

Locals flock to ceramics hub for traditional Khmer artwork

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Cambodian actress Shin Yubin takes in a pottery class at the Khmer Ceramics Centre. Facebook

Dotted with amazing ancient temples, the sacred land of Angkor in Siem Reap province has a lot more cultural experiences to offer travellers.

One of them is the educational and entertaining pottery class by Khmer Ceramics Centre. A popular stop for international travellers, it has increasingly attracted local tourists to learn pottery and take home their final work as souvenirs.

“Because of the pandemic, we have unfortunately experienced a sharp drop in the number of daily foreign visitors.

“Luckily, we have many Cambodian supporters and visitors now. And surprisingly we have had more local visitors in the last six months,” says Nhoeb Panha, a production manager at the centre.

Panha's work involves planning and organising the entire production process – from the first step to the final product. And he echoes founder Serge Rega's mission to contribute to economic and social development in the province.

“By practising such arts, we are ensuring the revival and survival of traditional Cambodian stoneware and ceramics that were at risk of disappearing after a thousand years. We are very proud of our enterprise,” he says.

Rega wants to see more people involved in safeguarding Khmer ceramic art and more opportunity for disadvantaged members of the community.

When Rega first came to Cambodia in 1999, the Belgian vacationer was captivated by the Kingdom's culture, ancient temples and the people's smiles.

Taking a deep dive into the country's art and history, the pottery enthusiast was saddened by the loss of traditional Khmer ceramic arts and knowledge during the Khmer Rouge period in the 1970s.



Clay art is created by your own hands on the potter's wheel. Kravan Snapshots
He worked on ancient Khmer ceramics as a hobby in his garden and was inspired to revive ancient pottery and ceramics techniques while developing contemporary Khmer ceramic art.

In 2001, Rega returned to Cambodia, not as a traveller but a founder of a small ceramics centre in Siem Reap, which he called it the spiritual and artistic heart of the Kingdom.

There, he worked with a few passionate Khmer pottery artists to promote Cambodian arts to the world and help create a sustainable local pottery community.

“In the following years, I focused on implementing traditional handmade Khmer ceramics techniques and after researching ancient kiln building techniques, I constructed a single wood-fired kiln and used natural wood ash glazes,” Rega says in the centre’s website.

The small ceramic centre evolved into a social enterprise, Khmer Ceramics and Fine Arts Centre in 2006, aiming to revive once-prosperous Khmer ceramics and provide training and employment to disadvantaged communities.

“We are using artisanal skills and producing high-quality products. We want to pass these skills on to future generations to provide a bright future for our community and ensure these skills are kept alive.

“We will be very happy if anyone would like to be a part of our project and visit our centre. Pottery classes enable people to experience first-hand the ancient process of creating ceramics. Our clay is local Cambodian clay and our potter’s wheels are of a traditional design,” Panha says

Professional pottery teachers, he says, are from local disadvantaged communities including the hearing impaired people.



Actress Kim Chanbormey visited the centre in September. Facebook

“Their communication skills amaze people. They use sign language with guests during classes,” he says, and adds that guests find the pottery experience with deaf people fascinating.

Panha says most visitors found pottery and painting classes a new experience that they have never done before.

People will learn to use a pottery wheel and Khmer traditional carving tools to design their craft in a peaceful and fun environment that even young participants would find it enjoyable.

“We have pottery and painting classes every day, for both adults and children from three years old and up. No previous knowledge of ceramics is required,” Panha says.

Local tour guide and pottery teachers will start with a brief introduction before demonstrating the art of pottery.

“During pottery classes, the participants make an Angkorian bowl by using the traditional pottery wheel. After finishing it, our teachers will demonstrate the traditional decorative carving to make it more unique, using special carving and pottery tools for beginners,” he says.

All art materials will be supplied and at the end of the session, participants will receive a pottery bowl (handmade by them) and a certificate of participation in the pottery class.



Beautiful lotus design is carved at Khmer Ceramics. Photo supplied

“Our pottery and painting classes take an hour and 45 minutes each. The cost is \$25 per person. Now, we have 30 per cent discount for both classes. Each class is only \$17.50,” he says.

Local communities also had a chance to earn their living through teaching ceramic art which has attracted an increasing number of local visitors, partly thanks to celebrities’ posts on Instagram and Facebook.

During the current Covid-19 pandemic, the centre remains open every day, while following the health and safety guidelines of the Ministry of Health.

“We set up a hand-washing area at the entrance to our workshop immediately, and asked all our customers to wash their hands before they enter the centre,” Panha says, stressing the importance of hygiene and social distancing practises.

“We also provide hand sanitiser. We put a distance between the potter wheels and chairs. We put on masks and also provide them to customers if they required,” he says.

Pottery classes are also recognised as an entertaining activity for team building. It enhances group communication, team spirit, and creativeness.

“Companies or schools can contact the centre in advance and they will arrange a programme that comes with exciting activities and a buffet,” Panha says.

Besides providing pottery, painting classes and team-building services, the centre also sells handmade products by local people in Siem Reap – in its shop and online.

“Our online shop located at www.khmerceraamics.com. We have more than 500 pieces available in our online shop now. You can see a big selection of products in every section.

“It is very easy to purchase via our online shop. Our sales team is always ready to help you via phone or message if you need any assistance. We have free delivery within two to three days to anywhere in Cambodia,” he says.

The price of products starts \$0.50. The variety of products ranges from high-quality handmade tableware, home decoration pieces, spa and bathroom essentials, unique sculptures, artworks and wall decorations.



Some of the pit firing at Khmer Ceramics. Photo supplied

“We have people who are into art and handmade ceramics in the hotel and restaurant industry. They support our products. We have support from local companies too, and our supporters are amazed by our unique designs and quality of our products which is sold at reasonable prices,” says Panha.

The centre is located at 0207, River Road, Traing gillage, Slakram commune, Siem Reap town.

Khmer Ceramics and Fine Arts Centre will open a Pottery Centre and shop in Phnom Penh on December 1. The pottery class will open regularly for the public in Phnom Penh soon.

It will be located at 16, Jayavarman 7 Street (Street 172), Daun Penh district, Phnom Penh.

For further information, contact 017 843014 or E-mail: booking@khmerc ceramics.com.

