



Warmer colors as seen from the rooftop of the restaurant in the middle of the lake

BEYOND ANGKOR, WHAT?

THERE'S MORE TO THE ANCIENT TEMPLE TOWN THAN JUST CATCHING THE SUN'S FIRST RAYS CARESSING IT. TAKE A CRUISE TO ITS FLOATING VILLAGES, CATCH AN APSARA DANCE OR HAGGLE AT ITS NIGHT MARKETS — ANGKOR WAT IS FULL OF SURPRISES

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So you have risen at the crack of dawn, or even earlier, and made your sleepy way to the Angkor Wat to see the famed sunrise. You have followed in the glamorous footsteps of Angkorians Jolie to the ruins of the Ta Prohm temple (where parts of the film *Tomb Raider* were shot),

held cognac for massages by the ancient trees. And at the Angkor Thom temples, you have been awed by the sight of the smiling Bechcha boys on the walls of the Bayon temple. So, now what?

DISCOVER ANGKOR, WATS AND ALL.

If you have satiated the sunrise at Angkor Wat (though it is entirely worth the effort,



One of the carvings on the outer walls of the Banteay Srei temple, depicting among other things, Garuda and Shiva.

despite the pretty records), head to Phnom Bakheng for the sunset. Get those early birds on the banks and find a vantage position from which to watch the sun go down the Angkor archaeological park.

Take some time to enjoy the smaller temples, to appreciate the exquisite *Santavy* (see introduction as the 'cradle of women'). Dismissive in size, the pinkish sandstone temple is a welcome relief from the imposing size and dull grey-brown tones of

most of the other temples here.

ART AT ANGKOR

It is impossible to visit Siem Reap and not get tempted into watching an evening dance performance. The *apsara* is a symbol of ancient Khmer culture and the performing tradition of Cambodia has seen a revival in recent years. Most restaurants offer shows as part of the evening meal, though if you have the money and interest, it is advisable to watch in at one of the more up-market

THE APSARA DANCE IS POPULAR NOT ONLY IN CAMBODIA

but in Thailand too. Traditionally, the dancer represents a woodland spirit whose performances are meant to tell myths and religious stories.



temples, such as the Angkor Village Apsara Theatre or the Ballet Grand Hotel D'Angkor.

And if you have the time, make a trip to the Artisans of Angkor workshop (near the old market) for Khmer handicrafts including stone and wood carving, silk painting and lacquer work — or head outside town to the silk farm, also managed by the same team.

WALKABOUTS

Walk along the river when the weather is cool, towards the Preaek Chhnong old market to shop for souvenirs and local food. Also drop in at the Angkor night market — open till midnight — just at the end of Pub Street (off Siem Reap Road) for occasional Khmer artefacts, and the experience. A good place to visit even before you get on the temple circuit is the Angkor National Museum (even if you are not the "museum type"). At \$12 for an entry ticket, it is an expensive but excellent way to get an overview of Khmer history, both ancient and recent. Several hand-drawn maps, books for the less inquisitive and therefore preserved, have found their way here and the stories on the well-made audio-video guides are interesting, if only for the walking guide's use with Indian mythology.

If you ever make your way way to Phnom Angkor heart, a visit to McDonald's gallery nearby is a must, for replica-tinted plinths of Cambodia and the Angkor temples.

TRAVEL IN STYLE

And I do not mean the tuk-tuks here, even those unique Cambodian ones, pulled by motorbikes. Go up on a balloon, balloon or a hot-air balloon for a comprehensive aerial view of the Angkor temples. At sunset, take a cruise on the Taok Sap lake to see the floating village, Chong Kneav in the forest and has a floating school and church among other things.

The boats usually dock at the crocodile farm (which doubles up as a small coffee and souvenir shop) and the view from the rooftop is amazing. The lake spreads all round you like a mosaic of green, and the Vietnamese refugees who have made their home go about their routine evening activities, as the sun sets on the horizon.

If you are fit and adventurous, hire a bicycle or motorcycle to travel around the Angkor archaeological sites; the terrain is flat and most of the major temples are located close to each other.

EAT, DRINK AND BE MERRY

Siem Reap has some excellent cafes and restaurants, including several authentic — I am told — Indian restaurants (Kamru Sam, Mitha Saphi). Most of them are clustered around the main market area and the unpretentiously named Pub Street.

Evening hours comprise for business, not just with great food, live music and cheap booze, but also with clever service. I was lured by Kampuchea, Angkor Wat and Phnom Penh and Laundry Bar. A drink at the Phnom Penh, overlooking the river is highly recommended, as is a (vegetarian) meal at the Singing Tree Garden Cafe.



A security guard at one of the temples — preservation of the temples is under the APSARA authority — with her daughter.



Evening at the Ta Prohm temple — the roots of the trees have taken over so strongly that it is now impossible to remove them without damaging the temple. Early morning and late evening are the best times to visit this site.



A passageway inside the Bayon temple — the entire complex is hidden in the jungle for centuries till it was rediscovered by French explorer Henri Mouhot in the mid-19th century.



A monk climbing the stone steps at one of the towers inside the Angkor Wat temple complex.



One of the 216 smiling faces of the Buddha, on the outer walls of the Bayon temple.



A monk sits reading near the main entrance, the eastern side, of the Angkor Wat temple.