



Cambodia's rock climbing scene is on the rise, with a climbing club, climbing site and soon-to-be opened climbing gym. Joanna Mayhew explores the Kingdom's newest pastime. Photography by Charles Fox.

The mixed language directions come in seamless bursts from 10 metres below. "To your right. À droite. C'est jolie. Ju-ey kowat," shouts Climbodias founder David Van Hulle, standing clad in Petzl-brand gear, with a helmet, harness and belt full of carabineers and quick-draws.

Breathless, I pause, limbs outstretched and fingers death-clutching the rough and jagged rock, while trying to determine which instructions are for me. "Reach with your left arm. Come on, higher, higher." Now sure, I reach with a grunt, grasp the previously elusive hold, and continue to ungracefully paw my way up the climb.

As the country's first official climbing site company, Climbodia represents a major boost to the Kingdom's climbing scene, historically eclipsed by attractions in Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. Opened in January 2013, Climbodia offers caving, abseiling, climbing and via ferratas—or cabled routes set across the cliffs. The picturesque site at Phnom Kbal Romeas, five kilometres from Kampot town, offers panoramic views of the ocean, lush green rice fields and red clay roads.

It is a labour of love for energetic Van Hulle, who has climbed for 16 years across the globe. Previously living in Phnom Penh, he discovered the future site of Climbodia while exploring caves during a return visit two years ago. "I was instinctively drawn to this place. The second I looked up, I knew I was going to do this," says the Belgian. "It hit me like a thunderbolt."

Contrary to nearby hills, the limestone formation offers climbs varying from easy to tough. "I don't want to make a climbing site for the elite climber," he says. "I want to make sure everybody can climb."

This has paid off, as Van Hulle estimates 99 percent of his customers are first-time climbers, with business growing to at least five visitors daily. To keep up, the 36-year-old has trained three staff from the nearby village.

Climbodia's initial success comes on the heels of an increased demand for existing offerings in Cambodia, including Phnom Penh Fun Climbers—an informal club operating for the past two years.

"When you're a climber, it doesn't mean that you're American or Cambodian"

As a female Cambodian climber, co-founder Léakhéna Sophan is an anomaly. Léakhéna started the group with German Henrik Hoffmann after he taught her to climb and belay in her Phnom Penh apartment, with a rope attached to the rooftop.

Afraid of heights, she was terrified during her first climb. Yet, feeling accomplished, she tried again and within a few months was hooked. "Now I love it," she says. "Of course, when you fall three metres, you still feel like your stomach's on your head, but it's fun."

The group organises monthly trips to Banteay Meanchey, Kampot, Kampong Cham and Takeo, taking between 10 and 20 climbers. Its casualness and openness reflects the small community—for trips, logistics are divided amongst members, equipment is shared, and anyone can join, free of charge.

An up-coming addition to the climbing scene is a Phnom Penh-based gym, tentatively named Phnom Climb. Currently an empty lot littered with plastic bottles, stray shoes and an uprooted toilet, the 400 square-metre Russian Market space will offer a range of walls and overhangs, with bouldering, lead climbs and top ropes to entice both newcomers and the advanced.

The gym, set to open in the first quarter of 2015, is the brainchild of married couple Christoph and Mary Lüthy. Though quick to emphasise it is a business and not an NGO, the founders hope the gym will have a social impact.

“We want to focus on teamwork, community, trusting each other. If somebody holds your rope, you have to trust that person,” says Cristoph. “This is something missing [here], that has been destroyed over the course of history. We see this as a small opportunity to break through those walls.”

While acknowledging the majority of customers will be foreigners, they aim to draw young Cambodians. “There [are more] younger Cambodians who want to do stuff in their free time, and who can afford to do so. The demand is growing with the economy,” Christoph says.

They also hope it will help build relationships across cultures. “When you’re a climber, it doesn’t mean that you’re American or Cambodian,” echoes Léakhéna. “It’s like an international language.” She too works to encourage her peers to climb, saying it builds understanding and communication.

Be it from expats, tourists or locals, demand is growing, and the enterprises seem to be feeding off each other. Whether this camaraderie will continue as competition increases remains to be seen, but for now there is space for everyone.

“There’s plenty of potential, it just needs to be exploited,” says Van Hulle, citing options for sites in Siem Reap and Battambang, among other provinces.

During Van Hulle’s years in Phnom Penh, lacking viable climbing options, he says he forced himself to temporarily forget the sport. “That’s one of the reasons I [left]; I really missed it.”

Pointing to the towering cliffs above—his ropes dangling from their varied rock faces—he shrugs with a smile and adds, “Now I can stay.”

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