

Angkor Wat - In the spotlight (March 9th 2001)

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citytalk



Photo by Val Mazzenga

“There are two ways to get to the top of the Temple Mountain here at Bakheng,” said our local guide Mr. Li as he motioned the driver to pull over. “You can walk it or ride up on the elephant”. You guessed it... Moments later we were plodding steadily upwards through jungle scenery on Ganshey our 35-year-old transportation option...

Every day hundreds of tourists and locals alike make this afternoon pilgrimage to watch the sun set on the Cambodian countryside. They come to drink in the panoramic view of rice fields stretching as far as the eye can see and the Great Lake Beyond. They come in the hope that the gods are smiling and their journey will be rewarded. They come to witness the legendary beam of light that is said to spotlight Angkor Wat, casting an orange glow on this majestic wonder of the world.

Angkor Wat, located in Siem Reap Cambodia is fast becoming Asia's most visited spot.

It is the architectural masterpiece of the powerful Khmer Empire that once ruled parts of present-day Cambodia, Thailand and Laos between the 8th and the 13th centuries AD.

In 1431 the Thai's invaded the great Kingdom at the capital of Angkor and conquered. The Khmer's fled south to Phnom Penh and the city was abandoned. For almost five hundred years the temples were overrun by the jungle and became the stuff of legends.

Mr. Li throws his legs over the side of the tower wall inviting us to sit and get comfortable. “We need to wait for the sun to go there” he points to the west. “Then you will see Angkor washed in the orange glow...” we give in to the wait and join him. Atonal melodies drift up from the motley group of gypsy musicians below, playing for tips. A cool breeze relieves the steamy, sweaty heat and birds like you've never seen before glide above the treetops. The atmosphere is ripe for storytelling... and that is Mr. Li's specialty.

“The memory of Angkor may have been lost to the outside world” he began, wiping the perspiration from his brow, “but we Cambodians have never forgotten the glory that once was.” Mr. Li is right both in fact and sentiment.

Although traders, missionaries and travelers wrote of the jungle ridden ruins as early as the 16th century, it wasn't until 1860 that the published diary's of French Explorer Henri Mouhot brought Angkor to the worlds attention. Projects dedicated to uncovering and documenting the sites began in the early 1900's. Restoration efforts continued until the Khmer Rouge put a stop to everything in 1972. Archeologists were forced to leave the country and locals were left to the mercy of the notorious soldiers who used the temples as supply depots and hideouts during the civil war.

Throughout Cambodia's history, Angkor has remained a national symbol of greatness and survival. It is a reminder of the best of times.

In 1993 the Angkor Complex became a world heritage site, and today 50 temples are safely accessible in the Siem Reap area. Restoration continues and signs warning of landmines have disappeared, though it is best advised to tour with a local guide and stay on the beaten path.

“Today you visited the most famous Angkor Wat” he continues, “which means holy city temple.”

Suryavarman II ordered it built in 1113, and it took over thirty years to complete. The purpose of the enormous wat is still debated. Many believe its westward facing orientation signals it was designed as a funerary temple. It stands amazingly intact. Not just an empty ruin of the past, it is alive today with Buddhist nuns stationed in shadowed hallways lighting incense offerings and monks in orange cloth chanting daily prayer requests. If politely asked they will agree to pose for the camera... hands folded in prayer with smiling eyes that hint at mysteries yet to be explored.

“What did the people of Angkor believe?” I ask.

“Much like today, the people believed in many things...” answered Mr. Li. “Spirits in nature, the religion of the King...” He paused and smiled, “Angkor is like me... half Hindu, half Buddhist and 100% Cambodian.”



The oldest form of worship in Cambodia, still embraced today, was a primitive belief in Animism or Spiritual Forces. Spirits live everywhere... in rivers, mountains, earth and stones. The people believe when they die their soul is reincarnated and spirit set free to live in the hills and trees of the Cambodian forest. While the religious culture shifted between Hindu and Buddhism, worship of local spirits was always practiced. The combination of all these beliefs is reflected in Khmer art.

Checking the sun's position over his shoulder Mr. Li adds “You will see more stories of the Hindu gods Vishnu, Brahma and Shiva along with many statues of Buddha when we visit the other temples tomorrow... the sun is almost in place now... just a few minutes longer...”

Our attention turns back to Angkor Wat. The largest Hindu temple in the world, the wat rests on 500 acres surrounded by a massive wall and tranquil moat. The western entrance features a long sandstone walkway flanked by statues of serpents and lions symbolizing the link from the human world outside to the world of the gods inside. The central tower represents the mythical Mount Meru, the center of the Hindu universe. Only the king and the high priest were allowed to frequent this most sacred area. Today visitors make the harrowing 70-degree steep climb up narrow steps to the top grasping a handrail for dear life.

A stroll down the long corridor of the gallery of bas-reliefs reveals the heart and soul of Angkor. Imposing architectural columns line the walkway creating an atmosphere of shadow and light. Seven-foot high sandstone wall carvings depict themes of historic battle, eternal struggle between gods and demons and the daily life of the Khmer people. The Great Preserver Vishnu is pictured in various incarnations saving the world from destruction. As the story goes, whenever the world is threatened Vishnu returns to earth to fight and triumph over evil.... And ultimately restore moral order.

Perhaps Vishnu is at work today. A half a million tourists visited Cambodia last year to see this Wonder, and the numbers are increasing.

“There...” Mr. Li gestures, his voice filled with pride.

The spotlight has finally settled on majestic Angkor Wat. Well worth the wait.