

# Angkor MAJESTY

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Our butler at the Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor woke us up with a fresh pot of coffee at 5 a.m. for this breathtaking sunrise spectacle. Our driver and guide from ABOUTAsia Travel drove in the dark towards Angkor Wat or "Small Imperial City" for about 13 minutes. We walked towards the largest religious complex in the world, considered to be the crowning achievement in Khmer art and architecture, and waited for the day to break through the clouds with hundreds of people for the sun salutations. Seeing the sun peering through the iconic lotus towers is a bucket list must.





Ta Nei (late 12th century) is small compared to the others and a great example of a “tumbledown temple.” Inaccessible to bigger buses, it remains intimate compared to other more famous temples. On our visit, we saw many butterflies fluttering in our midst.

My first trip to Siem Reap was like a page out of a *Lonely Planet* guide towards the end of the SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic. This was in 2003 with one of my best friends, Gia Barretto. I have always yearned for a more luxurious and curated experience, and an in-depth tour of the temples, which have remained an enigma and a fascination. A serendipitous time came last August, and it was even better than I wished, since I was in the company of very good friends. We enjoyed a truly bespoke experience courtesy of our gracious host, Raffles Grand Hotel d’Angkor and our guide, ABOUTAsia Travel.

Only Cebu Pacific has direct flights from Manila to Siem Reap, so we took the evening flight out, which was delayed for a few hours. We arrived past midnight with the full sturgeon moon shining brightly upon us as we deplaned on the tarmac. It was a humid night and our hotel chauffeur handed us cold towels and bottled water as soon as we got into the car for the 15-minute drive to the hotel. Smiling faces, more cold towels, and signature refreshments in intricate celadon *airavatas* (the Hindu mythical white elephant image) welcomed us as we stepped into the hotel foyer. Its stunning Art Deco touches—black and white checkerboard marble lined with Greek key patterns on the edges, antique phones, and an antique birdcage elevator that has been operational since 1932, give it so much character. Hungry and still on an adrenaline rush, we ordered room service and had a sampling of a few local dishes in our suites.

With only a few hours of shuteye, we started our day with a quick gulp of champagne and a bite of *pain au chocolate* at Cafe d’Angkor, the Raffles’ casual all-day outlet. We met our guide, Day, from ABOUTAsia Travel, and registered for our tickets. Make sure you hold onto your tickets as you temple-hop since these are checked all throughout the different temples and monuments. Day wanted us to get to Ta Prohm before 7:30 a.m. to avoid the



crowds. True enough, we had the place almost all to ourselves when we got there.

Ta Prohm was built in the late 12th century by King Jayavarman VII to honor his mother. It is famous for its magnificent and soaring overgrown trees with its web of root sculptures climbing up and growing in and out of the temple walls. Archaeologists wanted the viewers to

## Siem Reap, the jewel of Cambodia, offers a cultural and historical smorgasbord

experience the sheer awe and wonder they did upon rediscovering the lost structure, and tried to balance the preservation of walls and the growth of the silk cotton and strangler fig trees. It is a surreal experience to bask in the beauty of tree and temple. It has been proven that trees “talk” to each other to preserve themselves, and I wonder what these legendary trees have been talking about for them to live many lifetimes. After two hours of exploring its wonders and engaging with Day about the architectural details and stories surrounding this temple, we walked out to a path that led us to such a delightful picnic patch beside a rice field. There was a dressed table setting, teak chairs, and a brunch spread for six: local fruit: longan, rambutan, small and stubby bananas; French bread basket, butter, and preserves; tamarind, pineapple, and mango juices, and potent Cambodian coffee. It was a casual yet such a charming spread.

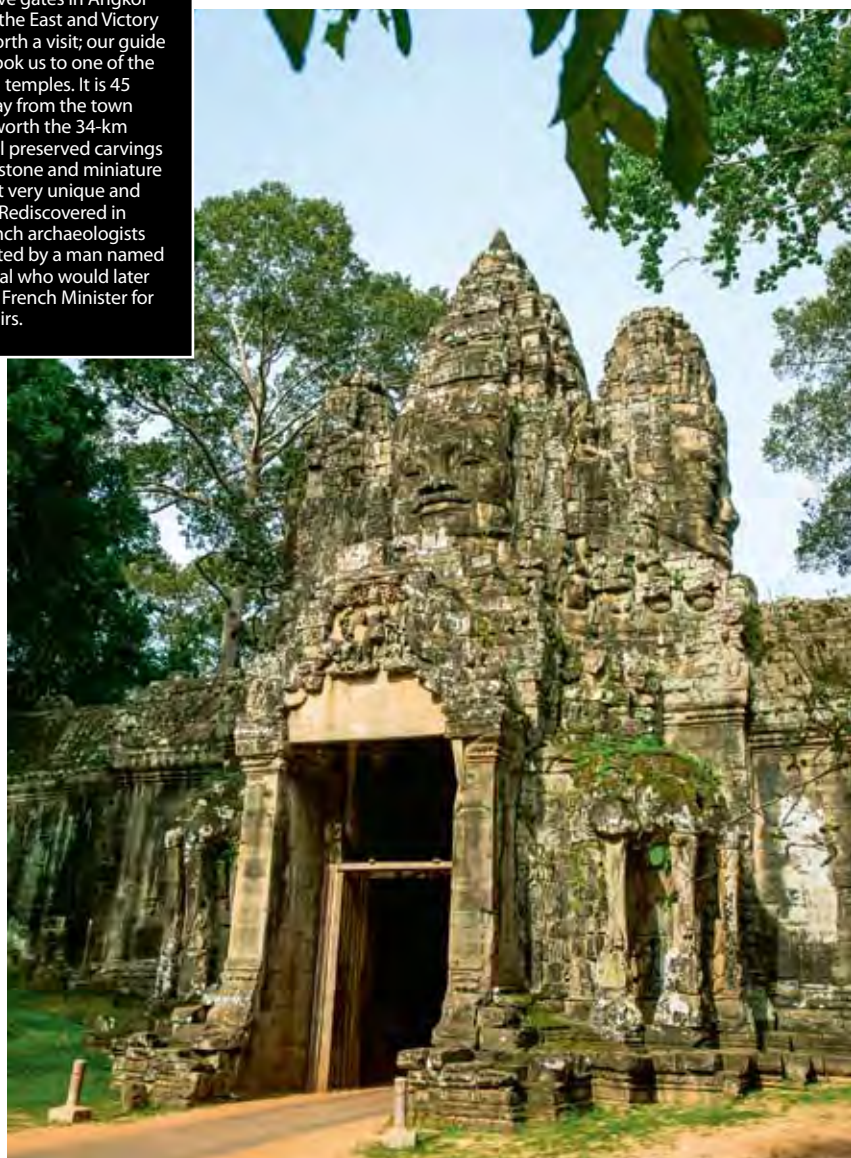
Ta Nei (late 12th century) was our next stop. It was also built by King Jayavarman VII. It is often overlooked due to its small size and path that cannot accommodate big tourist buses. We were some of the few who enjoyed the charm of this “tumbledown temple.” This was how most of the temples looked like before restoration. Most stones were scattered on the ground. It is small enough to walk continuously from end to end. There were many butterflies flying in our midst, which made it all quite mystical.

Our next temple stop, Ta Keo, was built by King Jayavarman V in the 11th century. He was only 10 years old when he ascended to the throne, and he chose this location because it was close to an area his father built. He started construction of this temple when he was 17. The unfinished five-layered pyramid temple is 22 meters high and considered one of the grandest temples of Angkor due to its use of corbeling method to create vaulted ceilings.

Raul Manzano, *Metro Society* Editor-in-Chief, chanced into two monks while walking along the path to Phimeanakas (early 11th century). It used to be a royal enclosure as well as living and sleeping quarters for palace officials, holy men, guards, the king’s wives, and concubines.



Clockwise from left: This intricate silk-cotton tree is in Ta Prohm and got major footage in the ‘Lara Croft: Tomb Raider’ movie starring Angelina Jolie. Aside from these magnificent tree or root sculptures, Ta Prohm is one of the few temples bearing an inscription detailing the “79,635 indentured servants, 2,740 officials, 2,232 assistants, 615 dancers, 18 high priests. An inventory of property included a set of gold plates weighing 5 tonnes, 35 diamonds, 40,620 pearls, 4,540 precious stones, 967 veils from China, 523 parasols and 512 silk beds.” Unfortunately, all these have been looted by real tomb raiders; a misty path in the complex; the Victory Gate is one of the five gates in Angkor Thom. Both the East and Victory Gates are worth a visit; our guide and driver took us to one of the most special temples. It is 45 minutes away from the town center and worth the 34-km drive. Its well preserved carvings in pink sandstone and miniature scale make it very unique and well visited. Rediscovered in 1914 by French archaeologists and was looted by a man named Henri Marchal who would later become the French Minister for Cultural Affairs.







From top: Monks walking along the Phimeanakas; a cheerful vendor at the Psar Samaki Market or Kampot Market offering fresh produce, fruit, meat, fish and seafood; this writer shopped with Executive Sous Chef Chantha for ingredients we used for our exclusive cooking class at Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor; an array of spices, herbs, and condiments we used for our cooking class.



Lunch was at the Charcoal restaurant in the city center where local dishes and ingredients are refined to appeal to a more Western palate. It was a great place to relax after temple-hopping in the heat all morning.

After a leisurely lunch, we explored Angkor Thom (late 12th, early 13th century). It was known as the Great City with five grand gates and is surrounded by a moat. We entered the Death or East Gate and walked up the slope to walk on a tree-lined walkway for about a kilometer. Towards the end of the path, we could slowly see King Jayavarman VII's calming face on the Victory Gate, framed dramatically in between two trees. King Jayavarman VII built about 300 temples in his lifetime.

The Elephant Terrace (late 12th, early 13th century) was built by King Jayavarman VII as a viewing platform for public functions. Phimeanakas (early 11th century), which connects to the terrace, was built by King Suryavarman I. It is the royal section where the king, his officials, family, and servants lived. Most of the structures were wooden, which is why there are not many parts left. An interesting feature are the two ponds that served the royal household.

Baphuon (mid to late 11th century) was built by King Udayadityavarman II and served as a Hindu shrine for centuries before it became a Buddhist one. Some 300,000 stone blocks were labeled, dismantled, and laid out on the ground over 10 hectares so the base of the structure could be reinforced, making it a long restoration process.

By this time, we had quite our fill of temples and committed terms and common architectural details to memory. The tour package comes with a brilliant Angkor temple guidebook. It is handy and a great addition to any library. Day, our tour guide, was really the perfect guide for us. He immediately recognized the nuances of our personalities and interests and tailored the tour for us. One of the highlights of the day was the one-hour gondola cruise along the moat. Note: go on a restroom stop before taking the cruise. It was such an exquisite way to wind down with the gentle breeze, shared stories, and laughs over perfect gin and tonics and chips. Christopher Smith, who runs the ABOUTAsia Travel ([www.aboutasiatravel.com](http://www.aboutasiatravel.com)) educational program, came to join us and represent Andrew Booth, the founder of the company. The program is currently supporting 53,000 children in 108 schools in Siem Reap.

Dinner that night was graciously hosted by Noemie Payumo, the hardworking marketing communications manager, of both Raffles Hotel Le Royal in Phnom Penh where she reports to most of the week, and Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor, which she frequents during weekends. Ms. Payumo and Maria Rowena Medina, the communications executive at the Siem Reap location, are the only two Philippine nationals with the hotel group and have adapted to the local life very well. We enjoyed a candlelit dinner at Le Grand and enjoyed the fine royal fare. Khmer cuisine has been handed down over centuries by the chefs of the Royal Palace. The hotel has access to the royal Khmer recipes since they continue to cook for the royal family when they are in town. The Royal Palace sits just right across the hotel. That night, we feasted on some of the royal Khmer recipes on china marked with their special pattern and seal.

On our second day, our personal butlers woke us up, with a fresh pot of coffee, at five o'clock in the morning so we could view the sunrise in Angkor Wat (early 12th century). Built by Suryavarman II, it is perhaps the most iconic image of all of Angkor. It is the largest religious complex in the world and considered to be the crowning achievement in Khmer art and architecture. We were driven by our driver and Day in the dark towards Angkor Wat or "Small Imperial City." It is a 13-minute drive. As we waited



Clockwise from above: We walked half a kilometer on the hill overlooking a moat from the death gate and ended with a promising glimpse of a Prohm's enigmatic face at the Victory gate; a row of gondolas in the moat. These are used for sunset cocktail rides around the moat; a sweet photo of a child framed in one of the pink sandstone windows of Banteay Srei. It also shows how little this frame is.

for the day to break through the clouds, it was amazing to see hundreds of people for the sun salutations. During peak season, the crowd can go up to the thousands. The moon was still shining brightly at this hour and it was such a poignant moment to witness the moonset and sunrise almost at the same time. Seeing the sun peering through the iconic lotus towers is a must.

We skipped the other temples and made our way out of the city to see the well-preserved Bantray Srei. It is 34 kilometers away and took 45 minutes. It is an exceptional jewel of Khmer art with fine carvings in pink sandstone.

Exhausted from the heat and humidity, we went back to the hotel to enjoy its amenities and surrendered to a luxurious traditional Khmer massage known as *chad ta shai*. It is a vigorous massage with lots of kneading and twisting of the muscles. Heated herbal compresses with turmeric, ginger, and lemongrass are then applied to the body to relieve stress, boost energy, and improve blood circulation.

Ms. Payumo took us out for a local night. We took the *remorque* (the proper name for the Cambodian *tuktuk*) to the other side of town to watch the Phare modern circus—a unique theater, music, and dance telling historical and folk stories. "It was founded in 1994 by nine young Cambodian men returning home from a refugee camp after the fall of the Khmer Rouge. At the camp, they took drawing classes and found







Clockwise from left: Curried prawns; sour chicken and kaffir lime soup; appetizer trio: banana blossom salad, grilled chicken, and smoked fish; lotus root and seafood salad; deep-fried rice paper spring rolls; 'Metro Society' Editor-in-Chief, Raul Manzano, in chef's toque, apron and very much in his element during our exclusive Royal Khmer cooking class; Cafe de Angkor's colonial charm for our daily champagne breakfast. Asian and Continental dishes are served all throughout the day as well.



Clockwise from top: The biggest swimming pool in Cambodia is in Siem Reap; the Conservatory is a homey veranda for afternoon tea, coffee, happy hour; or a nightcap; an elegant Art Deco cage elevator adorns the lobby and gracefully transports guests upwards just the way they did when it first opened in 1932. Overhead, ceiling fans gently beat a rhythm and move the still air. From a cool uncluttered lobby, Art Deco black-and-white tiled halls lead you to rooms of perfect luxury.







Four specially created Personality Suites take their inspiration from people who have been closely associated with Angkor. Located in the heritage building, each is fitted with a claw-foot bathtub, and a relaxing day bed on the oversized balcony which overlooks our magnificent pool. An exclusive collection of original memorabilia distinguishes each of these luxurious suites, making each truly unique experience.

**Henri Mouhot Suite**—He was the French naturalist and explorer who “rediscovered” the legacy of the ancient Khmer civilization and through his writings introduced Angkor to Western audiences.

**Louis Delaporte Suite**—(1842-1925) He was a member of the French Mekong Exploration Commission of 1866-1873 who acquired a great admiration for Khmer art to which he devoted the rest of his life.

**Henri Marchal Suite**—(1876-1970) He was the Conservator of the Monuments of Angkor for many years and was involved in the restoration of several temples including Banteay Srei.

**John Thomson Suite**—(1837-1921) He was the scholar-photographer who was the first to photograph Angkor Wat in 1866, a task fraught with enormous practical difficulties.

**Above:** A perspective of the Henri Marchal Suite.  
**Right:** A perspective of the Cabana Suite at Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor. These are considered the most romantic with a large private terrace, a day bed, a dining table and chairs. Decorated in French-Indochina style with the use of local accents such as fabrics and leather furnishings.





Clockwise from below: The roots of the ficus tree spilling over onto the East Gopura of Ta Prohm (late 12th century) is an oft photographed area. Archaeologists discovered the site in such a dramatic state with overgrown roots growing out of the temple walls in defiant abandon. They wanted to maintain the sense of awe one feels upon seeing it and continue to preserve both the trees and the temple in the most sustainable way possible. This is definitely the spot to do temple and tree bathing in the whole complex. Ta Prohm was built by Jayavarman VII to honor his mother and served as a Mahayana Buddhist complex; Angkor Thom (Great City) could be accessed by five gates but the South Gate befits the powerful capital of the Empire that dominated mainland Southeast Asia for almost two centuries. This portal with high laterite walls is the busiest and one of the well preserved structures especially the well carved Elephant Terrace; editor-in- chief, Raul Manzano, gives his wrist to the lady so she can tie a lucky red string on him.



art to be a powerful tool for healing. When they returned home, they began offering free drawing classes to street children. Soon they opened a school, eventually offering formal K-12 education and professional arts training in the areas of visual arts (illustration, painting, graphic design, and animation), theater, music, dance, and circus. Today more than 1,200 pupils attend the public school daily and 500 attend the vocational arts training programs. All programs are offered for free.” After the performance, we all went to Pub Street for the best Italian food in town at Il Forno.

We started our third day with an early morning jaunt to Psar Samaki, the fresh herb and vegetable market with executive sous chef, Ngin

Chantha, and Ms. Medina, who is quite fluent in Khmer. Chef Chantha has been with the hotel for 18 years and enjoyed showing us their local spices and ingredients, which we all brought back to the hotel. We donned our aprons and toques and started our cooking class with Chef Chantha along with junior sous chef, Chhoeuy Reaksmeay who taught us the techniques to make royal Khmer classics that we have been enjoying during our stay. The green mango and prawn salad, a clear fish soup, and the beef *lok lak*. Assistant pastry chef, Ouch Samnang showed us how to make a beautiful pumpkin custard. We all “passed” our lessons with flying colors and enjoyed our creations.

It was our last afternoon in Siem Reap and we spent it by buying Cambodian wares from the market: herbs, spices—especially the ‘kampot’ pepper—silver, and handcrafted goods. Haggling is part of the fun shopping process. It was a packed itinerary that was so well coordinated by Ms. Payumo. A lot of effort goes into making a hotel feel like a home and the Raffles team do it so effortlessly. The best part of our days was always coming home to the colonial charm of the Raffles.🍷



Bayon Temple (late 12th, early 13th century) taken right before sunset from the ground. This largest known settlement complex once had 200 stone faces smiling enigmatically. Locals refer to these faces as images of Prohm—the Khmer pronunciation of Brahma, the Hindu god of creation that were carved into approximately 50 towers. Today, only 37 towers remain. One needs to go up two narrow flights of stairs to see the faces up close and the carving details. This was likely the final large scale temple complex built in Angkor by Jayavarman VII.