

REMAINS OF THE DAY The red-brick temple of Prasat Kraham, seen from across the moat at Koh Ker.

SIDE TRIP

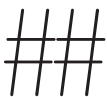
BY CHRISTOPHER R. COX

Angkor Away

Cambodia's farther-flung monuments offer a crowd-free perspective on the ancient majesty of Khmer civilization

JUST OVER A DECADE AGO, VENTURING BEYOND ANGKOR WAT AND INTO the Cambodian countryside to explore remoter ruins was a guaranteed buzzkill: land mines and Khmer Rouge guerrillas were always a possibility, while appalling roads were assured. But Herculean demining efforts, increased political stability, and improving infrastructure have steadily opened some of the Khmer Empire's near-forgotten masterworks to visitors.

Chief among these outliers are Beng Mealea and Koh Ker, two vast complexes equal to almost any Angkor attraction. There's just one notable difference—an almost total lack of tourists. For stone-temple pilots who like their ruins raw and



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untrammled, an adventurous, off-the-grid ramble to one or both of these sites promises a glimpse of a majestic past that has lain hidden for a millennium.

Satellite photographs indicate that ancient highways once radiated from Angkor to the empire's four corners, including a royal road that ran due east for 40 kilometers to Beng Mealea. At this crossroads, a branch veered northeast to connect to Koh Ker and, ultimately, Preah Vihear, a stunning temple commanding a 1,000-meter escarpment along the Thai border. The royal route, meanwhile, continued east to Preah Khan Kompong Svay, another enormous complex.

In his authoritative 1944 study *A Guide to the Angkor Monuments*, French archeologist Maurice Glaize suggested that: "A trip to Beng Mealea, which in itself demands an entire day, can be combined with a hunting party, since the region is rich in both small and large game and wild animals; tigers, panthers and elephants, herds of oxen and wild buffalo inhabit the forest as far as Preah Khan of Kompong Svay in the east."

It's no longer quite so wild and woolly in northern Cambodia. The big animals have vanished, regrettably, but better roads now exist. Today, the sanest access to Beng Mealea involves a 30-kilometer drive east from Siem Reap along National Highway 6, which passes the Roluos group—an assemblage of ninth-century temples that stand as the oldest permanent expression of Khmer classical art—before reaching the village of Damdek. From this junction, a decent two-lane road bears north approximately 30 more kilometers, then skirts the southeastern slopes of Phnom Kulen.

CLASSIC KHMER From far right: A toppled *apsara* bas-relief at Beng Mealea; the 40-meter-high pyramid of Prasat Thom, Koh Ker's principal monument; a groundskeeper at Koh Ker.



In the shadow of this sacred mountain one of Angkor's most illustrious rulers, Suryavarman II (1112–50 A.D.), commissioned Beng Mealea. The king, who reunified the Khmer Empire after decades of political turmoil and further expanded its borders into areas of present-day Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, is best remembered for building Angkor Wat.

In many ways, Beng Mealea was a dress rehearsal for that monumental endeavor. This prototype has a similarly ambitious scale: the complex covers 108 hectares and is girded by a moat measuring 4.2 kilometers in length. Sandstone causeways flanked by graceful, serpent-headed *naga* balustrades span a wide canal, now thick with lotus and other growth. Inside the enclosure's walls, the axial east-west layout also features corbeled-arch galleries, libraries, cloisters, and a central cruciform terrace, though it lacks Angkor Wat's iconic five-tower temple mount.

Here, the central sanctuary is in complete collapse, a victim of the encroaching vegetation that strangles practically every lintel and block of masonry. More than the semi-wild ruins of Angkor's Preah Khan, more even than moody Ta Prohm, it is this atmosphere of subdued, yet inexorable decay that gives solitary Beng Mealea its special aesthetic quality.

"It's an exciting place to visit," says Andrew J. Booth, president of Siem Reap-based tour operator About Asia, who started taking clients to Beng Mealea in 2005, just two years after the ruins were thoroughly



demined. “It’s surrounded by jungle, and less manicured than other temples. It is certainly wilder than most.”

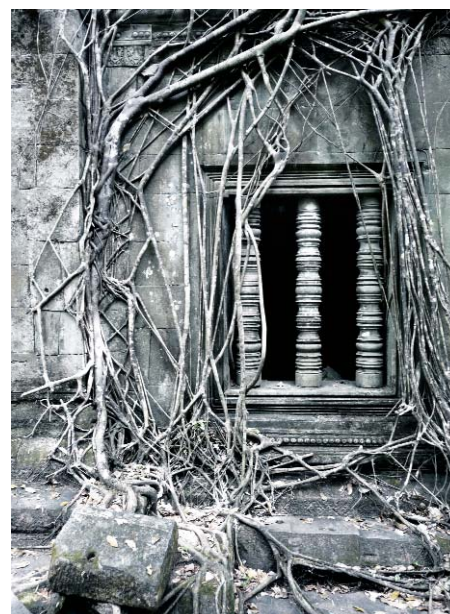
That’s an understatement: Beng Mealea’s main east gate is an impassable rockslide; to enter, I’m obliged to clamber up a steep gangway just to the north and then squeeze through an opening beneath an exquisitely carved lintel of Indra atop a three-headed elephant. Whereas Ta Prohm has been cleared of its underbrush and seen many of its structures rebuilt or shored up, at Beng Mealea nature runs rampant. The roots of strangler figs and silk-cotton trees grip the walls and whatever roofed galleries haven’t buckled under the weight of time; lichen-splotched sandstone blocks and lintels lie in huge, jumbled piles where they have toppled. Enormous shade trees rise above the wreckage, casting the debris below in dappled light.

With so much foliage, the ruins are alive with birdsong, especially in the early morning and late afternoon, a serenade that’s likely to include black-hooded orioles, linedated barbets, brown hawk-owls, and common flameback woodpeckers. French film director Jean-Jacques Annaud found this untamed setting so visually appealing he shot much of *Two Brothers*, his nature drama about a pair of tigers, on location here in 2003. The production

left behind scattered planks and ladders. Cambodia’s APSARA Authority—whose name, taken from the celestial nymphs so common to Angkorian bas-reliefs, is also a handy acronym for Autorité



STICKS AND STONES From far left: An offering of incense sticks inside a Koh Ker temple; another view of Prasat Krahom; a balustered window amid the ruins of Beng Mealea.



pour la Protection du Site et l’Aménagement de la Région d’Angkor —has added a few more walkways and staircases. Some sections, however, still require climbing and scrambling, such as a south-central rock pile connecting a cloister wall to a long, narrow passageway half-lit by stone-baluster windows. But it’s worth the effort. While Beng Mealea’s carvings are not equal to those of Angkor Wat, the quality of the pediments and lintels, including a dancing Shiva and the “Churning of the Ocean of Milk” creation myth, is breathtaking.

KOH KER HAS LONG HELD a mystical status among Khmer temple buffs. Hidden in an obscure corner of impoverished Preah Vihear province, it was until recently virtually inaccessible except to those armed with a good motorcycle, a reliable compass, and a blithe attitude toward unexploded ordnance. A new, albeit unsealed, road from Beng Mealea was scraped through the wilderness five years ago to facilitate dry-season passage, but so far only a trickle of independent travelers bother to make the two-and-a-half-hour drive from Siem Reap. That may change once the Cambodian Mine Action Centre finishes clearing the area and word filters back about this ultimate “lost city” abandoned more than a thousand years ago.

Enigmatic Koh Ker is a historic anomaly. In the late ninth century, King Yasovarman I shifted his capital from Roluos to Angkor, where he built Phnom Bakheng (the famed hilltop “sunset temple”). But in death he was succeeded by two weaker sons. Their uncle, Jayavarman IV, who also had a legitimate claim to the throne, decamped 100 kilometers to the northeast



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SITE SEEING Above, from left: Root-strangled ruins at Prasat Pram; Beng Mealea's collapsed central tower.

and established his own, competing royal capital, then called Chok Gargyar ("Island of Glory").

Jayavarman IV began building in earnest in 928, putting up nearly three dozen temples around a huge central *baray*, or reservoir. But Koh Ker's age was as brief as it was brilliant. Just three years after Jayavarman IV's death in 941, the capital reverted to Angkor, where it remained for nearly 500 years.

Slowly, steadily, the jungle swallowed Koh Ker. The French, led by legendary archeologist Henri Parmentier, didn't survey the site until 1921. Cambodian teams visited the ruins in the 1950s and '60s, but the Khmer Rouge destroyed all records. These expeditions did, however, send several of Koh Ker's finest works to the National Museum in Phnom Penh, including a showstopping *garuda*, a mythic half-man, half-bird creature. Like much of the complex's sculpture, it is of colossal scale. The site also represents the first instance of freestanding Angkorian art; previously, sculpture was confined to lintels and pediments.

Koh Ker's alpha temple, Prasat Thom, stands a few hundred meters to the northwest of the baray. To get to it, I pass through the red-brick entrance of Prasat Krahom, negotiate several tumbledown *gopura* gateways, and pick my way across an enclosure where all that remains of a life-size statue of Nandi, Shiva's sacred bull, is a head fragment. Looting was an all-too-common occurrence at Koh Ker, which didn't come under APSARA management until 2004.

Prasat Thom itself is a ziggurat-like sandstone structure that rises more than 30 meters above the surrounding forest. Behind the seven-tiered pyramid, common mynas and scarlet-backed flowerpeckers flit in the trees covering a tall, uniformly shaped hill; the unusual manmade mountain, known as the Tomb of the White Elephant, is currently being excavated by archeologists. Despite the

ravages of time and temple-robbers, Koh Ker's grandeur is still apparent.

A new loop road around the baray passes several sublime, smaller shrines: Prasat Balang, which holds a fuel-drum-sized *linga*, or stylized phallus; Prasat Krachap, with plunging rooflines that conclude in soaring stone antefixes; and Prasat Neang Khmau, where the sanctuary's doorway still retains its finely carved sandstone lintel and colonettes. The latter's exterior walls look to be blackened by smoke from a brushfire, but my guide explains it is actually just rust—the iron within the structure's ferrous laterite rock has oxidized.

The final stop, Prasat Pram, provides a satisfying coda. The jungle here has imbued a quintet of simple brick and laterite sanctuaries with an ineffable magic: trees sprout from the temple tops, while vein-like roots wrap around the walls. It's a quintessentially Angkorian scene, and there isn't another tour group in sight, just my party, the birds and the incessant cicadas, and these ancient stones. And suddenly, more than 120 kilometers' worth of Cambodian roads seems a small price to pay. ☺

Fact File

Khmer Temple Touring



GETTING THERE

Beng Mealea is about a 90-minute drive east of the tourist hub of Siem Reap; Koh Ker is another hour's drive. It's possible to combine both ruins on a daylong excursion. Tackle Koh Ker first, and then take advantage of Beng Mealea's ample shade in the afternoon.

WHEN TO GO

The road to Beng Mealea is now almost entirely sealed, making the temple a year-round attraction. Cambodia is subject to the southwest monsoon, with rains likely from July through October. Note that during this time, downpours can render the dirt road to Koh Ker a car-eating quagmire.

WHERE TO STAY

Base yourself in Siem Reap, where the hotel inventory runs the gamut from five-star properties like **La Résidence d'Angkor** (residencedangkor.com; 855-63/963-390; doubles from US\$185) to the exclusive one-room **One Hotel Angkor** (theonehotelangkor.com; 855-63/965-321; doubles from US\$250).

GETTING AROUND

It's possible to explore these ruins on your own, but a knowledgeable guide will come in handy, especially at Koh Ker. Stay on well-worn paths and obey all land-mine warning signs. Cambodia travel specialist **About Asia** (asiatravel-cambodia.com; 855-63/760-190) can organize a custom tour to Beng Mealea and Koh Ker, where cultural watchdog **Heritage Watch** (heritagewatch.org) offers excruciating rides of the temples. —CRC

