

## Cambodia



We arrived at Seam Reap airport from Saigon around 10.30 am. The airport took our breath away! Quaint and cute, it was really fascinating. Not only that, it was really clean – spic and span! Thanks to Ynot Travels (anjali@yntindia.com ) we were met at the airport by Proneys the guide, and Deap the driver. Once out of the airport, we had a taste of how hot and humid the place was. We headed straight for the Victoria Angkor Resort and Spa, where we were booked. As all the Victoria hotels this also had an ethnic character to it. The coconut based welcome drink here was rather nice. They also had a paan daan (a special container with ingredients to make paan) as a decorative piece with the leaves and betel nuts in it.

Sightseeing in Cambodia is done in two stages---one in the early part of the morning and the second stage is late afternoon. Therefore we were allowed just a few minutes to freshen up before sight seeing. Cambodia has an interesting system of buying a season ticket for all the sight seeing. So you go to the office, and get your photograph and a card made for the duration of your stay there. The first on the list was the Angkor Bayon Temple. The Temple is the spectacular central temple of the ancient city of Angkor Thom, which is located just to the north of the famous Angkor Wat in Angkor, Cambodia. Standing in the exact center of the walled city, Bayon Temple represents the intersection of heaven and earth. Built around 1190 AD by King Jayavarman VII, Bayon is a Buddhist temple but it incorporates elements of Hindu cosmology. Bayon is known for its huge stone faces of the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara, with one facing outward and keeping watch at each compass point. The curious smiling image, thought by many to be a portrait of Jayavarman himself, has been dubbed by some the "Mona Lisa of Southeast Asia."



We went through the South Gate. Preceding the gate there is a row of sculptures on each side: One is of the Asuras which are the demons and the other row is of Devtas that protect from the Asuras. The temples are in quite a state of ruin and are now being restored. Restoration will take a life time. They are all stone temples and have a lot of climbing up and down to be done to see them. The heat does not help, I can tell you that! There were a lot of carvings depicting the Cham dynasty. They showed images of whole villages moving in a convoy---some drinking wine from a Ginger jar, some getting gobbled by an alligator, etc. If you are not fascinated by temples or history, Cambodia is not highly recommended. What I found very interesting was to find 'our' gods in an alien country that does not even speak the same language.



The most popular place to take in an Angkor sunset is atop the Phnom Bakheng. This is a hill that sits high above the surrounding landscape and provides a great view to the Angkor Wat. With the light right from the sun, the entire place glows orange and red. Bijjan and I went up to the monument. It was only a 15 minute walk up. Of course once there, one climbed up the treacherously steep 'steps' to see the sunset. There were hordes of people already there with cameras in position. Bijjan went up while I watched from down below. The day was not very clear so we could see the sunset very 'moodily'. But Bijjan managed to get some good pictures. By now we were pretty exhausted and ready to go and relax at

the hotel!

For dinner we tried the Bistrot at the hotel itself. The menu they had displayed was inviting and we were too tired to go out, so that was the best bet. GP ordered escargots with garlic butter sauce, while two of us ordered French Onion Soup with puff pastry. Bijjan ordered

lamb chops. Wish I had taken my camera down, to photograph the dishes. The way the food was served, was an art in itself. One just wanted to look at it for sometime before 'attacking'! The bread basket they served gratis was with seasoned butter, olive oil and cold cuts. For dessert, we ordered two crepes, which were garnished with sesame seeds and accompanied with vanilla ice-cream, layered with black sesame seeds in between. The food was good **and** expensive too. It totaled to about \$100, American.

The first temple we visited on this our second day in Seam Reap was Pre Rup. Built in the early Angkor era, it is felt that this may have been used for cremations. Proneys pointed out the various portions which were said to be used first for bathing the body, then the pyre and then the sunk-in shed like structures where the bones may have been washed. It is customary to keep the body one day for the monks to pray, the second day for bathing it and then the cremation on the third day! That is what Proneys said. Considering how hot the weather is, I wonder how they managed that!

The second temple, Eastern Mebon we decided to just drive past and stopped next at Ta Som, a Buddhist temple. What we noticed immediately was that there was no climbing in this temple. As Proneys mentioned, it was mostly the Hindu temples that had a lot of climbing to do. It



surely rang a bell! Most of our pilgrimage places are all very difficult to reach! I suppose the Hindu religion believes in the adage, 'No pain no gain'! From the eastern Mebon, Ta Som appears as a tower with four faces of Lokesvara entwined within the roots of a giant Fichus tree that crowns it perfectly. Several of the roots have pierced the vault and descend straight to the ground, obstructing part of the passageway. You can see evidence of restoration work in some of these temples. There is a heap of stones on one side and the placing together before joining besides it (like a jigsaw puzzle). Having seen this, we decided to treat ourselves with

some fresh coconut water. The coconuts were huge, but we had a full one each.

Neak Pean was the next temple complex. This had four pools, representing the four different elements---Fire, Earth, Water and Air. Some believe Neak Pean re-creates a famous site in Buddhist mythology, the Southern island of Jambudvipa. This is the home of humans, and at the center is the Himalayan lake Anavatapta, the sacred springs visited by Buddha, Bodhisattva, Saints, hermits and affected people. The healing waters flowed out from the lake in the cardinal directions, through fountain-heads in the forms of a lion, an elephant, a horse, and a bull, the same four creatures found upon the drum of the famous Sarnath lion capital.

The last temple on this morning was the Preah Khan Temple. Preah Khan is the name of the sacred sword, the safeguard of Cambodia, which is preserved in the palace of Phnom Penh; it seems that there is a connection between this precious arm and the name of the monument, a name which is not unique among the temples of the country. It is among the largest monuments. The temple has four different entries. The passage ways into the temples are made so symmetrical, that one can stand outside and look straight through to the Shivling (statue of Shiva/Lokeshwara) in the center.

Proneys dropped us at the hotel. After a bath and some rest we took a Tuk tuk to town and had lunch at Angkor Palm which served Cambodian food. We ordered one platter (like our thali), which had: Fish Amok (fish in plantain leaf), pork spare ribs, green curry, salad, stir fried water spinach (which was morning glory), spring rolls and an awful dessert. Along with that we ordered one plate of chicken wings and an extra dish of fish Amok. The food was good, and all of

\$21, including a beer each!! Bijjan went for a massage from there and we returned to rest a bit to get rejuvenated for the visit to Angkor Wat in the evening.



So 3.30 pm saw us on our way to Angkor Wat! Angkor Wat is the largest and best preserved temple. It is surrounded by a moat and is a Vishnu Temple. It is generally accepted that Angkor Wat was a funerary temple for the king Suryavarman II symbolism between sunset and death. The walls of Angkor Wat have carvings depicting the Mahabharat on one side and the Ramayan on another. Bijjan and I climbed up to the top—it has three levels, including the ground floor. Some of the carvings are very neatly done, like the one of the Apsaras. There is a big statue of Vishnu in the Centre on the ground floor. It took us about 2 ½ hours to see the whole complex. One of the must dos is to take a picture of the temple reflected in the water. They have a dance show too in the evenings, which we did not opt for.

For dinner we went to Easy Speaking Café and Pub. It was surely an interesting name, and we thought language would not be a problem here, but not so! Like most of the evenings we spent down town throughout our travel, this restaurant was on a very active street full of pubs and restaurants and cafes. Except for the garlic bread (baguette smeared with garlic and butter, served cold) the food was good. We had Fish and Chips, Vegetable Noodles and Potato Skins.

Our last day, 12<sup>th</sup> March also had a long list of temples! I had first decided not to go as I had had my fill of temples, but was persuaded to go. Well I was glad though, as the first temple Banteay Srei, had finer carvings, unlike the rest. Banteay Srei, a beautiful 10th-century Hindu temple is about 23 miles north of Angkor Wat. The temple consists of low walls surrounding peaked structures of deep red sandstone. Banteay Srei means "**Citadel of Women,**" and it is said that the reliefs on this temple are so delicate that they could only have been carved by the hand of a woman. The well-preserved relief carvings on the central buildings depict scenes from ancient Hindu tales.



On our way to the last temple, Ta Prohm, we stopped at a road side stall selling Tadgolas (Palm fruit), which we were familiar with since childhood and rarely see it now. So we were all excited. Right there they were making palm sugar too. Cooked in a wat over wood fire, it was set into rounds made by palm leaves knotted into circles. This stop certainly revitalized us for Ta Prohm.



Ta Prohm has been largely left to the clutches of the living jungle. With its dynamic interaction between nature and man-made art, this atmospheric temple is quite unique. Great trees tower above Ta Prohm, their leaves filtering the sunlight, providing welcome shade. Delicately carved reliefs on the walls sprout lichen, moss and creeping plants. Some as wide as an oak tree, the vines at Ta Prohm cleave massive stones in two and spill over the top of temple ramparts. The effect is striking, especially at the strangulating root formation on the inside of the easternmost *gopura* (entrance pavilion). The temple is being restored by Indians and we were happy to meet the team as we were leaving. There were four officers, all from different parts of India---UP, Punjab, South and Haryana. They were also happy to talk with us for sometime.



The museum was the next stop. It is brand new and very well set up. Since a lot of the infra structure is new in Seam Reap, and sponsored by various countries, it has been made very tourist friendly. The toilets around these monuments are very neat and clean, the major roads are newly carpeted. The general public is so proud of his/her country, that

they are polite to the point of seeming humble. In fact Bijjan had to tell Proneys not to be so apologetic for being poor!

Ha! It was time for a welcome lunch now. We went back to the happening street to a place called Cambodian Barbeque. The Chicken curry was not great. The Mango Salad was nice, with sprouts, noodles, carrots, onions, and lots of basil and peanuts in a sweet and sour sauce. The Ginger chicken was stir-fried onions and ginger with cooked chicken. The Pork Ribs were more like pork chops.

Only Bijjan went for the afternoon sight seeing of the floating village. The rest of us relaxed and then went to the shopping center next door, where I bought a head of the Queen of Jayaverman and a top for my self. The Happy Hours at the hotel bar were from 5 to 7pm. So we reached there at 6.15 pm and Bijjan came soon after. The bar was quite warm and on asking if we could take our drinks to our room, they switched on the air-conditioner! The explanation they gave was that since it was lean season and not many were sitting inside they did not put it on. So that was our last night in Cambodia, all set for Phuket in the morning.

After breakfast we said goodbye to GP and proceeded for the airport. Throughout the drive to the airport, Proneys was conveying his thanks to the Indian Govt. for their help and humble about the poverty of his own country. That is what prompted Bijjan to advise him when saying goodbye that he should stop apologizing for his country as they were all such beautiful people and did not need to be apologetic! At the airport we were surprised by an unexpected fee slapped on each of us.