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APPRECIATING ANGKOR

Temple tours and beyond in Siem Reap

By Tamsin Cocks

Angkor Wat temple tours and beyond in Siem Reap

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Catching the sunrise at Angkor Wat is one of those rare bucket-list activities that truly deserves the hype. The mystical experience began with a 4:30 AM wake-up call and a short trek through pitch-black jungle. As dawn filtered into the night sky, a trio of soaring monolithic structures emerged from the darkness. The sheer size of the ancient towers was way beyond my expectations: more than 650 feet of intricately carved sandstone.

Entering the 500-acre complex from the deserted Ta Kou east entrance (most people arrive from the west gate) afforded me a rare tourist-free moment to absorb the magnitude of the thousand-year-old site – a faint chorus of chanting from Buddhist monks providing the perfect ethereal soundtrack. I arrived at the western entrance where a group of bleary-eyed tourists were gathered, cameras at the ready, to capture the majestic sight of Angkor Wat reflected in the lake as the sunrise flecked the sky with a kaleidoscope of reds, oranges and purples.

The awe-inspiring temple is one of the largest religious sites in the world, built as a Hindu temple whose masterful architecture replicates elements of the universe – the surrounding moat a symbol of the oceans, the soaring temples stretching to heaven. Having a guide provided invaluable insight into the various features and secrets of the remarkably well-preserved complex: The square holes that were once sacred pools; the mysterious doorway that only echoes when a person beats their chest; the 3,000 unique *apsaras* (celestial nymphs) carved into the walls; the numerous decapitated Buddhas, whose heads were plundered to sell on the black market.

At 7:30 AM I joined the opening queue to climb the hundred-odd seriously steep steps to Bakan, the sacred summit of the central tower – there's a strict limit on numbers, so it's best to go early to avoid the lines. From the lofty height of Bakan you can look over the grounds of Angkor Wat, and beyond. Though it is mostly hidden under jungle canopy, the sprawling 150-square-mile UNESCO World Heritage-listed archaeological site contains scores of ancient temples from the old Khmer Empire.

Bayon was next on our hit list, a short drive away. The entrance is guarded by two snaking lines of fearsome stone warriors holding *nagas* (mythological serpents) in front of a large archway topped with a four-sided face.

The Buddhist temple of Bayon is a maze of galleries, towers and more steep steps, but is most famous for the hundreds of giant, smiling stone faces carved into the walls and towers. There are also some incredibly detailed stone bas-reliefs carved into the walls depicting everyday life. From childbirth and cooking to gambling and war, the nationalities, dress and expressions are clearly visible in the fascinating historical narrative.

The final stop of my tour was Ta Prohm – famous the world over thanks to its Hollywood debut in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. The iconic silk cotton and fig tree roots creeping over the temple doorways, and stone walls covered in vivid green moss, are incredibly photogenic. Again, visitors have free reign to explore and soak up the atmosphere, and – of course – pose for iconic “tomb-raider” shots.

Chic Retreat

By the time I'd explored these three magnificent ruins, it was around 1 PM. Hardcore temple hunters can continue on to many more sites, but for me, some food and a nap were in order. I retreated to the beautiful Shinta Mani Angkor boutique resort (adjoining the Shinta Mani Shack resort), a short tuk-tuk ride or walk from the center of town.



The collection of 37 rooms was designed by renowned architect Bill Bensley, whose distinctive fingerprint is everywhere – from the optical illusion pool floor to the Khmer-inspired modern artwork. Favorite features of my beautiful Deluxe Poolview Suite included the artwork depicting scenes from Angkor, in particular the fresco directly above the bed that greeted me first thing in the morning, the spacious Terrazzo bathroom and rainshower, and the private balcony overlooking the pool.

In addition to international dishes, the hotel's on-site Kroya restaurant features a dazzling array of Khmer cuisine, which is all about contrasts. The seven-course tasting menu features fine-dining delights such as sun-dried fish with watermelon, beef *lok lak* and crispy fermented pork with roasted eggplant and papaya slaw.

After dinner, we headed up to the relaxed Bill Bensley bar for some modern cocktails and booked a rejuvenating treatment at the on-site spa (top tip: try the popular Khmer Coffee Scrub for a local twist, which combines white clay and organic Cambodian coffee beans from the hill tribes of Ratanakiri province).

In December the hotel launched a super-luxe collection of ten private villas. The exquisite two-story villas feature lush gardens, spacious accommodation, private pools and butler service, plus service add-ons in the form of fast-track immigration at the airport (shintamani.com).

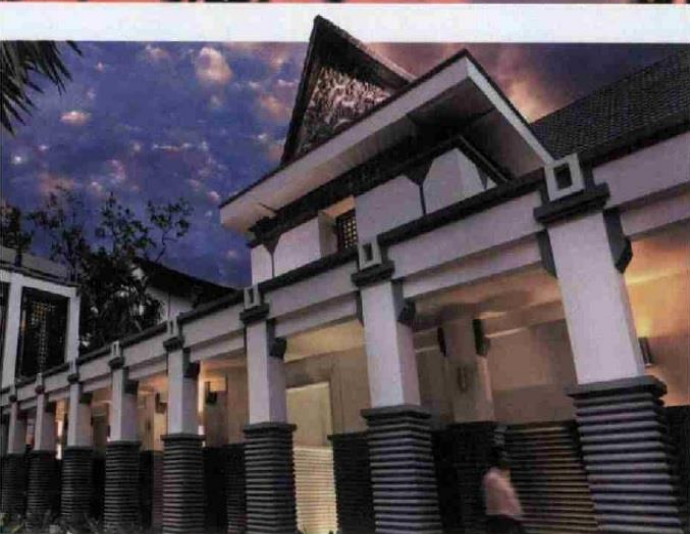
On the Town

If not for the temples at Angkor, Siem Reap would likely have remained a small, unknown Cambodian village. However, the treasured heritage site has seen the town blossom since the end of the political troubles. While once there was little to do apart from temple tours, Siem Reap is developing its tourist appeal fast, with a raft of new hotels, fine-dining establishments, cultural activities and entertainment on offer in recent years.

The heart of Siem Reap's nightlife emanates from the lively Pub Street – a collection of bars, restaurants and live music that merge happily with the customary Southeast Asian night market. One more distinctive addition – not for the faint-hearted – is the presence of food stalls selling genuine local snacks... in the form of scorpions, snakes, crickets and fried tarantulas.

If, like me, the latter is the stuff of nightmares, bragging rights can still be gained by posing for a photograph for a very reasonable 50 cents US. For a more upmarket serving of such critters, visitors can head to the Bug Café for some insect tapas or perhaps a scorpion salad? The café is open from 5:00 PM 'til late (bugs-cafe.e-monsite.com).

Alternatively, try ducking down one of the quieter streets to find more high-end options. The vivid red interiors of Miss Wong,



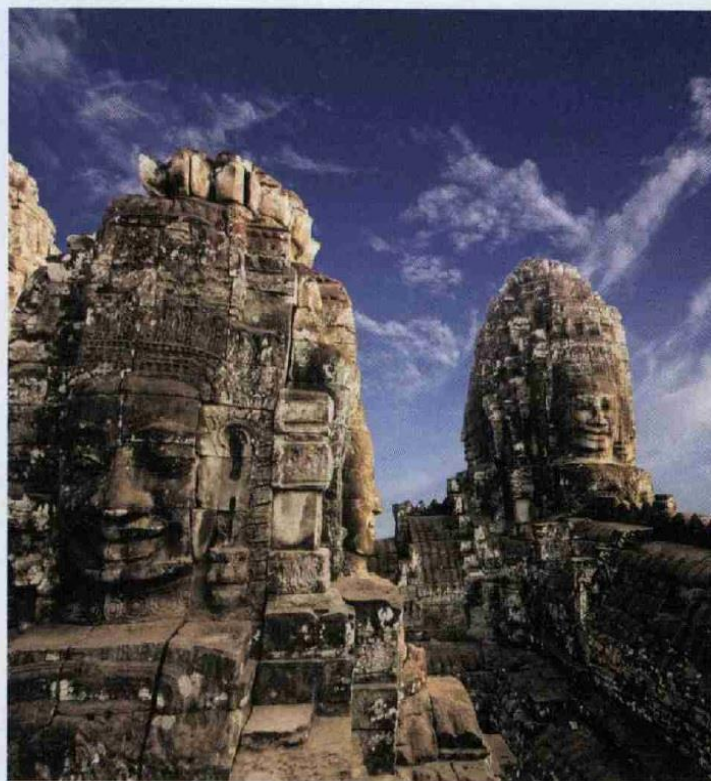
located on The Lane, beckon to those looking for an atmospheric cocktail lounge, with a modern drinks list and selection of food (misswong.net). If you want a more formal experience, fine-dining establishments can also be found in the center of town: The Steakhouse, again tucked away just off Pub Street, offers a refined setting with prime cuts of meat and a great wine list.

These days adrenaline junkies can find an array of options to satisfy them, from quad biking or horse riding through the countryside, to ultra-light flights over the temples and Tonlé Sap lake. Zip lining through the “Great Strangler” trees and trekking to little-visited waterfalls are also on the itinerary for those seeking adventure. **Anantara** Angkor Resort has recently launched a range of 45 curated activities to help visitors extend their visit beyond the typical 48 hours (angkor.anantara.com).

More cultural tastes can also be satisfied. A slew of ecotourism ventures have opened up, helping guests give back to the community while immersing themselves in traditional life. Become a farmer for the day, try your hand at a cooking class or join a homestay and interact with a local family.

Ecotourism initiatives have also merged with mainstream to help employ locals and generate profits to give back to the community. Phare, the Cambodian circus, is one such initiative, offering audiences a fire-dancing, acrobatic, aerial flying extravaganza in a modern retelling of classic Cambodian stories. Launched in 2013, it has become one of the hottest nights out in Siem Reap, with nightly performances at 8:00 PM (pharecircus.org).

To satisfy shopping habits, walk across Siem Reap River to the newer Art Centre Night Market, which is filled with a mixture of



Clockwise from left: Sunrise at Angkor Wat; the many faces of Bayon temple; snake snacks in Siem Reap; Shinta Mani Angkor's main entrance

craftwork ranging from textiles to paintings. Many of the artworks pay tribute to the temples of Angkor, along with carved ornaments, lacquerware, textiles and other trinkets that make for charming souvenirs.

For an even more modern take on traditional handicrafts and foodstuffs, head to Kandal Village – a cool, hipster enclave that wouldn't be out of place in any major city. Here you'll find an eclectic mishmash of cafés, bars and boutique shops offering high-quality alternatives to the usual tourist tat.

There's Trunkh, with its collection of high-quality goods, souvenirs and knick-knacks; Louise Loubatieres featuring lacquerwork, homeware, ceramic vases and textiles; and Saarti's with an array of gorgeous-smelling ecofriendly candles. The huge array of lovely products and decorations are perfect to take home as keepsakes, but for me, the ultimate souvenir is the unforgettable memory of Angkor Wat at sunrise – a truly amazing experience. **BT**