

In the footsteps of Chaplin, Kennedy...and Lara Croft

Cambodia is steeped in culture and history and is deservedly back on the tourist map, finds **Ian Morrison**

Moving cautiously through the darkness, I feel like a real tomb raider as I approach Angkor Wat for the first time. I drag myself up another step. Just in time: the first of the sun's rays are bursting across the ancient stone.

You don't forget your first sight of Angkor Wat. How could you? The world's largest temple complex soars from a massive jungle-shrouded moat, its trio of spires vaulting high like giant corn cobs

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into the heavens. Welcome to Cambodia, an ancient land awash with treasures only starting to emerge as a tourist destination — and where the second most important site, Preah Vihear, was declared safe to visit only last October.

It is a country with a rich culture evident in everyday life, in food, music and the revival of traditional arts after the dark days of the Khmer Rouge.

At Angkor, there is much more than just one temple. Unesco's World Heritage listing covers more than 400 square miles of Angkor and the Khmer Empire, where once 600 temples once stood. There is Bayon, where 200 giant Buddha heads recline, each with its own expression, staring out over the jungle. Ta Prohm should look familiar — this was where Angelina Jolie ventured in *Tomb Raider*. It is instantly cinematic, a web of thick vegetation, tangled tree trunks and gnarled roots weaving around a maze of statues, towers and sculptures.

InsideAsia Tours specialises in small group tours and fully-tailored trips to South East Asia, offering crowd-free ways to enjoy sights, whether in a gondola on an Angkorian waterway, or by tuk tuk to distant temples.

In Siem Reap, the town by Angkor Wat which is now attracting international hotels and boutiques, I stroll with the jet



Contemplation: an orange-robed Buddhist monk amid the tumbledown splendour of a temple

set ghosts of Jackie Kennedy and Charlie Chaplin and sip a cocktail at the Foreign Correspondents' Club. The Phare Circus provides a contrasting blast of Khmer entertainment.

InsideAsia's new 10-night, fully-tailored Hidden Temples of Cambodia tour has private guides to show visitors such delights as Preah Vihear, a delightfully preserved, Unesco-listed Hindu temple complex renowned for its decoration and the views it offers from its perch 500 metres high on an escarpment.

Any visit to the country has to include Phnom Penh, the capital, to admire the

royal palace and the city's crumbling colonial grandeur and to experience the horrific Khmer Rouge years by visiting the former Tuol Sleng Prison (now a poignant museum) and the desperately tragic "Killing Fields" on the city's edge.

Perhaps it is a relief to escape to the peaceful countryside, to peruse local markets and be welcomed in villages seemingly unchanged for centuries. Or to head for adventure in the dramatic Cardamom Mountains, an ideal base for a jungle trekking trip. The list goes on in a country that today offers far more than just the world's largest temple complex.

Have a whale of a time in the beguiling Azores

Robin McKelvie finds this Atlantic archipelago chock full of attractions designed to bring out the adventurer in you

The Azores are one of the world's great adventure travel secrets. They are all the more remarkable as this epic land, which evokes Hawaii and New Zealand, takes even less time to fly to from the UK than Tenerife.

This beguiling Portuguese archipelago spreads its tentacles across nine vastly different islands in the most westerly reaches of Macaronesia. It is an Atlantic Ocean escape off the beaten track that constantly surprises. The Azores, which boast Portugal's highest mountain (Pico at 2,351m), were first settled as recently as the 15th century and today are the

only place in Europe where tea is still grown commercially.

Comparisons with the volcanic Hawaii and mountainous New Zealand ring true, but parts of the Azores also recall stretches of the Scottish coast, while one of our whale watching party described their rich pastures and stonewalled fields as "Yorkshire on a volcano".

Archipelago Choice specialises in the activity and wildlife holidays for which the islands provide the ideal setting. On offer is everything from birdwatching, hiking and cycling, to coastering, kayaking and scuba diving. Members of staff travel there at least once every year to maintain their expert knowledge.

The Azores work well for everyone from single travellers, couples looking for something a little different and adventurous groups, right through to families. After one visit with my family, instead of being bored on a beach for a week my kids headed back to school to thrill their playground pals with tales of canyoning down gorges and swimming in the ocean with dolphins.

As more people become interested in visiting the Azores, flight availability is picking up and so is the range of activities. In 2016 Archipelago Choice is launching Darwin Trail Cycling. It takes its cue from the time when Darwin's *Beagle* docked in Angra do Heroismo in Terceira on its way back from the Galapagos. The famously curious Darwin couldn't resist exploring and this tour



follows in his footsteps, checking out the endemic flora and fauna in the island's nature reserves.

A key attraction for the Azores as an adventure destination is the value for money and quality of accommodation. The Terra Nostra Garden Hotel was named Leading Boutique Hotel in Portugal at last year's World Travel Awards. Or how about Casa do Garajau, a traditional, romantic lava stone cottage by the ocean? Then there is Argonauta, Europe's westernmost guesthouse, which

Kicks in the RIB:

Whale watching from a rigid inflatable boat, with Mount Pico in the background

boasts natural rock pools for swimming.

Wherever you stay, you will find it hard to resist whale watching. The nutrient rich waters here harbour more than a quarter of the world's whale species. You have opportunities to be guided by a marine biologist and to get up close and personal with these mighty cetaceans from a restored, traditional whaling canoe.

This is the sort of experience that makes this otherworldly Portuguese archipelago in the Atlantic so special.

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