are bright and cool. As everywhere, they’re still pretty basic, but if being near the water turns you on, then this is a good option that is still very close to the centre of the village.

It’s down a small track behind the buildings and businesses that front the main street. This is where you start to see what Cambodian villages actually look like as the litter-free main drag gives way to a heavily-littered mess, which was disappointing, if unsurprising. There’s a bare-boarded day bed overlooking the water, which nonetheless looks like a nice spot for evening beers and a picnic — the sunsets along here are lovely. There are no restaurant and bar facilities, but you’re only a few minutes’ walk from the CBET centre and other shops and restaurants.

**Room rates**
*Standard - Double: US$7*
PORCUPINE (CHAN TY) GUESTHOUSE

Central and quiet
Chi Phat
T: (015) 614 038
Under USD 10 (Backpacker)
Check online rates: [Booking]

Right in the heart of the main village area, virtually opposite the CBET centre, you can’t get more central than Chan Ty Guesthouse. There are more rooms in the brick building, in varying states of repair, than most of the homestays.

Guesthouses seem to offer a little more personal space than homestays, but the bare, off-colour walls can feel a little oppressive we felt. On the other hand, you’re going to be so tired from your day’s adventures, you’re not likely to care. If night-time noise is an issue for you then — those cicadas can roar — the guesthouses are definitely the option for you. The rooms also tend to feel cooler than in wooden buildings, especially when there’s no breeze to take the edge off the heat.

Room rates
Standard - Double: US$5
Click here or on the map above to see the location in Apple or Google maps.

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Eat and meet

Chi Phat

Chi Phat takes the hard work out of working out where to eat, mainly because as of March 2016 you have just four choices.

The first, if you're staying at a homestay, is to dine with your host family, which you will need to organise in advance with the CBET centre so that they can alert the family before they go to the market for the day's shopping. We didn't eat with our host family this time, but our experiences of this in the past have always been fascinating. It's a wonderful way to experience everyday family life, and enjoy simple but flavoursome dishes. Your host family may or may not speak a little English, but it's amazing how much you can communicate with smiles and a little willing.

The CBET centre serves up breakfast and dinner every day. They aim to serve up something different each time, so we tucked into some sweet scrambled eggs — unusual — and baguette before taking off on our hike, and some delicious veggie dishes with rice and noodles one evening. We regretted missing the night before when, among other things, they were serving up stuffed bitter gourd and stir-fried pork. In theory, you could almost work your way through the whole Cambodian culinary repertoire by dining here, and we consider that to be not a bad idea. Meals at the CBET centre need to be booked in advance. Breakfasts usually cost $2.50, and evening meals, $5. Attached to the main building, a small open-fronted bar has beers, wines and cocktails at very reasonable prices.

Heading out of the village, Danatra Kitchen serves up a nice selection of soups, curries and stir-fries that are prepared from scratch and very tasty. This is a very friendly and welcoming spot, just above the CBET centre — heading away from the river. The family seems to never stop working, and they speak excellent English. They also serve beers and soft drinks. And you might even score some palm wine if you ask nicely.

Next door to the CBET centre, Chalin Restaurant serves up a small menu of simple dishes. The service is decidedly unenthusiastic, and the food is not the greatest either, but they're cheaper than the other options if that's what you're looking for. A filling plate of fried rice with vegetables and an egg was just $1.50. Plates of fried noodles, vegetables or soup can also be had for the same price, or less. They also have a small shop with a selection of snacks, beers and soft drinks.

If you're going on long treks, you will be assigned a cook-guide to join your trip. Ours was fantastic, and indeed we never had the slightest tummy twinge during our entire trip until we
got back to the capital city.

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Sights and activities

**TREKKING**

Some stunning trails

With trails that run in virtually every direction into forested mountains, along cooling rivers and across open grassy plains, the opportunities for **exploring Chi Phat by trekking or bicycle** are virtually limitless. They offer an opportunity to explore this natural environment, discover mysterious cultural artefacts, and learn more about the important work carried out by Wildlife Alliance to rehabilitate and return Cambodia’s priceless wildlife to the world they belong in.

We did the **Trick or Treat** trek, which takes in **bat caves** and an **ancient jar burial sites**. It was 44 kilometres of easy to medium-hard going, but the conditions make it tougher than it might otherwise be. By the time we got to the camp only six hours after departure, we were ready for a nap. A big one. And our once comfortable hiking boots were beginning to pinch. Don’t even attempt these walks unless you’re sure of your shoes. The walk back the next day made us feel our age, which we weren’t too happy about.

But it’s worth it, every step of the way. Not just for the battalions of butterflies that guide you on your way, but the **abundance of birdlife** that we saw, from parakeets to eagles, kingfishers, wild chickens, magnificent hornbills whose huge wings beat a slow, deep rhythm in the air, and plenty more that we’re not switched on enough to identify. We also saw lizards and lots of nimble and pretty red squirrels flitting across branches and from tree to tree.

Along the way, our guides spotted tracks for civet cats, as well as plenty of their excrement, porcupines and elephants.

At first we thought our guide was pulling our leg about the **elephants**, as he pointed out long trails of flattened grass on the verges of our path. But our skepticism was soon put to rest on discovery of the first enormous pile of grassy poop. Either that was an elephant or a horse with a serious problem.

Despite being a solo traveller, I had two for company: a guide and a cook, both of whom were excellent. We stopped en route to the camp for a delicious lunch of rice with pork and vegetables, and cook turned out another delicious meal for dinner, of rice with a dense vegetable soup.

Amazingly, **we all drank all six litres of water** that we were each carrying before the day’s end. For the next day we boiled river water to sustain us for the journey back. It doesn’t taste the greatest — it tasted like ashes — but it did stop us from keeling over. We finished all six litres on the way back too (and didn’t once stop to pee).

The same route that we took can be done by bicycle as well, for a quicker trip up to the burial and bat caves. The going is pretty sandy in places, so prepare to haul. We personally prefer walking because you see more. We are thrilled to report that we didn’t see a single spider (that may be down to wilful blindness). Because we were at the height of dry season, we also
didn’t attract a single leech. They are abundant in these hills though, so you’ll need long socks to tuck your trousers.

The terrain, and aspect, varied from sandy, open tracks across grassy, exposed plains to thick, secondary jungle, and veered from flat and easy to some quite challenging climbs.

Our tour took in ancient burial jars — sadly looted of their remains and the jewellery that was likely in there when discovered by villagers — left by a people about whom little is known. The distinctive burial rite, which is so far unseen elsewhere in Cambodia than in the Cardamoms, indicate a culture that was quite distinct. They are still a fascinating relic, and set at the top of a very difficult climb. We can’t imagine how hard it must have been to get the coffins up here and in situ.

**Treks** range from $15 to $120, and can be undertaken at a level and duration that suits you; discuss with them the possibility of doing it by bike instead if you prefer. They even offer a 10-day hike into the forests for the really committed. Which we might yet do one day.

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**ON THE RIVER**

*Gorgeous*

You can chill out on the waterfalls or rapids, hire kayaks and explore, go bird watching, or take a sunset, starlight and fireflies cruise.

We did the latter because everything else seemed too exhausting after our trek. We missed the sunset unfortunately, but the evening’s cruise was gorgeous, not just because of the fireflies, which were, as ever, lovely as they flickered and winked in a tree on the bank of the riverside. But the main joy came from the fact that several of the local women and children chose to take the opportunity to come along too. So six women and two young children chugged down the river in the still, light-aired darkness on a large flat barge-like boat, chatting about everything and nothing, as the women laughed, and one took the time away from their families to indulge in a cheeky cigarette. The journey was a short one; we were out there for maybe an hour. But its impact will last far longer.

The sunset firefly cruise is $12, but subject to a $12 supplement if you’re on your own. Kayaking will cost $7 for up to four hours, $10 for 4 hours +. Two-seat kayaks are $10 for up to four hours, and $12 for 4 hours +.

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**Transport**

**Bus**

From Phnom Penh, you need to catch a bus that is heading to Koh Kong (you’ll pay full price), and then ask the driver if you can hop off at Andoung Teuk for Chi Phat. The driver may drop you off at Andoung Teuk itself, or at the turn off for Chi Phat, which is just a couple of kilometres before it. Andoung Teuk is a small town on the side of National Route 48, whereas there are just a few wooden stalls at the turn-off. A moto from either costs $7.

If you organise your transport in advance through the CBET programme, make sure the driver actually drops you off at Andoung Teuk because that is where your driver will be waiting for you.

The journey from Phnom Penh can take between four and six hours, depending largely on the traffic around Phnom Penh airport, which can get very congested. The trip from the drop-off to the village is just under 20 kilometres. You may need sunscreen as it is all exposed.

As of March 2016, Virak Buntham buses to Koh Kong leave Phnom Penh at 07:45 and 12:30. The tickets cost $10. They also have minivans, which are quicker, leaving at 07:30 and 13:00, which cost $13.

Olympic buses leave Phnom Penh at 07:45 and 11:45, and cost $8. They also run a minivan service, which costs $10.

Paramount Angkor buses from Phnom Penh leave at 07:00, 09:00, 11:00 and 13:00, and cost $8.

The Chi Phat website refers to Sorya Transport buses, however this had been suspended when we checked in December 2015. Our attempts to verify the situation in March 2016 were greeted with blank unawareness. Thank you Sorya Transport for putting on your publicly listed phone numbers people who do not know how to answer questions from potential customers.

From Sihanoukville, you can catch one of the Virak Buntham buses that leave at 08:00 and cost $8. The journey should take just under three hours.

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