

# NEW AGE TRAVEL

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## Magnificent, Mysterious Angkor Wat Temples in Cambodia

*by Murlı Menon*

I started my journey from Ahmedabad and flew from Ahmedabad to Bangkok via New Delhi and Bangkok to Phnom Penh. Both Bangkok and Phnom Penh airports offer visa on arrival for Indian passport holders. From Phnom Penh airport I took a taxi to Phnom Penh Bus Station and boarded the bus to Battambang.

From Battambang, I took the bus to Seam Reap. After a three hour bus ride through the lush green Cambodian countryside dotted with palm-fringed rice fields, the bus stops at the Ramdulatea for lunch. It almost felt like driving in India from Pallakad town to our ancestral village at Kollengode in Kerala. As soon as we get down from the bus, hawkers selling everything from roasted peanuts to souvenirs descend on us in hordes. One buys steamed sweet coconut rice pancakes



**The temples of Angkor Wat at Siem Reap**

and write my travel blog as my new Acer battery, which I bought from Bangkok lasts for 180 minutes, while waiting for my fellow passengers to finish their three course lunch.

The Tonle Sap lake is located near Angkor Wat and is a sanctuary to innumerable large water-birds which migrate from northern China in the months of December and January. Many of these birds can be seen perched on the treetops that surround the temples. A few can be seen flying above the Siem Reap river which snakes its way through the forests that surround Angkor. So there is a good chance of sighting several threatened and endangered species of large water-birds throughout your trip through Angkor.

As one explores the temple complex at Bayon, one is perplexed by the mysterious smile on the face of Vishnu. The answers to the riddle of the construction of Angkor Wat has left scientists searching for answers. Scientists are dumbstruck on the technology used by the Angkorian kings to haul thousands of stones weighing hundreds of tons and transport them over hundreds of kilometres across several cities stretching from Thailand to Vietnam. How were these stones sculpted to depict scenes from the Mahabharata, Ramayana and thousands of birds, plants, animals, deities, devatas and apsaras? How have these ancient monuments survived to this day without much damage though these monuments were left to the elements for a thousand years! The silent faces of Bayon mock the achievements of modern science. There is no better proof of the power of ancient wisdom, than a visit to the hundred temple complexes strewn across Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

One reaches Siem Reap at 5:30 p.m. just before the sun sets over Angkor Wat. The motorbike taxi charges US\$1 (Rs. 50/-) to drop you from the bus station to a family run guest house named Lay Lay guest house located 6 km. away from Angkor. Fan rooms with modern bathrooms and cold showers cost US\$6 (Rs. 300/-) per night. One pays US\$30 (Rs. 1500) in advance for five nights accommodation as one has seen the poster at FCC, Phnom Penh advertising the International Photography exhibition which is scheduled to be held at Foreign Correspondent's Club of Siem Reap between 27th November and 3rd December and this could see an influx of tourists and photography freaks! The room is spacious, beds are clean and

bathrooms have been renovated recently and the lights and fan work. Ideal place to drift into dreamful sleep after a hard day's trek amongst the largest temple complex in the world!

On the way to the guest-house one drinks a few tender coconuts and a packet of cashew nuts for watching the sunrise over Angkor Wat the following morning, which I had read about on Cambodia Tourism's website. One goes to bed early to prepare for the early morning two hour trek to Angkor to see the sunrise at 6:00 a.m. Moto taxi fares are negotiable and my Amdavadi bargaining skills stood me in good stead with these hardcore bargainers. Locals are quoted fares in Riels whereas foreigners are quoted in multiples of U. S. dollars ( as there are no cent or riel coins in Cambodia).

Also the fare quoted is for the return journey with a considerable amount of waiting time at the temples. Anticipating this during my stay at Phnom Penh, I had converted US\$50 into riels which amounted to 200,000 in 5000, 1000 and 500 riel notes. I started fixing moto taxis at Riel prices and got almost 50% discount on the dollar rates without haggling and taking one way trips to the temples, as empty moto-taxis are readily available for the return trips at cheaper prices. Also, one gets more time to explore the sculptures and architecture inside the temple complexes. The downside is that one has to walk the first kilometre to get the cheapest price. However, one also can get free rides to Seam Reap from the locals who do not seem to mind to give a short lift to foreigners!

One wakes up in the wee hours of the morning to find the streets full of life. A procession of tourists is on the way to see the the sandstone replica of "Mount Meru" bathed in molten gold. One hitches a lift on the luna of a local villager going to sell wooden carvings to the early birds. He drops one to the ticket window where one purchases a three-day unlimited pass for 60USD. One photograph is needed but the authorities click it on their digital camera at no extra cost.

Bayon is just one of the 60 temples that exist in the 50 km. radius around Seam Reap town. Some of the temples which are located on the outskirts of Siem Reap. There are 50 more such treasure troves to discover during my fifteen day stay at Seam Reap. The most exciting part of going to Angkor Wat is to experience the

architectural beauty of the temples combined with the beauty of nature. Several temples are viewed best before sunrise or sunset. This gives one an opportunity to enjoy the changing phases of the sun and also study the changing colours of the temples under various shades of light.

Some of the temples of Angkor have been purposely left exactly as the explorers found them. This is a good thing as one can see the giant silver cotton trees growing throughout the temple and giving it a wild look. This also ensures, one has to trek on foot through thick forests to enjoy the beauty of these temples which were abandoned to the elements. Even for a cursory visit to all the major temple complexes of Angkor could take almost three to four days. One can spend a considerable amount of time at the major temples if one stays at Angkor for at least seven days.

The more one spends one time at Bayon, the more one wishes to stay on. As one would not only like to photograph each and every of these enigmatic faces, but would also like to catch it in different moods during the twilight of the day. The most spectacular views are at mid-day and dusk. It is a pleasure to watch the crimson rays of the sun reflected by the black stones as the sun sets. The other important feature of Bayon is that it is located in the middle of thick forests and sounds of the crickets reverberate throughout the day as the crickets get fooled by the semi-darkness that envelops these forests. At many places the sun's rays fail to penetrate the forest floor due to the thick forest cover! After a tough day exploring the temples on foot, it is soothing to laze on the hammocks between the trunk of two big trees, while listening to the shrill cries of the crickets. One can close one eyes and meditate to the binaural beats of the crickets under the giant trees which surround these giant temples.

Walking around these giant sculptures almost instils a sense of timelessness. One could easily be a villager of the 10th century, or a French explorer of the 15th century who accidentally stumbled into these pristine remnants of an ancient civilization. Dumbfounded, astounded, stupified and awestruck, one lingers around these blocks of stone assembled painstakingly as a tribute to the elements. The most amazing fact about Angkor is that these temples have not only survived the ravages of time, fire, water, earth, plunderers, international smugglers, idol thieves

and civil war but continues to exist as it did when it was built! This itself is a proof of divine intervention!

More than the artistic beauty of the sculptures and the wilderness around the temples, Angkor is a miracle in stone. As one climbs the steep step pyramids to get a bird's eye view of the dense forests or when one watches the sun set after climbing to the Banta Samrey temple on top of the hill, one gets a feeling that these temples were constructed so that every visitor to these temples could experience the sights and sounds of nature. The energy aura of Bayon is incredibly powerful. As you enter the tiny caves, bathed by the setting sun, inside the evergreen forests, a cool breeze blows across one's face and immediately puts one at ease. The sounds of the evergreen forest and the peaceful environs of Bayon make it an ideal place for meditation, especially during the early hours of the morning when the tour groups are still asleep!c Meditating at Bayon before sunrise is a powerful experience. One can feel one's body, mind and soul being recharged with a new energy! Every cell of one's body vibrates with a primordial power, which pervades this ancient site.

Every step inside the ancient complex of Bayon is no short of a miraculous experience. The sound of the rainforest pervades the temple. The chirping of birds and shrill cries of macaques rent the air and in the centre of the wilderness, stands a black pagoda with giant sculpted faces! The effect of the first morning light on Bayon is an incredibly touching moment. The most unbelievable part of one's visit to Bayon is that the faces look different at different times of the day and is a photographer's dream. Each face is worth a million pictures and each picture speaks more than a million words. The language of stone defeats the language of man!

But in spite of the effect of the elements since a thousand years, only a few cracks show through some of the faces. A majority of the faces stand together as if assembled the previous day! The sandstone, dolomite and rock needed for the construction of these temples were quarried 30 km. away on the banks of the Seam Riep river and transported to Bayon, sculpted and assembled there. The immensity of this enormous accomplishment becomes apparent to one, as one gets tired walking through the labyrinth of towers, each adorned with four identical faces.

The emotions on the faces are clearly visible. While the face of Shiva (his third eye is clearly seen) is grim, Vishnu is seen smiling, whereas the two faces of Brahma are neutral. The emotions on the faces symbolise creation, maintenance and destruction!

After watching the sunrise over Angkor Wat, it is time to move on to the giant faces of Bayon, which were abandoned centuries ago after the Siamese sacked Angkor. A minimum amount of restoration has been carried out by archaeologists and most of the temple exists in harmony with the giant silver cotton trees and the evergreen forests that surround the numerous temple complexes that dot Angkor Wat. The ideal time to visit Bayon is late afternoon when the sun plays on the enigmatic smiles on these faces. A giant Shiva linga welcomes visitors into the narrow entrance to Bayon. One has to almost crawl through the series of tiny steps that leads to the terrace. As soon as one climbs up the steps, one is astounded by the stupendous scene that emerges. There are several towers at Bayon each sculpted with four faces looking at all the four directions. Each face is eight feet in height and four feet in breadth and have been assembled together by individually sculpting square blocks of stone.

After meeting two non-resident Indians, one from Melbourne (Goan origin) and the other from New York (Telugu origin) at Angkor, we three decided to stick together and visit all the temples in a tuk-tuk (equivalent of the Indian cycle-rickshaw with a engine). There are more than 60 temples dating from the 8th century to the 10th century built by Khmer kings with Indian names. After spending a week exploring the largest temple complex ever built by humanity, one would like to share some of the images which left a lasting impact on one's unconscious and have become indelible imprints, which time can never erase. A first glimpse of Angkor, nestled amidst evergreen forests, like a precious jewel, protected by nature, has a humbling effect. One's logical mind fails to comprehend, how a temple built nearly 1000 years ago, is so massive, that modern science cannot even dream of building such a temple in the next one thousand years!.

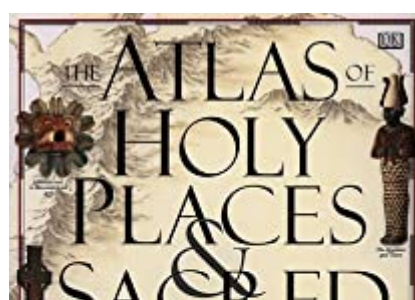
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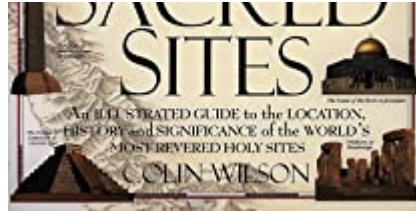
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