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A Haven for do-good foodies

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In a town as downright lovely as Siem Reap, you need never feel guilty about stuffing your gob. With NGO-funding eateries, training-school bistros and sustainable snacks available everywhere, there's no excuse for not doing good while you chew. That's the idea behind Haven, a new restaurant which markets itself on the idea that, "Helping Tastes Good."



ORPHANS FIND A NEW HAVEN. PHOTO BY CLAIRE BYRNE

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Sara and Paul Wallimann set up the venture as a means of integrating coming-of-age orphans back into society. "In 2008 we came to Cambodia on our world trip," recalls Sara. "We stopped here for longer than expected, working at an orphanage. We started wondering what happens to the children when they have to leave. Everyone just said, 'It's up to them'. That really worried us."

On returning to Switzerland the couple set up their organisation Dragon Fly, and began to raise funds and to think of a way they could come back to Cambodia and help. "We didn't want to set up just another young adult centre which would keep them like an orphanage," explains Sara. "We wanted to set up something that enables them to learn and then be able to take care of themselves."

The couple used their own backgrounds, Paul as a food engineer, Sara as a marketer for a large restaurant chain, as inspiration, and Haven was born as the first sustainable project of their organisation.

"We're not tailors or mechanics so we needed to do something that we knew enough about to teach them," says Sara. "We'd never worked in development before until the orphanage, but the world trip really changed everything for us, made us want to change our lives, and also help them to develop and improve theirs."

Haven has started small, with two half-orphan trainees Somnang in the kitchen and Chhao in front of house. Both 19-year olds were chosen for their enthusiasm and eagerness to learn about hospitality.

Along with their jobs and training programs at Haven, Sara and Paul have provided them with accommodation. The couple hopes to expand the training program to 10-12 students, while additional English training is provided to both the trainees and the rest of the restaurant staff in Haven's garden school room.

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The food that's served is a mix of Khmer and Western favourites along with some Swiss gems. "The biggest highlight will be our Swiss pies. They're open pies, kind of like a quiche, but they can be sweet and savoury," explains Paul. "We really wanted to bring in something special to the menu that we've never had in Siem Reap, so they'll be really cool."

Another highlight is Haven's Rise & Shine breakfast menu, a shopping list ordering card which allows you to create your own bespoke brekky.

The quaint garden restaurant, positioned just behind X Bar on Soksan Road seems a mile away from the hubbub around it. Decorated brightly, and from all local materials, the vibe of the enterprise is instantly friendly. Customers so far have been full of praise for both the concept and the food.

For Paul and Sara, the project has been a huge adjustment, living off savings, getting a business and a building literally off the ground, but they've taken it in their stride. "It didn't take any courage to make the commitment to come here and set this up," says Sara. "We so totally fell in love with Cambodia the first time we were here, and with the people here, it was the only thing we could think about. It was the most natural thing to do."

Paul surmises, "So many people they talk about wanting to help people and do something, so we came to point where we realised this is something we can actually do, a way we can really help. Let's just do it."

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