

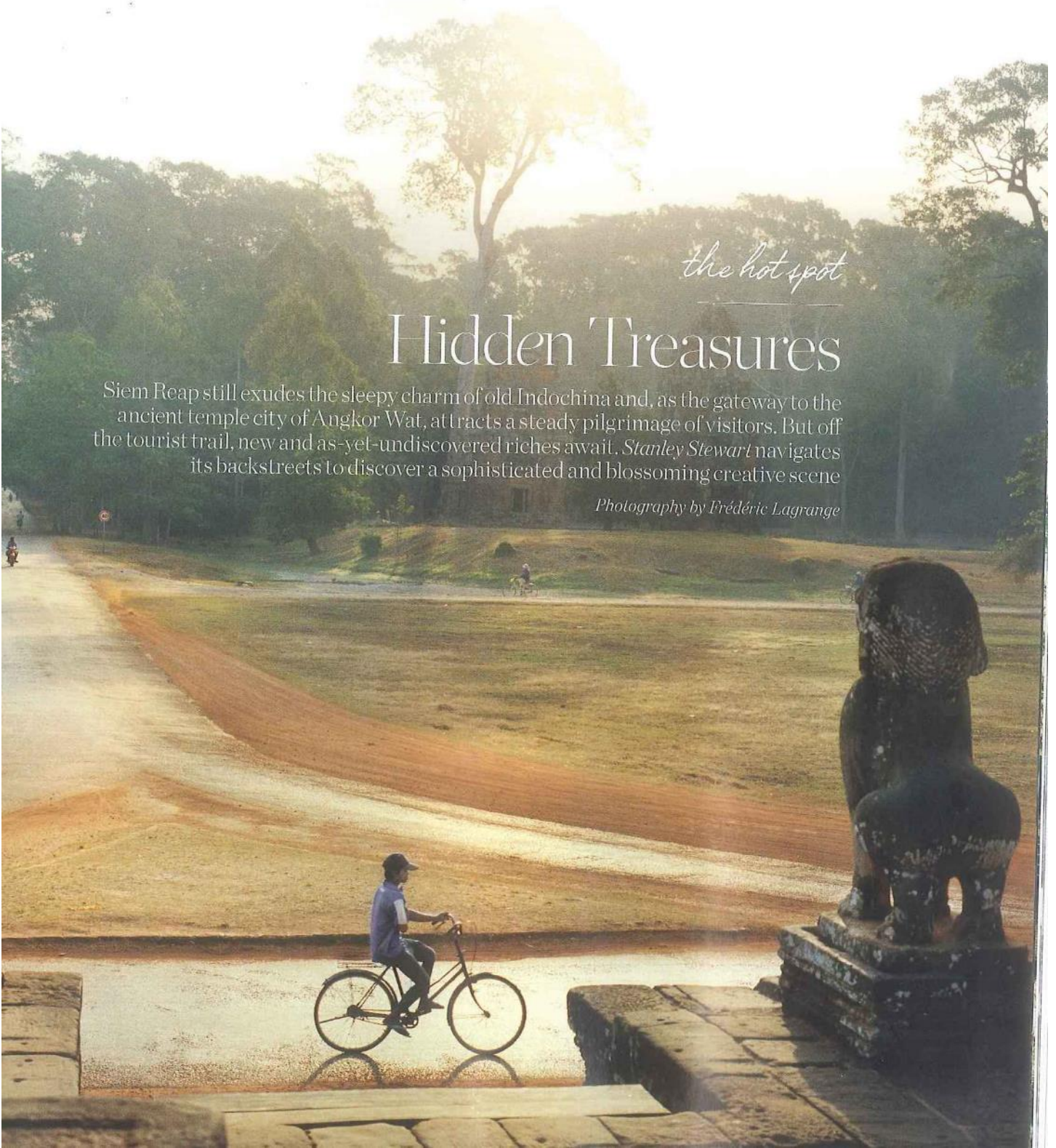
out of this world

the hot spot

Hidden Treasures

Siem Reap still exudes the sleepy charm of old Indochina and, as the gateway to the ancient temple city of Angkor Wat, attracts a steady pilgrimage of visitors. But off the tourist trail, new and as-yet-undiscovered riches await. *Stanley Stewart* navigates its backstreets to discover a sophisticated and blossoming creative scene

Photography by Frédéric Lagrange



Angkor is the original lost civilization, as mysterious as Atlantis, as evocative as Machu Picchu. A vast temple city, it broods in the jungles of northern Cambodia, in the grip of stranger figs and creeping liana. The capital of the sprawling Khmer empire, Angkor dominated Southeast Asia between the 10th and 13th centuries. For generations, its rulers competed to outdo their predecessors in the grandeur of temples and fantastical architectural visions. When the Thai invasion swept the empire away in the 15th century, the great city fell into ruin, the jungle closed in and Angkor dropped off the maps, a vanished world to be stumbled upon centuries later by confused Europeans.

The first travelers wrote of the stone faces of giants peering through the undergrowth, of temples and bare-breasted sirens enmeshed in the forest canopy. In 1860, Henri Mouhot staggered out of the jungle, claiming that Angkor was "grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome", a masterpiece by "an Eastern Michelangelo".

These days, everywhere from South Korea to South Dakota recognizes Angkor as one of the world's great cultural treasures. However, tourism sticks to narrow established channels, so it is quite possible to escape the crowds and imbibe the unique magic and atmosphere of the ruins. During one visit to Ta Keo, one of the outlying

ancient city temples, I arrived at midday, just as the crowds had returned to their hotels for lunch. The old place felt becalmed, as if time itself had slowed to a standstill. Temple guardians snored gently in hammocks strung between the kapok trees. A coconut seller, an old man in a loin cloth, settled down in an empty window frame, his head slumped forward on his knees. Dragonflies hung motionless around the reliefs of elegant *aspara* dancers, the angelic figures that adorn so many surfaces here. From the top of Ta Keo, I watched a man riding a bicycle, panniers stuffed with newly cut hay, along a dust lane towards the great impassive Buddha heads flanking a gateway in the distance.

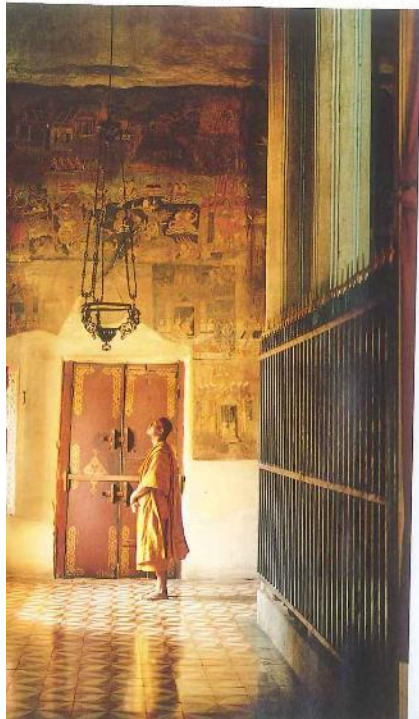
When I stepped inside the central chamber of this high terrace, I found a woman seated. She said her name was Proun. She was peeling an orange and, smiling, offered me a segment. Three ancient Buddhas - barely more than worn stumps of stone - were draped in dusty ribbons of gold cloth. For locals, faith still clings to these crumbling temples. Proun is the self-appointed attendant to these withered Buddhas, the barefoot heir to the grand priesthood who created this extravagant place a millennium ago.

"I hope to come here every day until I am too old to climb the steps," she said, while my guide translated. "It is an escape. This is an ancient place, and it allows us to step out of our lives." The ruins have become her refuge, the distant past a bulwark against more recent memories.

"My parents were both killed by the Khmer Rouge, in Phnom Penh," she said, without a trace of self-pity. "I came here to live with an aunt when I was seven. My husband died fighting the Khmer Rouge, 30 years ago. I was 19. He was cremated in the mountains where he fought. I never saw his face again," she said, her voice now breaking. I took her hands between mine, and we sat together, two strangers on the high terrace of Ta Keo, with the peel of our shared orange scattered about our feet.

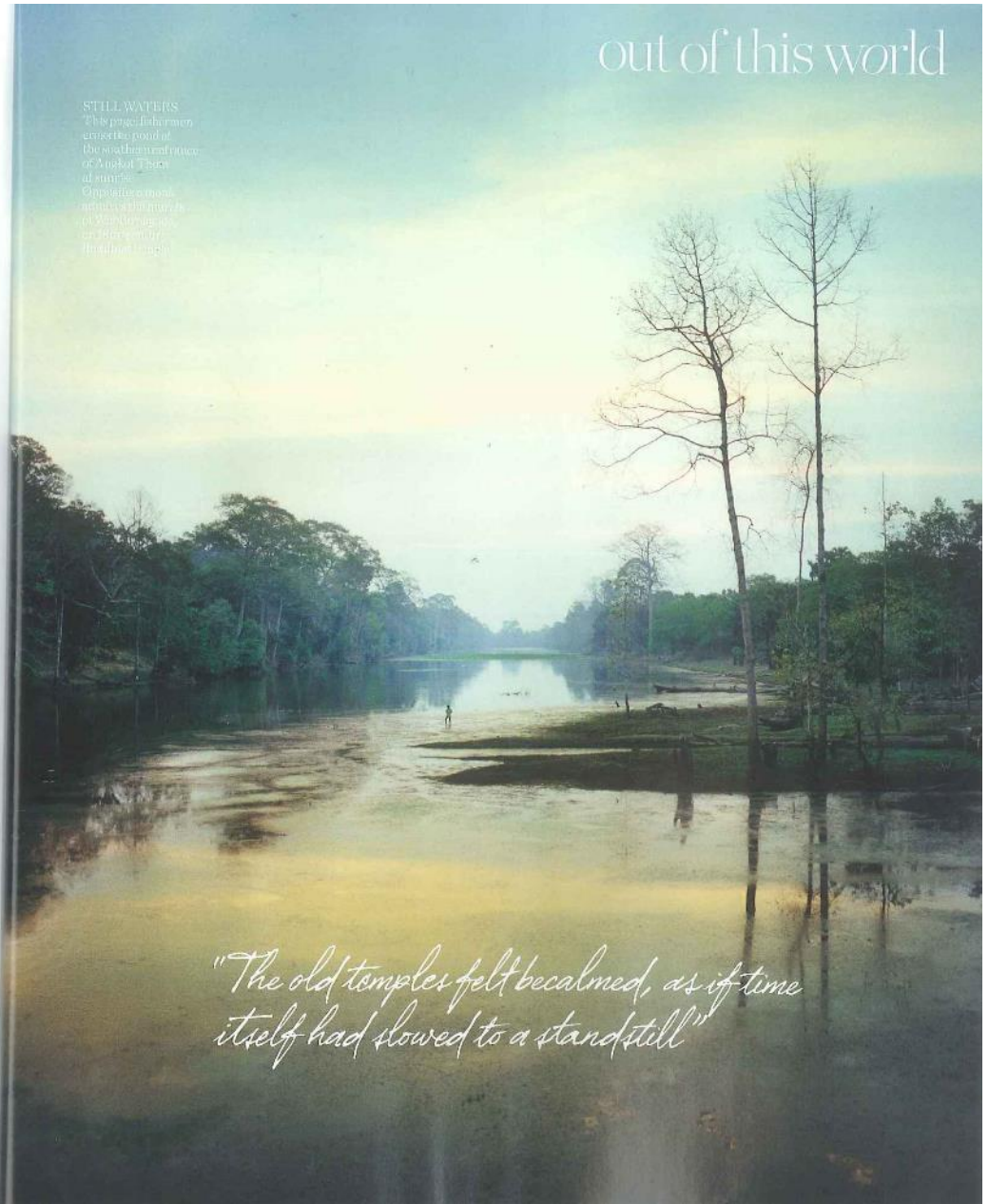
Later when I turned to leave, I looked up and saw that Proun had lit a candle in the doorway of her chamber. The ruins of a vanished civilization like Angkor, the memories of so many centuries, can make an individual life seem insignificant. Proun's lone candle, flickering in the dark hulk of the temple, reminded me it is not so. Destinations may draw us halfway around the world, but it is only individuals who allow us to connect to them, to understand them.

Siem Reap, meanwhile, is the town that has emerged from the shadows of the Angkor temples, blossoming into one of the most seductive destinations in Asia. A place of dust lanes and squeaking rickshaws, of walled gardens and elegant temples, it still oozes all the dreamy charm and exotic delicacy of Indochina. But provincial backwater it is not. Emerging from the trauma of war and with security no longer an issue, there has been a remarkable transformation in the past decade. It has become a creative hotbed for designers, artists and entrepreneurs, returning *émigrés* who escaped Cambodia's troubled years in the 1980s and 1990s. With a burgeoning expatriate population attracting sophisticated and international visitors (boutiques and galleries that would look good in Soho or Le Marais), Siem Reap has now come of age. >



out of this world

STILL WATERS
This page's fishermen
cross the road at
the weathered entrance
of Angkor Thmor
at sunrise.
Opposite a monk
admires a stone relief
of Vishnu in a
ruined temple
in the heart of
the ancient city.



"The old temples felt becalmed, as if time itself had slowed to a standstill"

the top hotels

For decades the Grand Hotel d'Angkor was the place to stay in Siem Reap, and when Raffles took it over in 1997, the renovations carefully preserved its nostalgic charm – the wrought-iron lift, the marble floors and the conservatory for afternoon tea. raffles.com

One of the newest openings in town, Sala Lodges consists of 11 traditional houses, transported from the countryside lock, stock, and stiffs to this smart designer garden and paddy fields. sala lodges.com

When the much-loved Hotel de la Paix was taken over by the Park Hyatt, it found the perfect suitor. American designer Bill Bensley renovated the hotel, and its Living Room – part-cocktail bar, part-lounge – is now one of the most stylish places in town. siemreap.park.hyatt.com

And finally our favorite, La Maison Polanka is a sanctuary at the end of a leafy lane in a residential quarter. Two traditional wooden Cambodian houses, elegantly decorated, are set in a walled tropical garden. Discreet, stylish, and tranquil, and you can even take over both dwellings. maisonpolanka.com

what to buy

The biggest name in Siem Reap's burgeoning fashion scene is Eric Raisina. Born in Madagascar, and a graduate of Paris's Institut Français de la Mode, Raisina's designs appear on the runways of New York and Paris while his gorgeous fabrics are favored by fashion houses such as Saint Laurent and Christian Lacroix. With three shops and a workshop in Siem Reap, you can expect to find glamorous designs in beautiful raw silk. ericsaisina.com

The Jasmine Boutique is another high-end boutique featuring the work of designers Kelliame Karatan & Cassandra McMillan, who share a passion for hand-woven Cambodian silks. Their clothes are bold and feminine with an eye for telling detail, and a wonderful handmade finish. jasmineboutique.net

Siem Reap's most ethical, fair-trade clothing outlet is Spicy Green Mango, whose contemporary designs are sewn by independent seamstresses in their own homes, allowing them to work and care for their families. spicygreenmango.com

Garden of Desire is the kind of jewelry boutique you dream of, full of exciting original pieces by Cambodian designer Ly Pisith, a protégé of Philippe Starck. Working mainly in silver and gold, sometimes paper-thin, Ly's mantra is "simple, clean and cool". gardenofdesire-asia.com

John McDermott has been photographing the ruins of Angkor since the mid-1990s and his haunting black and white photos are found in his two Siem Reap galleries, which sell both framed and unframed prints. mcdermottgallery.com

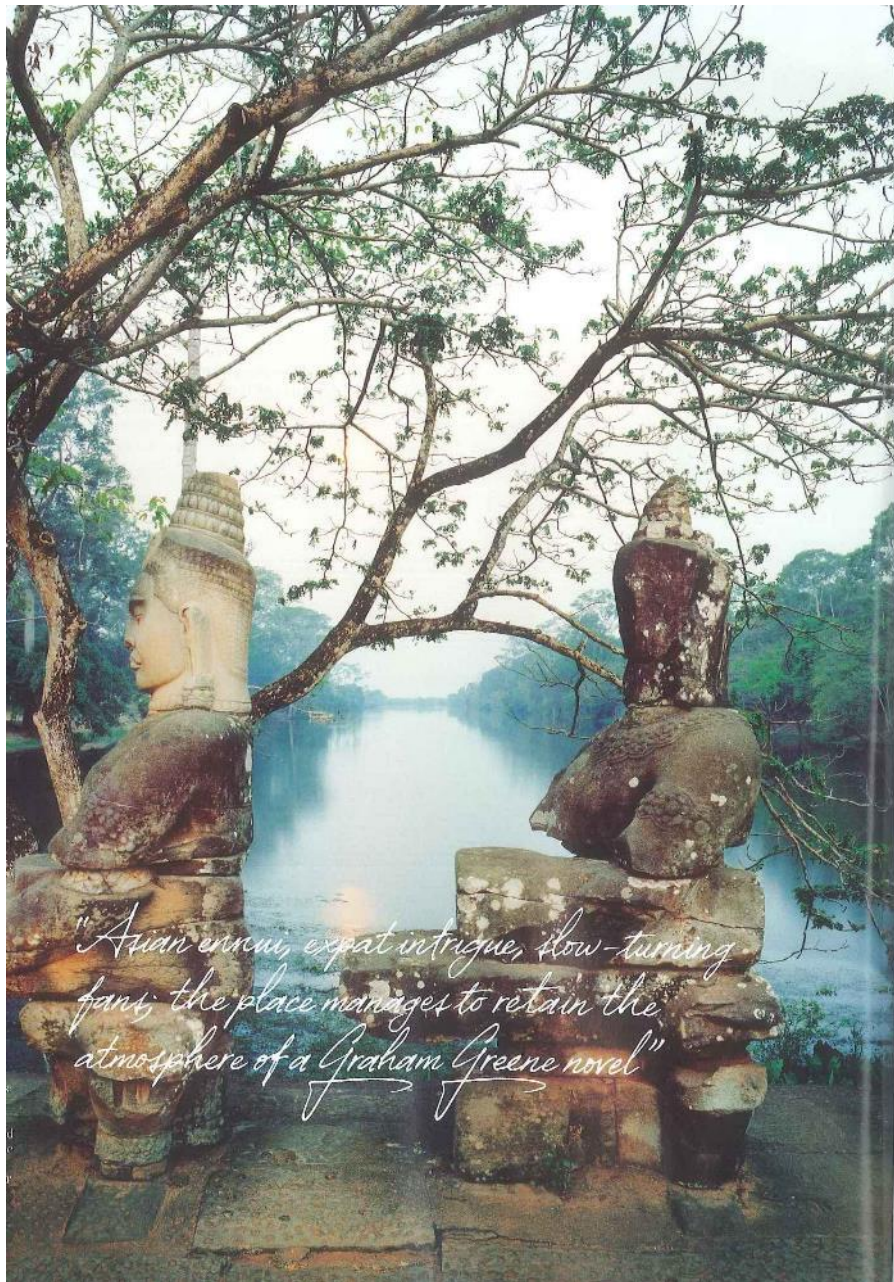
A refugee from the horrors of Cambodia's Khmer Rouge past, Lim Muy Theam, has set up a workshop, atelier and shop in a gracious villa on the outskirts >



out of this world

*"Angkor broods in the jungles
of northern Cambodia,
in the grip of strangler figs
and creeping liana"*

PHOTOGRAPHY
BY JOHN MCDERMOTT
FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



"Asian ennui, expat intrigue, slow-turning fans; the place manages to retain the atmosphere of a Graham Greene novel"

out of this world

of the town, where apprentices are trained in lacquer work, ceramics, silk weaving and gilding, creating a treasure chest of gorgeous and affordable delights. theamshouse.com

The Park Hyatt has its own gallery curated by Sasha Constable – a descendant of English landscape painter, John Constable – with revolving exhibitions of contemporary work. See Sasha's own work, too – lovely wood-block prints of temples, monks, and gardens – on her website. sashaconstable.co.uk

the hottest tables in town

A lyrical setting in a traditional wooden house, with a wide balcony of dark tropical woods and screens of exuberant vegetation, Sugar Palm has a full-on Khmer menu – ginger, limes, coconut, shrimps, saley fish pastes. Its Fish Amok, cooked in a palm leaf, is reputed to be the best in the country. thesugarpalm.com

Overlooking the river, the FCC, or Foreign Correspondents Club, manages to retain the atmosphere of a Graham Greene novel – rattan chairs, slow-turning fans, Asian ennui, expat intrigue – in spite of the fact that the foreign correspondents have moved on. In the upstairs bar with its plantation chairs, books and magazines, grab a couple of Singapore Slings, before settling down for dinner at one of the tables in the gardens. fcccambodia.com

A riverside setting amid lush gardens is the main draw at Belmond La Résidence D'Angkor, where its poolside restaurant, Ember, is the place for a Mediterranean lunch. In the evening it focuses on tapas and grills. belmond.com

the best cocktail

Miss Wong's cocktail bar is something out of 1930s Shanghai with its deep red walls, Chinese lanterns, old film posters and polished black furniture. In the absence of opium pipes, go for its signature cocktail, the Indochine Martini – vodka, ginger-infused cognac liqueur, and a splash of pineapple juice. Everyone has a fan to flutter; they come with the drinks. misswong.net

how to escape the crowds

Large tour groups can easily rob a temple visit of any atmosphere, but Angkor is a vast site with scores of evocative ruins, most of which see only a trickle of visitors. To make the most of it, rent a bicycle and set off by yourself down the long straight avenues, once the Royal Highways, to experience the dramatic site, seemingly alone. Or use a tour company such as About Asia Travel that creates individualized, unique itineraries (private rickshaws and picnics, twilights afloat in the moat of Angkor Thom...) to ensure clients are never besieged by hordes of visitors following a raised umbrella. The tour company

also donates its profits to local educational projects. aboutasiatravel.com

For the most dramatic view of the temples, and an understanding of their elegant symmetries, take to the air with the New Zealand-trained pilots of Helicopters Cambodia. Or float over the wondrous site in a hot air balloon. helicoptersecambodia.com; angkorballooning.com

The ancient art of *apsara* dance brings the temple reliefs of Angkor to life. Once performed only for the king, good dance troupes can now be seen at many of the town's hotels, with the best probably at Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor. raffles.com

Trekking, mountain biking, canoeing, and family excursions into the back country and the Cardamom Mountains are a speciality of Terre Cambodge. Or fly through the beautiful rainforest canopy surrounding the temples on an exhilarating zip-line called Flight of the Gibbon. terrecambodge.com; treetopasia.com
Specialized trips to Angkor and Siem Reap can be arranged by Ultimate Travel Company and About Asia Travel; theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk; aboutasiatravel.com ■

