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Fortress of solitude

November 20, 2010

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Amazing Angkor ... the battle between forest and stone at Ta Prohm.

Among the throngs at Angkor, Paul Sheehan finds peace and wonder among the temples less trampled.

A person could visit Angkor, one of the world's greatest cultural destinations, and for less than \$US100 (\$100) purchase some or all of the following smorgasbord of experiences in a single day:

One night's accommodation in a clean guesthouse (\$US20).

One full breakfast (\$US2).

One day's hire of a tuk-tuk and driver to visit Angkor Wat (\$US15).

One compulsory day-pass to the Angkor Wat complex (\$US20).

One session of foot-nibbling by tiny fish in a large tank (\$US4).

One hour's massage (\$US5).

One two-course dinner (\$US4).

Two large beers (\$US2).

One bar girl to provide a "happy ending" (\$US25).

Total, for full board and an even fuller menu of cultural activities: \$US96.

Siem Reap, the gateway city to Angkor, which is shorthand for the largest temple complex in the world, remains a paradise for the budget traveller. The old town bristles with all the services listed above, except for the entry pass to Angkor.

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Men should not be accosted with anything so gauche as street-walkers but they will be discreetly presented with an a la carte menu of prostitution options, usually by a driver: "You want 19-year-old Vietnamese girl? Whole night?"

So Siem Reap, an eight-minute drive by tuk-tuk from Angkor, remains a site of old-school Asian budget travel, with plenty of cheap flesh-pot options.

I, however, am seeking a very different experience. Siem Reap and Angkor have been transformed from backpacker havens and adventure travel destinations. Let me count the ways.

I run headlong into one of the new realities of Angkor in one of the most popular and densely visited of the hundreds of temple sites, named Ta Prohm.

Most visitors call it by another name - the "Angelina Jolie Temple" or the "Tomb Raiders Temple" - because it was the setting for several spectacular scenes in the first of the Tomb Raider films, with Jolie starring as the fantasy character Lara Croft. It is instantly recognisable and one of the most photographed temples in the world.

It is a zoo. The courtyard around the monumental gnarled tree roots growing around the walls is packed and noisy. A construction crew is busy amid lines of tourists. A crane is working. Drills, hammers, piles of rubble. A group of boisterous Koreans take turns having their photos taken in front of the tree, while other tour groups wait their turn.

The new Angkor is now like the Vatican - it requires crowd countermeasures. And that is what I have, in the form of a guide who steers me 20 paces, through a low arch and into an almost identical courtyard in the complex, with an equally monumental gnarled tree growing out of the stone. And silence. Not a soul. It is just as beautiful and I have it to myself.

"If you do your research, you can even have the temples at Angkor largely to yourself, depending on your timing and your routing," says Andy Booth, an Englishman (Oxford-educated, former British rowing champion, former highly successful options trader) who runs a tour company called AboutAsia. It customises day trips around the complex: driver, transport, English-speaking guide, refreshments and, above all, a shrewd and practised knowledge of where and when to go.

"Everyone does the same," he says over dinner at the Sugar Palm, one of the best restaurants in Siem Reap. "Everyone does Angkor Wat at dawn, then the south gate, then Bayon, then the terraces. The guides are using the manual written by Maurice Glaize 60 years ago [published in 1944]."

So this is how one best navigates the new realities of Angkor - with assistance.

My two-day visit starts well with the relief of arriving in the small airport and seeing a man holding a sign with my name on it.

My hotel, the five-star La Residence d'Angkor, part of the Orient Express group, has sent a car to pick me up from the airport. From that point, everything is seamless.

The hotel offers a day-long tour, with tuk-tuk, driver and guide for \$US79 and the driver is happy to zip back to the hotel for a break. This is important, because walking and climbing in the heat and humidity becomes arduous over the course of a day. The stone steps can be uncompromising but that is part of the aura of the place; my favourite climb is at Ta Keo.

There is so much to see and so much that is not crowded most of the time. The World Heritage Angkor Archaeological Park, its official title, spans about 400 square kilometres. In the cluster near the Angkor Wat temple complex and Siem Reap there are 45 distinct temple sites, each about a thousand years old and surrounded by forest. This is the apex of a Khmer civilisation that dominated the region across Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam and peaked in 1210. The temples are influenced by Indian civilisation, and Hindu and Buddhist beliefs.

Of the 45 temples I'll mention just four but visitors will find their own magic among the lesser temples. Obviously, the centrepiece, Angkor Wat, is a must but the eye needs to be alert to its myriad details, not just the grand scale, especially the bas-reliefs of battle scenes and royal ceremonies that run for hundreds of metres around the walls.

The guidebooks say that if you have time to visit just two temples then the other should be Bayon, so it needs to be mentioned, though I preferred other sites. This is another photographer's dream and instantly recognisable for its giant stone faces, dating from the 12th century.

A favourite is Banteay Srei, the "citadel of women", built 1000 years ago. It's an intricate array of towers, stairways, chambers and ramparts in pink sandstone with ornate designs and walls decorated in carvings of dense and intricate detail. This temple was a lost treasure for hundreds of years until its rediscovery in 1914.

Visitors will find their own treasures among the lesser temple complexes and one of mine is Preah Palilay, in a forest glen where trees have forced their way into the stone over years and been cut back. The battle between forest and stone is one of the delights of the walks through the complex and the forest is what protected this marvel after the Khmer empire went into decline and eclipse 700 years ago.

The new empire of Angkor is in the era of tourism, and here the changes have been exponential. Twenty years ago there was only a trickle of visitors to a country still haunted by the ravages of 20 years of war, civil war and genocide. Siem Reap had one fine hotel, Raffles, and two decent guesthouses.

Today there are 140 hotels, including five five-star resorts and more than 400 guesthouses. Another 40 hotels are under construction, mostly funded by Chinese and Korean developers. Siem Reap sits on a huge water table but so great has been the growth in demand that the city is experiencing water shortages.

Cambodia would have almost no infrastructure were it not for foreign aid and in this case the Japanese government intervened by building a new water-supply system for Siem Reap.

The once-sleepy regional town of Siem Reap has 1 million residents and the nearby temples now receive more than a million foreign visitors a year, especially middle-class Asians. Visitor numbers have been growing exponentially for a decade - 20 per cent a year compounding - doubling since 2003 from 500,000 visitors.

This growth reflects not just the end of turmoil in Cambodia but the rapid growth of the Asian middle classes in the past decade.

Ninety per cent of visitors to Angkor are from Asia. Chinese and Koreans are travelling to Angkor in great numbers and they travel in squadrons, with flags marking their groups.

The most numerous are the Chinese, who one tour manager politely describes to me as "early-stage travellers".

As my Cambodian guide, Sophy Chhay, mentions as we walk around Angkor Wat: "When I avoid the crowds and take the Chinese groups to places where there are no other tourists, they say to me: 'Why are you not taking us to popular temples?'"

The number of temple complexes have grown in size and accessibility. Numerous restorations have begun or have been completed by foreign-aid agencies and more archaeological sites have been discovered by satellite mapping. The sense of adventure the jungle complex used to have can be recaptured at another significant temple complex, Beng Melea, 85 kilometres from Siem Reap and a 90-minute drive by dirt road. It is a large site and much more ruined than Angkor Wat. The place is largely deserted, especially in the afternoon. I imagine this is how Angkor Wat used to feel, 60 years ago.

Cambodia is poor and a four- or five-star experience can be had for a three-star price. Apart from Siem Reap's five five-star hotels, there are dozens of excellent-value options at the next level down.

One of the joys of travel is the unexpected, the unfamiliar, the unprogrammed.

Angkor, however, is simply too big, too sprawling and too hot to wander aimlessly for long. To move from complex to complex takes time and saps energy.

With stamina and some planning, however, the site's impact is cumulative. Each new glade reveals a discovery. The combination of splendour, scale, antiquity and isolation, along with the melding of Hindu and Buddhist worship, is unique. Nothing commercial is in view.

When you lose the crowds, a visitor can feel just a little like Henri Mouhot, the French naturalist who came upon Angkor in 1860 when the complex was still under a canopy of equatorial forest. He is popularly credited with rediscovering the lost city of Angkor, though it was never lost, just obscured for centuries. The sense of mystery that comes from seeing what was buried treasure still clings to the place.

The Khmer people also help. They are gentle, not pushy. I have two vivid memories of them among the temples. One is of a group of musicians, all missing limbs, the victims of land mines, sitting in the grass and playing gentle music. And elsewhere a tiny girl, sitting alone in the dust in front of an equally tiny pile of fruit, which she is selling. No adult is anywhere to be seen.

She is working, alone, a human dot among a maze of temples and forest.

FAST FACTS

Getting there

Thai Airways flies to Bangkok from Sydney and Melbourne (about 9hrs) for about \$985, connecting to Siem Reap (1hr) on Bangkok Airways for about \$470. Fares are low-season return, including tax. Singapore Airlines flies to Siem Reap via Singapore and Malaysia Airlines flies via Kuala Lumpur. Australians obtain a visa on arrival for stays of up to 30 days.

When to go

The rainy season runs from June to October and the dry season is divided into two sub-seasons: the cool peak season (November to February) and the hot shoulder season (March to May). The rainy season is not onerous; the city and the temples are quieter, the hotels cheaper and the daily showers are not sustained.

Staying there

La Residence d'Angkor has rooms from \$US350 (\$249.25) a night in peak season, \$US300 in shoulder season and \$US250 in the rainy season, which the hotel calls the "green season". My room is one of the best I've ever stayed in, anywhere: elegant, spacious, airy and quiet. The hotel has a \$US79 day-trip package to the temples for two people, including a tuk-tuk, an English-speaking guide, driver, refreshments, a trip back to the hotel for breakfast and, if needed, a rest, then back to the temples.

The hotel works in conjunction with AboutAsia, which offers a standard day tour (including a good break for lunch and a rest). See aboutasiatravel.com.