

Water Festival

What is Water Festival or “Bon Om Touk”?

The full name of this festival is “Bon Om Touk, Bon-dait bro-dteeb, Sam-bpay-ah Preah Khe, Ork Om Bok.” Directly translated, this means “the festival of the boat race, illuminated floats, praying to the moon, and rice cereal gulping.”



When is this festival celebrated and how long does it last?

This festival lasts for three days. This year it happens from 13 to 15 November. The date is determined according to the Khmer lunar calendar. 13 November is called “Dob boo-an gart” or Wax Gibbous which means the moon illumination is at 98%. 14 November is called “dob b’rum gart” or Full Moon when the illumination is 100%. Lastly, 15 November is called “moo-ay roach” or Waning Gibbous when the illumination is 99%.

It is considered as one of the biggest celebrations in Khmer culture. In the capital city, it is held on the bank of Tonle Sap River in front of the Royal Palace. Normally, people come to join the festival and to support their favorite boat racing teams.

Why is it celebrated?

This festival is a ceremony of appreciation for the victory of the Cambodian Navy back in the old days, it is an expression of gratitude for god’s blessings in regards to agriculture, and most importantly it celebrates the full moon.

It looks back to the 12th century when the king battled his enemies at sea. Back in those days, the water festival was when the Cambodian Naval forces practiced their sailing skills. The best sailors would be sent to battle. Since then, it has become a tradition that we celebrate every November.

What activities take place during the festival?

1. Boat Race

It starts in the morning; you will see many colorful boats along the bank of the river waiting to compete. Each boat represents each of Cambodia's districts and provinces, and each has its own fancy long name and is decorated with very vibrant colors. The race will continue until there is one winning boat which will be rewarded.

2. Illuminated Floats

In the evening, around 7pm, with a cold breezy wind and a joyful crowd, rows of illuminated floats will float slowly one by one along the river. Each illuminated float represents each government department and institution. Each float is carefully selected with a creative design, fancy patterns, and colorful lights with a deep meaningful message behind each one. There will be a narrator explaining the meaning of each float as it passes.

Along with this beautiful scene and the cozy hemisphere, many fireworks will light up the sky, creating additional excitement. This is a great time to spend with family, friends and loved ones.

3. Praying to the Moon

This is celebrated on Full Moon Day. This year the full moon falls on 14 November at 8:52 p.m. Traditionally, each family prepares special food for this moment, such as rice cereal (also known as ombok), coconuts and bananas. These foods are commonly served together while family sits outside and chit-chats under the bright full moon.

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