



# Captivating Cambodia

**Kaushik Mitra comes back from Siem Reap captivated by its old-world charm and history**

I have been in Vietnam for the past 14 months and a visit to neighbouring Cambodia was always high on the To Do list. The opportunity came in an unique way.

A couple of our childhood friends based in the US were making their summer trip to India and decided to visit Cambodia on their way back home. August is rainy season and not the best time to visit Cambodia but the prospect of getting together after many years with old friends was too tempting to let go. Our destination was Siem Reap, home to the famous Angkor Wat temple.

## **Some History First**

Cambodia has a long and chequered history which dates to 2300 BC and the first civilization was formed around the Mekong river delta in 150 AD. In the 9th Century a king named Jayavarman II founded the Khmer empire. It was during this time that the famous temples of Cambodia were built. Angkor Wat

was built in early 12th Century. By the end of the fifteenth century the Khmer empire gave way to the Thais and in the seventeenth century to the Vietnamese. In the late seventeenth century, the strategic city of Pray Nokor which was later to be renamed Saigon fell to Vietnamese rule. During the Eighteenth-Century Cambodia was sandwiched between two invading neighbours the Thais and the Vietnamese until the mid-nineteenth century when the French arrived in Cambodia. The first part of the twentieth century saw some development under the French with basic infrastructure of Roads and Railways being built until 1941 when the Japanese took over Cambodia. This was short-lived with the Japanese suffering a heavy defeat in World War II, the French regained control and ruled until 1953, when Cambodia became an independent State. In the 1970's the infamous Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot ruled the country and was responsible for the death of



more than 1.7 Mn people. Finally, in 1993 constitutional Monarchy was established in Cambodia and the country joined the ASEAN in 1999. In the early 21st century the Cambodian economy grew rapidly and the future remains promising for this economically backward country, steeped in a rich cultural heritage.

### **Getting There, and Basic Travel Tips**

Cambodia's two main cities Phnom Phen (Capital) and Siem Reap are well connected by several

South East Asian Airlines i.e. Thai, Singapore, Air Asia, Malaysia, Cathay, China Eastern and Southern and Garuda Indonesia among other airlines. Cambodia has its own Cambodia Angkor Air which is the closest there is to a National Airline. We flew Vietnam Airlines from Ho Chi Minh directly into Siem Reap a short one hour flight. Once you are in Cambodia, local travel is an adventure. There are several options ranging from Boats on the Mekong River, Privately operated buses, shared taxis, pickup trucks and Cambodia's unique Tuk-tuks.

The train lines built during the French rule were destroyed in the Khmer rouge regime. Hiring a care to drive is fraught with perils and certainly not recommended. The most popular means of travelling within the city amongst tourists is Motorcycles and Bicycles. In Siem Reap however one cannot hire Motor Bikes unlike in other cities. Private taxis normally can be found in front of hotels and the fares are reasonable.

Cambodia has basically two seasons dry and wet. It is hot and humid for most parts of the year.



Weather wise the best time to travel to Cambodia is between November to March when it is dry and relatively less hot and humid. If you are looking to avoid the rush and watching your wallet, May to September would be the preferred time. The official currency is the Cambodian riel but I wouldn't advise any traveller to the country to buy Riel. The de-facto currency for tourists is the US dollar. The greenback is quoted from hotel room rates, to local food, to Tuk-tuk rides. Talking about Tuk-tuks, these are unique four/six seaters pulled by

a motor cycle. The Tuk-tuks move at a slow leisurely pace in synch with the local milieu and makes for an enjoyable ride.

### **Siem Reap – Old World Charm**

We spent four days in Siem Reap. This is the place tourists head to see the famous Angkor Wat Temple. There is a lot more to the city that just the temples as we found out. We felt at home immediately on landing in the quaint traditional airport in Siem reap which incidentally is the busiest hub for travel in and out of Cambodia. The place was bustling

with Tourists, but there was a slow calm pace to everything.

A 45-minute drive along National highway six got us to our hotel in the centre of the City. There are myriad accommodation options in Siem Reap to suit all budgets. We settled for the mid-tier Memoire d' Angkor Boutique hotel which is a reminder of Cambodia's French heritage. The warm hospitality of the hotel staff was very endearing as we set about deciding the plans for the next few days. Our friends had checked into another hotel down the road and we planned to meet after dinner

at Siem Reap's most happening night place, Pub Street. This is a street lined with Pubs, cheap foot massage centres and restaurants on both sides, thronging with tourists who came to unwind after a long hot day visiting the temples or out exploring the countryside. The atmosphere is party like and stays that way till the wee hours of the morning. We met at the quieter and more refined Shanghai style Cocktail Bar Ms. Wongs which had colourful paper lanterns and comfortable leather sitting silos ideal for a group of 4-6 people. We ordered some of the popular cocktails amongst which were the "Indochine Martini" (vodka, pineapple juice and cognac) and Miss Wong Punch (Cranberry, Pineapple, Lime and Mango juice with White rum) and a bottle of Yalumba Sangiovese rose wine. The conversation was animated. There was so much to catch up on having met after such a long time. It was Saturday and the DJ was playing nice soft chill out music. Great start to our Cambodia trip.

Next morning all of us got into an eight-seater private taxi which would take us on a tour of the temples. We wanted to see the sunrise and started early at 4 am.

There are more than 1000 temples built between the 9th and 13th century at the peak of the Khmer Empire. The most famous amongst these are the Angkor Wat, Bayon and Ta Prohm. Our trip started with Angkor Wat. This is the largest religious temple in the world and took almost 30 years to build. We used our cell phone torch lights to walk past the head of the Naga as we crossed the cause way at the front entrance in the darkness. It was amazing to see thousands of tourists and local guides waiting to enter the temple complex at such an early hour. As the first rays of light produced a halo at the back, we looked in awe at the majestic symmetry of the Angkor temple peaks which are now part of the Cambodia flag. It was surreal and beautiful at the same time. Everyone waited anxiously on both sides of the temple near the water bodies to get the first glimpse of the sun rising from behind the temple complex. There were tourists from all over the world. . .backpackers from the West, a large contingent of Japanese, folks from the sub-continent all ready with their cameras to get the perfect shot of the sunrise. After the sunrise "photo-shoot" we entered

the main temple complex. Angkor was initially built as a Vishnu temple and later converted to a Buddhist one. The temple is presently used by Buddhist Monks.

The whole temple is built of stone in the shape of Mount Meru (abode of the Gods) with five peaks in the Centre of the Temple Complex. We walked up to the highest point to get a good view of the surrounding lush green forests in the early morning sun. The next hour was spent walking around the complex and soaking in the beauty and sheer architectural wonder of the gigantic temple. It reminded me of our own Kailash Temple in Ellora, only this was on a much grander scale.

Next on our tour plan was Ta Prohm temple made famous by Angelina Jolie playing Lara croft in Tomb Raider. This Buddhist temple is a striking contrast to Angkor Wat. While Angkor was an architectural wonder, the Ta Prohm temple is a unique synergy of Nature and man-made architecture. The temple is embraced by tall trees with massive roots the most famous one being at the entrance pavilion to the East. The other interesting feature of this temple is its maze of corridors some of which are out of bounds as the temple is currently under restoration.

Finally, we headed to Bayon which I felt was the most beautiful of the three. Bayon, another Buddhist temple is famous for the series of large smiling stone faces surrounding the central tower of the temple. We took photos in the many small cave like enclosures in the central temple structure and in front of the massive stone faces. For those keen on history a visit to the Khmer Temples is a must do in a lifetime.

We returned to a sumptuous lunch of traditional Cambodian food at the Khmer Kitchen Restaurant. Our meal comprised of the delicious Chicken Amok a traditional dish made in a yellow curry, the spicy Khmer Red curry and fried Crab. We rounded off the meal with the cha





houyteuk a delectable traditional Jelly dessert. Post lunch we headed to the Old market for some trinket shopping and spent some time trying our hand at Pottery at the Khmer Ceramic fine arts centre. It had been a long morning and we decided to give our aching legs a rest with a typical Cambodian afternoon siesta. It was too hot to do anything outside anyways.

Recharged, that evening we headed to the Angkor Night market. This is a popular shopping venue for tourists and houses over 200 bamboo huts selling a wide variety of local products. We picked up a shadow puppet and a handbag from the Angkor recycled stall which only sold products made from recycled material. It was then time to head to the Apsara Theatre for our pre-booked dinner and dance show but before that we decided to

get our feet wet and cleaned in one of the many Fish Spas that abound in Siem Reap. This is very typical of South East Asia where you sink your feet into a tank of dead skin eating fish, a novel way of cleaning and rejuvenating the skin your feet. The Apsara dance shows are very popular among tourists. We enjoyed the sequence of the four dances i.e. the Apsara, Masked, Shadow and Folk. The ornate long headgear and rhythmic motions of the dancers created an appetite for the traditional Cambodian dinner.

Post dinner, we got on a TukTuk and made our way to Pub Street, this time looking for a good lounge. We found one in Mezze near the centre of the street. The music was to our taste as we let our hair down and had a blast. We tried the flaming Sambuca which is a must have here. The next day was spent at a leisurely

pace on an Eco Tour of the Floating Village on the Tonle Sap Lake. The day's itinerary included visiting a stilted floating fishing village on the lake, witnessing lotus and cricket harvesting and visiting a local village and Buddhist Monastery. A day spent on the water of the Tonle Sap Lake was a perfect foil to the bustle of Siem Reap.

We were not ready to return from Siem Reap without another visit to the temples. This time we opted for afternoon and Sunset tour. As luck, would have it just as we were ending our temple round it started to pour heavily. The Angkor looked different in the rain, more real and vulnerable than what we had seen at sunrise on the first day.

Our evening was dedicated to watching the Phare Cambodian Circus which was a captivating mix of Theatre, music, dance telling unique Cambodian stories. The young Cambodian artists

did not fail us with their outstanding show that combines the vigour of their youth mixed with exceptional skill and emotion. This is a must-see for all visitors to Siem Reap.

Bidding farewell to Siem Reap after four eventful days was tough. It may not be the most sophisticated place on earth but what it lacks in modernity it more than makes up by its captivating Old World Charm. For us it was like turning the clock back a couple of decades to soak in the sights, sounds, food and culture of a land with a rich History. Above all the mesmerizing experience of the Angkor Wat temples will

remain with us as an unforgettable experience. ■



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