

## Trip Review



# Cambodia

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## How It All Began

I first visited Cambodia in 2001 after hearing for many years how much JOURNEYS travelers enjoyed their visits. In the 1990's there were still guerilla bands in some rural areas limiting where tourists could travel safely. In the past five years all of the insurgent groups have been controlled and most of the land mines have been at least demarcated if not defused.

My first visit in October was off season. The Mekong River was at peak flow and most of Cambodia was underwater, a normal condition for that time of year. We often had to take off our shoes to wade rather than walk around Angkor Wat. It was fun and there were few tourists. Most of the five star hotels were empty and the three and four star hotels had plenty of space. My plane from Bangkok was about a quarter full. There were virtually no backpackers around. Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom were ominously deserted, but I felt no threat or danger at any time while in Cambodia.

I subsequently visited Cambodia in late January 2004. There were many more tourists, the hotels were quite full and it was very helpful to travel with a guide willing to start early and change the usual sequence of the Angkor Wat tour to avoid the other tourists.



The weather from December to February is wonderfully cool and dry, but I think I would prefer the heat and showers of the off season and fewer other tourists. All of the hotels and vehicles are air conditioned.

## The Major, Monumental Attraction



The biggest reason most people visit Cambodia is to see the largest and, perhaps, most intricately articulated religious monument in the world, Angkor Wat. The associated sites of Angkor Thom and other temples add further interest and insight into a remarkable Hindu civilization that evolved to a Buddhist society which flourished here between the 9th and 13th Centuries. Extraordinarily precise and geometric temples, beautifully detailed bas-relief murals, enormous deity sculptures, terraces, moats and spires rise from the jungle. They document the battles and spiritual obsessions of a lineage of kings who turned the wealth and energies of their people into enduring sandstone and laterite monuments. Suffice it to say here, if you have marveled at Inca, Chinese, Mayan, Egyptian or Burmese dynastic monumental and archaeological legacies, you will find these sites in Cambodia at least as visually interesting, accessible and inspiring.

Even with the disruptive 700 years since the last monument was created, much of the most beautiful work has been preserved and restored. Recently, during the terrible reign of the Khmer Rouge after the Vietnam War-related surrender of Phnom Penh in 1975, a dark period descended on the country. Under the Maoist-inspired and Chinese-supported policies of Pol Pot, between 2-4 million Cambodians were murdered and the cities emptied. Anyone with education, foreign contacts, knowledge of a foreign language or any tangible wealth was tortured and killed. The last of the Khmer Rouge were rooted out in the 1990's and now some of them are slipping back into legitimate government. Justice in a land where all judges, lawyers and intellectuals were killed has been difficult to provide. Unfortunately, sex slavery and exploitation of children is too common.

## The Sad Legacy of the Khmer Rouge

The survivors of the Khmer Rouge killing fields vividly remember the horrors of the past, but seem disinclined to demand justice. It seems only now can they even publicly and safely acknowledge their grief. In Cambodia May 20 is National Hate Day for recalling the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge. But, no one seems confident that complaints or calls for compensation will be heard sympathetically. My guide in 2001, Saul, recalled how as a young boy he experienced the loss of six members of his family, including his father, to most horrible deaths. All family land and property were confiscated. None has been returned. Other people I met were the sole child survivors of large families. As much as they want to forget, to know them even slightly is to know their sadness.

While you may visit Cambodia primarily to see Angkor Wat, you also will be impressed by the courtesy and hospitality of the Cambodian people. Because all of the most capable, most educated and wealthy people were killed, it has been hard for the country to build a tourism industry. Most hotels are owned by foreign companies. Cambodians in positions of management are rare, though more and more are learning.

A guide who speaks good English and comprehends the history of the ruins is a good find, although if you try to visit the ruins by yourself, you will be besieged by eager volunteers who want to help you.



## Inhabiting the Higher Ground

If you wish to find a complete escape from the realities of life in Cambodia, the new crop of luxury hotels will oblige. For prices ranging from \$250-600 and up per night you can stay in royal opulence with a choice of spas, four types of massage therapies, multiple swimming pools, gourmet restaurants and unending additional amenities. If I had had to choose one of the five star hotels, I would have chosen the PanSea, elegantly designed with a maximum of Cambodian-style hardwood architecture and a bit smaller and less ostentatious



than the Sofitel or the Grand Hotel D'Angkor. I stayed instead at the four star Angkor Hotel which was more than adequate, and I would have happily accepted a smaller room, smaller pool and more modest buffet. I looked at several three star hotels. You get a clean, air-conditioned room, good security, and a reasonable breakfast, but the rooms, bath and beds may not suit a large or tall person. If you are staying more than two nights, especially in the hot/wet season (March-September) you may want to move upscale a bit. Most hotels of any stature offer massage in the afternoons and evenings for about \$20-25 an hour and most people feel this is a good value.

## Travel Tips & Timing

The weather in mid-October was quite warm and rain showers were predictable each afternoon. However, the rains did not disrupt or ruin visits, and I enjoyed the combination of showers, luxuriant vegetation and breaks from the hot sun. Most of Cambodia is underwater at this time of year from the flooding Mekong River. Siem Reap is a meter or so higher than the vast surrounding countryside. I did not experience a mosquito problem, though my guide warned me to have repellent handy. Sandals were adequate foot wear, but in most cases it is not necessary to remove shoes before entering ruins. Easily removable or water-proof footwear is helpful. Rains end in early November, and many consider December-February as the ideal time to visit Cambodia. The ruins are within an area of extensive natural vegetation. Bird, butterfly or flower enthusiasts will want to bring their optical equipment and field guides along during the visit to Angkor Thom. Some of the bas-relief patterns are very subtle and often situated in dark or shady locations. Your guide will try to time your visit for the best lighting conditions, but talk over your concerns about light and timing. Early morning starts are advisable in the hot season. Your guide will provide water or cool drinks.

I visited the main temple of Angkor Wat on Sunday. This is picnic and wedding day for Cambodians and the locals far outnumbered the foreigners at the site.

The local visitors made the experience all the more interesting. I was encouraged to take all the pictures I wanted of a wedding party and other attractively dressed Cambodian visitors.

Siem Reap is a small town where there is a nice bookstore and a few tourist restaurants. It is worth walking the streets just to get a direct sense of the local life. Cambodians are short people and build local structures that match their stature, so watch out for low ceilings or doorways. If you are over six feet tall be especially wary for I came home with an unwanted souvenir on my forehead. Cambodia is expensive to visit as a tourist expecting any level of amenities beyond what local people have available. I concluded this is for several reasons. The tourist industry requires foreign managers and investment. There is a long low season from March to September when there are few visitors even in a good year.

Tourism is heavily taxed. The goods and services tourists typically require are imported from other countries at high cost. The daily admittance charge to the ruins is about \$40. The best way to visit the ruins is in a very small guided party at your own pace. This costs more than the larger groups you will be eager to avoid. A guide is essential and any of a number of locally available guide books help to enhance your visit.

While Angkor Wat is the most famous location in Cambodia, we enjoyed the boat trip on the Mekong River via Tonle Sap lake from Pnom Penh. Pnom Penh is a large and busy city, but one easier to navigate than Bangkok or Saigon.

I also visited Sihouanoukville arriving by boat from Thailand, but that experience, while interesting, in no way compares with an extended visit to the ruins of Angkor Wat.

In conclusion, I had wanted to visit Angkor Wat since 1971 when I was in Asia in the Peace Corps. In the past 30 years the ruins and all of Cambodia have been heavily damaged, but the experience of what remains is still inspiring and gratifying. I have now visited Cambodia three times and would eagerly return again to see more of this beautiful country.

Large numbers of tourists, mostly Asians now visit Cambodia on group tours. It is nice to see the Angkor ruins with relatively fewer people around. Consider visiting between February and November or at least plan on taking a private guide very familiar with the area so you can avoid the tourist bottlenecks at some of the popular ruin sites.

