

FAR EASTERN PRECISION

CITADEL GIVES THE GENTLEMAN'S FOLDER AN EXOTIC TWIST

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TIM STETZER
ADDITIONAL PHOTOS COURTESY OF CAS IBERIA

SOMETIMES the best things come from
the most unexpected places.

When you think about where to find custom-quality handmade knives, Cambodia is probably not the first place that pops into your head—but it should be. Citadel Knives and Swords, by CAS Iberia, is producing handmade knives using a mix of modern steels and traditional materials. The result is unique, functional, beautiful pieces unlike anything else on the market.





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UNIQUE, FUNCTIONAL,
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From Cambodia with Love

While Citadel knives have been available in the U.S. for a while now, until recently they were often hard to find. But all that changed when the Citadel line was picked up by CAS Iberia. You can now find an impressive array of folders, fixed blades and swords either directly through the CAS Iberia website or through one of their distributors.

I spoke with the folks from CAS Iberia at Blade last year and at this year's SHOT show and got some scoop on Citadel and how things are made. The short version: While many Asian-made blades come from a large factory, that couldn't be further from the truth about Citadel knives.

Like many custom and semi-custom shops in the U.S., Citadel has a small crew of employees that build their knives by hand. They use a mix of imported steels like German Bohler N690Co stainless and DNH7, which is pretty similar to 1075 carbon steel but responds well to differential heat treating. Handle materials are largely traditional, such as Micarta, rosewood, palisander wood, buffalo horn and bone, but also include more unique materials such as rayskin.

The folks at CAS Iberia are excited about the Citadel line, so I figured it was time to pick up a couple pieces and see what all the fuss was about. After some discussion we settled on the Saigon, a small everyday-carry, and the Kukri Lock, a big heavy-duty folder.

A Tale of Rays and Buffalo

While I tend to review a lot of modern blades and have worked with more than my share of tactical designs I have to admit I have an affinity for old-school, ethnic patterns. There's something in these designs that sings to my soul. Maybe it's the connection to the cultures they spring from, or maybe it's just the novelty compared to the styles and designs that I more commonly see. Either way I was eager to work with these Citadel folders.

When I opened the box from CAS Iberia the first thing I noted was that both knives came in sturdy, padded, zippered nylon carry cases—a nice touch right out of the gate and one I usually only see with custom knives. Unzipping the cases revealed the pocket-sized Saigon with its distinc-



Citadel folders come with padded nylon pouches just like many custom knives.



The Saigon is a compact, classy EDC folder that blends modern European steel with classic Far East handle materials.

“THE SAIGON IS CLASSY AND DISTINCTIVE, BUT AT THE SAME TIME SMALL ENOUGH TO BE SUBTLE IN MIXED COMPANY.”

tive rayskin scales and the massive Kukri Lock with its buffalo horn scales.

I gave both knives a thorough look-over and a few things soon became apparent. First, Citadel knows what it's doing when it comes to building knives. The fit and

finish on these folders is impeccable. The blades are well centered when folded and lock up solidly with no play present in any direction when opened. Both knives use liner locks with sturdy liners that click positively in place, yet are still easy

enough to disengage when you're ready to close your knife. They both feature cutouts in the scales to allow access to the lock as well.

The blades on these knives are the Bohler N690Co stainless, and they feature a saber grind with polished edges and matte finished flats. The edges appear to be convex and both would pop hair with ease out of the box. The spine of the knives is adorned with hand-engraved scrollwork that lines up with matching scrollwork on the blade spines when the knives are opened. It's a subtle, but classy addition to already impressive blades.

At only 3.5 inches long when closed, the Saigon is a compact folder. It carries a drop-point blade just over 2 inches in length and weighs in at a petite 3.5 ounces. An extended tang acts as a flipper of sorts, and the Saigon can be opened with one hand with a little practice. It definitely classifies as a gentleman's knife in my book and would be right at home in any formal setting.

The rayskin handles are unique and

SAIGON

OVERALL: 6 inches
BLADE LENGTH: 2.1 inches
HANDLE LENGTH: 3.5 inches
WEIGHT: 3.5 ounces
BLADE STEEL: N690Co
HANDLE MATERIAL: Rayskin
MSRP: \$215

KUKRI LOCK

OVERALL: 9.5 inches
BLADE LENGTH: 3.9 inches
HANDLE LENGTH: 5.4 inches
WEIGHT: 10 ounces
BLADE STEEL: N690Co
HANDLE MATERIAL: Horn
MSRP: \$209



A sturdy liner lock keeps the Saigon's blade open.

attractive. They consist of rayskin glued to a wooden scale and then polished and coated with a clear lacquer-type finish. The polishing smooths out the rough rayskin texture and leaves behind a black and white spotted pattern that my 10-year-old son said reminded him of a leopard skin. It's visually stunning and quite the departure from most other handles.

Citadel also makes the Saigon in a rosewood handle if the rayskin is a bit too exotic for you, but I have to say that the ray is much of what makes this knife stand out. In traditional form, no pocket clip is present or available for this little EDC blade. It'll ride nicely in the pocket of dress slacks or cargo pants with equal aplomb.

The Kukri Lock is a big working blade that channels the impressive Nepalese blades it's designed after. At 9.5 inches open, and with a downswept, recurve blade that looks bigger than its 3.9 inches, the Kukri Lock is a sizeable piece. It carries a 4-millimeter thick blade that locks on its generous 5.5-inch long handle and clocks in at a hefty 10 ounces.

There is no provision for one-hand opening and, in fact, no opening mechanism of any sort, not even a nail nick. The blade is easily opened, though, by simply grasping the tall blade on its matte-textured flats with the index finger and thumb of your support hand and opening the blade until it snicks into the locked position.

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The spine of the Saigon is hand engraved with decorative scrollwork.

“THE KUKRI’S BIG HANDLE MAKES IT VERY COMFORTABLE TO USE AND THE RECURVE BLADE IS CAPABLE OF MAKING POWERFUL CUTS...”



The Saigon uses handle scales of polished rayskin that make for an extremely unique and striking appearance.

The handle shape with its flared butt and buffalo horn scales is all kukri; it’s even affixed with a lanyard hole and comes with a braided leather lanyard.

Rosewood is also an option for the Kukri Lock if that’s what you’d prefer. Again, in traditional fashion there’s no pocket clip on this piece and it probably is best suited being tucked into the back pocket of your jeans or Carhartts.

The size, weight, and opening characteristics of the Kukri Lock reminded me in a lot of ways of the classic Buck 110. The Bucks were a solid folder in this class and often rode in the back pocket of many an outdoorsman, cop and tradesman back in the day. Think of the Kukri Lock in the same sort of light, but with custom craftsmanship and materials and a far-Eastern feel.

Putting the Citadels to Work

I put both knives into my EDC rotation to see just what they could do off and on for a period of approximately two months. On a day-to-day basis I would drop the Saigon in my pocket, as it’s definitely the easier of the two pieces to carry. Its smooth, rounded handles rode well in the pocket and proved very comfortable to use for routine chores. I didn’t do anything crazy with the Saigon, but it did open its share of boxes and packages, cut some string, tape and other odds and ends—basically all of the things you normally do with your pocketknife.

I found that the 2.1-inch blade was plenty big enough for all of those chores, yet small enough that it didn’t panic anyone when I pulled it out in public to use it. The rayskin handle garnered quite a few compliments, even from folks who are not normally “knife people” and wouldn’t generally pay much attention to what I was carrying. The Saigon is classy and distinc-

KUKRI VS. KUKRI LOCK



The Citadel Kukri Lock folder and an authentic, World War II-era kukri the author inherited from his father.

I have in my collection an interesting kukri that dates back to the 1940s. It’s a very nice buffalo-horned model that’s a quite a bit nicer than the typical British military issue ones from that era.

This knife came to me via my father, who in turn had acquired it from a woman in his art league. Her husband was a pilot in the Army Air Corps and was responsible for flying the “Hump” over the Himalayas from India to China to resupply Chiang Kai-shek’s forces in their fight against the Japanese during World War II. He, like many other pilots of the era, picked up a locally made kukri in India and carried it on his missions in case he was shot down or crashed in such rugged terrain. Thankfully he never had to put it to any use and it sat in a footlocker until his passing and eventually ended up in my hands.

When I received the Citadel Kukri Lock folder, I was immediately reminded of this piece both because of the obvious kukri styling of the folder but also due to its beautiful buffalo horn handle scales and the quality of build. While I certainly am not doing anything remotely as dangerous as flying the Hump on a day-to-day basis, I do find the presence of the Kukri Lock in my daily kit nearly as comforting as those pilots did with their full-sized kukris back in the day!



The Kukri Lock has a large 5.4-inch long handle complete with braided leather lanyard.

FAST FACTS

SAIGON

- Distinctive rayskin handle
- Compact but effect blade size
- Best for everyday pocket carry

KUKRI LOCK

- Large, comfortable handle
- Powerful recurve blade
- Best for light camping/outdoors chores

tive, but at the same time small enough to be subtle in mixed company. It's a great choice for someone who wants a solid EEC blade without all the tactical bling.

The Kukri Lock mostly got carried when I was dressed casually in jeans or cargo pants. It's pretty heavy to just drop in your front pocket but it worked well tucked in my back pocket alongside my wallet. I've given some thought to having an open-top leather belt pouch made for the Kukri and think that might be just the ticket for regular carry.



The Kukri Lock's handle is very similar to the author's buffalo horn handled kukri from World War II.

Regardless of how you carry it, the Kukri is a real performer when you start using it. The big handle makes it very comfortable to use and the recurve blade is capable of making powerful cuts. I can see this knife being a great outdoors blade, especially in areas where a fix bladed knife might be prohibited. The lock-up is extremely positive and while I didn't try any chopping with it, I did run it through some basic camp and bushcraft chores such as cutting poles for a cooking tripod, sharpening stakes and prepping tinder for the fire.



The Kukri Lock uses a recurve blade similar in style to a full-sized kukri.

Pairing this knife up with a sturdy fixed blade or a small axe would make for a formidable camp combo.

Custom Quality the Cambodian Way

Both the Saigon and the Kukri Lock tested impressively, and they're in excellent company among Citadel's dozens of other options. If you're looking for a unique blade that blends classic features and handle materials with top-notch construction and modern blade steel then look no further than CAS Iberia. 