

Spurned in Angkor Wat

Amidst the towering forests just outside Siem Reap are fifty temples from the time that Cambodia ruled much of modern-day Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. The ancient Angkor Kingdom rose up in 800AD when a heroic warrior named Jayavarman II defeated warring factions to declare a single, united kingdom. For over 600 years, Angkor prospered and huge temples were built to honour the Hindu gods. The most famous of these is the magnificent Angkor Wat, behind which the sun rises in the early morning, blessing its five central towers and turning sandstone walls into gold.

The five towers are the focal point of what is the largest religious monument ever built. Rectangular in shape and surrounded by a moat five kilometres long and 190 metres wide, Angkor Wat’s perimeter walls enclose 162 hectares¹. It was a temple (wat) that became a city (angkor), housing tens of buildings and a royal palace. Angkor Wat itself was the centre of the Angkor mega city that measured 1000 kilometres squared², ten times the size of present-day Paris. The Angkor area still features

¹ The following paragraphs on Angkor are greatly informed by Freeman, M. & Jacques, C (2003). *Ancient Angkor*. Bangkok, Thailand: River Books unless otherwise cited.

² Evans, D. et al (2007). A comprehensive archaeological map of the world's largest preindustrial settlement complex at Angkor, Cambodia. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 104 (36), 14277-14282. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0702525104>

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huge reservoirs kilometres long and wide, which supported an intricate water system that sustained the life of approximately 700,000 people³.

After passing through a small doorway in the stone perimeter wall, the main complex of Angkor Wat rises in front of you, standing as a pyramid of three levels with the five towers reaching sixty metres into the sky. It was built in the 12th century but the carvings on the stone walls are pristine allowing you to see what people would have looked at 900 years ago. One wall has a 94-metre-long bas-relief depicting the then King Suryavarnam II and his army, who had successfully defeated ancient rivals Siam (Thailand) and the now forgotten Champa (modern day southern Vietnam). Another wall tells the Hindu creation story of the Churning of the Sea of Milk when the gods rotated a mountain for 1000 years to create an elixir of immortality. People wander up towers, along galleries, through shaded courtyards and touch walls to feel the echoes of the old kingdom.

Tourists are advised to get to Angkor Wat at 5:30am to see the sun rise over it. They will position their cameras in front of the lotus flower pond, waiting to capture the rays of sun colour the sky behind Angkor Wat. To justify their early rise, you may hear some delight you with its

³ Stone, R. (2009, July), Divining Angkor. *National Geographic*. Retrieved from <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/>

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wonder, but the truth is that the sun rises quicker than a helium balloon, instantly switching night into day.

The real wonder of early morning can be found at other temples in the forest, where you will be alone with the mists of time. In the early morning of the 2013 election day, I decided to climb *Phnom Bakheng* (Bakheng Hill) and gaze over the forest canopy with the tops of temples, including Angkor Wat, peeking through. In the daytime, tourists can ride elephants that take them to the top of this hill, but at dawn, I sat alone pondering what that day’s election would bring for this country I now referred to as home.

After a while, a lone German tourist appeared and poked around the hilltop temple. He had been in Siem Reap for a few days and was enjoying what he found to be a peaceful country with friendly people. He was oblivious to the day’s undercurrent that would see millions demand a change in government and end with police battling an enraged mob on the streets. We walked down the hill, and he went right to see Ta Prohm, the temple where Angeline Jolie filmed *Tomb Raider* and I hopped on my bicycle to go left, deeper into the forest.

The forest was the fountain of the Angkor Empire but it outlived that mortal empire and the trees are now king. Trees stretch fifty metres upwards with trunks as thick as a car and buttress roots burst from the

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ground. At the temples of Ta Prohm and Preah Khan, the roots of the *Tetrameles Nudiflora* tree sprawl like a python over the temple walls absorbing them as part of its own. Larger than a Strangler Fig, we do not have a word for this tree in English but Cambodians call it *spung*. Angkor is a place where our words are often found to be inadequate.

Many of the trees have silvery, smooth trunks with evergreen canopies towering above your head and providing shade from the sun’s punishment. Macaque monkeys, dancing amongst branches and stone walls, feast on the fruits of the custard apple tree, while daring to rob the snack from your hand⁴.

The forest is still home for many Cambodians today. Children cycle through the South Gate of Angkor Thom temple and past the giant stone heads of Bayon on their way to school. Farmers gather rice in the fields beside where tourists get off their bus to enter Ta Prohm and cows are washed in the ancient moat surrounding Angkor Wat. While millions come to gaze at temples a thousand years old, villagers are ploughing their daily lives amongst them. At the back of Angkor Wat, I saw local villagers praying, burning incense and memorialising a loved one. We

⁴ These paragraphs have used information from: Singh M, Evans D, Tan BS, Nin CS (2015). Mapping and Characterizing Selected Canopy Tree Species at the Angkor World Heritage Site in Cambodia Using Aerial Data. PLoS ONE 10(4). <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0154548>

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may go to Angkor because of what it was in the past, but there are people living there because of what it provides today.

Unlike the suffocating, manicured chateaux of France, where every breath feels is an intrusion, there are few roped-off areas in the temples of Angkor. People can wander into every nook and cranny and press their faces right up to the carvings of the female Apsara dancers on walls. In those temples slightly more ruined, you may find yourself clambering over huge stones or crouching through collapsing doorways. People go off in all directions to explore and discover their own favourite place to imagine life as it was. Often you will find people just sitting against a temple wall, gazing and wondering. In Angkor, there is not silence but peace.

I wandered through an empty Preah Khan temple and it felt a lifetime away from the world of politics, and that day's national election [2013]. Hours had passed and it was now late morning, so I started to cycle back to Siem Reap to meet a friend for lunch. The forest wanted to keep me a little while longer though and a puncture began to hiss from my rear tyre. In Phnom Penh, you don't have to walk more than a few hundred metres to find a bicycle repairman set up on a pavement, but I was in the middle of an archaeological park seven kilometres from the main tourist part. I began to walk, trundling my bicycle alongside me.

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Thankfully a tuk-tuk driver stopped to help. I don't know why he was travelling anywhere without a paying customer, such is their care not to waste expensive petrol, but there he was beside me. He tied my bicycle to the back of his tuk-tuk and I hopped inside to be refreshed by the cooling breeze as he drove us towards Angkor Wat.

We soon arrived at a mechanic's home only to find that he was not there. Cambodians, especially self-employed ones, rarely take days off and the concept of the weekend is alien to many, but he was away voting. The tuk-tuk driver desperately scratched his head before we set off again unsure of our destination. Just as Angkor Wat was coming into view on our left, he pulled off the road to the right, veering towards some shacks where people sat with tools lying on the grass. I clambered out of the tuk-tuk and let the driver do the talking.

The repairman roused himself and wrangled the inner tube from the tyre, submerging sections of it in a basin of water. At one section, bubbles began to rise revealing where the hole was and he took the tube out of the water, dried and scrubbed the area around the hole before sealing it with molten wax. The bike was fixed. As the repairman worked, I had begun talking with the tuk-tuk driver, who had already refused payment for his time and travails. We spoke in Khmer, and he asked where I lived in Cambodia and what I worked as, before asking me about

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my marital status, how many children I had and how old I was. I was frequently a figure of curiosity for being over thirty but without children.

He was also in his thirties and married with three children. He wasn't from Siem Reap originally and had arrived in the tourist tinselled town desperate to find work. Sizing me up, the man began to ask questions about who I thought would win the election or which leader I liked more. I avoided his question explaining that this was not my country but undeterred he said I must have seen many things during my time in Cambodia. I smiled and asked if he had voted already that morning. He told me that before he "loved" the CPP, but now, he voted for the CNRP. He was angry that the CPP did more to support the wealthy *Okhnas*⁵ than the huge number of poor people struggling to eat and live. He talked about poor people being thrown off their land, of forests being cut down and corruption stealing the dreams of many. Now, he wanted change. The Cambodian People's Party was no longer serving the people; but feeding themselves with great swathes of land and money that should be Cambodia's. His view was one that many were forming; an already disgustingly rich elite was robbing the country and leaving the poor destitute.

⁵ *Okhna* is an ancient honorific title that is now given to people who donate \$100,000 for public works. It is often viewed as a mechanism to buy favour from the government.

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Cambodians do not exhibit anger by wild gesticulations. Anger is contained within, repressed below the surface. It is deeply felt but simmers in near silence. This man was angry and his eyes burned with it.

I had been struck that he used the Khmer word for love when talking about his previous support for Hun Sen and the CPP. I thought about the anger one feels when abandoned by somebody that they loved, or even worse, when cheated on and betrayed. Anger can become fury, and no matter how strong the forces of repression are, fury can erupt. The CNRP were channelling that fury into hope.

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