



MONKS IN BRIGHTLY COLORED ROBES GAZE AT THE HISTORIC STRUCTURES OF ANGKOR WAT.

Cambodian Contrasts

Exploring historic temples and the contemporary city of Siem Reap

By Rob Dunton

It is New Year's Eve, 87 degrees and heavy with humidity. I'm riding in the back of a *moto*—a covered buggy attached to the back of a small motorcycle—and being given a tour of the area by my driver, Marom Hem. Our top speed is 35 mph, and I savor the wind as we drive through a tunnel of stately trees worthy of an antebellum estate. What seem like 12 lanes of traffic weave and flow on the two-lane road without a toot.

We pass oxcarts, bicycles stacked with enough inventory to stock a mini-mart and motorcycles carrying families, while the occasional air-conditioned tour bus or minivan drives by.

My driver turns left at the broad moat that surrounds Angkor Wat, and I spot a

group of wild monkeys playing on the roadside. A handful of tourists have stopped to look and take pictures; a kindly woman tosses a small banana to one of the monkeys. Across the road I see two men in a hand-built canoe, cleaning the moat's surface, while monks with shaved heads

and saffron robes stroll toward the temple's looming towers.

The Kingdom of Cambodia sits in the lap of Southeast Asia, bordered by Thailand, Laos and Vietnam, and sharing the tropical climate of the region. More than 1 million visitors come to Cambodia each year, and virtually all come to see the pinnacle of Khmer architecture, the exotic Temples of Angkor. The expansive Angkor Archaeological Park is a UNESCO World Heritage Site encompassing dozens of millennium-old complexes built during the Khmer Empire, on the fringe of the mod-

ern provincial capital, Siem Reap.

Angkor means "capital city," and the area was the nexus of the Khmer Empire, which included all of modern Cambodia and much of Thailand, Vietnam and Laos. Scholars believe the Khmer people originated to the north, and came to the area around 3,000 years ago to escape invading Sino-Tibetans. By 850 A.D. the Khmer had assembled an empire, and ruled the large region until 1219, reaching its apex around 1181 under the leadership of King Jayavarman VII; following his death in 1218, the empire went into decline. Today the Khmer are still the dominant ethnic group in Cambodia, accounting for approximately 90 percent of the country's population. Predominantly Buddhist, Cambodia enjoyed a long and mostly peaceful history, interrupted by a civil war and the brutal reign of the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, a difficult time from which the country continues to recover today.

Marom is friendly and soft-spoken, like many Cambodians I meet. Born in 1971, Marom grew up in a small roadside village, survived the time of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, became a policeman, and eventually moved to more lucrative work as an independent driver. Saving part of his \$50-a-month government salary, it took years to collect the \$500 he needed to buy a secondhand moto.

We arrive at a sea of parked bicycles,



THE MASSIVE ROOTS OF A SILK COTTON TREE GRADUALLY ENTWINE THE RUINS OF THE KHMER TEMPLE TA PROHM.

motos, cars and buses near the entrance of Angkor Wat, framed by an array of elaborate cupolas atop the main temple. I walk along a sandstone causeway into a maze of carved stone decorated with beguiling *asparas* (heavenly nymphs), bas-relief histograms and intricate towers. There are no wooden beams, ceramic floors or plaster—only carved stone. As I enter the western gate, it grows dark. I smell the warm scent of incense, and see a tall, seated Buddha adorned with a colorful sash. Nearby is a female monk collecting alms, giving blessings and incense in return.

Unlike at many historic ruins, visitors are allowed to explore freely much of Ang-

kor Wat. I scale precipitous staircases, sit on high ledges and venture into rooms and hallways. One minute I am surrounded by a crowd of chatty visitors, and the next I am alone in a large quad.

After the sun sets, I ask Marom to take me to the heart of Siem Reap, the provincial capital adjacent to the Angkor Archaeological Park. Marom drives me to Pub Street in the Old Market area. I wander past worn colonial-era buildings housing Indian, French, Thai and Vietnamese restaurants. Young children hawk guidebooks, and impress me with their English



A FEMALE MONK SMILES WARMLY AT A VISITOR IN A TEMPLE AT BAYON.



A YOUNG MONK WANDERS
THROUGH THE TEMPLE RUINS
OF TA PROHM.

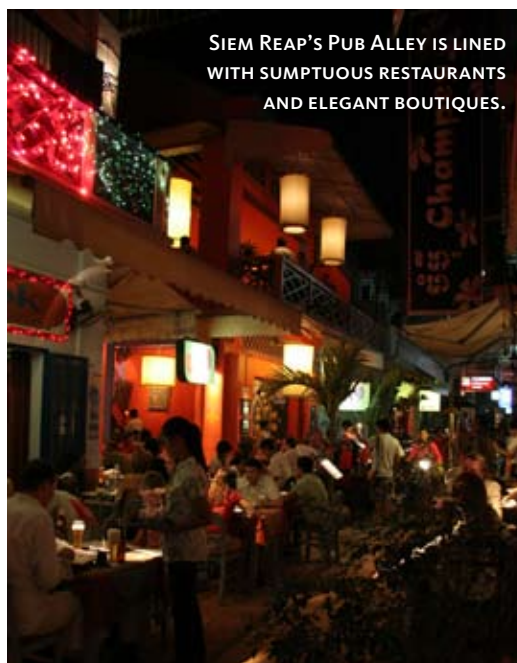
ROB DUNTON (2)

proficiency and their ability to name all the U.S. state capitals. Music from bars and pool halls fills the street, and moto and pedicab drivers tout for fares.

The aroma of fresh basil, garlic, coconut milk, saffron, curry and other savory spices draws me into Pub Alley, between Pub Street and the Old Market. This cozy, pedestrian-only alleyway is the jewel of Siem Reap. Candlelit tables are perched beneath colorful canopies, and sumptuous-smelling food is presented with flair on colorful plates and polished banana leaves. The traditional Khmer food looks and smells amazing, so I take a table at Khmer Kitchen. According to my guidebook, Mick Jagger was a recent customer—so I decide if it's good enough for Mick, it's good enough for me. I order the custardlike baked pumpkin prepared with sautéed onions, shrimp, julienne carrots, garlic and a hint of lime and pepper. Every seasoning is fresh and perfectly balanced, and I take the names of other dishes I spy at adjacent tables, and plan to try them during my stay.

Sated and tired, I return to the main street in search of air conditioning and a rejuvenating massage. At only \$5 an hour, the massages sound

so enticing that I promise myself at least one a day, preferably two or more. I enter a massage shop called Islands, and walk past visitors reclined in plush chairs, getting foot massages. I go upstairs, where more customers are lying on mats enjoying Thai, Khmer or reflexology massages; some have two or more masseuses working on them. I lie on a comfortable mat, where I am gently cleaned with a cool washcloth and lightly sprayed with oil. Then the hands begin, with deep, powerful strokes. I am kneaded and stretched and my body loses



SIEM REAP'S PUB ALLEY IS LINED
WITH SUMPTUOUS RESTAURANTS
AND ELEGANT BOUTIQUES.

DETAILS

Cambodia's rainy season runs from May through October; visit during this time, and you'll have much of Angkor to yourself, the area will be green and lush, and the moats and ponds will be fuller. Visit during the dry months and you'll enjoy cooler, drier weather, but encounter more crowds.

Cambodia is recovering from a long period of war and unrest during the 1970s and '80s. While the Angkor Archaeological Park and frequently visited areas are safe to explore, land mines are still found in many areas. Regardless of your location, be sure to stay on existing pathways.

Visas are required to enter Cambodia, and can be obtained online at evisa.mfaic.gov.kh.

To find out more about visiting Cambodia or to reserve transportation (including Marom Hem), visit www.talesofasia.com.

Lodging

Hôtel de la Paix (Sivutha Boulevard, Siem Reap; 011-855-063-966-000; www.hoteldelapaixangkor.com). Rooms start at \$280.

Royal Angkor Resort & Spa (Highway No. 6, Phum Kaseman, near Siem Reap; 011-855-063-767-555; www.royalangkoresort.com). Rooms start at \$75.

Temple Villa Guesthouse (Steng Thmei, Svaydongkum, Siem Reap; 011-855-063-767-555; www.goldentemplevilla.com). Rooms start at \$15.

Dining

Khmer cuisine is fresh and flavorful, with spices mixed in perfect balance.

Blue Pumpkin (near Pub Street & Pub Alley; 011-85-063-963-574;

www.tbpumpkin.com). The sandwiches, fresh-baked pastries and homemade ice cream at this modern, stylish cafe will satisfy all your western needs.

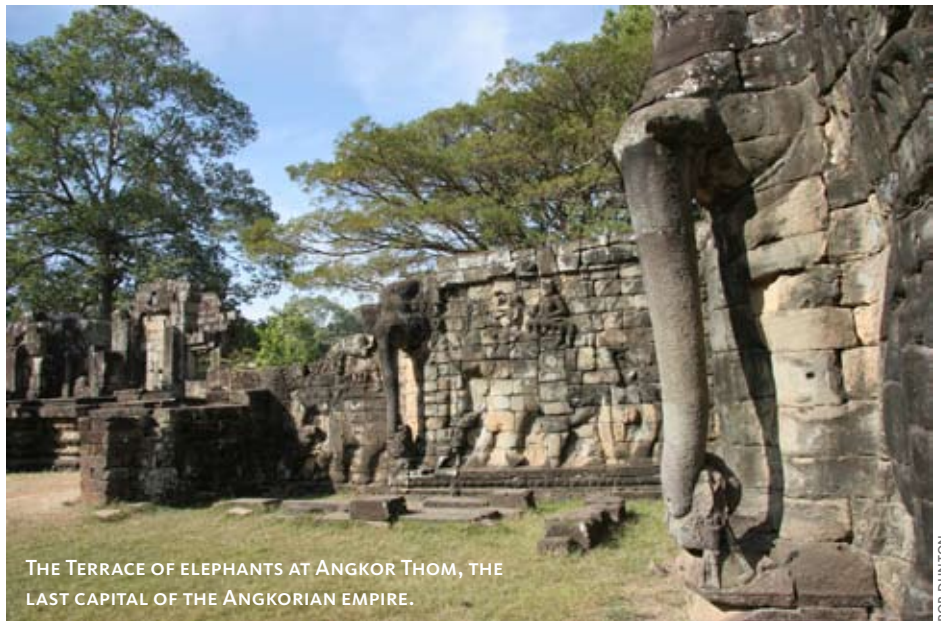
Amok (Pub Alley; 011-855-012-800-309) Named after a type of Khmer curry, this restaurant serves some of the best Khmer food I tasted.

Khmer Kitchen (Pub Alley; 011-855-012-763-468) This popular restaurant features a diverse Khmer menu with an array of curries and stir-fries.

Massage

Most resorts have stunning spas with superb massages for \$35 to \$65, but visitors can get a wonderful massage in basic surroundings for about \$5 per hour.

Islands Traditional Khmer Massage (north of the Old Market/Psar Chas; 011-855-063-964-402) is my favorite.



itself in complete relaxation. As the hour draws near, I am cognizant enough to request a second hour. I finally exit, refreshed and revitalized. Marom is waiting and ushers me back to my hotel, confirming plans for tomorrow's predawn trip back to Angkor Wat for sunrise.

Five hours later, Marom and I retrace our path to Angkor in the chilly darkness. At the entrance, I don a head lantern and make my way to the north reflecting pool on the fringe of the main temple. I rent a chair by purchasing a cup of steaming chai, then sit and wait for the sun. Stars

Hotel Murano
1/2 h.

Heathman Hotel Kirkland
1/3 sq.

Heathman Hotel Portland
1/3 sq.

glimmer above the central tower, and I take a few pictures using a pocket tripod and my chair.

As the sun rises, the stars fade and the temple's silhouette emerges on the reflecting pond. Satisfied with my photographs, I turn to give up my quiet spot and am astounded to see that a large group of visitors has moved in quietly behind me, while many more stream in. I move to the still-silent corridors and empty courtyards of the temple grounds, and enjoy exploring on my own.

An hour later I rejoin Marom and we head north to the massive walled city of Angkor Thom (Great Angkor), less than one mile away. Almost nine times larger than Angkor Wat, and in many ways more

As the sun rises,
the stars fade and
the temple's silhouette
emerges on the
reflecting pond.

artistic and surreal, Angkor Thom is an entire city complex, the last capital of the Angkorian empire and King Jayavarman VII's swan song. As we motor through a strand of massive trees, we pass a tethered elephant, then cross a bridge flanked by 54 stone gods on the left and 54 demons on the right, pulling on a giant serpent in an eternal tug-of-war. A 60-foot-tall tower emerges from the morning haze, with four gargantuan faces staring vigilantly toward each of the cardinal points. The city's walls have grown character-rich with moss, twisting roots and towering trees. The ruins of the Parthenon or Chichen Itza seem simple and utilitarian by comparison. I have never seen anything this surreal, this theatrical in the *real* world—only in the movies.

Over the next two days, Marom leads me to the Angkor's gems, each with its own unique character: Bayon, famous for its collection of 216 enormous, smiling

Verdeaux
1/3 sq.

Hotel Deluxe
1/3 sq.

faces of bodhisattva carved into 54 ornate towers; the Royal Enclosure and Terrace of Elephants, decorated with life-size carvings of elephants; atmospheric Ta Prohm, used in the film *Tomb Raider* and wrapped in tree-root tentacles. Each evening I return to Siem Reap for sensational cuisine and a rejuvenating massage.

Our third and final day of temple viewing is dedicated to Beng Mealea, located two hours away by moto. As we leave the bustle of Siem Reap, the road empties. Instead of filling stations, independent fuel vendors dispense liters of gasoline from emptied liquor bottles. Overloaded pickup trucks from Phnom Penh zoom past, carrying passengers on the roof, in the cab and in the open truck bed.

We arrive at Beng Mealea and find perhaps a dozen other visitors. I enter the complex—clambering on all fours over a massive pile of stones, up onto ridges and rooflines—and scamper like a monkey over root-tangled walls, collapsed rooms and through intact corridors. I feel I am discovering an ancient temple, as though my trip has begun in earnest. I feel like a kid, free to uncover every last hideaway, sculpture and architectural gem. Hours fly by, and more often than not, I am the only person around. I think back to the sunrise crowds at Angkor Wat, and smile at the silence that surrounds me now.

This is how I wanted to discover Cambodia—unhurried and hands-on. With hundreds of Khmer sites even farther off the beaten path, I wonder how far Marom and his moto can go. ▲

Rob Dunton is a freelance writer in Santa Barbara, California.

GETTING THERE



Use Mileage Plan miles to reach Bangkok, gateway to Cambodia and the Indochinese peninsula, via partner airlines British Airways, Cathay Pacific and Northwest Airlines. For information or to enroll in Mileage Plan, go online to alaskaair.com or call 800-654-5669.