

GOING PLACES

JOHN COONEY



Angkor Wat

ASTONISHING ANGKOR



There's more than one way to climb a hill. And I've tried a few of them in my time. But I never expected to be climbing a rather steep hill on the back of a rather large elephant. That hill was in the middle of the jungle in the middle of Cambodia. And the view from the top of my plodding, hairy mammoth was something else ...

Cambodia. Most people who go there go to eyeball what I went to eyeball: the famous temple complex of the ancient Kingdom of Angkor. And I was both relieved and excited when my noisy plane touched down.

Relieved: because I'd been trapped in a seat next to this thin American woman who'd insisted on sharing the whole gory story of her messed-up marriage.

Excited: because I'd read enough about my destination to know it was a treat for travellers – a World Heritage site, up there with other archaeological biggies like Egypt's Pyramids, China's Great Wall, Jordan's Petra and South America's Machu Picchu.

I was met at the airport by my Cambodian guide – a delightful young man whose name ('Daling' – pronounced 'Darling') embarrassed me at first when I used it out-loud. But within a shortish drive from the town of Siem Reap, I'd got used to it ...

Way, way back, between the 9th and 13th centuries, a string of Khmer kings ruled Indo-China from around here, and used their empire's wealth and work-force to complete a swag of monumental construction projects. Someone has counted 209 different temples spread over 300 square kilometres, many of them largely reclaimed by the relentless jungle. But some of the most beautiful examples have been restored.

It was hard to believe what I was seeing: towering moss-smothered stone-work ... vast terraces, moats and spires ... endless sculptures of deities and royals ... wall-to-wall murals recording Hindu battles and Buddhist lifestyles.

The centuries have taken their toll, of course, but 1000 years ago, while other eventual world capitals were still villages, this was a royal centre populated by more than a million people.

The largest and best-preserved temple is Angkor Wat, built by Suryavarman II in honour of the god-king Vishnu. Bridges across a deep moat point the way through arched entrances to the central temple structure, where paved courtyards and corridors are decorated with 'Apsaras' (Heavenly Dancers) – still graceful, frozen in time and stone.

Trying not to look down, I scrambled nervously up dangerously steep steps to the topmost terrace where Buddhist priests once did their thing. Then, stilling my beating heart and stealing a breath-taking glance at the countryside, I scrambled nervously back down again.





Angkor Wat



Ta Prohm

Next morning, after breakfasting well and trying out some Cambodian expressions (“sour sdei” = hello ... “or kuon” = thank you) on a couple of giggling waitresses, it was off to another famous site: the walled city of Angkor Thom.

As we approached the spectacular entrance-way through looming forest

trees and rows of once-elegant statues, I was suddenly aware of a giant creviced face peering at me from a mound of weathered rock above the gate. Inside the temple complex, countless collapsing towers were adorned with more huge faces in various stages of disrepair, smiling meditatively as they lit up in the morning sun.

Nearby was an ancient parade ground, the Elephant Terrace, and I tried to imagine monks and warriors, decorated elephants and cheering crowds, in a colourful, noisy procession.

Elsewhere amongst these sprawling remains is the Ta Prohm monastery – left as it was found, unrestored, still gripped in a battle with the tropical jungle. The intricate stonework is being devoured by 600-year-old silk-cotton trees, enormous trunks and roots spreading like claws to grip every crack and crevice ... in places, tearing the structure apart ... in others, holding it together.

A shadow hangs over Cambodia. The bloody rule of Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge (1975 to 1978) saw cities emptied and two-to-three million people murdered. And I felt that shadow



most acutely whenever I got talking with ordinary Cambodians.

Over lunch, for example, I met Veesna, a serious young man who was only four when his father disappeared. A local government official until neighbours dobbed him in, he was taken to a prison camp, tortured and executed.

"Cambodians killing Cambodians – so evil!" said Veesna, who also lost grandparents, uncles, cousins. "I still can't understand it."

Thankfully, the shadow is lifting. The Khmer Rouge are no more, the infamous landmines are being cleared, and this small nation with a remarkable, ancient past is slowly recovering.

Phnom Bakheng was the name of that rather steep hill – and the chance to do it by elephant was too good to pass up. So off we lurched, along a muddy track that zig-zagged up through the jungle.

My elephant was fast – we easily caught

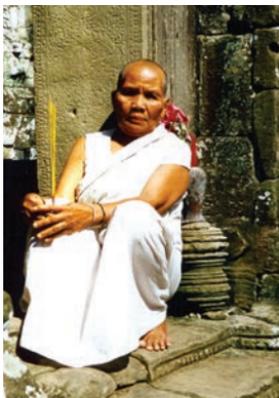
up with a slower beast in front. But in the absence of passing-bays, my driver could only shout and prod its hairy bum with his sharpened pole.

Up top were more ruins, plus crowds of camera-toting tourists. A white-robed nun accepted some of my local currency in exchange for a photo. And Daling and I sat down to a picnic of boiled eggs and sour mango that he'd purchased from a stall down below.

Night falls quickly in this part of the world. The brilliant orange sunset we'd all come to see was fading before we knew it ... and on the way back down (via

200 what-used-to-be stone steps!) a vast cloud of black bats filled the darkening sky.

Another day in Indo-China was over. "Or kuon (thank you) Cambodia!"



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An illustration of a woman wearing a traditional conical hat, standing on a boat. The boat is labeled 'MIDLIFE MADNESS ON THE MEKONG'.