

ANGKOR WAT BRINGS BACK THE TOURISTS

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If winter in Korea finds you dreaming of sunnier climes, a long-weekend is sufficient time to enjoy the ancient charms of Angkor Wat. Non-stop flights from Incheon to Siem Reap are conveniently timed. We left Friday evening and arrived in time to enjoy a leisurely nightcap at the terrace bar of our hotel. Late night departures from Siem Reap on Monday allow for a full day of sightseeing, and the 6.00am arrival at Seoul on Tuesday morning leaves time for a shower before heading back to the office. A lovely customer-service touch from Asiana Airlines means you can check your heavy overcoats and collect them upon your return. As February to April is the hot/dry season in Cambodia you definitely won't need them. What you will need is lots of U.S. dollars (small denominations are best) as there are no ATMs in Siem Reap. A word of caution- the slightest tear will render a note useless.



The small provincial capital of

Siem Reap is the gateway to the millennium-old temple ruins of the Khmer Empire. Angkor Archaeological Park, a UNESCO designated World Heritage Site, has dozens of temple ruins including Bayon, Angkor Thom and the legendary Angkor Wat. Unlike the Pyramids and Machu Picchu you can walk through every inch of these monuments. If you schedule your visits well you can sit alone in a cloister and soak up a scene that is part grand opera and part Hollywood. One balmy afternoon I felt certain that if I waited long enough Indiana Jones would appear.

Siem Reap has been receiving foreign visitors to the temples for over 100 years and is a cluster of old villages, which originally developed around individual pagodas, and was later overlaid with a French colonial-era centre. The short drive from Siem Reap airport to the township foreshadows its future. New luxury hotels flank both sides of the narrow two-lane highway and dominate older guesthouses. Names of these new hotels - Angkor Palace Resort and Spa, Angkoriana Hotel, Angkor City Hotel and Apsara Angkor Hotel confirm how closely Siem



Reap's future is tied to Angkor Wat just a few kilometres away. Our guide told us that many of these new hotels are owned by the Cambodian military and political leaders but asked not to be named after expounding upon supposed illegal financing mechanisms.

Our hotel was the FCC (Foreign Correspondents Club) and is set in the old French Ambassador's mansion next to the official residence of the King of Cambodia. We were puzzled when told that breakfast started at 4.30 am until our helpful receptionist explained that many guests leave around 5.30 am to photograph Angkor Wat at sunrise. This is a definite "must" but more about this later. Our ultra-modern accommodation included flat screen TV, broadband Internet access and a waterfall shower. The Visaya Spa opposite our room offered its signature "Hot Stone" massage which became an essential part of my Cambodian siesta.

Friends had explained the rather regimented schedule of

morning temple visits, lunch back at your hotel and more temples in the afternoon so we decided to start with Angkor Thom early afternoon to minimize the crowding. We also wanted to enjoy our first glimpse of Angkor Wat at sunrise the following morning. After a typical Cambodian breakfast of fish Bor Bor (Khmer style rice porridge) we walked by the river to the Phsar Chas (Old Market). In the light of day we saw a country just beginning the long haul out of devastating poverty. The dusty streets were an obstacle course. Open trenches loomed treacherously as they wait to house huge cement pipes that lay by the side of the road. Cars and tuk-tuks (motorcycle trailers) honk in exasperation at tourists who have to walk gingerly down the middle of the road to avoid this open-air construction as well as potholes and muddy water holes. I tried to imagine the time between the 9th and 12th centuries when this area contained more than a million people and Khmer kings constructed vast waterworks and grand temples. But the image remained elusive. Momentarily I lost my sense of place and shivered in spite of the bright sunshine. Stories of the Pol Pot regime whispered their atrocities. Instinctively my husband took my hand while I recovered. After a few moments as smiling tourists dipped croissants into their cappuccinos at the Blue Pumpkin cafe across the street I returned to the present. Back in the holiday spirit we headed for Senteurs d'Angkor to browse the silk fabrics and spices wrapped in their signature sugarpalm leaves.

We were reminded it was time for lunch when we walked past a line of stalls with neatly stacked tropical fruits. Mangoes, bunches of fresh red lychees, jackfruit, longans (known as dragon's eyes in Cambodia), rambutan (the hairy sibling of the lychee but larger), watermelon and pineapples were just some of what was being sold. Most interesting to us was the dragon fruit (also called the strawberry pear) with its pink/purple shell and milky white inside generously interspersed with small black seeds. It has a delicate, semi-sweet taste and is very inexpensive. However our favourite was the Mangosteen. This queen of fruits with its hard and thick avocado-coloured shell must be one of the most delicious offerings on this planet. Five or six small, white fleshy segments, one of which often contains a large seed, melt on the tongue. Mangosteen juice is said to have powerful healing capacities. Just around the corner we chanced upon the "Carnets d'Asia" restaurant for our first Cambodian lunch. This stylish terrace garden restaurant sat behind a galleria of quality boutiques offering Cambodian art and attractive hand-made silk and wooden ornaments. It offered a tranquil respite from the busy street and the extensive menu was an excellent introduction to Cambodian cuisine.

Cambodian cookery is often compared with Thai but is simpler, less spicy and relies more on the flavours of the ingredients. The methods of cooking are often quick stir-frying in a wok, steaming or simple grilling over a charcoal fire, leaving everything very fresh-tasting. Cambodians have continued an older tradition of Southeast Asian cookery that was common before the Portuguese brought the chilli from South America. Instead of the familiar chopped chillies in either rice



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vinegar or fish sauce, the Cambodians use tik marij, a mix of ground black pepper, salt and lime juice. It was here at "Carnets d'Asia" that we tried our first Yoam Makah Trey Ang - smoked fish with green mango salad. It was so delicious we ordered it the following day at the "Cafe Indochine."

It was time for our first visit to Angkor. For US\$30 our hotel had arranged an air-conditioned car with driver and an English-speaking guide named Huy for the afternoon. It is possible to hire a tuk-tuk for only US\$10 a day and we did this on our final day. Huy explained that we would have our photograph taken at the entrance gate and agreed we should buy a three-day pass for US\$40 as we planned to visit each day. At the first bridge to Angkor Thom we were pleased to see there were no large crowds as Huy began his instruction on Khmer's golden age that spanned four centuries, alternating between Hinduism and Buddhism; each successive ruler trying to outdo his predecessor in size and splendour. Angkor Thom which literally means "big Angkor" was the royal city built at the end of the 12th century by Jayavarman VII. Bordered by a 100-metre wide moat and protected behind eight-metre high walls it houses many temples. At the very heart of this walled domain King Jayavarman VII placed the Bayon, dedicated to the worship of the Hindu

pantheon. Despite the ravages of time and wars, the Bayon contains some of the world's greatest art and is famous for its four giant faces on top of the five cardinal entrance points for the city. Bas-relief carvings of over 11,000 figures depict scenes from Hindu mythology or heroic moments from wars when Jayavarman drove the invading Chams from the Khmer lands. These stories unfold like a storybook along the outer corridors of the complex. We wandered for hours through the labyrinth of ruins to Baphuon then on to Phimeanakas which is the tallest scalable temple in Angkor Thom. The view from the top is definitely worth the climb up the western staircase at the back. Legend has it that the golden tower crowned the temple and was inhabited by a serpent which would transform every night into a woman. The Kings of Angkor were required to make love with the serpent/woman to stave off disaster.

After our walking and climbing it was time to try out the hot stone massage at our hotel. Hot stone therapy which is becoming widely known for its deeply relaxing benefits employs a technique that uses smooth, heated basalt stones. These are placed on acupressure points on the body to melt away knots, tension and stress. That evening it was hard to believe we had only arrived the previous night as we strolled to



the Borei Angkor Hotel for their Apsara dance performance and poolside dinner. The Apsara dances involve smooth and sinuous movements, as well as difficult and seemingly impossible contortions. Dancers work for years to perfect the difficult movements. At the Bayon that afternoon our guide Huy had explained that Apsaras are female spirits of nature who love to dance and perform for gods. He told a charming tale about lovers being inspired by Apsaras who were often sent by Ravana to tempt Rishis or Brahmans who were retreating into the forest. Modern-day Apsara dancing offers a future for many under-privileged children who are learning this traditional art at school. After the performance we headed home quite early as we had a sunrise start next morning.

The best place to view Angkor Wat at sunrise is from the northern reflecting pool in front. We arrived in the dark and set up our camera in a quiet spot with an unimpeded view. As the light started to filter through we caught our breath at the perfect reflection of the distinctively shaped towers in the water. As the sun rose behind Angkor Wat we photographed the best colours just before the sun broke over the horizon. The visual impact of Angkor Wat, particularly on a first visit, is breath-taking. At first glimpse its size and architecture make it appear

two dimensional, like a giant postcard against the sky. After crossing through the gate it slowly gains depth and complexity. The first level is the most interesting artistically. We started at the temple with the bas-reliefs that cover the exterior wall of the first level, following the bas-reliefs counter clockwise around the temple. We followed the mythological Battle of Kuru on the west wall, the historical march of the army of Suryavarman II, builder of Angkor Wat, against the Cham, then the scenes from Heaven and Hell on the south wall. We ended at the classic 'Churning of the Ocean Milk' on the north wall. The temple interior is not as densely carved as the first level exterior, but our guide Huy was on hand to repeat some of his impressive knowledge about the hundreds of fine carvings of apsaras and scenes from Hindu mythology.

After such an early start that day we welcomed an early lunch at our hotel before a short nap. The FCC restaurant rates in the top five in Siem Reap and Chef Eddie Gibson describes the FCC Angkor Kitchen as "casually elegant where East meets West dining". I had the Hot and Sour Prawn soup with coconut milk, kaffir limes and lemongrass and my husband tucked into Cambodian Spicy Fish Amok which is a curry baked in a banana leaf. Both dishes were delicious and relaxing on the verandah under cool fans was just what we needed. At 2.00pm we set

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off with our guide Huy to Tonle Sap (Great Lake). During the half-hour drive south he explained how during the rainy season the Tonle Sap River reverses direction, flooding the lake, increasing its size almost tenfold and making it the largest freshwater body in Southeast Asia. In the flood season, he elaborated, water engulfs surrounding forests, ensuring that the countryside is covered with fresh, fertile silt for rice cultivation. This helped us understand how the rivers and lakes of Cambodia are truly the lifeline for this largely agrarian and fishing society. We were fascinated by the children coming home from school in long boats and the women delivering goods by boat.

Our final day in Siem Reap came around too quickly but we looked forward to an early morning start at Eastern Angkor to explore Banteay Kdei and Ta Prohm. A pre-arranged evening checkout from our hotel meant we would be able to nap for an hour or so before showering and changing for our overnight flight back to Seoul. Today we planned to also visit surrounding villages to buy the unique handicrafts that are still individually made in Siem Reap. Optimistically we even hoped to fit in a trip to the silk farm to see the entire silk creation process including growing the food for the silk worms, breeding the worms, silk extraction, spinning and refinement, traditional ikat dying, pattern creation, and looming. When we arrived at Banteay Kdei at 8.00am we were delighted to have the place to ourselves. We were by now familiar with the temples and monasteries of Jayavarman VII but this one had been built using an inferior grade of sandstone and poor construction techniques that led to much of the deterioration visible today. Some areas were blocked off for restoration but we were still able to see the 13th century vandalism of Buddha images.

Eager to stay ahead of the tourist groups we expected any moment, we moved quickly to Ta Prohm which was probably the most spectacularly different experience of our entire trip. It was here I had my Indiana Jones fantasy.

This quiet, sprawling monastic is only partially cleared of jungle overgrowth. Intentionally left partially unrestored, massive fig and silk-cotton trees grow from the towers and corridors offering some of the best photo opportunities at Angkor. We were still ahead of the crowds so were able to wander slowly through dark corridors and open plazas. Ta Prohm was one of Jayavarman VII's first major temple projects and was dedicated to his mother. Originally constructed as a Buddhist monastery it was enormously wealthy in its time, boasting of control over 3000 villages, thousands of support staff and vast stores of jewels and gold. Of the monastic complex style temples, Ta Prohm is a "must see" when you visit Angkor.

That afternoon we managed to visit the silk farm. I was successful in my hunt for unusual pottery pieces and lacquer ware and my husband treasures the ornate opium pipe he found in a crowded stall not far from our hotel. Late afternoon on Monday we were both ready to return to our hotel for one last massage before thinking about our flight back home to Seoul. In retrospect we are very happy with our crowded itinerary and still crave some of the delicious Khmer dishes we discovered in Siem Reap. Only last week I read in the local newspaper that Cambodia is possibly facing some changes in governmental control. One can only pray for continued peace and prosperity for the beautiful Khmer people and perhaps the Government may see the good sense of maintaining a safe and stable environment to ensure a continuation of tourist visits to Angkor Wat. ☺

