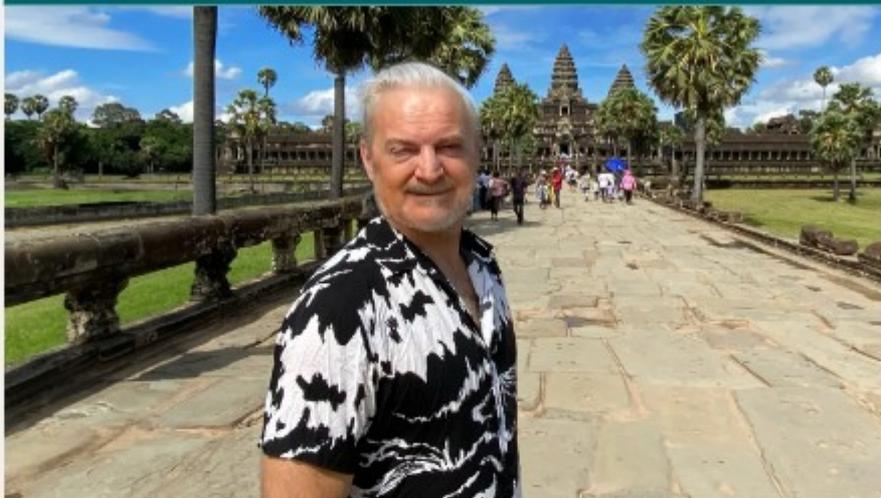


FIRST PERSON

'A freak incident made me rethink my life — and led me to Cambodia'

Born in Leeds, John Brown was ready for adventures overseas. Now he and his wife, Sandra, have settled in southeast Asia



John Brown at the temple complex of Angkor Wat in Siem Reap

Interview by [Liz Rowlinson](#)

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Born in Roundhay, Leeds, I moved to south London when I joined the Metropolitan Police after finishing school. I spent three and a half years in the Met until

something happened that made me have a complete rethink *[says John Brown, 62]*.

I was on the beat in Peckham, southeast London, with my partner, and we were walking past a tower block when a mini fridge smashed on to the pavement just beside us, flung from a high window. Realising the near-miss, I decided we needed a change of scenery.

I'd met my wife, Sandra, who is from near York, on a blind date and we both fancied an adventure. I'd studied hospitality at the University of Leeds and always felt it was a good fit for me, so we thought we'd try out a year in Galle, Sri Lanka, where I got a junior management role at a hotel.

We loved the expat lifestyle and knew we'd made the right move. There is something about Asian hospitality that I found really respectful and refreshing compared with the UK, so there was no looking back for us.

I moved into a general manager role in Penang, Malaysia, for five years and then to another five-star hotel in Kuala Lumpur. Next I was based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, before transferring to a boutique hotel in Singapore. Sandra, now 60, worked for the British Council and would take a teaching job in whichever location I was working.

Approached to join a hotel in Cambodia, we visited Siem Reap, the country's second-largest city, which is famous for its 900-year-old temple complex of Angkor Wat, a Unesco world heritage site.

Because of this it's a big tourism hub with lots of high-end hotels. There are some superb restaurants because of the

country's French colonial history.



The retirement residence where the Browns live includes a swimming pool, yoga studio and rooftop restaurant

Cambodia is developing fast but Siem Reap has retained an old Asian charm, a tropical feel of little wooden houses among coconut trees and palms, the paddy fields bursting with colour — it's nothing like Singapore, which is much more developed. But there are international supermarkets where we can buy Marks & Spencer products.

I instantly felt a special spiritual calling in this Buddhist country, where the family-orientated people have a strong respect for their elders, and we preferred this to the cultures of Thailand and Malaysia. There's hardly any crime from what we can see.

We bought a villa in Siem Reap when I retired at 60. The city has the Royal Angkor International Hospital and is a 40-minute flight from Bangkok. We pay only \$300 (£231) a month for private healthcare for the both of us.

• ['After upsizing to Orkney in retirement, I finally feel at home'](#)

There are many bridges across the Siem Reap river and we love walking along the waterside every day — we are very active. We enjoy passing the Royal Palace Gardens, the luxury Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor and then the old city market where the locals buy their fruit and vegetables.

Our experiences of living across southeast Asia had made us weigh up where to move: the healthcare is generally very good, the cost of living is relatively affordable and of course the climate is nice.

We considered Thailand and Malaysia, where the country's My Second Home residency scheme for foreigners is well established. But the financial requirements for residency have become tougher.



The couple pay \$2,000 (£1,569) a month for their two-bedroom apartment at Sullivan Retirement Residence

When I heard about Sullivan Retirement Residence in Siem Reap, a new building of apartments to rent, we decided to try it out and sold our villa. Run by a British expat family, it's fully opening this month with an onsite driver, swimming pool, yoga studio and rooftop restaurant with room service. For a two-bedroom apartment we are paying \$2,000 (£1,569) a month, including its running costs and all these services.

We also have someone to sort out our visa — after dealing with Asian bureaucratic headaches for many years this is a huge benefit. In Cambodia the retirement visa requirements are not as stringent as elsewhere: you need to be over 55, not working and have some pension income. We are on a rolling one-year visa.

There's a sociable international community here — especially Brits and Americans — and Sandra has joined poker, bridge and book clubs and the choir. We have a Sunday roast at Joe's Bar with friends for \$5.40 (£4.15) with a good bottle of sauvignon blanc for \$11.50 (£8.86).

Having to deal with two currencies, the US dollar and the riel, is a bit annoying, and the roads can be bumpy. But a ride in a tuk-tuk is \$1 and although it's only a 15-minute walk to Angkor Wat (we get a free temple pass as long-term residents), it's nice to escape temple land to the mountains and waterfalls of Phnom Kulen National Park every so often.

There could be more flights into Siem Reap's new international airport. For now we fly in and out of Bangkok from the UK, although Phnom Penh, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore are also options, from where we take short regional flights. We love to travel and have just returned from Australia.