

Sunday March 27

After breakfast in the hotel we were driven to Angkor Wat for our 2 ½ hour visit. The local guide gave us a good deal on not only the history of the site – why it was built, why it was abandoned, how it has changed and when it was re-discovered – but on the religious beliefs of the Hindus who built it and the Buddhists who took it over in the later centuries of its function as a temple. He was very interesting to listen to, quite amusing at times but probably took a little too long with the “background” which took away from our opportunity to simply admire the carvings and sculpture that literally cover every part of the temple. We felt that if this were our only visit here, we would have got a quick overview but would have missed a lot and would not have the same appreciation that we have for the site.



Bus “A” Tour Group at Angkor Wat

The temple complex is huge! The main entrance promenade (which we did last on this particular tour) is probably over a kilometer in length and crosses a wide moat which completely encircles the temple itself. This was representative of the ocean, and the temple is raised above the level ground to represent a mountain. Hence the temple “spires” (all shaped like a lotus flower) are at the highest points, to be closer to the gods and Nirvana.

The main part of the temple is built on three levels, the last of which was closed today because of some Buddhist monk celebration; we are almost upon the Buddhist New Year.

The lowest level has four galleries, each a kilometer in length and absolutely covered in carvings which tell the story of the various Hindu gods and their exploits. The “life stories” seem very contrived to us (the gods changing in form between human, animal, reptile, etc.) but nevertheless the carved characters are fascinating and beautifully formed. They must have been spectacular when they were painted in the first centuries of the Angkor dynasty. At that time a million people lived here – and it would seem that every one of them must have worked on the temple because it was completed within a forty

year period.

Throughout the temple are carvings of the female form from which the Apsara dancing is inspired. It is said that there are thousands here – all different in facial features, hairstyle and headdress as well as representing women (mostly young) of all different classes and covering a wide range of body size and shape. Our guide gave us his interpretation of what the carvings represented (virgin, married, pregnant, divorced, etc.) which provided some “color” to his presentation, whether or not it was the intent of the original artist.







Angkor



Wat

The temples of Angkor, built by the Khmer civilization between 802 and 1220 AD, represent one of humankind's most astonishing and enduring architectural achievements. From Angkor the Khmer kings ruled over a vast domain that reached from Vietnam to China to the Bay of Bengal. The structures one sees at Angkor today, more than 100 stone temples in all, are the surviving remains of a grand religious, social and administrative metropolis whose other buildings - palaces, public buildings, and houses - were built of wood and have long since decayed and disappeared.



Overall, however, whatever the religious beliefs of those who built the temple or of those of us who now view it, no-one can leave without a sense of awe at the scale of the project and the beauty of the presentation. From the sheer size of the temple to the minute intricacies of a tiny segment of carving, it must be one of the greatest wonders of the world, rivalling manmade structures such as the cathedrals of Europe, for example, as well as the enormous natural phenomena such as Victoria Falls or canyons of Utah.

It should be on everyone's "bucket list" and even after our second visit I hope that I can see it again in the future.

After lunch we had another two hour visit; this time to Angkor Thom Wat in the old city of Bayon. This city (again one million people) had been built only 30 years after Angkor and (although it wasn't made absolutely clear) presumably was populated by those who had lived at Angkor. The two sites are only a few miles apart and it appears that Angkor, despite being a very large complex, was not that easily defended so Thom (Bayon) was built within city walls.

The main temple in the huge area is still in the midst of major excavation and study and I think it was perhaps not even open for visitors during our last visit just a few years ago. Certainly we don't recall climbing the very steep staircases and walking through the narrow chambers at the top before today. Once again, the carvings, while not as numerous as those at Angkor, were of the same style and intricacy and told the same story.

In addition to the temple there is also a huge flat (now grassy) area which our guide called the coliseum. Here the game of polo had been played (imported from and by the Mongolians) – but with a difference to today's game. The "ball" was the head of some unfortunate who had crossed with the king!





Angkor Thom

Another feature of Bayon is the very long elephant wall. This is the wall that runs below a long promenade and is filled with elephant reliefs and even a number of sculptures of elephant. It is also where the statue of the “Leper King” was found (now in the National Museum), although the name, given by the early French explorers and based on the appearance of the king in the statue, is now thought to be misplaced. In fact (?) the king was very careful not to interface with the common folk and, especially, his concubines were examined in great detail to ensure their cleanliness – and their virginity. So, it wasn’t clear exactly how his statue was determined to be that of a leper, except that when found it was covered in a white/green lichen and a number of limbs were missing.



So, today we have seen the two greatest temples in the Angkor area and, unlike the last time we were here, the weather cooperated. It was much cooler (probably not even 80F), the humidity was tolerable and there was a breeze most of the day. It made for a very interesting and pleasant visit.

Tonight we dined downtown at a Khmer restaurant and enjoyed another very good meal.

Monday March 28

This morning we visited two more temples which were about a 45 minute drive from the hotel. The first was Banteay Srei, which was built not by a king but by a prime minister and was built almost two hundred years before Angkor Wat. Because it was not commissioned by a king it is built on level ground and is nowhere near the scale of Angkor or Thom. However, it does have many beautiful carvings (some experts believe the best are here) in the same art form as those at the better known temples.



*Banteay
Srei*

Following Banteay, we then went to visit the temple at Taprohm. This one has not been cleared from its jungle overgrowth to anywhere near the extent of the others and so we saw trees growing in, around and through parts of the buildings, many of which were in a partially ruined condition.

Restoration work is ongoing but it would appear that at least some of the more impressive tree roots and branches that are taking over the buildings will be left as they are to provide some semblance of the way things were when they were re-discovered in the late 19th century. This was the site where the movie "Tomb Raider" was set.



Taprohm



In the afternoon we visited the old market in Siem Reap again and did some more shopping before our farewell dinner in Cambodia at what was billed as the best restaurant (“Nest”) in Cambodia in 2009. Our guide had said that it had the best steak so there were a number in the group who were really looking forward to a medium rare filet mignon. However, the meal was entirely Khmer and the beef dish was small chunks of beef in a mild sauce, with rice and potatoes. I thought it was excellent – as was the rest of the meal – but I am sure there were a few who felt let down. We finished the evening in the hotel bar where about a dozen of us gathered for a final drink in Cambodia.

Siem Reap

Tuesday March 29



Hotel Sofitel, Seim Reap



After breakfast we went to the Angkor Artisan’s workshop (and store!). This was established to provide trade skills to locals which could then be taken back to their own communities. The pieces were made from stone, wood, silk and several other local materials and all had Cambodia art as a basis. Many pieces were copies of the artwork we had seen in the Wats and I believe the guide

said that they actually used some in the restoration work that is taking place at Angkor and other temples. We had been “warned” that the prices were very steep (as they often in such establishments that are controlled by the government and made by “artisans”) but we found them acceptable enough to make a couple of purchases.

We were back at the hotel by 10:30 as we had to have our cases out of the room and check out by noon. There was a tour in the afternoon to a silk farm (and, of course, more opportunity to buy) but we opted out and had a leisurely lunch and a lazy afternoon in the hotel.

At 5:30 we left for the airport and had a lot of hanging around until our flight at 9:30. The 1 ½ flight to Hanoi was followed by Customs and Immigration and then a 45 minute bus ride to the downtown hotel (Sofitel Metropole; supposedly in the top twenty in the world). So, it was 1am before we got to bed.

