

Temples of Angkor

Welcome to the heart and soul of Cambodia. The temples of Angkor are a source of inspiration and national pride to all Khmers as they struggle to rebuild their lives after years of terror and trauma. Today, the temples are a point of pilgrimage for all Cambodians, and no traveller to the region will want to miss their extravagant beauty.

Angkor is the perfect fusion of creative ambition and spiritual devotion. The Cambodian ‘god-kings’ of old each strove to better their ancestors in size, scale and symmetry, culminating in the world’s largest religious building, Angkor Wat. The hundreds of temples surviving today are but the sacred skeleton of the vast political, religious and social centre of Cambodia’s ancient Khmer empire; a city that, at its zenith, boasted a population of one million when London was a scrawny town of 50,000. The houses, public buildings and palaces of Angkor were constructed of wood – now long decayed – because the right to dwell in structures of brick or stone was reserved for the gods.

Some visitors assume they will be templd out within a day or two, but soon discover the sheer diversity in design among the temples that switches dramatically from one god-king to another. Come face to face (quite literally) with Bayon, one of the world’s weirdest buildings; experience the excitement of the first European explorers at Ta Prohm, where nature runs riot; or follow the sacred river of a thousand lingas like pilgrims of old. If these holy sites were anywhere else in the region they would have top billing. One day at Angkor? Sacrilege! Don’t even consider it.

HISTORY Early Years

The Angkorian period spans more than 600 years from AD 802 to 1432. This incredible period of history saw the construction of the temples of Angkor and the Khmer empire consolidate its position as one of the great powers in Southeast Asia. This era encompasses periods of decline and revival, and wars with rival powers in Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar. This brief history deals only with the periods that produced the temples that can be seen at Angkor.

The Angkorian period began with the rule of Jayavarman II (r 802–50). He was the first to unify Cambodia’s competing kingdoms before the birth of Angkor. His court was situated at various locations, including Phnom

Jayavarman II spent his formative years on the island of Java, at the court of the Shailendras Kingdom, and may have been inspired by the Hindu temples of Prambanan and the great Buddhist temple of Borobudur.

ANGKOR EXPERIENCES

- See the sun rise over the holiest of holies, **Angkor Wat** (p154), the world’s largest religious building
- Contemplate the serenity and splendour of the **Bayon** (p161), its 216 enigmatic faces staring out into the jungle
- Witness nature reclaiming the stones at the mysterious ruin of **Ta Prohm** (p166), the *Tomb Raider* temple
- Stare in wonder at the delicate carvings adorning **Banteay Srei** (p175), the finest seen at Angkor
- Trek deep into the jungle to discover the River of a Thousand Lingas at **Kbal Spean** (p176)

TOP 10 KINGS OF ANGKOR

A mind-numbing array of kings ruled the Khmer empire from the 9th century AD to the 14th century. All of their names include the word ‘*varman*’, which means ‘armour’ or ‘protector’. Forget the small fry and focus on the big fish in our Top 10:

- **Jayavarman II** (r 802–50) Founder of the Khmer empire in AD 802
- **Indravarman I** (r 877–89) Builder of the first *baray* (reservoir), and of Preah Ko and Bakong
- **Yasovarman I** (r 889–910) Moved the capital to Angkor and built Lolei and Phnom Bakheng
- **Jayavarman IV** (r 928–42) Usurper king who moved the capital to Koh Ker
- **Rajendravarmn II** (r 944–68) Builder of Eastern Mebon, Pre Rup and Phimeanakas
- **Jayavarman V** (r 968–1001) Oversaw construction of Ta Keo and Banteay Srei
- **Suryavarman I** (r 1002–49) Expanded the empire into much of Laos and Thailand
- **Udayadityavarman II** (r 1049–65) Builder of the pyramidal Baphuon and the Western Mebon
- **Suryavarman II** (r 1112–52) Legendary builder of Angkor Wat and Beng Mealea
- **Jayavarman VII** (r 1181–1219) The king of the god-kings, building Angkor Thom, Preah Khan and Ta Prohm

Kulen (p177), 40km northeast of Angkor Wat, and Roluos (p173; known then as Hariharalaya), 13km east of Siem Reap.

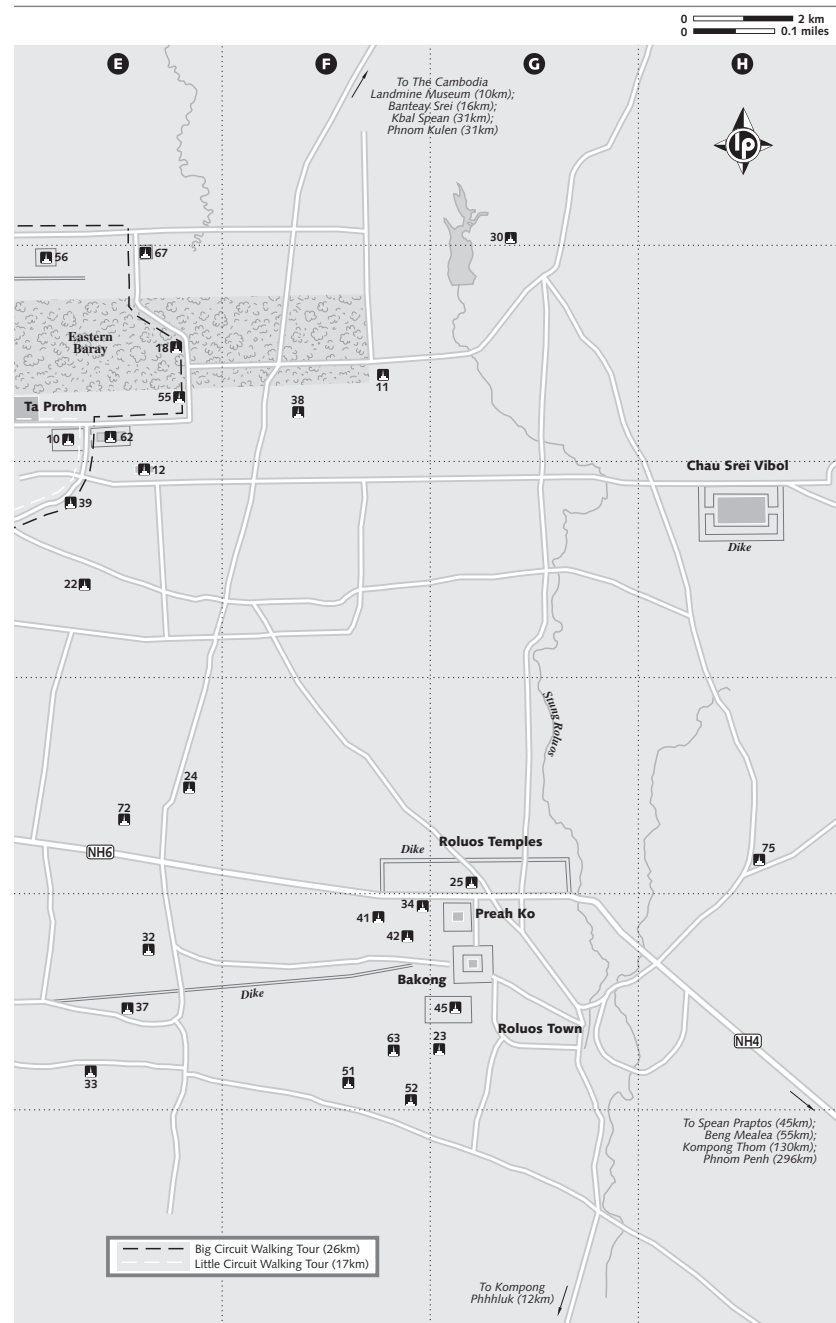
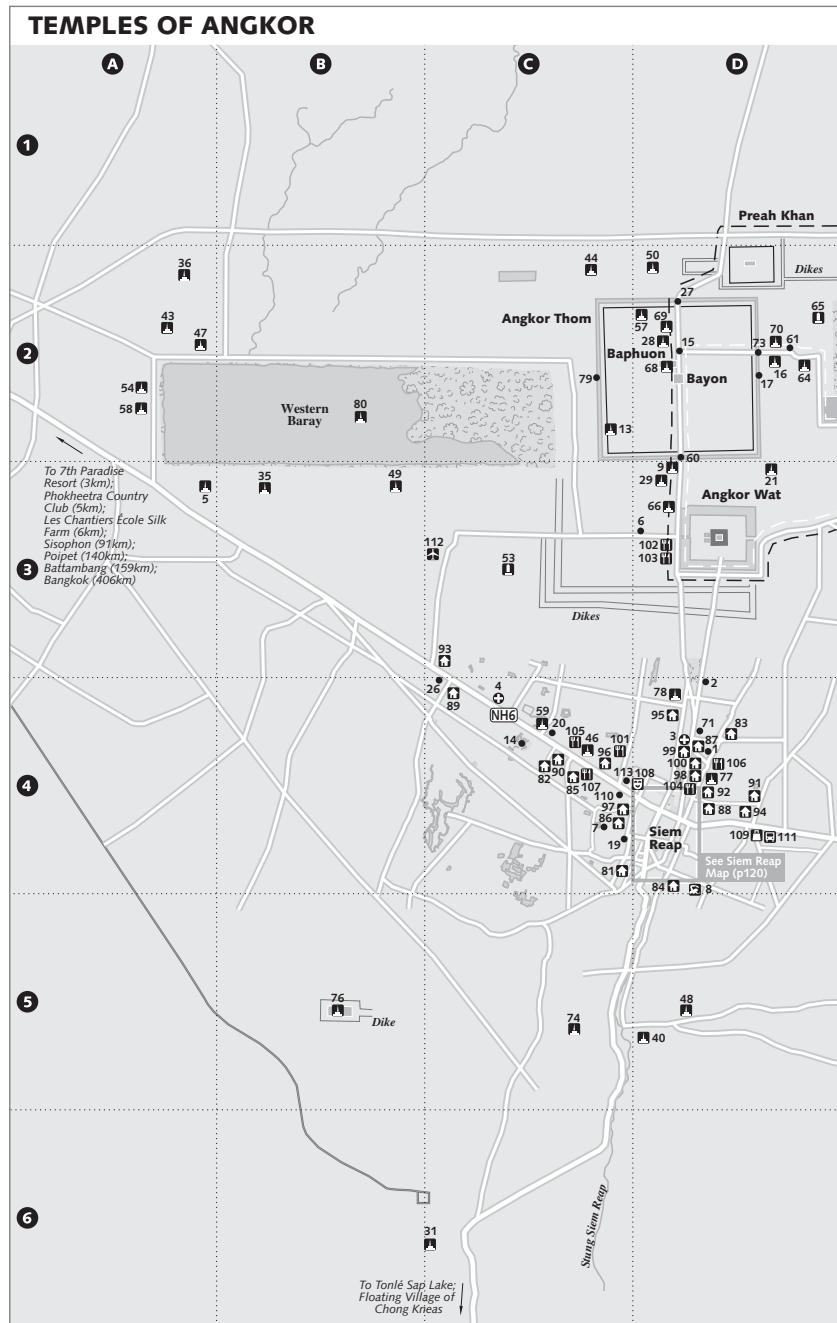
Jayavarman II proclaimed himself a *devaraja* (god-king), the earthly representative of Hindu god Shiva. Jayavarman built a ‘temple-mountain’ at Phnom Kulen, symbolising Shiva’s dwelling place of Mt Meru, the holy mountain at the centre of the universe. This set a precedent that became a dominant feature of the Angkorian period and accounts for the staggering architectural productivity of the Khmers at this time.

Indravarman I (r 877–89) is believed to have been a usurper, and probably inherited the mantle of *devaraja* through conquest. He built a 6.5 sq km *baray* (reservoir) at Roluos and established Preah Ko (p174). The *baray* was the first stage of an irrigation system that created a hydraulic city, the ancient Khmers mastering the cycle of nature to water their lands. It also had religious significance as, according to legend, Mt Meru is flanked by lakes. As is often the case, form and function work together in harmony. Indravarman’s final work was Bakong (p174), a pyramidal representation of Mt Meru.

Indravarman I’s son Yasovarman I (r 889–910) looked further afield to celebrate his divinity and glory in a temple-mountain of his own. He first built Lolei (p174) on an artificial island in the *baray* established by his father, before beginning work on the Bakheng. Today this hill is known as Phnom Bakheng (p168), a favoured spot for viewing the sunset over Angkor Wat. A raised highway was constructed to connect Phnom Bakheng with Roluos, 16km to the southeast, and a large *baray* was constructed to the east of Phnom Bakheng. Today it is known as the Eastern Baray (p172), but has entirely silted up. Yasovarman I also established the temple-mountains of Phnom Krom (p174) and Phnom Bok (p175).

After the death of Yasovarman I, power briefly shifted from the Angkor region to Koh Ker (p264), around 80km to the northeast, under another usurper – Jayavarman IV (r 928–42). In AD 944 power returned again to Angkor under the leadership of Rajendravarmn II (r 944–68), who built the Eastern Mebon (p172) and Pre Rup (p173). The reign of his son Jayavarman V (r 968–1001) produced the temples Ta Keo (p169) and Banteay Srei (p175), the latter built by a Brahman rather than the king.

For Indian Hindus, the Himalayas represent Mt Meru, the home of the gods, while the Khmer kings of old adopted Phnom Kulen as their symbolic Mt Meru.



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Classical Age

The temples that are now the highlight of a visit to Angkor – Angkor Wat and those in and around the walled city of Angkor Thom – were built during the classical age. The classical appellation conjures up images of a golden age of abundance and leisurely temple construction, but while this period is marked by fits of remarkable productivity, it was also a time of turmoil, conquests and setbacks. The great city of Angkor Thom owes its existence to the fact that the old city of Angkor – which stood on the same site – was destroyed during the Cham invasion of 1177.

Suryavarman I (r 1002–49) was a usurper to the throne who won the day through strategic alliances and military conquests. Although he adopted the Hindu cult of the god-king, he is thought to have come from a Mahayana Buddhist tradition and may even have sponsored the growth of Buddhism

in Cambodia. Buddhist sculpture certainly became more commonplace in the Angkor region during his time.

Little physical evidence of Suryavarman I's reign remains at Angkor, but his military exploits brought much of southern Thailand and southern Laos under the control of Angkor. His son Udayadityavarman II (r 1049–65) embarked on further military expeditions, extending the empire once more, and building Baphuon (p163) and the Western Mebon (p173).

From 1066 until the end of the century, Angkor was again divided as rival factions contested the throne. The first important monarch of this new era was Suryavarman II (r 1112–52), who unified Cambodia and extended Khmer influence to Malaya and Burma (Myanmar). He also set himself apart religiously from earlier kings through his devotion to the Hindu deity Vishnu, to whom he consecrated the largest and arguably most magnificent of all the Angkorian temples, Angkor Wat (p154).

The reign of Suryavarman II and the construction of Angkor Wat signifies one of the high-water marks of Khmer civilisation. However, there were signs that decline was waiting in the wings. It is thought that the hydraulic system of reservoirs and canals that supported the agriculture of Angkor had by this time been pushed beyond its limits, and was slowly starting to silt up due to overpopulation and deforestation. The construction of Angkor Wat was a major strain on resources, and, on top of this, Suryavarman II led a disastrous campaign against the Dai Viet (Vietnamese) late in his reign.

In 1177 the Chams of southern Vietnam, then the Kingdom of Champa and long annexed by the Khmer empire, rose up and sacked Angkor. They burned the wooden city and plundered its wealth. Four years later Jayavarman VII (r 1181–1219) struck back, emphatically driving the Chams out of Cambodia and reclaiming Angkor.

Jayavarman VII's reign has given scholars much to debate. It represents a radical departure from the reigns of his predecessors. For centuries the fount of royal divinity had reposed in the Hindu deity Shiva (and, occasionally, Vishnu). Jayavarman VII adopted Mahayana Buddhism and looked to Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, for patronage during his reign. In doing so he may well have been converting to a religion that already enjoyed wide popular support among his subjects. It may also be that the destruction of Angkor was such a blow to royal divinity that a new religious foundation was thought to be needed.

During his reign, Jayavarman VII embarked on a dizzying array of temple projects that centred on Baphuon, which was the site of the capital city destroyed by the Chams. Angkor Thom (p159), Jayavarman VII's new city, was surrounded by walls and a moat, which became another component of Angkor's complex irrigation system. The centrepiece of Angkor Thom was Bayon (p161), the temple-mountain studded with faces that, along with Angkor Wat, is the most famous of Cambodia's temples. Other temples built during his reign include Ta Prohm (p166), Banteay Kdei (p169) and Preah Khan (p170). Further away, he rebuilt vast temple complexes such as Banteay Chhmar (p255) and Preah Khan (p262), making him by far the most prolific builder of Angkor's many kings.

Jayavarman VII also embarked on a major public-works programme, building roads, schools and hospitals across the empire. Remains of many of these roads and their magnificent bridges can be seen across Cambodia. Spean Praptos at Kompong Kdei, 60km southeast of Siem Reap on National Hwy 6 (NH6), is the most famous, but there are many more lost in the forest on the old Angkorian road from Beng Mealea to the great Preah Khan.

After the death of Jayavarman VII around 1219, the Khmer empire went into decline. The state religion reverted to Hinduism for a century or more

When the Chams attacked Angkor in 1177, it caught the Khmers completely by surprise, as they attacked by sea, river and lake rather than the traditional land routes.

While Suryavarman II may have planned Angkor Wat as his funerary temple or mausoleum, he was never buried there and it is believed he may have died after returning from a failed expedition to subdue the Dai Viet (Vietnamese).

The King's Last Song by Geoff Ryman weaves together the story of Jayavarman VII with a contemporary drama involving kidnapping and the Khmer Rouge.

Check out the website of Heritage Watch at www.heritagewatch.org to learn more about sustainable initiatives to involve the local community in the tourism boom in Angkor.

The glorious Siamese capital of Ayuthaya, which enjoyed a golden age from the 14th to 18th centuries, was in many ways a recreation of the glories of Angkor from which the Thai conquerors drew inspiration.

Henri Mouhot was French by birth, but was married to an Englishwoman. His 'journey of discovery' to Angkor was actually funded by the Royal Geographic Society of London.

and outbreaks of iconoclasm saw Buddhist sculpture adorning the Hindu temples vandalised or altered. The Thais sacked Angkor in 1351 and again with devastating efficiency in 1431. The Khmer court moved to Phnom Penh, only to return fleetingly to Angkor in the 16th century; in the meantime it was abandoned to pilgrims, holy men and the elements.

Angkor Rediscovered

The French 'discovery' of Angkor in the 1860s made an international splash and created a great deal of outside interest in Cambodia. But 'discovery', with all the romance it implied, was something of a misnomer. When French explorer Henri Mouhot first stumbled across Angkor Wat it included a wealthy, working monastery with monks and slaves. Moreover, Portuguese travellers in the 16th century encountered Angkor, referring to it as the Walled City. Diogo do Couto produced an accurate description of Angkor in 1614, but it was not published until 1958.

Still, it was the publication of *Voyage à Siam et dans le Cambodge* by Mouhot in 1868 that first brought Angkor to the public eye. Although the explorer himself made no such claims, by the 1870s he was being posthumously celebrated as the discoverer of the lost temple-city of Cambodia. In fact, a French missionary known as Charles-Emile Bouillevaux had visited Angkor 10 years before Mouhot and had published his own account of his findings. However, the Bouillevaux account was roundly ignored and it was Mouhot's account, with its rich descriptions and tantalising pen-and-ink colour sketches of the temples, that turned the temple ruins into an international obsession.

GUIDE TO THE GUIDES

Countless books on Angkor have been written over the years, with more and more new titles coming out every year, reflecting Angkor's rebirth as one of the world's cultural hotspots. Here are just a few of them.

- *A Guide to the Angkor Monuments* (Maurice Glaize) – the definitive guide to Angkor, downloadable for free at www.theangkorguide.com
- *A Passage Through Angkor* (Mark Standen) – one of the best photographic records of the temples of Angkor
- *A Pilgrimage to Angkor* (Pierre Loti) – one of the most beautifully written books on Angkor, based on the author's 1910 journey
- *Ancient Angkor* (Claudes Jacques) – written by one of the foremost scholars on Angkor, this is the most readable guide to the temples, with photos by Michael Freeman
- *Angkor: an Introduction to the Temples* (Dawn Rooney) – probably the most popular contemporary guide available
- *Angkor: Millennium of Glory* (various authors) – a fascinating introduction to the history, culture, sculpture and religion of the Angkorian period
- *Angkor – Heart of an Asian Empire* (Bruno Dagens) – the story of the 'discovery' of Angkor, complete with lavish illustrations
- *Angkor: Splendours of the Khmer Civilisation* (Marilia Albanese) – Beautifully photographed guide to the major temples, including some of the more remote places in northern Cambodia
- *Khmer Heritage in the Old Siamese Provinces of Cambodia* (Etienne Aymonier) – Aymonier journeyed through Cambodia in 1901 and visited many of the major temples
- *The Customs of Cambodia* (Chou Ta Kuan) – the only eyewitness account of Angkor, from a Chinese emissary who spent a year at the Khmer capital in the late 13th century

From the time of Mouhot, Angkor became the target of French-financed expeditions and, in 1901, the **École Française d'Extrême-Orient** (EFEO; www.efeo.fr) began a long association with Angkor by funding an expedition to the Bayon. In 1907, Angkor was returned to Cambodia, having been under Thai control for almost 150 years, and the EFEO took responsibility for clearing and restoring the whole site. In the same year, the first foreign tourists arrived in Angkor – an unprecedented 200 of them in three months. Angkor had been 'rescued' from the jungle and was assuming its place in the modern world.

ARCHAEOLOGY OF ANGKOR

With the exception of Angkor Wat, which was restored for use as a Buddhist shrine in the 16th century by the Khmer royalty, the temples of Angkor were left to the jungle for many centuries. The majority of temples are made of sandstone, which tends to dissolve when in prolonged contact with dampness. Bat droppings took their toll, as did sporadic pilfering of sculptures and cut stones. At some monuments, such as Ta Prohm, the jungle had stealthily waged an all-out invasion, and plant-life could only be removed at great risk to the structures it now supported in its web of roots.

Initial attempts to clear Angkor under the aegis of the EFEO were fraught with technical difficulties and theoretical disputes. On a technical front, the jungle tended to grow back as soon as it was cleared, and on a theoretical front, scholars debated the extent to which temples should be restored and whether later additions, such as Buddha images in Hindu temples, should be removed.

It was not until the late 1920s that a solution came along – anastylosis. This was the method the Dutch had used to restore Borobudur in Java. Put simply, it was a way of reconstructing monuments using the original materials and in keeping with the original form of the structure. New materials were permitted only where the originals could not be found, and were to be used discreetly. An example of this method can be seen on the causeway leading to the entrance of Angkor Wat, as the right-hand side was originally restored by the French.

The first major restoration job was carried out on Banteay Srei in 1930. It was deemed such a success that many more extensive restoration projects were undertaken elsewhere around Angkor, culminating in the massive Angkor Wat restoration in the 1960s. Large cranes and earth-moving machines were brought in, and the operation was backed by a veritable army of surveying equipment.

The Khmer Rouge victory and Cambodia's subsequent slide into an intractable civil war resulted in far less damage to Angkor than many had assumed, as EFEO and Ministry of Culture teams had removed many of the statues from the temple sites for protection. Nevertheless, turmoil in Cambodia resulted in a long interruption of restoration work, allowing the jungle to grow back and once again resume its assault on the monuments. The illegal trade of *objets d'art* on the world art market has also been a major threat to Angkor, although it is the more remote sites that have been targeted recently. Angkor has been under the jurisdiction of the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) since 1992 as a World Heritage site, and international and local efforts continue to preserve and reconstruct the monuments. In a sign of real progress, Angkor was removed from Unesco's endangered list in 2003.

Many of Angkor's secrets remain to be discovered, as most of the work at the temples has concentrated on restoration efforts above ground rather than archaeological surveys below. Underground is where the real story of Angkor and its people lies – the inscriptions on the temples give us only a partial picture of the gods to whom each structure was dedicated, and the kings who built them.

Architect Lucien Fournereau travelled to Angkor in 1887. He produced plans and meticulously executed cross-sections that were to stand as the best available until the 1960s.

A 17th-century Japanese pilgrim drew a detailed plan of Angkor Wat, though he mistakenly recalled that he had seen it in India.

Between 1970 and 1973, the front line of fighting between Lon Nol forces and Khmer Rouge/North Vietnamese soldiers was midway between Siem Reap and Angkor Wat. Archaeologists were allowed to cross back and forth to continue their work restoring the temples.

HIDDEN RICHES, POLITICAL HITCHES

Angkor Conservation is a Ministry of Culture compound on the banks of the Stung Siem Reap, about 400m east of the Sofitel Phokheetra Royal Angkor Hotel. The compound houses more than 5000 statues, *lingas* (phallic symbols) and inscribed steles, stored here to protect them from the wanton looting that has blighted hundreds of sites around Angkor. The finest statuary is hidden away inside Angkor Conservation's warehouses, meticulously numbered and catalogued. Unfortunately, without the right contacts, trying to get a peek at the statues is a lost cause. Some of the statuary is now on public display in the Angkor National Museum (p123) in Siem Reap, but it is only a fraction of the collection. In a further development, the Thai consortium behind the new museum now has control over Angkor Conservation.

Formerly housed at Angkor Conservation, but now going it alone in offices throughout Siem Reap, is Apsara Authority (Authority for the Protection and Management of Angkor and the region of Siem Reap). This organisation is responsible for the research, protection and conservation of cultural heritage around Angkor, as well as urban planning in Siem Reap and tourism development in the region. Quite a mandate, quite a challenge – especially now that the government is taking such a keen interest in its work. Angkor is a money-spinner; it remains to be seen whether Apsara will be empowered to put preservation before profits.

ARCHITECTURAL STYLES

From the time of the earliest Angkorian monuments at Roluos, Khmer architecture was continually evolving, often from the rule of one king to the next. Archaeologists therefore divide the monuments of Angkor into nine separate periods, named after the foremost example of each period's architectural style.

The evolution of Khmer architecture was based around a central theme of the temple-mountain, preferably set on a real hill, but artificial if there weren't any mountains to hand. The earlier a temple was constructed, the closer it adheres to this fundamental idea. Essentially, the mountain was represented by a tower mounted on a tiered base. At the summit was the central sanctuary, usually with an open door to the east, and three false doors at the remaining cardinal points of the compass.

By the time of the Bakheng period, this layout was being embellished. The summit of the central tower was crowned with five 'peaks' – four at the points of the compass and one in the centre. Even Angkor Wat features this layout, though on a grandiose scale. Other features that came to be favoured included an entry tower and a causeway lined with *naga* (mythical serpent) balustrades leading up to the temple.

As the temples grew in ambition, the central tower became a less-prominent feature, although it remained the focus of the temple. Later temples saw the central tower flanked by courtyards and richly decorated galleries. Smaller towers were placed on gates and on the corners of walls, their overall number often marking a religious or astrological significance.

These refinements and additions eventually culminated in Angkor Wat, which effectively showcases the evolution of Angkorian architecture. The architecture of the Bayon period breaks with tradition in temples such as Ta Prohm and Preah Khan. In these temples, the horizontal layout of the galleries, corridors and courtyards seems to completely eclipse the central tower.

The curious narrowness of the corridors and doorways in these structures can be explained by the fact that Angkorian architects never mastered the flying buttress to build a full arch. They engineered arches by laying blocks on top of each other, until they met at a central point; known as false arches, they can only support very short spans.

To learn more about Unesco's activities at Angkor and the incredible diversity of World Heritage sites, visit <http://whc.unesco.org>.

John Thomson was a Scottish photographer who took the first photographs of the temples in 1866. He was the first to posit the idea that they were symbolic representations of the mythical Mt Meru.

The seven-headed *naga*, which is a feature at many temples, represents the rainbow which acts as a bridge between heaven and earth.

ORIENTATION

Heading north from Siem Reap, Angkor Wat is the first major temple, followed by the walled city of Angkor Thom. To the east and west of this city are two vast reservoirs, which helped to feed the huge population. Further east are temples including Ta Prohm, Banteay Kdei and Pre Rup. North of Angkor Thom is Preah Khan and way beyond in the northeast, Banteay Srei, Kbal Spean, Phnom Kulen and Beng Mealea. To the southeast of Siem Reap is the Roluos Group of early Angkorian temples.

Maps

There are several free maps covering Angkor, including the *Siem Reap Angkor 3D Map*, available at certain hotels, guesthouses and restaurants in town. River Books of Thailand publishes a foldout *Angkor Map*, which is one of the more detailed offerings available.

INFORMATION

Admission Fees

While the cost of entry to Angkor is relatively expensive by Cambodian standards, the fees represent excellent value. Visitors have a choice of a one-day pass (US\$20), a three-day pass (US\$40) or a one-week pass (US\$60). Passes cannot be extended and days run consecutively, so plan your visit in advance. Purchase the entry pass from the large official entrance booth on the road to Angkor Wat. Passes include a digital photo snapped at the entrance booth, so queues can be quite long. Visitors entering after 5pm get a free sunset, as the ticket starts from the following day. The fee includes access to all the monuments in the Siem Reap area, but does not currently include the sacred mountain of Phnom Kulen or the remote complexes of Beng Mealea and Koh Ker.

Entry tickets to the temples of Angkor are controlled by local hotel chain Sokha Hotels, part of a local petroleum conglomerate called Sokimex, which in return for administrating the site takes 17% of the revenue. A mere 10% goes to Apsara Authority (see the boxed text, opposite), the body responsible for protecting and conserving the temples, and the lion's share is returned to the black hole that is the Finance Ministry.

Most of the major temples now have uniformed guards to check the tickets, which has reduced the opportunity for scams (although many would argue that the current arrangement with Sokha is the biggest scam of all). A pass is not required for excursions to villages around or beyond Angkor, but you still have to stop at the checkpoint to explain your movements to the guards.

ITINERARIES

Back in the early days of tourism, the problem of what to see and in what order came down to two basic temple itineraries: the Small (Petit) Circuit and the Big (Grand) Circuit, both marked on the Temples of Angkor map (Map pp142–3). It's difficult to imagine that anyone follows these to the letter

WHEN NATURE CALLS

Angkor is now blessed with some of the finest public toilets in Asia. Designed in wooden chalets and complete with amenities such as electronic flush, they wouldn't be out of place in a fancy hotel. The trouble is that the guardians often choose not to run the generators that power the toilets, meaning it is pretty dark inside the cubicles (but thankfully you can flush manually, too!). Entrance is free if you show your Angkor pass, and they are found near most of the major temples.

Remember, in remote areas, don't stray off the path – being seen in a compromising position is infinitely better than stepping on a land mine.

Stung Siem Reap, the river that runs from the foothills of Phnom Kulen to Tonlé Sap Lake, was diverted to run through most of the major temples and *barays* of Angkor.

WARNING!

Visitors found inside any of the main temples without a ticket will be fined a whopping US\$100.

ANGKORIN' FOR LUNCH

Most of the tour groups buzzing around Angkor head back to Siem Reap for lunch. This is as good a reason as any to stick around the temples, taking advantage of the lack of crowds to explore some popular sites and enjoy a local lunch at one of the many stalls. Almost all the major temples have some sort of nourishment available beyond the walls. Anyone travelling with a *moto* or *remorque-moto* should ask the driver for tips on cheap eats, as these guys eat around the temples every day. They know the best spots, at the best price, and should be able to sort you out (assuming you are getting along well).

The most extensive selection of restaurants is lined up opposite the entrance to Angkor Wat. It includes several restaurants, such as Khmer Angkor Restaurant and Angkor Reach Restaurant, with dishes ranging from US\$3 to US\$6. There is also now a handy branch of **Blue Pumpkin** (Map pp142-3; dishes US\$2-4) turning out sandwiches, salads and ice creams, as well as the usual divine fruit shakes, all to take away if required. **Chez Sophea** (Map pp142-3; ☎012 858003; meals US\$10-20) offers barbecued meats and fish, accompanied by a cracking homemade salad, but prices are at the high end.

There are dozens of local noodle stalls just north of the Bayon, which are a good spot for a quick bite to eat. Other central temples with food available include Ta Prohm, Preah Khan and Ta Keo. Further afield, Banteay Srei has several small restaurants, complete with ornate wood furnishings cut from Cambodia's forests. Further north at Kbal Spean, food stalls at the bottom of the hill can cook up fried rice or a noodle soup, plus there is the excellent Borey Sovann Restaurant (meals US\$3 to US\$5), which is a great place to wind down before or after an ascent. There are also stop-and-dip stalls (dishes US\$1 to US\$3) near the entrance to Beng Mealea temple.

Water and soft drinks are available throughout the temple area, and many sellers lurk outside the temples, ready to pounce with offers of 'You wanna buy cold drink?' Sometimes they ask at just the right moment; on other occasions it is the 27th time in an hour that you've been approached and you are ready to scream. Try not to – you'll scare your fellow travellers and lose face with the locals.

any more, but in their time they were an essential component of the Angkor experience and were often undertaken on the back of an elephant.

For tips on the best times to visit particular temples, the best locations for sunrise and sunset and avoiding the hordes see the boxed text, opposite.

Small Circuit

The 17km Small Circuit begins at Angkor Wat and heads north to Phnom Bakheng, Baksei Chamkrong and Angkor Thom (including the city wall and gates, the Bayon, the Baphuon, the Royal Enclosure, Phimeanakas, Preah Palilay, the Terrace of the Leper King, the Terrace of Elephants, the Kleangs and Prasat Suor Prat. It exits from Angkor Thom via the Victory Gate in the eastern wall, and continues to Chau Say Tevoda, Thommanon, Spean Thmor and Ta Keo. It then heads northeast of the road to Ta Nei, turns south to Ta Prohm, continues east to Banteay Kdei and Sra Srang, and finally returns to Angkor Wat via Prasat Kravan.

Big Circuit

The 26km Big Circuit is an extension of the Small Circuit: instead of exiting the walled city of Angkor Thom at the east gate, the Big Circuit exits at the north gate and continues to Preah Khan and Preah Neak Poan, east to Ta Som then south via the Eastern Mebon to Pre Rup. From there it heads west and then southwest on its return to Angkor Wat.

One Day

If you have only one day to visit Angkor, then bad luck, but a good itinerary would be Angkor Wat for sunrise and then stick around to explore the

mighty temple while it is quieter. From there continue to the tree roots of Ta Prohm before breaking for lunch. In the afternoon, explore the temples within the walled city of Angkor Thom and the beauty of the Bayon in the late afternoon light.

Two Days

A two-day itinerary allows time to include some of the other big hitters around Angkor. Spend the first day visiting petite Banteay Srei, with its fabulous carvings, and stop at Banteay Samré on the return leg. In the afternoon, visit immense Preah Khan, delicate Preah Neak Poan and the tree roots of Ta Som, before taking in a sunset at Pre Rup. Spend the second day following the one-day itinerary to Angkor Wat, Ta Prohm and Angkor Thom.

DODGING THE CROWDS

Angkor is on the tourist trail and is getting busier by the year but, with a little planning, it is still possible to escape the hordes. One important thing to remember, particularly when it comes to sunrise and sunset, is that places are popular for a reason, and it is worth going with the flow at least once.

A curious lore of itineraries and times for visiting the monuments developed at Angkor when tourism first began early in the 20th century. It is received wisdom that as Angkor Wat faces west, one should be there for late afternoon, and in the case of the Bayon, which faces east, in the morning. Ta Prohm, most people seem to agree, can be visited in the middle of the day because of its umbrella of foliage. This is all well and good, but if you reverse the order, the temples will still look good – and you can avoid some of the crowds.

The most popular place for sunrise is Angkor Wat. Most tour groups head back to town for breakfast, so stick around and explore the temple while it's cool and quiet. The Bayon sees far fewer visitors than Angkor Wat in the early hours. Sra Srang is usually pretty quiet, and sunrise here can be spectacular thanks to reflections in the extensive waters. Phnom Bakheng could be an attractive option, because the sun comes up behind Angkor Wat and you are far from the madding crowd that gathers here at sunset. Ta Prohm is an alternative option, with no sight of sunrise, but a mysterious and magical atmosphere.

The definitive sunset spot is the hilltop temple of Phnom Bakheng, but this has been getting well out of control lately, with as many as 1000 tourists clambering around the small structure. Better to check it out for sunrise or early morning and miss the crowds. Staying within the confines of Angkor Wat for sunset is a rewarding option, as it can be pretty peaceful when most tourists head off to Phnom Bakheng around 4.30pm or so. Pre Rup is popular with some for an authentic rural sunset over the surrounding rice-fields, but this is starting to get busier (although nothing like the circus at Bakheng). Better is the hilltop temple of Phnom Krom, which offers commanding views across Tonlé Sap Lake, but involves a long drive back to town in the dark. The Western Baray takes in the sunset from the eastern end, across its vast waters, and is generally a quiet option.

When it comes to the most popular temples, the middle of the day is consistently the quietest time. This is because the majority of the large tour groups head back to Siem Reap for lunch. It is also the hottest part of the day, which makes it tough going around relatively open temples such as Banteay Srei and the Bayon, but fine at well-covered temples such as Ta Prohm, Preah Khan and Beng Mealea, or even the bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat. The busiest times at Angkor Wat are from 6am to 7am and 3pm to 5pm; at the Bayon from 7.30am to 9.30am; at Banteay Srei mid-morning and mid-afternoon. However, at other popular temples, such as Ta Prohm and Preah Khan, the crowds are harder to predict, and at most other temples in the Angkor region it's just a case of pot luck. If you pull up outside and see a car park full of tour buses, you may want to move on to somewhere quieter. The wonderful thing about Angkor is that there is always another temple to explore.

Take a virtual tour of Angkor in 360 degrees on the *World Heritage Tour* website at www.world-heritage-tour.org.

Three to Five Days

If you have three to five days to explore Angkor, it is possible to see most of the important sites. One approach is to see as much as possible on the first day or two (as covered earlier) and then spend the final days combining visits to other sites such as the Roluos temples and Banteay Kdei. Better still is a gradual build-up to the most spectacular monuments. After all, if you see Angkor Wat on the first day, then a temple like Ta Keo just won't cut it. Another option is a chronological approach, starting with the earliest Angkorian temples and working steadily forwards in time to Angkor Thom, taking stock of the evolution of Khmer architecture and artistry.

It is well worth making the trip to the River of a Thousand Lingas at Kbal Spean for the chance to stretch your legs amid natural and manmade splendour, or making a trip to the remote, vast and overgrown temple of Beng Mealea; both can be combined with Banteay Srei in one long day.

One Week

Those with the time to spend a week at Angkor will be richly rewarded. Not only is it possible to fit all the temples of the region into an itinerary, but a longer stay also allows for non-temple activities, such as relaxing by a pool, indulging in a spa treatment or shopping around Siem Reap. Check out the aforementioned itineraries for some ideas on approach, but relax in the knowledge that you'll see it all. You may also want to throw in some of the more remote sites such as Koh Ker (p264), Prasat Preah Vihear (p268) or Banteay Chhmar (p255).

TOURS

Most budget and midrange travellers not on package tours prefer to take in the temples at their own pace. However, visitors who have only a day or two at this incredible site may prefer something organised locally.

It is possible to link up with an official tour guide in Siem Reap. The **Khmer Angkor Tour Guides Association** (☎0964347; khmerang@camintel.com) represents all of Angkor's authorised guides. English- or French-speaking guides can be booked from US\$20 to US\$30 a day; guides speaking other languages, such as Italian, German, Spanish, Japanese and Chinese, are available at a higher rate as there are fewer of them.

For an organised tour around Angkor, check out the recommended Cambodian operators under Tours (p332) in the Transport chapter. Other good Siem Reap-based companies:

Buffalo Trails (☎012-297506; buffaloatrails@online.com.kh) Promotes homestays, birdwatching, traditional fishing techniques and Cambodian cooking classes.

La Villa (☎092-256691; www.thevillasiemreap.com) Small group trips to the more remote spots like Beng Mealea temple and Kompong Phhluk village, plus lifestyle visits beyond the temples.

Paneman (☎063-761759; www.paneman.org) A specialist ecotourism company that operates bio-diesel boats on Tonlé Sap Lake and arranges remote temple, lifestyle and specialist trips around the Angkor area.

Terre Cambodge (☎063-964391; www.terrecambodge.com) Offers trips to a variety of remote sites around Angkor, some by bicycle, plus boat trips on Tonlé Sap Lake aboard its wooden sampan.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Visitors heading to the temples of Angkor – in other words pretty much everybody coming to Cambodia – need to consider the most suitable way to travel between the temples. Many of the best-known temples are no more than a few kilometres from the walled city of Angkor Thom, which is just 8km from Siem Reap, and can be visited using anything from a car or

motorcycle to a sturdy pair of walking boots. For the independent traveller there is a daunting range of alternatives to consider.

Bicycle

A great way to get around the temples, bicycles are environmentally friendly and are used by most locals living around the area. There are few hills and the roads are good, so there's no need for much cycling experience. Moving about at a slower speed, you soon find that you take in more than from out of a car window or on the back of a speeding *moto*.

White Bicycles (www.thewhitebicycles.org; per day US\$2) is supported by some guesthouses around town, with proceeds from the US\$2 hire fee going towards community projects. Many guesthouses and hotels in town rent bikes for around US\$1 to US\$2 per day. There are also electric bicycles for hire and these cost about US\$3 to US\$4 a day, although make sure the battery is fully charged before setting off.

Car & Motorcycle

Cars are a popular choice for getting about the temples. The obvious advantage is protection from the elements, be it rain or the punishing sun. Shared between several travellers, they can also be an economical way to explore. The downside is that visitors are a little more isolated from the sights, sounds and smells as they travel between temples. A car for the day around the central temples is US\$25 to US\$30 and can be arranged with hotels, guesthouses and agencies in town.

Motorcycle rental in Siem Reap is currently prohibited, but some travellers bring a motorcycle from Phnom Penh. If you manage to get a bike up here, leave it at a guarded parking area or with a stallholder outside each temple, otherwise it could get stolen.

4WD

People planning adventures further afield to the remote temples in Preah Vihear Province (p261) will need to arrange a 4WD if they don't want to be on a motorcycle for several long days. Rates are higher the further you plan to go and the fancier the vehicle. Think US\$80 and up per day.

Elephant

Travelling by elephant was the traditional way to see the temples way back in the early days of tourism at Angkor, at the start of the 20th century. It is once again possible to take an elephant ride between the south gate of Angkor Thom and the Bayon (US\$10) in the morning, or up to the summit of Phnom Bakheng for sunset (US\$15). The elephants owned by the **Angkor Village** (www.angkorvillage.com) resort group are very well looked after. A half-day mahout course was recently introduced. It costs US\$50 per person and includes learning some elephant commands, a ride around Angkor Thom and a chance to bathe the elephant.

Helicopter

For those with plenty of spending money, there are tourist flights around Angkor Wat (US\$75) and the temples outside Angkor Thom (US\$130) with **Helicopters Cambodia** (Map p120; ☎012 814500; www.helicopterscambodia.com), which has an office near the Psar Chaa in Siem Reap. The company also offers charters to remote temples such as Prasat Preah Vihear and Preah Khan, with prices starting at around US\$1800 per hour plus 10% sales tax. Call the bank manager first. Newcomer **Sokha Helicopters** (Map p120; ☎017 848891; www.sokhahelicopters.com) has slightly cheaper sightseeing flights.

The average stay at Angkor is still just 2½ days, which barely allows enough time to see the major temples, let alone enjoy the action-packed town of Siem Reap.

For the ultimate Angkor experience, try a pick and mix approach, with a *moto*, *remorque-moto* (*tuk tuk*) or car for one day to cover the remote sites, a bicycle to experience the central temples, and an exploration on foot for a spot of peace and serenity.

Hot-Air Balloon

For a bird's eye view of Angkor Wat, try the **Angkor Balloon** (Map pp142-3; ☐012 844049; per person US\$11). The balloon carries up to 30 people, is on a fixed line and rises 200m above the landscape.

Minibus

Minibuses are available from various hotels and travel agents around town. A 12-seat minibus costs from US\$50 per day, while a 25- or 30-seat coaster bus is around US\$80 to US\$100 per day.

Moto

Many independent travellers end up visiting the temples by *moto*. *Moto* drivers accost visitors from the moment they set foot in Siem Reap, but they often end up being knowledgeable and friendly, and good companions for a tour around the temples. They can drop you off and pick you up at allotted times and places and even tell you a bit of background about the temples as you zip around. Those on a really tight budget can just take individual *moto* rides from temple to temple and this may end up cheaper than the US\$7 to US\$8 a day most drivers charge.

Remorque-moto

A motorcycle with a twee little hooded carriage towed behind, these are also known as *tuk tuks*. They are a popular way to get around Angkor as fellow travellers can still talk to each other as they explore (unlike on the back of a *moto*). They also offer some protection from the rain. As with *moto* drivers, some *remorque* drivers are very good companions for a tour of the temples. Prices start run from US\$10 to US\$20 for the day, depending on the destination and number of passengers.

Transport will be more expensive to remote temples such as Banteay Srei or Beng Mealea, due to extra fuel costs.

Walking

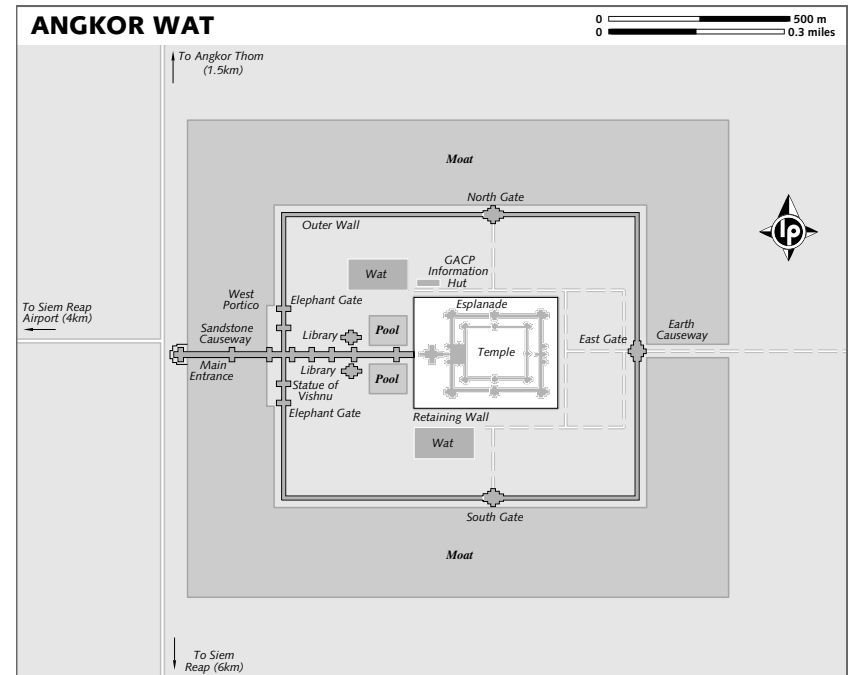
Why not forget all these new-fangled methods and simply explore on foot? There are obvious limitations to what can be seen, as some temples are just too far from Siem Reap. However, it is easy enough to walk to Angkor Wat and the temples of Angkor Thom, and this is a great way to meet up with villagers in the area. Those who want to get away from the roads should try the peaceful walk along the walls of Angkor Thom. It is about 13km in total, and offers access to several small, remote temples and a lot of birdlife. Another rewarding walk is from Ta Nei to Ta Keo through the forest.

ANGKOR WAT

វត្ត វិហារ

Angkor Wat is the largest and undoubtedly the most breathtaking of the monuments at Angkor, and is widely believed to be the largest religious structure in the world. It is simply unique, a stunning blend of spirituality and symmetry, an enduring example of man's devotion to his gods. Relish the very first approach, as that spine-tickling moment when you emerge on the inner causeway will rarely be felt again. It is the best-preserved temple at Angkor, as it was never abandoned to the elements, and repeat visits are rewarded with previously unnoticed details. It was probably built as a funerary temple for Suryavarman II (r 1112–52) to honour Vishnu, the Hindu deity with whom the king identified.

There is much about Angkor Wat that is unique among the temples of Angkor. The most significant fact is that the temple is oriented towards the



west. West is symbolically the direction of death, which once led a large number of scholars to conclude that Angkor Wat must have existed primarily as a tomb. This idea was supported by the fact that the magnificent bas-reliefs of the temple were designed to be viewed in an anticlockwise direction, a practice that has precedents in ancient Hindu funerary rites. Vishnu, however, is also frequently associated with the west, and it is now commonly accepted that Angkor Wat most likely served both as a temple and a mausoleum for Suryavarman II.

Angkor Wat is famous for its beguiling *apsaras* (heavenly nymphs). Many of these exquisite *apsaras* were damaged during Indian efforts to clean the temples with chemicals during the 1980s, the ultimate bad acid trip, but they are now being restored by the teams with the **German Apsara Conservation Project** (GACP; www.gacp-angkor.de). The organisation operates a small information booth in the north-west corner of Angkor Wat, near the wat, where beautiful black-and-white postcards and images of Angkor are available.

SYMBOLISM

Visitors to Angkor Wat are struck by its imposing grandeur and, at close quarters, its fascinating decorative flourishes and extensive bas-reliefs. Holy men at the time of Angkor must have revelled in its multilayered levels of meaning in much the same way a contemporary literary scholar might delight in James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Eleanor Mannikka explains in her book *Angkor Wat: Time, Space and Kingship* that the spatial dimensions of Angkor Wat parallel the lengths of the four ages (Yuga) of classical Hindu thought. Thus the visitor to Angkor Wat who walks the causeway to the main entrance and through the courtyards to

There are more than 3000 *apsaras* carved into the walls of Angkor Wat, each of them unique, and there are more than 30 different hairstyles for budding stylists to check out.

MOTIFS, SYMBOLS & CHARACTERS AROUND ANGKOR

The temples of Angkor are intricately carved with myths and legends, symbols and signs, and a cast of characters in their thousands. Deciphering them can be quite a challenge, so here we've highlighted some of the most commonly seen around the majestic temples. For more help unravelling the carvings of Angkor, pick up a copy of *Images of the Gods* by Vittorio Reveda.

- **Apsaras** Heavenly nymphs or goddesses, also known as *devadas*; these beautiful female forms decorate the walls of many temples.
- **Asuras** These devils feature extensively in representations of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, such as at Angkor Wat (p158).
- **Devas** The 'good gods' in the creation myth of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk.
- **Essai** A Hindu wise man or ascetic; these bearded characters are often seen sitting cross-legged at the base of pillars or flanking walls.
- **Flame** The flame motif is found flanking steps and doorways and is intended to purify the pilgrim as they enter the temple.
- **Garuda** Vehicle of Vishnu; this half-man-half-bird features in some temples and was combined with his old enemy *naga* to promote religious unity under Jayavarman VII.
- **Kala** The temple guardian appointed by Shiva; he had such an appetite that he tried to devour his own body and appears only as a giant head above many doorways.
- **Linga** A phallic symbol of fertility, *lingas* would have originally been located within the towers of most Hindu temples.
- **Lotus** Another symbol of purity, the lotus features extensively in the shape of towers, the shape of steps to entrances and in decoration.
- **Makara** A giant sea serpent with a reticulated jaw; features on the corner of pediments, spewing forth a *naga* or some other creature.
- **Naga** The multiheaded serpent, half-brother and enemy of *garuda*, who controls the rains and, therefore, prosperity of the kingdom; seen on causeways, doorways and roofs.
- **Nandi** The mount of Shiva; there are several statues of Nandi dotted about the temples, although many have been damaged or stolen by looters.
- **Vine** Yet another symbol of purity, the vine graces doorways and lintels and is meant to help cleanse the visitor on their journey to this heaven on earth, the abode of the gods.
- **Yama** God of death who presides over the underworld and passes judgement on whether people continue to heaven or hell.
- **Yoni** Female fertility symbol that is combined with the *linga* to produce holy water infused with fertility.

the final main tower, which once contained a statue of Vishnu, is metaphorically travelling back to the first age of the creation of the universe.

Like the other temple-mountains of Angkor, Angkor Wat also replicates the spatial universe in miniature. The central tower is Mt Meru, with its surrounding smaller peaks, bounded in turn by continents (the lower courtyards) and the oceans (the moat). The seven-headed *naga* becomes a symbolic rainbow bridge for man to reach the abode of the gods.

ARCHITECTURAL LAYOUT

Angkor Wat is surrounded by a 190m-wide moat, which forms a giant rectangle measuring 1.5km by 1.3km. It makes the moats around European castles look like kid's play. From the west, a sandstone causeway crosses the moat. The sandstone blocks from which Angkor Wat was built were

quarried more than 50km away (from the district of Svay Leu at the eastern foot of Phnom Kulen) and floated down the Stung Siem Reap on rafts. The logistics of such an operation are mind-blowing, consuming the labour of thousands – an unbelievable feat given the lack of cranes and trucks that we take for granted in contemporary construction projects.

The rectangular outer wall, which measures 1025m by 800m, has a gate on each side, but the main entrance, a 235m-wide porch richly decorated with carvings and sculptures, is on the western side. There is a statue of Vishnu, 3.25m in height and hewn from a single block of sandstone, located in the right-hand tower. Vishnu's eight arms hold a mace, a spear, a disc, a conch and other items. You may also see locks of hair lying about. These are offerings from both young people preparing to get married and by pilgrims giving thanks for their good fortune.

An avenue, 475m long and 9.5m wide and lined with *naga* balustrades, leads from the main entrance to the central temple, passing between two graceful libraries (the northern one restored by a Japanese team) and then two pools, the northern one a popular spot from which to watch the sunrise.

The central temple complex consists of three storeys, each made of laterite, which enclose a square surrounded by intricately interlinked galleries. The Gallery of a Thousand Buddhas used to house hundreds of Buddha images before the war, but many of these were removed or stolen, leaving just the handful we see today.

The corners of the second and third storeys are marked by towers, each topped with symbolic lotus bud towers. Rising 31m above the third level and 55m above the ground is the central tower, which gives the whole ensemble its sublime unity. The stairs to the upper level are immensely steep, because reaching the kingdom of the gods was no easy task. Apsara Authority is currently building large wooden staircases that will make life easier for modern-day pilgrims.

Once at the central tower, the pilgrimage is complete; soak up the breeze, take in the views and then find a quiet corner in which to contemplate the symmetry and symbolism of this Everest of temples.

BAS-RELIEFS

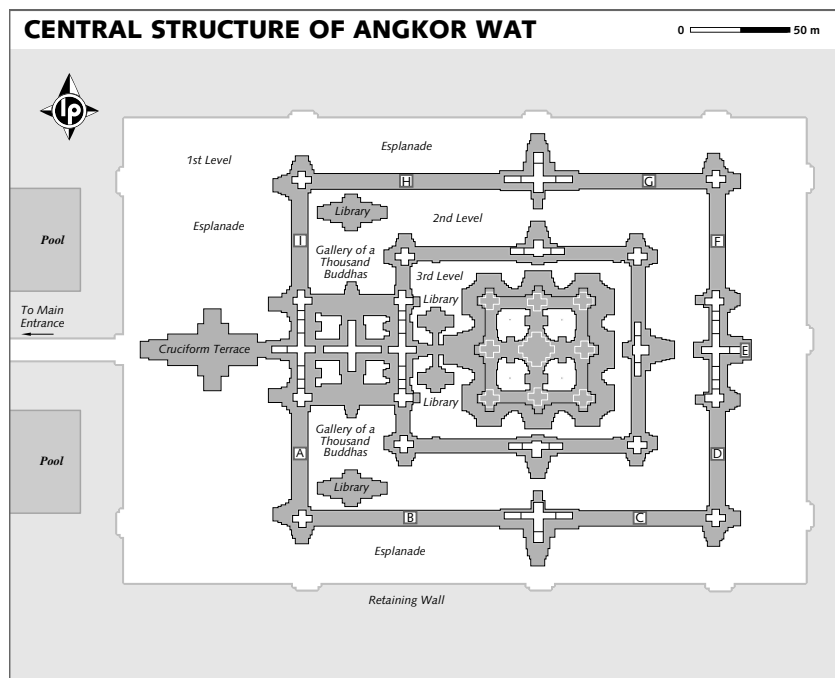
Stretching around the outside of the central temple complex is an 800m-long series of intricate and astonishing bas-reliefs. The following is a brief description of the epic events depicted on the panels. They are described in the order in which you'll come to them if you begin on the western side and keep the bas-reliefs to your left. The majority of them were completed in the 12th century, but in the 16th century several new reliefs were added to unfinished panels.

(A) The Battle of Kurukshetra

The southern portion of the west gallery depicts a battle scene from the Hindu *Mahabharata* epic, in which the Kauravas (coming from the north) and the Pandavas (coming from the south) advance upon each other, meeting in furious battle. Infantry are shown on the lowest tier, with officers on elephant-back and chiefs on the second and third tiers. Some of the more interesting details (from left to right): a dead chief lying on a pile of arrows, surrounded by his grieving parents and troops; a warrior on an elephant who, by putting down his weapon, has accepted defeat; and a mortally wounded officer, falling from his carriage into the arms of his soldiers. Over the centuries, some sections have been polished (by the millions of hands that fall upon them) to look like black marble. The portico at the southwestern corner is decorated with sculptures representing characters from the *Ramayana*.

Most of the major sandstone blocks around Angkor include small circular holes. These originally held wooden stakes that were used to lift and position the stones during construction before being sawn off.

According to inscriptions, the construction of Angkor Wat involved 300,000 workers and 6000 elephants, yet was still not fully completed.



(B) The Army of Suryavarman II

The remarkable western section of the south gallery depicts a triumphal battle-march of Suryavarman II's army. In the southwestern corner about 2m from the floor is Suryavarman II on an elephant, wearing the royal tiara and armed with a battle-axe; he is shaded by 15 parasols and fanned by legions of servants. Further on is a procession of well-armed soldiers and officers on horseback; among them are bold and warlike chiefs on elephants. Just before the end of this panel is the rather disorderly Siamese mercenary army, with their long headdresses and ragged marching, at that time allied with the Khmers in their conflict with the Chams. The Khmer troops have square breastplates and are armed with spears; the Thais wear skirts and carry tridents.

(C) Heaven & Hell

The eastern half of the south gallery depicts the punishments and rewards of the 37 heavens and 32 hells. On the left, the upper and middle tiers show fine gentlemen and ladies proceeding towards 18-armed Yama (the judge of the dead) seated on a bull; below him are his assistants, Dharmā and Sitragupta. On the lower tier, devils drag the wicked along the road to hell. To Yama's right, the tableau is divided into two parts by a horizontal line of *garudas*: above, the elect dwell in beautiful mansions, served by women and attendants; below, the condemned suffer horrible tortures that might have inspired the Khmer Rouge. The ceiling in this section was restored by the French in the 1930s.

(D) Churning of the Ocean of Milk

The southern section of the east gallery is decorated by the most famous of the bas-relief scenes at Angkor Wat, the Churning of the Ocean of Milk.

This brilliantly executed carving depicts 88 *asuras* on the left, and 92 *devas*, with crested helmets, churning up the sea to extract from it the elixir of immortality. The demons hold the head of the serpent and the gods hold its tail. At the centre of the sea, the serpent is coiled around Mt Mandala, which turns and churns up the water in the tug of war between the demons and the gods. Vishnu, incarnated as a huge turtle, lends his shell to serve as the base and pivot of Mt Mandala. Brahma, Shiva, Hanuman (the monkey god) and Lakshmi (the goddess of beauty) all make appearances, while overhead a host of heavenly female spirits sing and dance in encouragement. Luckily for us the gods won through, as the *apsaras* above were too much for the hot-blooded devils to take.

(E) The Elephant Gate

This gate, which has no stairway, was used by the king and others for mounting and dismounting elephants directly from the gallery. North of the gate is a Khmer inscription recording the erection of a nearby stupa in the 18th century.

(F) Vishnu Conquers the Demons

The northern section of the east gallery shows a furious and desperate encounter between Vishnu, riding on a *garuda*, and innumerable devils. Needless to say, he slays all comers. This gallery was completed at a later date, most likely in the 16th century, and the later carving is notably inferior to the original work from the 12th century.

(G) Krishna and the Demon King

The eastern section of the north gallery shows Vishnu incarnated as Krishna riding a *garuda*. He confronts a burning walled city, the residence of Bana, the demon king. The *garuda* puts out the fire and Bana is captured. In the final scene Krishna kneels before Shiva and asks that Bana's life be spared.

(H) Battle of the Gods and the Demons

The western section of the north gallery depicts the battle between the 21 gods of the Brahmanic pantheon and various demons. The gods are featured with their traditional attributes and mounts. Vishnu, for example, has four arms and is seated on a *garuda*, while Shiva rides a sacred goose.

(I) Battle of Lanka

The northern half of the west gallery shows scenes from the *Ramayana*. In the Battle of Lanka, Rama (on the shoulders of Hanuman), along with his army of monkeys, battles 10-headed, 20-armed Ravana, seducer of Rama's beautiful wife Sita. Ravana rides a chariot drawn by monsters and commands an army of giants.

ANGKOR THOM

អង្គរធំ

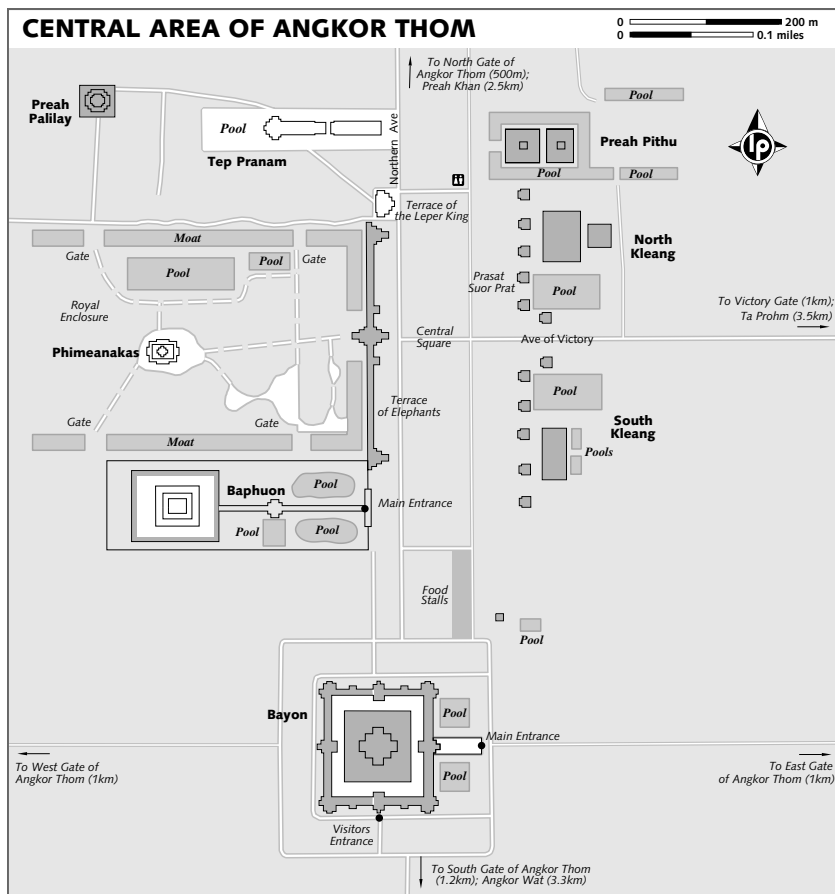
The fortified city of Angkor Thom (Great Angkor, or Great City), is on an epic scale, some 10 sq km in size. It was built by Angkor's greatest king, Jayavarman VII (r 1181–1219), who came to power following the disastrous sacking of the previous Khmer capital by the Chams. At the city's height, it may have supported a population of one million people in the surrounding region. Centred on the Bayon, Angkor Thom is enclosed by a *jayagiri* (square

The bas-reliefs at Angkor Wat were once sheltered by the cloister's wooden roof, which long ago rotted away except for one original beam in the western half of the north gallery. The other roofed sections are reconstructions.

Check out the images of Suryavarman II on the southern gallery and compare him with the image of Rama in the northern gallery and you'll notice an uncanny likeness that helped reinforce the aura of the god-king.

The rectangular holes seen in the Army of Suryavarman II relief were created when, long ago, pieces of the scene containing inscriptions (reputed to possess magical powers) were removed.

Originally, the central sanctuary of Angkor Wat held a gold statue of Vishnu mounted on a *garuda* (a mythical half-man, half-bird creature) that represented the deified god-king Suryavarman II.



wall) 8m high and 12km in length and encircled by a 100m-wide *jayasindhu* (moat). (The moat is said to have been inhabited by fierce crocodiles.) This architectural layout is yet another monumental expression of Mt Meru surrounded by the oceans.

The city has five immense gates, one each in the northern, western and southern walls and two in the eastern wall. The gates are 20m in height, decorated with stone elephant trunks and crowned by four gargantuan faces of Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, facing the cardinal directions. In front of each gate stands giant statues of 54 gods (to the left of the causeway) and 54 demons (to the right of the causeway), a motif taken from the story of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk. The south gate is most popular with visitors, as it has been fully restored and many of the heads (usually copies) remain in place. The gate is on the main road into Angkor Thom from Angkor Wat, and it gets very busy. More peaceful are the east and west gates, found at the end of uneven trails. The east gate was used as a location in *Tomb Raider* where the bad guys broke into the 'tomb' by pulling down a giant (polystyrene!) *apsara*.

The causeway at the west gate of Angkor Thom has completely collapsed, leaving a jumble of ancient stones sticking out of the soil like victims of a terrible historical pile-up.

In the centre of the walled enclosure are the city's most important monuments, including the Bayon, the Baphuon, the Royal Enclosure, Phimeanakas and the Terrace of Elephants.

BAYON

បាយ័ន

Unique, even among its cherished contemporaries, Bayon epitomises the creative genius and inflated ego of Cambodia's legendary king, Jayavarman VII. It's a place of stooped corridors, precipitous flights of stairs and, best of all, a collection of 54 gothic towers decorated with 216 coldly smiling, enormous faces of Avalokiteshvara that bear more than a passing resemblance to the great king himself. These huge heads glare down from every angle, exuding power and control with a hint of humanity – this was precisely the blend required to hold sway over such a vast empire, ensuring the disparate and far-flung population yielded to his magnanimous will. As you walk around, a dozen or more of the heads are visible at any one time – full-face or in profile, almost level with your eyes or staring down from on high.

Bayon is now known to have been built by Jayavarman VII, though for many years its origins were unknown. Shrouded in dense jungle, it also took researchers some time to realise that it stands in the exact centre of the city of Angkor Thom. There is still much mystery associated with Bayon – such as its exact function and symbolism – and this seems only appropriate for a monument whose signature is an enigmatic smiling face.

The eastward orientation of Bayon leads most people to visit early in the morning, preferably just after sunrise, when the sun inches upwards, lighting face after face. Bayon, however, looks equally good in the late afternoon, and if you stay for the sunset you get the same effect as at sunrise, in reverse. A Japanese team is restoring several outer areas of the temple.

Architectural Layout

Unlike Angkor Wat, which looks impressive from all angles, the Bayon looks rather like a glorified pile of rubble from a distance. It's only when you enter the temple and make your way up to the third level that its magic becomes apparent.

The basic structure of the Bayon is a simple three levels, which correspond more or less to three distinct phases of building. This is because Jayavarman VII began construction of this temple at an advanced age, so was never confident it would be completed. Each time one phase was completed, he moved on to the next. The first two levels are square and adorned with bas-reliefs. They lead up to a third, circular level, with the towers and their faces.

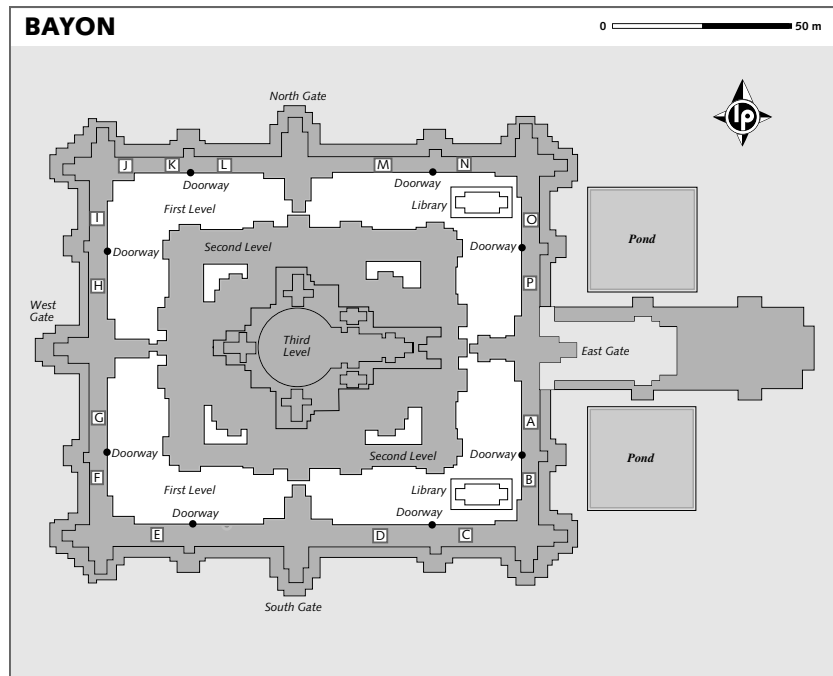
Bas-Reliefs

Bayon is decorated with a total of 1.2km of extraordinary bas-reliefs incorporating more than 11,000 figures. The famous carvings on the outer wall of the first level depict vivid scenes of everyday life in 12th-century Cambodia. The bas-reliefs on the second level do not have the epic proportions of those on the first level and tend to be fragmented. The reliefs described are those on the first level. The sequence assumes that you enter the Bayon from the east and view the reliefs in a clockwise direction.

(A) CHAMS ON THE RUN

Just south of the east gate is a three-level panorama. On the first tier, Khmer soldiers march off to battle; check out the elephants and the ox carts, which are almost exactly like those still used in Cambodia today. The second tier depicts the coffins being carried back from the battlefield. In the centre of

Some say that the Khmer empire was divided into 54 provinces at the time of Bayon's construction, hence the all-seeing eyes of Avalokiteshvara (or Jayavarman VII) keeping watch on the kingdom's outlying subjects.



the third tier, Jayavarman VII, shaded by parasols, is shown on horseback followed by legions of concubines (to the left).

(B) LINGA WORSHIP

The first panel north of the southeastern corner shows Hindus praying to a *linga* (phallic symbol). This image was probably originally a Buddha, later modified by a Hindu king.

(C) NAVAL BATTLE

The next panel has some of the best-carved reliefs. The scenes depict a naval battle between the Khmers and the Chams (the latter with head coverings) and everyday life around Tonlé Sap Lake, where the battle was fought. Look for images of people picking lice from each other's hair, of hunters and, towards the western end of the panel, a woman giving birth.

(D) THE CHAMS VANQUISHED

In the next panel, scenes from daily life continue and the battle shifts to the shore where the Chams are soundly thrashed. Scenes include two people playing chess, a cockfight and women selling fish in the market. The scenes of meals being prepared and served are in celebration of the Khmer victory.

(E & F) MILITARY PROCESSION

The last section of the south gallery, depicting a military procession, is unfinished, as is the panel showing elephants being led down from the mountains. Brahmins have been chased up two trees by tigers.

(G) CIVIL WAR

This panel depicts scenes that some scholars maintain is a civil war. Groups of people, some armed, confront each other, and the violence escalates until elephants and warriors join the melee.

(H) THE ALL-SEEING KING

The fighting continues on a smaller scale in the next panel. An antelope is being swallowed by a gargantuan fish; among the smaller fish is a prawn, under which an inscription proclaims that the king will seek out those in hiding.

(I) VICTORY PARADE

This panel depicts a procession that includes the king (carrying a bow). Presumably it is a celebration of his victory.

(J) THE CIRCUS COMES TO TOWN

At the western corner of the northern wall is a Khmer circus. A strong man holds three dwarfs, and a man on his back is spinning a wheel with his feet; above is a group of tightrope walkers. To the right of the circus, the royal court watches from a terrace, below which is a procession of animals. Some of the reliefs in this section remain unfinished.

(K) A LAND OF PLENTY

The two rivers, one next to the doorpost and the other a few metres to the right, are teeming with fish.

(L, M & N) THE CHAMS RETREAT

On the lowest level of this unfinished three-tiered scene, the Cham armies are being defeated and expelled from the Khmer kingdom. The next panel depicts the Cham armies advancing, and the badly deteriorated panel shows the Chams (on the left) chasing the Khmers.

(O) THE SACKING OF ANGKOR

This panel shows the war of 1177, when the Khmers were defeated by the Chams, and Angkor was pillaged. The wounded Khmer king is being lowered from the back of an elephant and a wounded Khmer general is being carried on a hammock suspended from a pole. Directly above, despairing Khmers are getting drunk. The Chams (on the right) are in hot pursuit of their vanquished enemy.

(P) THE CHAMS ENTER ANGKOR

This panel depicts another meeting of the two armies. Notice the flag bearers among the Cham troops (on the right). The Chams were defeated in the war, which ended in 1181, as depicted on panel A.

BAPHUON

បាវ្យូន

Baphuon would have been one of the most spectacular of Angkor's temples in its heyday. Located 200m northwest of Bayon, it's a pyramidal representation of mythical Mt Meru. Construction probably began under Suryavarman I and was later completed by Udayadityavarman II (r 1049–65). It marked the centre of the city that existed before the construction of Angkor Thom.

Baphuon was the centre of EFEO restoration efforts when the Cambodian civil war erupted and work paused for a quarter of a century. The temple

For the filming of *Tomb Raider*, an elaborate floating village was constructed on the northern pond of Angkor Wat; Angelina Jolie came ashore here before borrowing a mobile phone from a local monk.

was taken apart piece by piece, in keeping with the anastylosis method of renovation, but all the records were destroyed during the Khmer Rouge years, leaving experts with the world's largest jigsaw puzzle. The EFEO resumed a 10-year restoration programme in 1995, which is running behind schedule but will see the temple reopen some time during the lifetime of this book. Baphuon is approached by a 200m elevated walkway made of sandstone, and the central structure is 43m high.

On the western side of the temple is the retaining wall of the second level. The wall was fashioned – apparently in the 15th or 16th century – into a reclining Buddha 60m in length. The unfinished figure is quite difficult to make out, but the head is on the northern side of the wall and the gate is where the hips should be; to the left of the gate protrudes an arm. When it comes to the legs and feet – the latter are entirely gone – imagination must suffice. This huge project was undertaken by the Buddhist faithful around 500 years ago, which reinforces the fact that Angkor was never entirely abandoned.

ROYAL ENCLOSURE & PHIMEANAKAS

ភិមាណកាស

Phimeanakas stands close to the centre of a walled area that once housed the royal palace. There's very little left of the palace today except for two sandstone pools near the northern wall. Once the site of royal ablutions, these are now used as swimming holes by local children. It is fronted to the east by the Terrace of Elephants. Construction of the palace began under Rajendravarman II, although it was used by Jayavarman V and Udayadityavarman I. It was later added to and embellished by Jayavarman VII (who else?) and his successors.

Phimeanakas means 'Celestial Palace', and some scholars say that it was once topped by a golden spire. Today it only hints at its former splendour and looks a little worse for wear. The temple is another pyramidal representation of Mt Meru, with three levels. Most of the decorative features are broken or have disappeared. Still, it is worth clambering up to the second and third levels for good views of Baphuon.

PREAH PALILAY

ព្រះប៉ាលីឡៃ

Preah Palilay is one of the most atmospheric temples in Angkor Thom, located about 200m north of the Royal Enclosure's northern wall. It was erected during the rule of Jayavarman VII and originally housed a Buddha, which has long since vanished. There are several enormous trees looming large over the central sanctuary, which make for a fine photo.

TEP PRANAM

ទេព្យប្រណាម្យ

Tep Pranam, an 82m by 34m cruciform Buddhist terrace 150m east of Preah Palilay, was once the base of a pagoda of lightweight construction. Nearby is a Buddha that's 4.5m high, but it's a reconstruction of the original. A group of Buddhist nuns lives in a wooden structure close by.

PREAH PITHU

ព្រះពិដ្ឋ

Preah Pithu, which is across Northern Ave from Tep Pranam, is a group of 12th-century Hindu and Buddhist temples enclosed by a wall. It includes some beautifully decorated terraces and guardian animals in the form of elephants and lions.

TIP

Clamber under the elevated causeway leading to Baphuon for an incredible view of the hundreds of pillars supporting it.

View the striking temples of Angkor Thom in a different light by checking out the sepia, infra-red images of John McDermott at www.mcdermottgallery.com or visit his gallery in Siem Reap (p136).

TERRACE OF THE LEPER KING

ទីលានព្រះគម្ពង្គ

The Terrace of the Leper King is just north of the Terrace of Elephants. It is a 7m-high platform, on top of which stands a nude, though sexless, statue. It is yet another of Angkor's mysteries. The original of the statue is in Phnom Penh's National Museum (p84), and various theories have been advanced to explain its meaning. Legend has it that at least two of the Angkor kings had leprosy, and the statue may represent one of them. Another theory, and a more likely explanation, is that the statue is of Yama, the god of death, and that the Terrace of the Leper King housed the royal crematorium.

The front retaining walls of the terrace are decorated with at least five tiers of meticulously executed carvings of seated *apsaras*; other figures include kings wearing pointed diadems, armed with short double-edged swords and accompanied by the court and princesses, the latter adorned with beautiful rows of pearls. The terrace, built in the late 12th century between the construction of Angkor Wat and the Bayon, once supported a pavilion made of lightweight materials.

On the southern side of the Terrace of the Leper King (facing the Terrace of Elephants), there is access to the front wall of a hidden terrace that was covered up when the outer structure was built – a terrace within a terrace. The four tiers of *apsaras* and other figures, including *nagas*, look as fresh as if they had been carved yesterday, thanks to being covered up for centuries. Some of the figures carry fearsome expressions.

TERRACE OF ELEPHANTS

ទីលានជលដំរី

The 350m-long Terrace of Elephants was used as a giant viewing stand for public ceremonies and served as a base for the king's grand audience hall. As you stand here, try to imagine the pomp and grandeur of the Khmer empire at its height, with infantry, cavalry, horse-drawn chariots and elephants parading across the Central Sq in a colourful procession, pennants and standards aloft. Looking on is the god-king, crowned with a gold diadem, shaded by multitiered parasols and attended by mandarins and handmaidens bearing gold and silver utensils.

The Terrace of Elephants has five piers extending towards the Central Sq – three in the centre and one at each end. The middle section of the retaining wall is decorated with life-size *garudas* and lions; towards either end are the two parts of the famous parade of elephants, complete with their Khmer mahouts.

KLEANGS & PRASAT SUOR PRAT

ហ្គ្លាំង/ប្រាសាទសួរព្រាត

Along the east side of Central Sq are two groups of buildings, called Kleangs. The North Kleang and the South Kleang may at one time have been palaces. The North Kleang has been dated from the period of Jayavarman V (r 968–1001).

Along the Central Sq in front of the two Kleangs are 12 laterite towers – 10 in a row and two more at right angles facing the Ave of Victory – known as the Prasat Suor Prat or Temple of the Tightrope Dancers. Archaeologists believe the towers, which form an honour guard along Central Sq, were constructed by Jayavarman VII (r 1181–1219). It is likely that each one originally contained either a *linga* or a statue. It is said artists performed for the king on tightropes or rope-bridges strung between these towers.

TIP

As you follow the inner wall of the Terrace of the Leper King, notice the increasingly rough chisel marks on the figures, an indication that this wall was never completed, like many of the temples at Angkor.

According to Chinese emissary Chou Ta-Kuan, the towers of Suor Prat were also used for public trials of sorts – during a dispute the two parties would be made to sit inside two towers, one party eventually succumbing to disease and proven guilty.

AROUND ANGKOR THOM

TA PROHM

តាព្រហ្ម

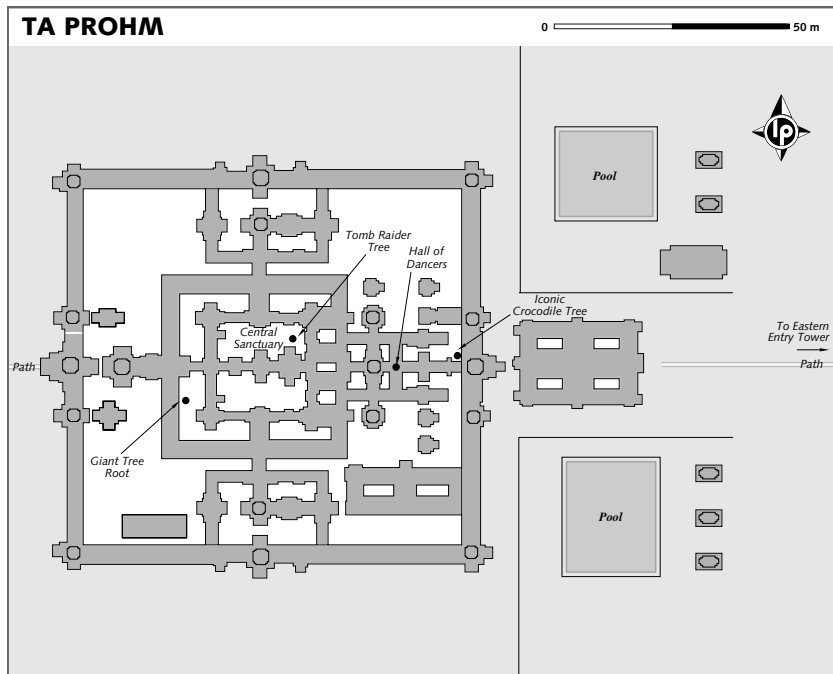
Ta Prohm is undoubtedly the most atmospheric ruin at Angkor and should be high on the hit list of every visitor. Its appeal lies in the fact that, unlike the other monuments of Angkor, it has been swallowed by the jungle, and looks very much the way most of the monuments of Angkor appeared when European explorers first stumbled upon them. Well, that's the theory, but in fact the jungle is pegged back and only the largest trees are left in place, making it manicured rather than raw like Beng Mealea. Still, a visit to Ta Prohm is a unique, other-world experience. The temple is cloaked in dappled shadow, its crumbling towers and walls locked in the slow muscular embrace of vast root systems. If Angkor Wat, the Bayon and other temples are testimony to the genius of the ancient Khmers, Ta Prohm reminds us equally of the awesome fecundity and power of the jungle. There is a poetic cycle to this venerable ruin, with humanity first conquering nature to rapidly create, and nature once again conquering humanity to slowly destroy.

Built from 1186 and originally known as Rajavihara (Monastery of the King), Ta Prohm was a Buddhist temple dedicated to the mother of Jayavarman VII. It is one of the few temples in the Angkor region where an inscription provides information about the temple's dependents and inhabitants.

Ta Prohm is a temple of towers, closed courtyards and narrow corridors. Many of the corridors are impassable, clogged with jumbled piles

According to an inscription stele from Ta Prohm, close to 80,000 people were required to maintain or attend at the temple, among them more than 2700 officials and 615 dancers.

TA PROHM



NHIEM CHUN *Nick Ray*

Nhiem Chun is as much an icon of Angkor as the tangled roots that slowly choke the ancient stones of Ta Prohm. He will forever be known as the 'sweeper of Ta Prohm', as Nhiem Chun has dedicated his life to stemming the tide of nature, bent double, stooping low over the stones to sweep away the falling leaves each day.

I first met Nhiem back in 1995 when exploring Ta Prohm. He was more sprightly then, nimbly gliding over fallen pillars, tumbled stones and moss-clad lintels in search of his quarry, those ever-falling leaves. Nhiem's face was every bit as chiselled and characterful as the beautiful *devadas* that still lined the galleries.

Years later he was immortalised by Lonely Planet when his iconic image was selected as the cover shot for the fourth edition of this Cambodia guidebook (see p6). It is a definitive shot, Nhiem standing in front of the 'Tomb Raider tree'. Nhiem soon became an A-list Angkor celebrity and crowds thronged around him wanting a photograph. At 86, Nhiem Chun is about the same age as King Sihanouk, although their lives could hardly be more different. He grew up tending buffalo and helping with the harvest, but thanks to a chance meeting with Angkor curator Henri Marchal in 1941 he began work as a labourer, helping with temple restoration at Angkor. It was the start of a lifelong love affair with the temples and Nhiem was destined to spend the next 65 years of his life working amid the sacred stones.

Nhiem's world crumbled around him when the Khmer Rouge came to power. 'In the 1970s, our lives were turned upside down. I could not do my job, I had to work the land,' says Nhiem. 'You had no choice. You would be killed.' More precious than his beloved temples, his two sons disappeared during the Khmer Rouge regime. 'When the fighting was over, my two sons were still missing,' he recalls. 'I was told they had been killed by the Khmer Rouge, their throats slit with sharpened sugar palm fronds.'

In 2006 the BBC came to Cambodia to film for the documentary series *Imagine...Who Cares About Art?* and Nhiem Chun, the ever-loyal guardian of Ta Prohm, was our subject. We spent several days with him, learning about his life, his loves, and his loss. 'The older I get the more I love this place. These temples are the spirit of the Cambodian nation,' muses Nhiem, wandering about Ta Prohm. 'I could have built this temple in a past life. If I did not have any connection, I would not be here to take care of it today.'

Nhiem is not getting any younger and frets about the future: 'I am old now. I can't take care of these temples any more,' he opines wistfully. 'But when I am gone, these stones will still be here. These temples are the symbols of our soul. We will not survive if we don't look after our temples.'

Like the ancient stones of Ta Prohm, like his beloved monarch Sihanouk, Nhiem Chun has experienced light and dark. A life lived among beauty and brilliance, he has also experienced the ugly side of mankind. But life goes on and the leaves continue to fall. 'If I don't sweep, the leaves will cover the temple. I must sweep,' he mutters. Nhiem Chun is a man for all seasons.

Nhiem Chun has finally hung up his brush to enjoy a well-earned retirement and lives with his grandchildren in a village near Ta Prohm. Some quotes taken from BBC film Imagine...Who Cares About Art?

of delicately carved stone blocks dislodged by the roots of long-decayed trees. Bas-reliefs on bulging walls are carpeted with lichen, moss and creeping plants, and shrubs sprout from the roofs of monumental porches. Trees, hundreds of years old – some supported by flying buttresses – tower overhead, their leaves filtering the sunlight and casting a greenish pall over the whole scene. The most popular of the many strangulating root formations is that on the inside of the easternmost *gopura* (entrance pavilion) of the central enclosure, nicknamed the Crocodile Tree. It used to be possible to climb onto the damaged galleries, but this is now prohibited to protect both the temple and visitor. Many of these precariously balanced stones weigh a tonne or more and would do some serious damage if they came down.

One of the most famous spots in Ta Prohm is the so-called 'Tomb Raider tree' where Angelina Jolie's Lara Croft picked a jasmine flower before falling through the earth into...Pinewood Studios.

BAKSEI CHAMKROG

បក្សីចាំក្រុង

Located southwest of the south gate of Angkor Thom, Baksei Chamkrong is one of the few brick edifices in the immediate vicinity of Angkor. A well-proportioned though petite temple, it was once decorated with a covering of lime mortar. Like virtually all of the structures of Angkor, it opens to the east. In the early 10th century, Harshavarman I erected five statues in this temple: two of Shiva, one of Vishnu and two of Devi.

PHNOM BAKHENG

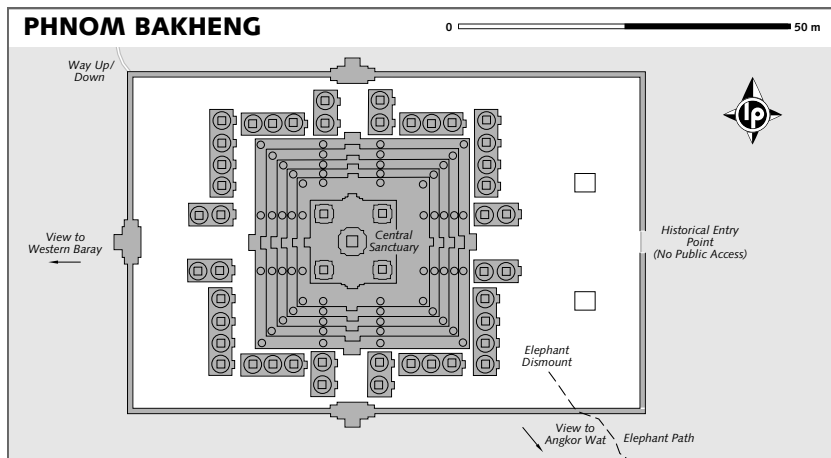
ភ្នំបាក់ខែង

Located around 400m south of Angkor Thom, the main attraction at Phnom Bakheng is the photo op of a sunset view of Angkor Wat. Unfortunately, the whole affair has turned into something of a circus, with crowds of tourists ascending the slopes of the hill and jockeying for space once on top. Coming down can be even worse as there is nothing at all in the way of lighting. Still, the sunset over the Western Baray is very impressive from the hill. To get a decent picture of Angkor Wat in the warm glow of the late afternoon sun you will need at least a 300mm lens, as the temple is 1.3km away.

Phnom Bakheng also lays claim to being home to the first of the temple-mountains built in the vicinity of Angkor. Yasovarman I (r 889–910) chose Phnom Bakheng over the Roluos area, where the earlier capital (and temple-mountains) had been located.

The temple-mountain has five tiers, with seven levels (including the base and the summit). At the base are – or were – 44 towers. Each of the five tiers had 12 towers. The summit of the temple has four towers at the cardinal points of the compass as well as a central sanctuary. All of these numbers are of symbolic significance. The seven levels, for example, represent the seven Hindu heavens, while the total number of towers, excluding the Central Sanctuary, is 108, a particularly auspicious number and one that correlates to the lunar calendar.

It is now possible to arrange an elephant ride up the hill (one way US\$15; see p153). It is advisable to book in advance, as the rides are very popular with tour groups.



THE LONG STRIDER

One of Vishnu's best-loved incarnations was when he appeared as the dwarf Vamana, and proceeded to reclaim the world from the evil demon-king Bali. The dwarf politely asked the demon-king for a comfortable patch of ground upon which to meditate, saying that the patch need only be big enough so that he could easily walk across it in three paces. The demon agreed, only to see the dwarf swell into a mighty giant who strode across the universe in three enormous steps. From this legend, depicted at Prasat Kravan, Vishnu is sometimes known as the 'long strider'.

PRASAT KRAVAN

ប្រាសាទក្រវាំង

Prasat Kravan is famous for its interior brick carvings concealed within its towers. The five brick towers of Prasat Kravan, which are arranged in a north-south line and oriented to the east, were built for Hindu worship in AD 921. The structure is unusual in that it was not constructed by royalty; this accounts for its slightly distant location, away from the centre of the capital. Prasat Kravan is just south of the road between Angkor Wat and Banteay Kdei.

Prasat Kravan was partially restored in 1968, returning the brick carvings to their former glory. The images of Vishnu in the largest central tower show the eight-armed deity on the back wall; taking the three gigantic steps with which he reclaimed the world on the left wall (see above); and riding a *garuda* on the right wall. The northernmost tower displays bas-reliefs of Vishnu's consort, Lakshmi.

BANTEAY KDEI & SRA SRANG

ប្រាសាទក្តី និង ស្រះស្រង់

Banteay Kdei, a massive Buddhist monastery from the latter part of the 12th century, is surrounded by four concentric walls. The outer wall measures 500m by 700m. Each of its four entrances is decorated with *garudas*, which hold aloft one of Jayavarman VII's favourite themes: the four faces of Avalokiteshvara. The inside of the central tower was never finished and much of the temple is in a ruinous state due to hasty construction. It is considerably less busy than nearby Ta Prohm and this alone can justify a visit.

East of Banteay Kdei is an earlier basin, Sra Srang (Pool of Ablutions), measuring 800m by 400m, reserved for the king and his wives. A tiny island in the middle once bore a wooden temple, of which only the stone base remains. This is a beautiful body of water from which to take in a quiet sunrise.

TA KEO

តាកែវ

Ta Keo is a stark, undecorated temple that undoubtedly would have been one of the finest of Angkor's structures, had it been finished. Built by Jayavarman V (r 968–1001), it was dedicated to Shiva and was the first Angkorian monument built entirely of sandstone. The summit of the central tower, which is surrounded by four lower towers, is almost 50m high. This quincuncial arrangement (with four towers at the corners of a square and a fifth tower in the centre) is typical of many Angkorian temple-mountains.

No-one is certain why work was never completed, but a likely cause may have been the death of Jayavarman V.

TA NEI

តាណៃ

Ta Nei, 800m north of Ta Keo, was built by Jayavarman VII (r 1181–1219). There is something of the spirit of Ta Prohm here, albeit on a lesser scale, with

For a great online photographic resource on the temples of Angkor, look no further than www.angkor-ruins.com, a Japanese website with an English version.

According to inscriptions, Ta Keo was struck by lightning during construction, which may have been a bad omen and led to its abandonment.

TIP

It is possible to walk from Ta Nei to Ta Keo through the forest, a guaranteed way to leave the crowds behind.

moss and tentacle-like roots covering outer areas of this small temple. The number of visitors are also on a lesser scale, making it very atmospheric. It now houses the Apsara Authority's training unit and can be accessed by walking across the French-built dam. To get to the dam, take the long track on the left, just after the Victory Gate of Angkor Thom when coming from Siem Reap.

SPEAN THMOR

ស្ពាន់ត្នមរ

Spean Thmor (Stone Bridge), of which an arch and several piers remain, is 200m east of Thommanon. Jayavarman VII, the last great builder of Angkor, constructed many roads with these immense stone bridges spanning watercourses. This is the only large bridge remaining in the immediate vicinity of Angkor. The bridge vividly highlights how the water level has changed course over the subsequent centuries and may offer another clue to the collapse of Angkor's extensive irrigation system. Just north of Spean Thmor is a large water wheel.

There are more-spectacular examples of these ancient bridges elsewhere in Siem Reap Province, such as Spean Praptos, with 19 arches, in Kompong Kdei on NH6 from Phnom Penh; and Spean Ta Ong, a 77m bridge with a beautiful *naga*, forgotten in the forest about 25km east of Beng Mealea.

CHAU SAY TEVODA

ចៅសាយទេវតា

Just east of Angkor Thom's east gate is Chau Say Tevoda. It was probably built during the second quarter of the 12th century, under the reign of Suryavarman II, and dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu. It is under renovation by the Chinese to bring it up to the condition of its twin temple, Thommanon.

THOMMANON

ធំម្នួន

Thommanon is just north of Chau Say Tevoda. Although unique, the temple complements its neighbour, as it was built to a similar design around the same time. It was also dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu. Thommanon is in much better condition than Chau Say Tevoda thanks to extensive work by the EFEO in the 1960s.

PREAH KHAN

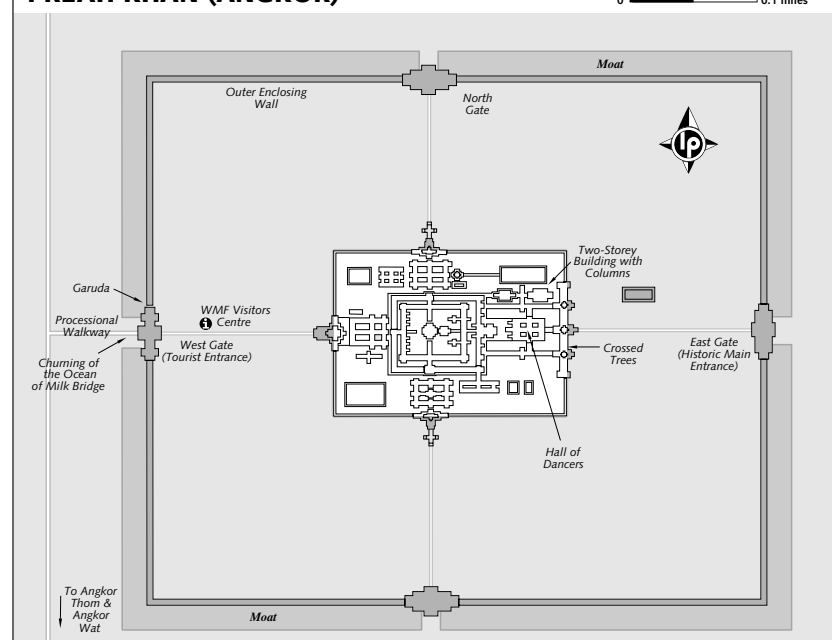
ព្រះខ័ន្ទ

The temple of Preah Khan (Sacred Sword) is one of the largest complexes at Angkor – a maze of vaulted corridors, fine carvings and lichen-clad stonework. It is a good counterpoint to Ta Prohm and generally sees slightly fewer visitors. Preah Khan was built by Jayavarman VII and probably served as his temporary residence while Angkor Thom was being built. Like Ta Prohm it is a place of towered enclosures and shoulder-hugging corridors. Unlike Ta Prohm, however, the temple of Preah Khan is in a reasonable state of preservation thanks to the ongoing restoration efforts of the **World Monuments Fund** (WMF; www.wmf.org).

The central sanctuary of the temple was dedicated in AD 1191 and a large stone stele tells us much about Preah Khan's role as a centre for worship and learning. Originally located within the first eastern enclosure, this stele is now housed safely at Angkor Conservation. The temple was dedicated to 515 divinities and during the course of a year 18 major festivals took place here, requiring a team of thousands just to maintain the place.

Preah Khan covers a very large area, but the temple itself is within a rectangular enclosing wall of around 700m by 800m. Four processional walkways approach the gates of the temple, and these are bordered by another stunning depiction of the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, as in the

Preah Khan is a genuine fusion temple, the eastern entrance dedicated to Mahayana Buddhism with equal sized doors, and the other cardinal directions dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma with successively smaller doors, emphasising the unequal nature of Hinduism.

PREAH KHAN (ANGKOR)

approach to Angkor Thom, although most of the heads have disappeared. From the central sanctuary, four long, vaulted galleries extend in the cardinal directions. Many of the interior walls of Preah Khan were once coated with plaster that was held in place by holes in the stone. Today, many delicate reliefs remain, including *essai* and *apsara* carvings.

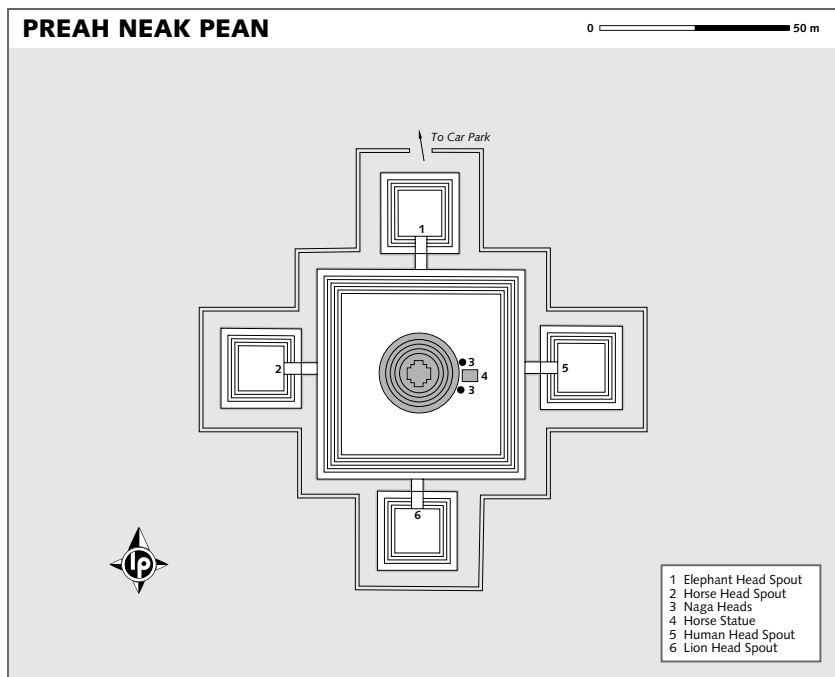
The main entrance to Preah Khan is in the east but most tourists enter at the west gate near the main road, walk the length of the temple to the east gate before doubling back to the central sanctuary, and exit at the north gate. This is reason enough to rip up the rule book and enter from the original entrance in the east. Approaching from the west, there is little clue to nature's genius, but on the outer retaining wall of the east gate is a pair of trees with monstrous roots embracing, one still reaching for the sky. There is also a curious Grecian-style two-storey structure in the temple grounds, the purpose of which is unknown, but it looks like an exile from Athens.

PREAH NEAK PEAN

ព្រះនាគព័ន្ទ

The Buddhist temple of Preah Neak Poan (Intertwined Nagas; pronounced preah neak *po-an*) is a petite yet perfect temple constructed by...surely not him again...Jayavarman VII in the late 12th century. It has a large square pool surrounded by four smaller square pools. In the middle of the central pool is a circular 'island' encircled by the two *nagas* whose intertwined tails give the temple its name. Although it has been centuries since the small pools were last filled with water, it's a safe bet that when the Encore Angkor casino is eventually but inevitably developed in Las Vegas, Preah Neak Poan will provide the blueprint for the ultimate swimming complex.

Preah Neak Pean was once in the centre of a huge 3km-by-900m *baray* serving Preah Khan, known as *Jayata-taka*, now dried up and overgrown.



In the pool around the central island there were once four statues, but only one remains, reconstructed from the debris by the French archaeologists who cleared the site. The curious figure has the body of a horse supported by a tangle of human legs. It relates to a legend that Avalokiteshvara once saved a group of shipwrecked followers from an island of ghouls by transforming into a flying horse. A beautiful replica of this statue decorates the main roundabout at Siem Reap Airport.

Water once flowed from the central pool into the four peripheral pools via ornamental spouts, which can still be seen in the pavilions at each axis of the pool. The spouts are in the form of an elephant's head, a horse's head, a lion's head and a human head. The pool was used for ritual purification rites.

TA SOM
តាំស៊ោម

Ta Som, which stands to the east of Preah Neak Pean, is yet another of the late-12th-century Buddhist temples of Jayavarman VII, the Donald Trump of ancient Cambodia. The central area of Ta Som is in a ruinous state, but restoration by the WMF is close to completion.

EASTERN BARAY & EASTERN MEBON

ព្រហ្មបារាយណ៍កើត/មេឃុណ្យខាងកើត
The enormous one-time reservoir known as the Eastern Baray was excavated by Yasovarman I (r 889–910), who marked its four corners with steles. This basin, now entirely dried up, was the most important of the public works of Yasodharapura, Yasovarman I's capital, and is 7km by 1.8km. It was originally fed by the Stung Siem Reap.

TIP

The most impressive feature at Ta Som is the huge tree completely overwhelming the eastern *gopura*, providing one of the most popular photo opportunities in the Angkor area.

The Hindu temple known as the Eastern Mebon, erected by Rajendravarma II (r 944–68), would have been on an islet in the centre of the Eastern Baray, but is now very much on dry land. This temple is like a smaller version of Pre Rup, which was built 15 to 20 years later and lies to the south. The temple-mountain form is topped off by the now familiar quincunial arrangement of towers. The elaborate brick shrines are dotted with neatly arranged holes, which attached the original plasterwork. The base of the temple is guarded at its corners by perfectly carved stone figures of elephants, many of which are still in a very good state of preservation.

PRE RUP

ប្រែរូប

Pre Rup, built by Rajendravarma II, is about 1km south of the Eastern Mebon. Like its nearby predecessor, the temple consists of a pyramid-shaped temple-mountain with the uppermost of the three tiers carrying five lotus towers. The brick sanctuaries were also once decorated with a plaster coating, fragments of which still remain on the southwestern tower; there are some amazingly detailed lintel carvings here. Several of the outermost eastern towers are perilously close to collapse and are propped up by an army of wooden supports.

Pre Rup means 'Turning the Body' and refers to a traditional method of cremation in which a corpse's outline is traced in the cinders, first in one direction and then in the other; this suggests that the temple may have served as an early royal crematorium.

BANTEAY SAMRÉ

បន្ទាយសំរែ

Banteay Samré dates from the same period as Angkor Wat and was built by Suryavarman II (r 1112–52). The temple is in a fairly healthy state of preservation due to some extensive renovation work, although its isolation has resulted in some looting during the past two decades. The area consists of a central temple with four wings, preceded by a hall and also accompanied by two libraries, the southern one remarkably well preserved. The whole ensemble is enclosed by two large concentric walls around what would have been the unique feature of an inner moat, sadly now dry.

Banteay Samré is 400m east of the Eastern Baray, which in practical terms means following the road to Banteay Srei to the village of Preah Dak and continuing straight ahead rather than following the tarmac to the left. A visit here can be combined with a trip to Banteay Srei or Phnom Bok.

WESTERN BARAY & WESTERN MEBON

ព្រហ្មបារាយណ៍លិច ដីធ្លីមេឃុណ្យខាងលិច

The Western Baray, measuring an incredible 8km by 2.3km, was excavated by hand to provide water for the intensive cultivation of lands around Angkor. Just for the record, these enormous *barays* weren't dug out, but were huge dykes built up around the edges. In the centre of the Western Baray is the ruin of the Western Mebon temple, where the giant bronze statue of Vishnu, now in the National Museum (p84) in Phnom Penh, was found. The Western Mebon is accessible by boat from the dam on the southern shore.

ROLUOS TEMPLES

វិល្ល័ស

The monuments of Roluos, which served as Indravarman I's (r 877–89) capital, Hariharalaya, are among the earliest large, permanent temples built

Eastern Mebon is flanked by earthen ramps, a clue that this temple was never finished and a good visual guide to how the temples were constructed.

TIP

Pre Rup is one of the most popular sunset spots around Angkor, as the view over the surrounding rice-fields of the Eastern Baray is beautiful.

The Western Baray is the main local swimming pool around Siem Reap. There is a small beach of sorts at the western extreme (complete with picnic huts and inner tubes for rent), which attracts plenty of Khmers at weekends.

by the Khmers and mark the dawn of Khmer classical art. Before the construction of Roluos, generally only lighter (and less-durable) construction materials such as brick were employed.

The temples can be found 13km east of Siem Reap along NH6 near the modern-day town of Roluos.

PREAH KO

ព្រះគោ

Preah Ko was erected by Indravarman I in the late 9th century, and was dedicated to Shiva. The six *prasats* (stone halls), aligned in two rows and decorated with carved sandstone and plaster reliefs, face east; the central tower of the front row is a great deal larger than the other towers. Preah Ko has some of the best surviving examples of plasterwork seen at Angkor and is currently under restoration by a German team. There are elaborate inscriptions in the ancient Hindu language of Sanskrit on the doorposts of each tower.

The towers of Preah Ko (Sacred Ox) feature three *nandis* (sacred oxen), all of whom look like a few steaks have been sliced off them over the years. Preah Ko was dedicated by Indravarman I to his deified ancestors in AD 880. The front towers relate to male ancestors or gods, the rear towers to female ancestors or goddesses. Lions guard the steps up to the temple.

BAKONG

បាក់ឯង

Bakong is the largest and most interesting of the Roluos Group temples, and has an active Buddhist monastery just to the north of the east entrance. It was built and dedicated to Shiva by Indravarman I. It's a representation of Mt Meru, and it served as the city's central temple. The east-facing complex consists of a five-tier central pyramid of sandstone, 60m square at the base, flanked by eight towers (or their remains) of brick and sandstone and by other minor sanctuaries. A number of the eight towers below the upper central tower are still partly covered by their original plasterwork.

The complex is enclosed by three concentric walls and a moat. There are well-preserved statues of stone elephants on each corner of the first three levels of the central temple. There are 12 stupas – three to a side – on the third tier.

LOLEI

លលៃ

The four brick towers of Lolei, an almost exact replica of the towers of Preah Ko (although in much worse shape) were built on an islet in the centre of a large reservoir – now rice-fields – by Yasovarman I (r 889–910), the founder of the first city at Angkor. The sandstone carvings in the niches of the temples are worth a look and there are Sanskrit inscriptions on the doorposts. According to one of the inscriptions, the four towers were dedicated by Yasovarman I to his mother, his father and his maternal grandparents on 12 July 893.

AROUND ANGKOR

PHNOM KROM

ភ្នំក្រោម

The temple of Phnom Krom, 12km south of Siem Reap on a hill overlooking Tonlé Sap Lake, dates from the reign of Yasovarman I in the late 9th or early 10th century. The name means 'Lower Hill' and is a reference to its

geographic location in relation to its sister temples of Phnom Bakheng and Phnom Bok. The three towers, dedicated (from north to south) to Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma, are in a ruined state, but Phnom Krom remains one of the more tranquil spots from which to view the sunset, complete with an active wat. The fast boats from Phnom Penh dock near here, but it is not possible to see the temple from beneath the hill. If coming here by *moto* or car, try to get the driver to take you to the summit, as it is a long, hot climb otherwise.

PHNOM BOK

ភ្នំបូក

Making up the triplicate of temple-mountains built by Yasovarman I in the late 9th or early 10th century, this peaceful but remote location sees few visitors. The small temple is in reasonable shape and includes two frangipani trees growing out of a pair of ruinous towers – they look like some sort of extravagant haircut when in full flower. However, it is the views of Phnom Kulen to the north and the plains of Angkor to the south from this 212m hill that make it worth the trip. The remains of a 5m *linga* are also visible at the opposite end of the hill and it's believed there were similar *linga* at Phnom Bakheng and Phnom Krom. Unfortunately, it is not a sensible place for sunrise or sunset, as it would require a long journey in the dark to get here or get back.

There is a long, winding trail (not suitable for bikes) snaking up the hill, which takes about 20 minutes to climb, plus a new faster cement staircase, but the latter is fairly exposed. Avoid the heat of the middle of the day and carry plenty of water, which can be purchased near the base of the mountain.

Phnom Bok is about 25km from Siem Reap and is clearly visible from the road to Banteay Srei. It is accessible by continuing east on the road to Banteay Samré for another 6km. It is possible to loop back to Siem Reap via the temples of Roluos by heading south instead of west on the return journey, and gain some rewarding glimpses of the countryside.

CHAU SREI VIBOL

ចៅស្រីវិបុល

This petite hilltop temple sees few visitors, as it is difficult to access. The central sanctuary is in a ruined state, but is nicely complemented by the construction of a modern wat nearby. Surrounding the base of the hill are laterite walls, each with a small entrance hall in reasonable condition. To get here, turn east off the reasonable dirt road between Phnom Bok and Roluos at a point about 8km north of NH6, or 5km south of Phnom Bok. From this point, the trail deteriorates and crosses several small, rickety bridges, helping to explain why tour buses don't make it here. The path also crosses a small Angkorian bridge, built at the end of the 12th century, complete with *naga* balustrades. The route is easy to lose, so keep asking locals for directions at junctions and eventually you will find yourself in a monastic compound at the base of the small hill.

BANTEAY SREI

បន្ទាយស្រី

Banteay Srei is considered by many to be the jewel in the crown of Angkorian art. A Hindu temple dedicated to Shiva, it is cut from stone of a pinkish hue and includes some of the finest stone carving seen anywhere on earth. It is one of the smallest sites at Angkor, but what it lacks in size it makes up for in stature. It is wonderfully well preserved and many of its carvings are three-dimensional.

The sanctuary on the fifth level of Bakong temple was a later addition during the reign of Suryavarman II, in the style of Angkor Wat's central tower.

Construction on Banteay Srei began in AD 967 and it is one of the few temples around Angkor not to be commissioned by a king, but by a Brahman, who may have been a tutor to Jayavarman V. The temple is square and has entrances at the east and west, the east approached by a causeway. Of interest are the lavishly decorated libraries and the three central towers, which are decorated with male and female divinities and beautiful filigree relief work.

Classic carvings at Banteay Srei include delicate women with lotus flowers in hand and traditional skirts clearly visible, as well as breathtaking recreations of scenes from the epic *Ramayana* adorning the library pediments (carved inlays above a lintel). However, the sum of the parts is no greater than the whole – almost every inch of these interior buildings is covered in decoration. Standing watch over such perfect creations are the mythical guardians, all of which are copies of originals stored in the National Museum (p84).

Banteay Srei was the first major temple-restoration undertaken by the EFEO in 1930 using the anastylosis method. The project, as evidenced today, was a major success and soon led to other larger projects such as the restoration of the Bayon.

When Banteay Srei was first rediscovered, it was assumed to be from the 13th or 14th centuries, as the refined carving must have come at the end of the Angkor period. It was later dated to AD 967, from inscriptions found at the site. However, some scholars are once again calling for a revision of this date, given that the style of this temple and its carvings are unlike anything else seen in the 10th century. New theories suggest that like the great cathedrals of Europe, some Angkorian temples may have been destroyed and then rebuilt, or altered beyond recognition, and that the inscription stele at Banteay Srei relates to an earlier structure on the site, not the delicate flower of a temple we see today.

Banteay Srei is 21km northeast of Bayon or about 32km from Siem Reap. It is well signposted and the road is surfaced all the way – a trip from Siem Reap should take about one hour. *Moto* and *remorque* drivers will want a bit of extra cash to come out here, so agree on a sum first. It is possible to combine a visit to Banteay Srei with a trip to the River of a Thousand Lingas at Kbal Spean and Beng Mealea, or to Banteay Samré and Phnom Bok.

KBAL SPEAN

ក្បាលស្បែក

Kbal Spean is a spectacularly carved riverbed, set deep in the jungle to the northeast of Angkor. More commonly referred to in English as the 'River of a Thousand Lingas', the name actually means 'bridgehead', a reference to the natural rock bridge at the site. *Lingas* have been elaborately carved into the riverbed, and images of Hindu deities are dotted about the area.

It is a 2km uphill walk to the carvings, along a pretty path that winds its way up into the jungle, passing by some interesting boulder formations along the way. Carry plenty of water up the hill, as there is none available beyond the parking area. The path eventually splits to the waterfall or the river carvings. There is an impressive carving of Vishnu on the upper section of the river, followed by a series of carvings at the bridgehead itself, many of which have been tragically hacked off in the past few years. This area is now roped off to protect the carvings from further damage.

Following the river down, there are several more impressive carvings of Vishnu, and Shiva with his consort Uma, and further downstream hundreds of *linga* appear on the riverbed. At the top of the waterfall, there are many animal images, including a cow and a frog, and a path winds around the boulders to a wooden staircase leading down to the base of the falls. Visitors between January and June will be disappointed to see very little water here. The best time to visit is between September and December.

Banteay Srei means 'Citadel of the Women' and it is said that it must have been built by a woman, as the elaborate carvings are too fine for the hand of a man.

In 1923 Frenchman André Malraux was arrested in Phnom Penh for attempting to steal several of Banteay Srei's major statues and pieces of sculpture. Ironically, Malraux was later appointed Minister of Culture under Charles de Gaulle.

TIP

When exploring Kbal Spean it is best to start with the river carvings and work back down to the waterfall to cool off.

LAND MINE ALERT!

At no point during a visit to Kbal Spean or Phnom Kulen should you leave well-trodden paths, as there may be land mines in the area.

Nearby is the **Angkor Centre for Conservation of Biodiversity** (www.accb-cambodia.org), committed to rescuing, rehabilitating and reintroducing threatened wildlife. Tours of the centre can be arranged daily at 1pm.

Kbal Spean is about 50km northeast of Siem Reap or about 18km beyond the temple of Banteay Srei. The road is sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes ugly, but it should be surfaced in the near future because it continues north to Anlong Veng (p258) near the Thai border.

Moto drivers will no doubt want a bit of extra money to take you here – a few extra dollars should do, or US\$10 to US\$15 for the day, including a trip to Banteay Srei. Likewise, *remorque* drivers will probably up the price to US\$20. A surcharge is also levied to come out here by car. Admission to Kbal Spean is included in the general Angkor pass and the last entry to the site is at 3.30pm.

PHNOM KULEN

ភ្នំគូលែន

Phnom Kulen is considered by Khmers to be the most sacred mountain in Cambodia and is a popular place of pilgrimage during weekends and festivals. It played a significant role in the history of the Khmer empire, as it was from here in AD 802 that Jayavarman II proclaimed himself a *devaraja* (god-king) and announced independence from Java, giving birth to modern-day Cambodia. There is a small wat at the summit of the mountain, which houses a large **reclining Buddha** carved into the sandstone boulder upon which it is built. Nearby is a large **waterfall** and above it are smaller bathing areas and a number of carvings in the riverbed, including numerous *lingas*. The bad news is that a private businessman bulldozed a road up here back in 1999 and charges a US\$20 toll per foreign visitor, an ambitious fee compared with what you get for your money at Angkor. None of the toll goes towards preserving the site.

The new road winds its way through some spectacular jungle scenery, emerging on the plateau after a 20km ascent. The road eventually splits: the left fork leads to the picnic spot, waterfalls and ruins of a 9th-century temple; the right fork continues over a bridge and some riverbed carvings to the reclining Buddha. This is the focal point of a pilgrimage here for Khmer people, so it is important to take off your shoes and any head covering before climbing the stairs to the sanctuary. The views from the 487m peak are tremendous, as you can see right across the forested plateau.

The waterfall is an attractive spot, but could be much more beautiful were it not for all the litter left here by families picnicking at the weekend. Near the top of the waterfall is a jungle-clad temple known as **Prasat Krau Romeas**, dating from the 9th century.

There are plenty of other Angkorian sites on Phnom Kulen, including as many as 20 minor temples around the plateau, the most important of which is **Prasat Rong Chen**, the first pyramid or temple-mountain to be constructed in the Angkor area. Most impressive of all are the giant stone animals or guardians of the mountain, known as **Sra Damrei** (Elephant Pond). These are very difficult to get to, with the route passing through mined sections of the mountain (stick to the path!) and the trail impossible in the wet season. The few people who make it, however, are rewarded with a life-size replica of a stone elephant – a full 4m long and 3m tall – and smaller statues of lions, a

Kbal Spean was 'discovered' in 1969, when EFEO ethnologist Jean Bouilbet was shown the area by an *essai*; the area was soon off-limits due to the civil war, only becoming safe again in 1998.

TIP

It is possible to buy a cheaper entrance ticket to Phnom Kulen for US\$12 from the City Angkor Hotel in Siem Reap.

frog and a cow. These were constructed on the southern face of the mountain and from here there are spectacular views across the plains below. Getting here requires taking a *moto* from Wat Preah Ang Thom for about 12km on very rough trails through thick forest before arriving at a sheer rock face. From here it is a 1km walk to the animals through the forest. Don't try to find it on your own; expect to pay the *moto* driver about US\$6 (with some hard negotiating) and carry plenty of water, as none is available.

Before the construction of the private road up Phnom Kulen, visitors had to scale the mountain and then walk across the top of the plateau to the reclining Buddha. This route takes more than two hours and is still an option. About 15km east of the new road, the trail winds its way to a small pagoda called Wat Chou, set into the cliff face from which a *tuk chou* (spring) emerges. The water is considered holy and Khmers like to bottle it to take home with them. This water source eventually flows into Tonlé Sap Lake and is thought to bless the waterways of Cambodia.

Phnom Kulen is a huge plateau around 50km from Siem Reap and about 15km from Banteay Srei. To get here on the new toll road, take the well-signposted right fork just before Banteay Srei village and go straight ahead at the crossroads. Just before the road starts to climb the mountain, there is a barrier and it is here that the US\$20 charge is levied. It is only possible to go up before 11am and only possible to come down after midday, to avoid vehicles meeting on the narrow road.

To walk to the site, head east along the base of the mountain from the major crossroads. After about 15km, there is a wat-style gate on the left and a sandy trail. Follow this to a small community from where the climb begins. It is about a 2km climb and then an hour or more in a westerly direction along the top of the plateau. This route of the pilgrims of old should cost nothing if you arrive after midday, although it takes considerably longer.

Moto drivers are likely to want about US\$15 or more to bring you out here, and rented cars will hit passengers with a surcharge, more than double the going rate for Angkor; forget coming by *remorque* as the hill climb is just too tough.

BENG MEALEA

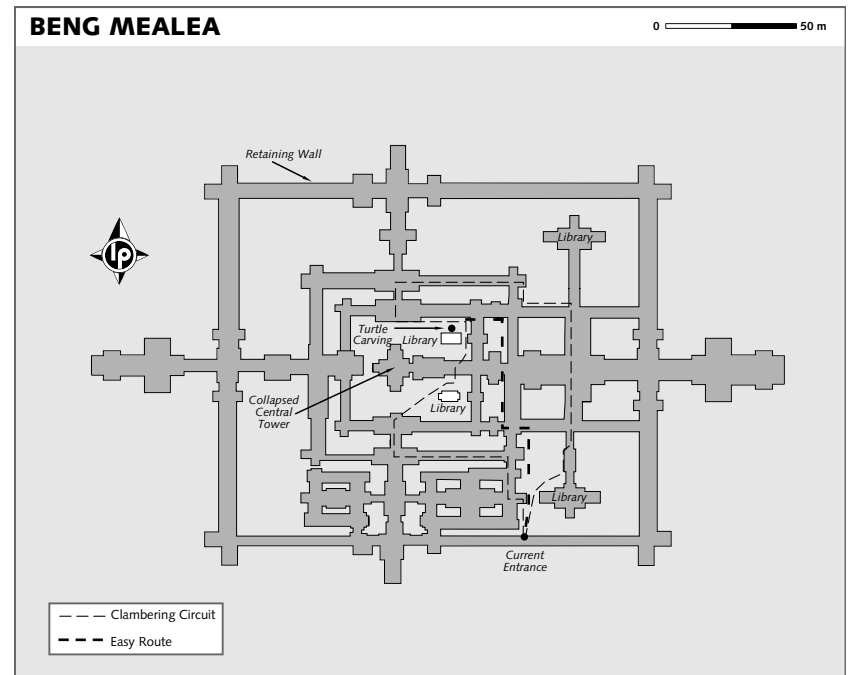
បឹងមាលា

Beng Mealea is a spectacular sight to behold. It's one of the most mysterious temples at Angkor, as nature has well and truly run riot. Built to the same floorplan as Angkor Wat, exploring this titanic of temples is Angkor's ultimate Indiana Jones experience. Built in the 12th century under Suryavarman II (r 1112–52), Beng Mealea is enclosed by a massive moat measuring 1.2km by 900m, much of which has dried up today.

The temple used to be utterly subsumed by jungle, but some of the dense foliage has been cut back in recent years. Entering from the south, visitors wend their way over piles of masonry, through long dark chambers and between hanging vines to arrive at the central tower, which has completely collapsed. Hidden away among the rubble and foliage are several impressive carvings, as well as a well-preserved library in the northeastern quadrant. The temple is a special place and it is worth taking the time to explore it thoroughly. There is also a large wooden walkway to the centre, originally constructed for the filming of Jean-Jacques Annaud's *Two Brothers* (2004).

Beng Mealea is at the centre of an ancient Angkorian road connecting Angkor Thom and Preah Khan in Preah Vihear Province. A small Angkorian bridge just west of Chau Srei Vibol temple is the only remaining trace of the old Angkorian road between Beng Mealea and Angkor Thom; between Beng Mealea and Preah Khan there are at least 10 bridges abandoned in the forest.

The filming of *Two Brothers* (2004) included some locations in Beng Mealea and the production worked with 20 tigers of all ages for continuity throughout the story.



This is a way for extreme adventurers to get to Preah Khan temple (p262); however, don't undertake this journey lightly.

It now costs US\$5 to visit Beng Mealea and there are additional small charges for cars and motorcycles – make sure you work out in advance who is paying this. It is best to undertake a long day trip combining Beng Mealea, Kbal Spean and Banteay Srei.

Beng Mealea is about 40km east of Bayon (as the crow flies) and 6.5km southeast of Phnom Kulen. By road it is about 70km from Siem Reap and is a 1½ hour trip.

The shortest route is via the small town of Dam Dek, located on NH6 towards Phnom Penh. Turn north immediately after the market and continue on this road for about 35km. The entrance to the temple lies just beyond the left-hand turn to Koh Ker.

For the second, longer route, take the road towards Banteay Srei and follow the right fork to Phnom Kulen, continuing right at the major crossroads along the base of the holy mountain. Follow this route for about 25km until you leave Kulen behind and come to a T-junction where you turn left on to the tarmac for the final 10km to Beng Mealea. This is another private road and partly privatised temple, where profit takes precedence over preservation. It usually costs US\$2.50 for a car, US\$1 for a motorbike, but that is each way, believe it or not!

REMOTE ANGKORIAN SITES

Information on the following remote Angkorian sites is found in the Northwestern Cambodia chapter: Banteay Chhmar (p255), Koh Ker (p264), Preah Khan (p262) and Prasat Preah Vihear (p268).

Take a virtual photographic tour of the remote temples of Cambodia before you leave home to work out which places you want to visit: <http://angkor.main.jp>.

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