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Visiting Tonle Sap:



There are several places one can visit on Tonle Sap. The primary destinations when making a visit are: the well-known **floating villages** at Chong Khneas ([map location](#)), or the lessor known and lessor visited **stilted villages** of Kompong Phluk ([rough map location](#)) or Kompong Khleang ([rough map location](#)). At the bottom of this brochure you can find information about visiting the Prek Toal Bird Sanctuary and several links with background to the lake and its ecosystem.

Most tourists go to the **floating villages** at Chong Khneas because it is the most well-known, the closest to Siem Reap, the easiest to serve for large tour groups and the cheapest to get to because of its closeness to Siem Reap. Kompong Phluk has started to get a lot more visitors while Kompong Khleang remains the one that gets the fewest visitors. I have been to all three on several occasions and in my opinion, which is shared by most seasoned travelers to Siem Reap, Kompong Phluk and especially Kompong Khleang are the better alternatives for a visit.



The **floating villages** at Chong Khneas are made up largely of transient migrants who come and go with the water levels. This prevents the community from developing the feeling one finds in a place with a steady social structure which is the case at Phluk and Khleang. All three are quite poor but the floating villages are desperately poor in a way that can be very uncomfortable for many tourists. In addition, because of the massive number of



tourists going

there and the Heartbreaking poverty you will see, there is an entire business of charity 'scams' you will be exposed to while taking the boat tour of the floating village. One very reputable and responsible local tour company writes [this](#) of the floating villages: "Being a popular tourist destination the lake is home to 'scams'. Please do not buy books, pens or any items like these, they will not reach the said recipients and the deals only line someone's pockets. The lake area is an area of extreme

poverty and sometimes can be quite confronting please be aware of this."

Largely due to the scams, the [reviews](#) of the floating villages at Chong Khneas are extremely negative.

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As the number of tourists has risen at Kompong Phluk it is allegedly beginning to show some of the same 'bad behavior' but recent [reviews](#) of Kompong Phluk on Tripadvisor remain quite enthusiastic. Kompong Khleang is visited the least so there are far less [reviews](#) still on Tripadvisor. I feel that a visit to any of these places, even the floating villages at Chong Khneas, if there is no other choice, is quite an unusual and eye-opening experience even if the poverty and scams at Chong

Khneas can be disheartening for some.

If you do plan to visit the **floating villages** at Chong Khneas then brace yourself ahead of time for the scenes of poverty and get your polite assertiveness well practiced to be saying "No" to the requests to purchase school supplies and usually rice for the local orphanage. As mentioned above, nothing you buy will get to those who need it. It will be resold usually at the same inflated prices you bought it for. If you want to do something like this, offer your driver's family a bag of rice or equivalent as there is almost no driver who succeeds in keeping his family properly fed the whole year through.

Many people combine a visit to the lake with the 'jungle temple' Beng Mealea. Kompong Phluk or Kompong Khleang make more sense for this combo as they are all in the same direction while the floating villages are on the the other side of Siem Reap requiring you to double back through Siem Reap to get to both places in one day. Khleang and Phluk are in many ways quite similar. The biggest difference is that Phluk also has a flooded forest during parts of the year. Very often one has the opportunity to tour the main village in the regular motor boats and then for a small additional fee it is usually possible to have a tour of the flooded forest in a small dugout canoe.



There is a last important difference between the floating villages at Chong Khneas and either of the stilted villages Kompong Phluk or Kompong Khleang which a visitor should know. When the lake levels are low during the dry season, the homes in the stilted villages tower 6 - 8 meters above the dry flood plain

while during the wet season, the water approaches or reaches the level of the homes. At the floating villages, the boats people live on come and go with the water level so they are always floating.



Many people wonder if a visit to one of the stilted villages is a worthwhile experience in the dry season. Here is one traveler's [impressions](#) that I think are quite characteristic: "On dry season, when we went, the stilts are exposed. Which, we think, makes it even look more impressive. The houses seemed to soar way high over our heads." So many people find it just as fascinating albeit different. Do note, as described [here](#), in the dry season the final bit of road to Kompong Phluk can be impassable except for

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motorbikes or on foot. Kompong Khleang does not have this problem.

If you decide to visit one of the lake communities then you can decide which one is most suitable with your driver or after asking your hotel/guesthouse when you are there. Conditions are variable, the water level changes drastically from season to season and for example sometimes one or the other stilted community is easier to get to depending on road and lake conditions.

The boat tour of the floating villages at Chong Khneas hovers around \$20 - 25 p.p. The entrance fee to the stilted villages with boat tours hovers around \$20 p.p. At Kompong Phluk there is usually the possibility to do an optional dugout canoe ride through the flooded mangrove forest which usually costs an additional \$5. This is Cambodia and these prices can fluctuate just a little day to day so take these prices as guidelines.

ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND



Tonle Sap and the Mekong River together form a totally unique ecosystem not found anywhere in the world. From the dry to the wet season the lake expands to 3 to 5 times its normal size and the river flowing into the Mekong actually reverses the direction of its flow. For some more background:

- A great 6 min video from Expedition Blue Planet: Tonle Sap: [The Pulse of Life](#)
- [Wikipedia article on Tonle Sap](#)
- [Tonle Sap profile](#) from Worldlakes.org
- My web albums for the [floating villages](#) at Chong Khneas and the stilted villages of [Kompong Phluk](#) and [Kompong Khleang](#) (all my visits have been in the wet season as you can see)
- Traveler ratings from Tripadvisor's 'things to do': floating villages at [Chong Khneas](#) (ranked 92 out of 101 activities) and [Kompong Phluk](#) (ranked 35 out of 101). Kompong Khleang apparently doesn't yet get enough visitors who are writing stuff to get into this particular list as a distinct attraction. Click the links for many traveler reviews of the two places that are listed as distinct attractions.
- Travelfish staff reviews: [Chong Khneas](#) ("tourist trap"), [Kompong Phluk](#) ("well worth a look") and [Kompong Khleang](#) ("highly recommended"). Click the links for the full Travelfish articles.
- PREK TOAL BIRD SANCTUARY: Bird and nature enthusiasts may also be interested in the Prek Toal bird sanctuary on Tonle Sap. This is one of the world's most important breeding grounds for many species including some endangered species. The best time to visit is October - March. A visit is a whole day affair and needs to be done through a specialized company. These three companies are very experienced, responsible and reputable: [Osmoste](#), [Sam Veasna Center](#) and [Beyond Unique Escapes](#)