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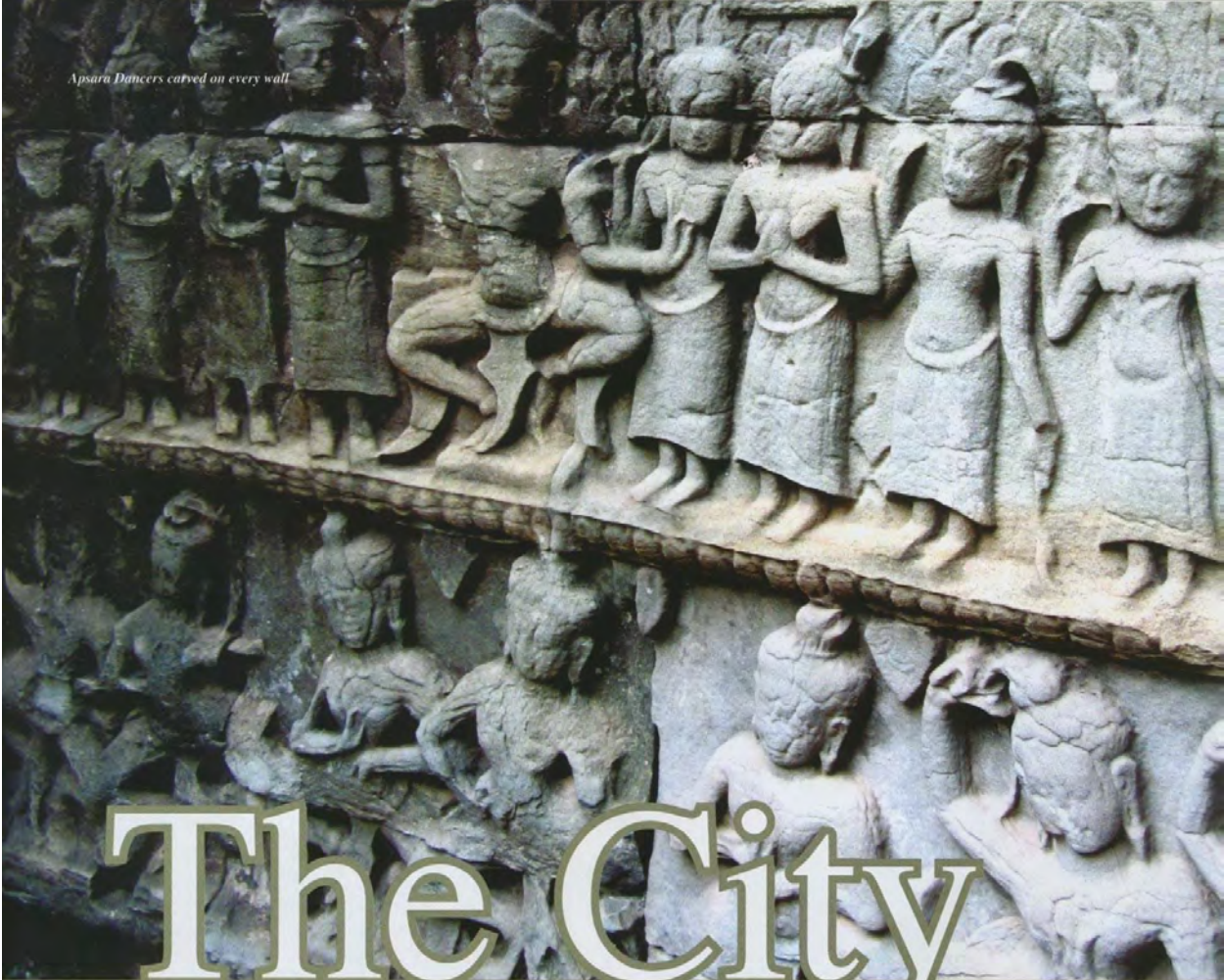
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DESTINATION



The only smiling face of the Buddha in Bayon Temple



Apsara Dancers carved on every wall

The City

of all cities

The largest and tallest free-standing structure in a city of a million people, Angkor Wat was the jewel of the Angkor city, now confirmed to have been the largest city in the pre-industrial world.

Text by Grace Lai
Photography by Quinten Wong

About 20 minutes from the city centre of Siem Reap, Cambodia, lies the ruins of what was once the largest ancient civilization of the world (pre 12th century). The Angkor Archaeological Park, stretching over 400 square kilometres, holds the magnificent Angkor Wat temple, the Angkor Thom, the largest kingdom of the 12th century and within that, the Bayon Temple – among others. Declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1992, Angkor is just literally, 2 hours away by flight. From Kuala Lumpur, daily direct flights are available via AirAsia.

Angkor is today a relic of Hinduism and Buddhism and a city that had, at its prime, a population of one million. Built by King Suryvarman II in the 12th century (in just 35 years) the temples were built first in honour of Hindu gods. Based on the concept of 'temple mountains', the temples were built on elevated stones as representation of the mythical Mount Meru, home of the gods. Surrounded by moats and topped by precisely five towers which represent the five peaks of Mount Meru, you will see repeated motifs and mythical figures all around and on the faces of the temples. Most notably, the carvings of Apsara Dancers. Also known as Heavenly Dancers, in Ta Phrom (known now as the 'Tomb Raider Temple') alone, there are about 1600 Apsara Dancers on the walls. Nagas guard every entrance of Angkor Thom, a five-headed serpent, said to be associated with the Hindu god Vishnu and also the protectors of sacred entrances.



The rickshaw – the local common mode of transportation

Ta Phrom temple, also known as the "Tomb Raider Temple"



Ta Phrom temple's many faces

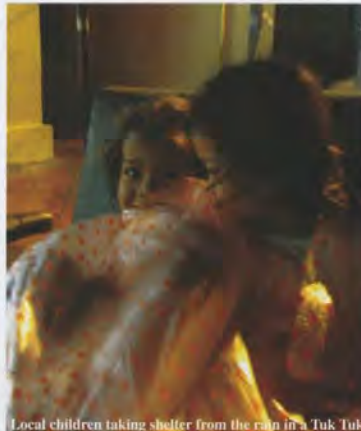
Siem Reap itself is a beautiful country. Supported mainly by agriculture and tourism, Siem Reap town is placid and unassuming. The most common mode of transportation in Siem Reap is the Tuk Tuk, the local 'taxi'. A ride to your hotel or restaurant of choice cost as low as USD 1 (the preferred currency of the country). Alternatively, cycling is also a common practice in Siem Reap. The food in Siem Reap is amazing. A legacy of French colonization, bread in Siem Reap is a dream - especially their Baguettes. Sold in markets, by the road and peddled on bicycles, their bread is crisp on the outside and soft as cloud on the inside. With food available from USD 2-5, Siem Reap is every tourist's dream. For those brave of heart (and stomach) try their snack of choice - bugs, grasshoppers and even tarantulas.

If you are a first time visitor to Siem Reap and Angkor, check out AboutAsia, a luxury private Cambodia tour agency (www.aboutasiatravel.com). From whisking you pass immigration to arranging for a hotel smack in the middle of town and taking you around Angkor (at hours timed precisely opposite the usual group tours to ensure total freedom and privacy), AboutAsia also has a philanthropic arm to their company. Visit their website for more details on the company and reservations.

To fly to Siem Reap, go to www.airasia.com. Daily direct flights give you the freedom to travel as and when you like and amazing features like the online booking, self-check in and pre-booking your meals (try the Pancakes - they're delicious!) make the entire trip a breeze. To see Siem Reap and Angkor in its total beauty, a minimum of three days is necessary. When you consider that this is a world heritage site, a 12th century kingdom left standing from the days of old, there really is no reason not to go ahead and make your reservations right now.

After the death of King Suryvarman II, a new king, Jayavarman VII re-built the kingdom and established a new capital and state temple - Angkor Thom and the Bayon Temple. A king that practises Theravada Buddhism, you see all around Bayon temple, carvings of Buddha, elephants and lotus flowers. "One of these temples (Angkor Wat) is a rival to that of Solomon's, erected by some ancient Michelangelo. It is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome, and presents a sad contrast to the state of barbarism in which the nation is now plunged" Henry Mouhot, one of the first who discovered Angkor, aptly put it.

Start your trek of the ancient city from the Eastern Gate of the temple. There you will see one of the most celebrated scenes in the city, the Churning of the Sea of Milk. Depicting 92 Asuras and 88 Devas using the serpent Vasuki, the mythical creatures churn the sea under Vishnu's direction in hopes of attaining the elixir of immortality. This is the only depiction in the religion where both gods and demons work together. On nearly every surface, columns, lintels and even the roofs of Angkor are carved miles of bas-reliefs, illustrating scenes from Indian literature including unicorns, griffins, winged dragons pulling chariots as well as warriors following an elephant mounted leader and celestial dancing girls (Apsara Dancers) with elaborate hair styles. The gallery wall alone is decorated with almost 1,000 square metres of bas reliefs. Holes on some of the walls indicate that they may have been decorated with bronze sheets. These were highly prized in ancient times and were a prime target for robbers. A sad but common sight is the many headless statues of Buddha, stolen by robbers or demolished by rebels.



Local children taking shelter from the rain in a Tuk Tuk



Statue shaded and de-faced by treasure thieves and raiders



Ta Phrom