

FESTIVALS AND EVENTS

Cambodia has a wealth of traditional and international festivals. Most of these are a time of great rejoicing for the predominantly rural populace, many of whom flock to the capital to join in the celebrations and witness the organized fireworks displays which accompany the festivals. It is at these times the nation unites with a shared common understanding of values and traditions and they are looking forward to the future with great expectation. Even in times of hardship people try even harder to make these times special. All the traditional festivals are influenced by the concepts of Buddhism, Hinduism and royal cultures. The following are the most important of the celebrations organized throughout the year.

KHMER NEW YEAR'S DAY – CHAUL CHNAM THMEY (MID APRIL)



Unlike other Asian countries which celebrate Lunar New Year in the late January or early February, Cambodia welcomes a new year at the mid of April, which is the end of harvesting season and farmers start enjoying the fruits before the rainy season. The holiday lasts 3 days from 13th to 15th and based on the ancient Khmer calendar. The first day of New Year celebration is called “Moha Sangkran”. On this day, people nicely dress-up and light candle and burn incense sticks at shrines. Cambodians show special thanks to Buddha’s teachings by bowing, kneeling and prostrating themselves three times before Buddha’s image. Especially, Cambodians wash their faces with holy water in the morning, their chest at noon and their feet in the evening for good luck. The second day of New Year celebration is called “Virak Wanabat”. Cambodians spend this day on charitable activities by helping less fortune people. Families will attend a dedication ceremony to their ancestors at the monastery. The last day named “T’ngai Leang Saka” is to clean Buddha statues and their elders with perfumed water. Cambodians carried this activity with belief that it will bring longevity, good luck, happiness and prosperity in life. The Khmer New Year is also a time to prepare special dishes. One of them is “kralan” – a steamed rice cake mixed with beans or peas, grated coconut and coconut milk. The mixture is stuffed inside a bamboo stick and slowly roasted. Cambodians also have many traditional games to play in New Year such as Chab Kon Kleng, Leak Kanseng, Chol Chhung, etc which bring a lot of fun and laugh on the first days of the year.

PCHUM BEN DAY (SEPTEMBER)



Pchum Ben regarded as “Ancestors’ Day” is the most important festival in the Khmer religious calendar which is celebrated in October. This is a special 15-day-last occasion when Cambodians show their respects to deceased relatives of up to 7 generations. In their perception, there is a time when the gates of hell being opened, ghosts of the dead are presumed to be especially active. Therefore, they prepare food to serve them. Cambodians try not to miss a visit to the pagoda to dedicate food and offerings to the dead. By this way, they show their respects to ancestors. In addition, everyone goes to the pagoda because they do not want the spirits of dead members of their family to come to seek offerings at pagodas in vain. Pchum Ben is considered unique to Cambodia. This merit-transference ceremony contributes to enrich the Cambodia tradition and culture.

WATER FESTIVAL (OCTOBER OR NOVEMBER)



In Cambodia, Water Festival is the most sparkling traditional festival. Water Festival is celebrated once a year, on the full moon of the Buddhist of Kadeuk (usually in November) at aim of welcome a major natural occurrence: the reversing flow between the Tonle Sap and the Mekong River. Water Festival has long history since 12th century by the King Jayavarman VII to kick off the Cambodia fishing season. Nowadays, Cambodian celebrates this festival to express their special thank to Tonle Sap – the source of most Cambodians’ lives. Water Festival often takes place in 3 days. People from far away gather at the river bank to join celebration. The most exciting activity is boat sailing competition. Colorful racing boats with bright paint schemes, eyes painted on the prow to protect against evil make up a vivid picture. Many boat crews are complemented with a colorfully-costumed lady at the prow dancing to the beat of the drums. In the evening, the festivities continue with carnival rides, traditional music performances and dances.

ROYAL PLOUGHING DAY (MAY)



Cambodia is an agricultural country with a deep astrological belief that the Ox plays vital role in determining the fate of the harvest each year. Royal Ploughing Day is celebrated in May, at the large park next to the Royal Palace at two aims: the first is the king sets a good example for farmers, telling them farming is important to the country, the second is to predict the harvest of the year. In the past, the king and the queen will plough by themselves, however, nowadays their representatives will lead the oxen walk around the square 3 times. At last, the royal oxen will be led to seven golden trays at the middle of the square. These trays contain rice, corn, sesame seeds, beans, grass, water and wine. If the oxen choose crop, it means that the harvest will be good, if the oxen choose other things like wine, the harvest will not be good. It is a very traditional even in Cambodia which has sacred meaning in Cambodian's belief and values.

MEAK BOCHEA (FEBRUARY OR MARCH)



Often held on the full moon day of the third lunar month (usually in late February or early March), Meak Bochea Day is an important religious festival of Buddhist follower in Cambodia. According to the mythology, Meak Bochea was the day Buddha met with 1,250 of his initiates, who had gathered spontaneously to hear him preach in India and predicted and announced the date he would attain enlightenment and enter into nirvana. In Buddhism's perception, full moon day is a holy day which is an ideal time to make merits. On this day, many people go to the local temples and pagodas and make merits. In the evening, most temples in Cambodia hosts a candle procession called "Wien Tien". Holding lotus flower and candle in hand, people walk around the temples three times to venerate Buddha, Dharma (Buddha's teaching) and the Sangha (monastic life). Meak Bochea Day is a precious occasion for Buddhist followers to be reminded of Buddha and his teachings. This day is also a public holiday in Laos and Thailand. Cambodia, Laos and Thailand hold strong Theravada Buddhist traditions, making this holiday a very important one in each country's calendars but the date may differ in each country due to the local lunar calendars used. Moreover, it contributes to create Buddhism atmosphere which make these three Southeast Asian countries colors and attractions.