



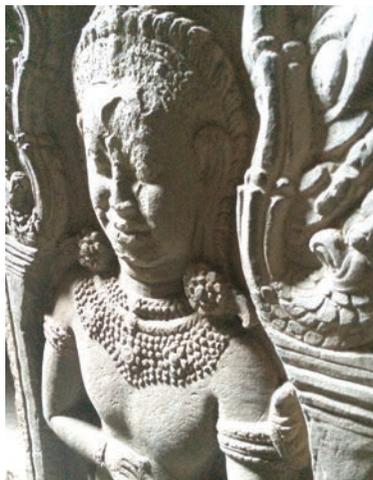
Essentials

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The Many Faces of Angkor

From the bustle of trendy Siam Reap to isolated temples in the jungle, a visit to Angkor Wat is a multifaceted experience, reports *Robin McKelvie*.



Images: Getty Images/Brian Johnston





Essentials

Travel



“It frustrates me that people think there’s just one Angkor temple, when there are over 600 spread across an ancient metropolis that it took London’s population until the 19th century to overtake,” Roland Fletcher explains, his passion brimming over his university professor calm. I have to confess to Fletcher that I’m one of those arriving in the ancient city of Angkor with a hazy idea of what to expect. Soon, though, I’m lost in the most remarkable temple complex on earth, which I discover is backed up by Siem Reap, an emerging chic jet set destination.

Almost everyone who visits the Angkor temples stays at the adjacent city of Siem Reap. In the Swinging Sixties it was a favourite of international A-List celebrities. Jackie Kennedy and Charlie Chaplin breezed through its glamorous bars and restaurants, sipping a cocktail on the terrace of the Foreign Correspondent’s Club. Then the horrors of the Khmer Rouge clouded over Cambodia in the



Top: Monks in front of Angkor Wat Temple.
Above: The first of the sun’s rays bursting through the ancient stone put on a spectacular light show.



1970s, putting Angkor virtually off limits for the best part of two decades.

Stumbling through the darkness I feel like a real life tomb raider, as I approach Angkor Wat for the first time. I haul myself up yet another step and I’m finally here, deep inside the world’s largest temple. I am just in time. The first of the sun’s rays are bursting through the ancient stone, putting on a spectacular light show. You just don’t forget your first sight of Angkor Wat. How could you? It soars

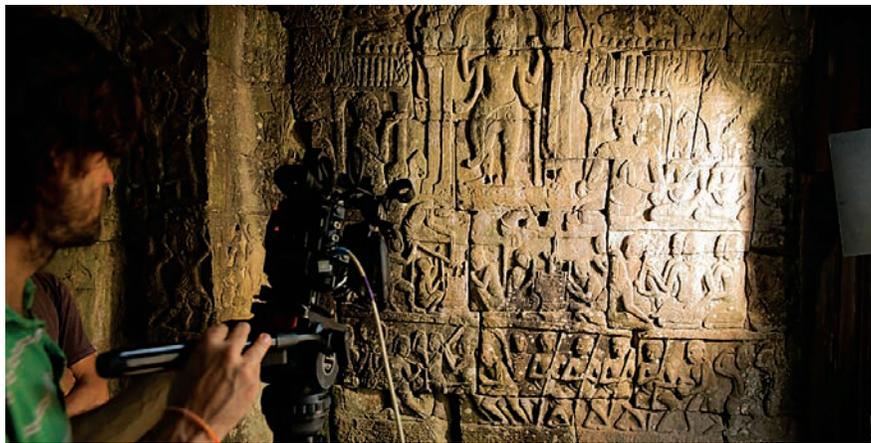
from a massive jungle-shrouded moat, its trio of elegant giant corn-cob-like spires vaulting high into the heavens. It’s easy to see why the inhabitants of Angkor felt so close to the gods here.

TODAY ANGKOR WAT is firmly back on the tourist map, as its reputation as one of the wonders of the world grows. The temple teems with tourists, but there has also been a flowering of interest in the rest of the UNESCO World Heritage-





Clockwise: A Buddhist statue at the Bayon temple; Ta Keo Temple was built around 975; Angkor Wat is probably the best-preserved of the Angkorean temples; Filming *Jungle Atlantis*.



listed 1,000-square-kilometre Angkor. Most of what remains of the ancient metropolis of Angkor is its crumbling temples. All of its wooden houses have been forever lost to the jungle.

Many people just visit Angkor Wat. I have a hunger, though, to discover more of what was the world's largest pre-industrial city. Handily I'm staying at the Amansara, a former royal residence where the room rate includes your own *remork* (similar to a Thai tuk-tuk) and a local guide.

I seek the advice of renowned local photographer and gallery owner John McDermott, who fires my enthusiasm: "Angkor encompasses the temples and all

the life that goes on around them – forests and small villages, as well as the ancient ruins. As a photographer it is the periphery of these places that I find most interesting."

John points me in the direction of the Bayon. I hike up scores of steep stone steps into a world where I'm vastly outnumbered by giant Buddha heads. There are more than 200 in total, each with their own unique expression staring out over the lush jungle as they have done since the 12th century, when the Bayon was built as the state temple of Mahayana Buddhist King Jayacarman VII.

I continue on the *Tomb Raider* trail, following in the footsteps of Hollywood's

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version, Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie). Scenes from the movie were shot at Ta Prohm and it's easy to see why at this most dramatic of temples. My guide wakes me at 4am, as I'm determined to catch the sunrise. We arrive as the nocturnal inhabitants of the jungle retreat and the first chink of light breaks through the dense canopy. The ruins here look like they are losing a spectacular battle with the jungle. A web of thick vegetation, tangled tree trunks and gnarled roots weaves in and around the wealth of statues, towers and sculptures.

BACK AT THE Amansara, where Roland Fletcher gives lectures, I catch up over lunch. He reveals I've still only scratched the surface. He should know as he is an Angkor specialist who worked

on the BBC's acclaimed *Jungle Atlantis* documentary. This project utilised pioneering laser technology to create a remarkable picture of what the medieval world's greatest metropolis would have looked liked.

"The LiDAR Project allowed us to see the sheer scale of Angkor for the first time. For me the colossal Western Barai irrigation scheme – which anyone can visit – is even more impressive than Angkor Wat, which is a medium-sized piece of engineering compared to what was the pre-modern world's largest single object, eclipsing the Great Wall."

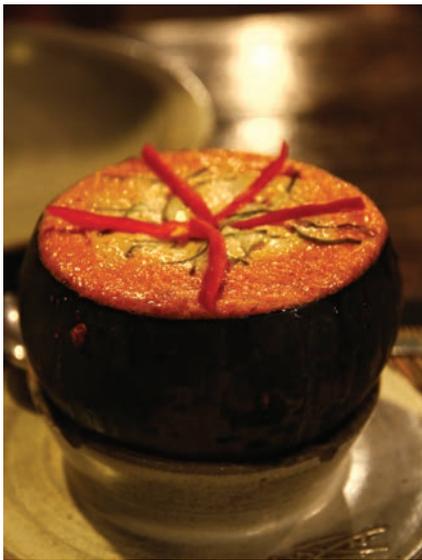
Buoyed by Fletcher's enthusiasm I set out with my guide to visit some of the more remote temples of Ta Keo, Ta Nai and Preah Khan. We switch from the remork to a sturdier old-style Jeep to

Above: Ta Prohm has been left in the same dramatic condition in which it was found, with trees invading and growing out of the ruins.

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tackle the rugged jungle trails. Delving deeper now, the crowds are left far behind. In place of chattering phones and selfie sticks are the myriad sounds of the jungle, the chirp of exotic birds, the crackle of an animal I cannot even see moving just on the edge of the ruins. The jungle wraps its velvety cloak around the ruins, wilder ruins, so I have to ramble over rocks and slip over boulders to explore them. I'm immersed in the world that Fletcher and McDermott have become so beguiled by.

These remote sites won't stay free of tourists forever. I see signs flagging up restoration projects backed by China,





India and America as I head back to Siem Reap. There are plans for new roads too and Siem Reap airport is expanding.

IN SIEM REAP MAN already seems to have won his battle against the jungle. Sam Clark, founder and director of Experience Travel Group, has witnessed the city transforming itself over the post last few years: "The majestic temples have attracted plenty of tourist attention in the past few years, and Siem Reap, the gateway town to these temples, has upped its game to cater to the increased demand," he explains.

I take a stroll with the jet set ghosts of Jackie Kennedy and Charlie Chaplin and sip a cocktail on the terrace at the Foreign Correspondent's Club. The club still stands proudly on the banks of the

Clockwise from top left: Preah Khan; Foreign Correspondent's Club; Amansara; A spicy Cambodian amok at Sugar Palm.

Siem Reap River. Over a dinner of Khmer specialities I chat to Douglas Moe, who has worked here for over a decade. In recent years he has witnessed the boom times return for Siem Reap. "The town is buzzing again with people flocking here from all over the world," he beams. "Business is good and once again the glamour is back in Siem Reap".

It certainly is. Outside the cosseted world of the Amansara, with its slick service and superb spa, the local cafes, bars, restaurants and shops are booming. Chic boutiques and international brands are joining the existing array of independent art galleries and craft shops that sprinkle the city. At Sugar Palm I

feast on a delicious stir-fried beef salad and a spicy Cambodian amok (a rich fish soup). The hottest ticket in town is Cuisine Wat Damnak. Here in the shadow of Angkor Wat long lost Khmer dishes are being brought back to life by mercurial French head chef Johannes Riviere.

On my last night as I watch the crowds gather for sunset at Angkor Wat and the restaurants in Siem Reap bustle into life I dream of the other Angkor that lies deeper in the black of the jungle where the tourist buses don't venture. It is an intoxicating otherworldly place where you feel more like a tomb raider than just another tourist. Take a little time, make the effort and follow the advice of Angkor experts like Fletcher and McDermott and you too can gaze through this tantalising window into another time, a time when Angkor was the largest city in the world.

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