

Streetsmart: Sothearos Boulevard

Home to royalty, Sothearos Boulevard is one of the city's most interesting thoroughfares. **Liz Ledden** traverses its length finding great Asian eateries, diverse furniture options and some of Phnom Penh's most significant buildings.



PHOTO BY KEITH KELLY

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THE PICTURESQUE PARKLAND at the heart of Sothearos, housing the Cambodia-Vietnam memorial, is pristine in parts, home to squatters in others. The contradiction continues down Sothearos, as Japanese restaurants sit side-by-side with local noodle shops. Further down, upmarket I-Ching shares a street with some of Phnom Penh's best bargain furniture finds. The boulevard also sees visitors by the busload embarking daily to marvel at the beautiful and ornate Royal Palace.

■ 1. WAT OUNALOM

*Sothearos Boulevard
(near corner Street 154)*
This large, centrally located wat is said to be the country's most significant. A stupa believed to hold Buddha's eyelash is on the grounds, along with many statues and items resurrected and reconstructed following the Khmer Rouge's ransacking of the place. Despite its very central location at the heart of the riverfront, the wat is a serene place to wander around and explore, except on religious holidays when it is a bustle of commotion.

■ 2. UP TO YOU

3 Sothearos Blvd
This tiny NGO retail outlet sells a small selection of fair trade handicraft products, mostly silks. Very good quality silk scarves coloured with natural dyes sell for US\$12-14, and there's also a small selection of handbags and lampshades. Purchase silk by the metre for US\$10, or watch the in-house tailors create your own silk outfit. There's also a comprehensive catalogue of clothing styles to choose from.

■ 3. BOHR'S BOOKS

5 Sothearos Blvd
A small second-hand book shop offering excellent value for money, the books are in very good condition, and are often cheaper than similar dealers around town. In addition to all the previously loved books is a small selection of new photocopied books going beyond the usual Cambodia-based tales. Contemporary best sellers recently for sale here include Freakonomics and Fast Food Nation, priced at US\$3.50, with some other titles selling for only US\$3.

■ 4. THE ROYAL PALACE

Sothearos Blvd
A picture of glittering gold and Cambodian heritage, the Royal Palace is Sothearos Boulevard's – and for that matter Phnom Penh's – focal point and highlight. Constructed in 1866 under the reign of King Norodom, the palace has undergone renovations and received additions in more recent times, including the Silver Pagoda and the Napoleon building. The palace costs US\$2 per person to enter, with extra charges for still cameras

and video cameras (US\$3 and US\$5 respectively). The opening hours are from 7am to 11am and 2.30pm to 5pm, and it's closed for some holidays and functions. Some parts of the grounds are off limits to visitors – it's easy to forget that this is still an active palace, not just a tourist attraction.

■ 5. THURY RESTAURANT

176 Sothearos Blvd
This slightly upmarket Khmer and western restaurant features Cambodian favourites and an



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even wider range of international dishes. Soups, salads, burgers, pizzas and steak all feature, with rib-eye and t-bone steak at US\$12 with a choice of side and sauce. The wood-fired pizzas include a seafood option with most priced at US\$6 or just under. The Khmer dishes range from US\$4 to US\$6.50 and include fish amok and beef luk lak.

■ **6. ORIGAMI**

88 Sothearos Boulevard
Stylish and serene, this Japanese restaurant is a refined choice for a memorable meal. Set in a nicely restored villa, the restaurant has great sushi and sashimi and good deal box sets of Japanese favourites. The ramen noodles are authentic and tasty, and along with the delicious food the ambience and service are very good. Dinner works out on average at US\$10-15 a person.

Held in high esteem by Phnom Penh's Japanese community, one nearby Japanese restaurant owner hails it the best quality Japanese eatery in the city.

■ **7. HIMAJIN**

84 Sothearos Boulevard
Entering Himajin is like entering a charming home filled with hidden little rooms and crammed bookshelves. This traditional style Japanese eatery offers separate rooms for each group of diners, all wood panelled with bench seating around a central table. Beware though that the dividing walls are thin, so if you have a group getting stuck into the sake next door you may be in for a boisterous night.

Service is discreet with staff making well-timed visits to replenish drinks, and the food is excellent. The extensive menu includes sashimi, edamame, gyoza, mackerel and croquettes, all of which are authentic and delicious. A large meal with a group sharing more than enough dishes to satisfy works out at around US\$12 a head, including drinks.

■ **8. KOREAN RESTAURANT COCO**

88 Sothearos Blvd
Eclectically numbered the same as Origami, the other number 88 is a recent addition to the Sothearos restaurant strip. Not the cheapest eatery around, the interior features a few private rooms and a curtained-off section, with fairly basic décor.

Most dishes are either US\$10 or US\$15 including beef soup with mushrooms and fried chicken pieces (with Korean herbs and ingredients), with a few US\$6 snacks such as Korean sushi and noodle soup. It is something different in an area known more for its Japanese restaurants.

■ **9. Q BAR**

96 Sothearos Boulevard
This new bar is fast gaining popularity as a late night venue playing good house and dance music in an intimate atmosphere. Veering away from the hostess bar scene – most of the bartenders are guys – Q Bar is a cross between a dance club and a small cocktail bar.

Early customers can partake in the generous happy hour from



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6pm to 9pm, and if the dance music gets too loud there's streetside seating as well.

■ **10. KID'S WORLD**

112Eo Sothearos Blvd
Another recent addition to Sothearos, Kid's World opened in early 2007 and is a small, colourful, well-organised shop. Claiming to have the exclusive rights to sell Lego in Cambodia, it also has a line of baby products called 'Nuk', including baby bottles and sterilizing equipment.

Huge box sets of Lego pirate ships and build-your-own Ferraris are available, great for kids Christmas presents or even for F-1 fans who can't afford the real thing. In the store is a table with Lego pieces to play with and relive some childhood memories.

■ **11. AN NAM**

118 Sothearos Boulevard
Good quality Vietnamese cuisine is available at An Nam, a small,

air-conditioned eatery with colourful, whimsical décor. Snacks such as banh xeo (fried pancakes stuffed with pork and shrimp) go for US\$4.50, and typical Vietnamese salads, soups and meat dishes average US\$5.50 a dish.

At US\$3 the beef pho is a little pricier than average, however the service and ambience make this a pleasant lunch option.

■ **12. PHNOM PENH CENTRE**

Corner of Sothearos and Sihanouk
Consisting predominantly of office-based businesses, Phnom Penh Centre is a handy stop-off point for computer enthusiasts. The ground floor Anana Computer is an excellent source of not only new computers, but memory sticks, headphones, printers, ink cartridges and the like. Reputable brands for sale include Sony, Toshiba and Hewlett Packard, and next door is a computer repair centre if you're unfortunate enough to need it. The centre also is the



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home of internet provider Angkor Net.

■ **13. LUCKY SEVEN**

Corner of Sothearos and Sihanouk (in front of Phnom Penh Centre)

A local place with great gelato, Lucky Seven is well worth a pit stop, particularly in the heat of the day. The gelato counter is beautifully presented, with each flavour (such as hazelnut and mint chocolate) having decorative touches on top, be it wafers, nuts, strawberries or chocolate sauce. Prices range from 90 cents for one scoop in a small cup, to US\$1.70 for a medium and US\$2.40 for a large.

The fast food restaurant also has a main counter with McDonalds-like food, including chicken nuggets, sandwiches and ice-cream sundaes, with most items in the US\$1 to US\$2.50 range.

The third counter is LucKafe, with coffees, doughnuts and other enticing baked treats for only 50 cents. This is an excellent place for great dessert on the cheap and its ANZ ATM is convenient if heading to any nearby shops for a spree.

■ **14. U-SHOP AND U-SHOP RESTAURANT**

43 Sothearos Boulevard

Across from Lucky Seven lies a 7-11 style convenience store open 24 hours, with an adjoining Thai restaurant. The convenience store is one of the few in the city open all night long, so is perfect for a snack or cold drink at any hour.

At its restaurant next door, you can view the staff busy at work behind a big glass window preparing fresh ingredients to make their curries, soups, stir-fries, and rice and noodle dishes.

Most of the menu is around US\$1 to US\$3, with the US\$1.50 pad thai being a particularly good deal for a quick, bargain priced meal.

■ **15. I CHING DECOR**

85 Sothearos Blvd

Heading further south is one of Phnom Penh's most prominent furniture and interiors shops. In its relatively new premises – it used to be just off the riverfront in Street 178 up until late 2006 – I Ching stocks contemporary furniture and homewares, and updated versions of classic Chinese antiques.

Particularly good buys are the home accessories, which are more contemporary than any available in the markets. Glasses come in many different colours including ranges of purple, yellow and turquoise glassware, with pieces from US\$4 each. In addition to retail, I Ching offers an interior design consulting service.

■ **16. SECOND-HAND ANTIQUE SHOPS**

Southern end of Sothearos Blvd

Just before reaching the street's renowned wicker shops are a few wooden furniture dealers, with antiques sourced from all over the country. Look for the sign saying "Selling strange, ancient furniture" and uncover amazing coffee tables, cabinets and wardrobes at really good prices.



Across the road is Dara's, another business that brings furniture in from the provinces, often in a state of disrepair, and fixes them up to inject new life. Don't forget to delve down into the dusty, cobwebbed rear of these shops, as you'll never know what you may uncover.

■ **17. WICKER MARKET**

Southern end of Sothearos Blvd, junction with Monivong

The strip of small shops just before the junction with Monivong is the place for all things wicker in Phnom Penh. Expat home décor enthusiasts, guesthouse and bar owners and locals alike flock to this strip of wickerware shops at Sothearos' southern end. Chairs, tables, baskets, shoe racks, hat stands, ottomans and more can be found in this strip of stalls.

This is the cheapest way to furnish your place. Three-tiered shoe stands go for US\$3 to US\$4 and simple wicker chairs often for around US\$5.

A bamboo three-seater lounge frame costs from US\$7 to US\$16 depending which store you go to – shopping around is key here. Huge floor mats go for around US\$10 to US\$12. Most of these places accept a bit of bargaining, particularly if buying multiple pieces, and they can tailor make cushions to fit

any seating purchased. ■

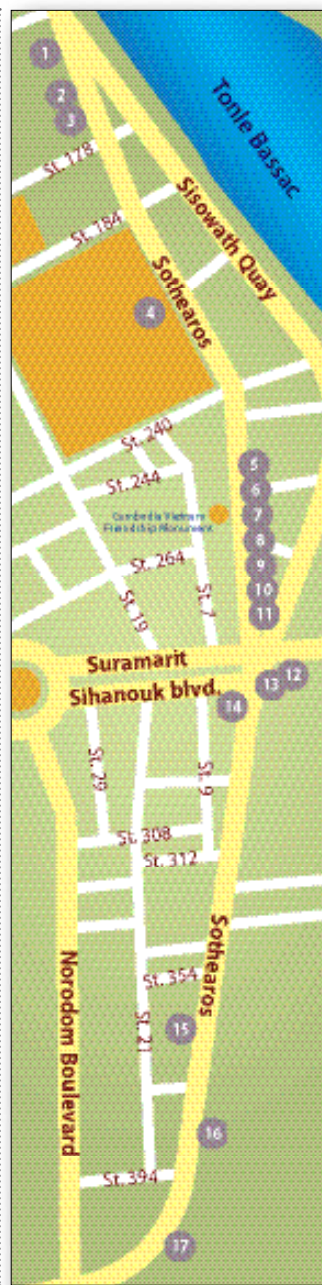


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