

# Exploring One of Southeast Asia's Treasures – the Ancient Ruins of Angkor

By Bill Poorman

Christmas Day 2017 began with a water blessing from a Buddhist Monk. Yep, it was going to be an unusual one, even by our recent standards.

Since moving to Singapore three-and-a-half years ago, every Christmas has been atypical. We use a plastic palm for our Christmas tree. Our warming fire has been a crackling yule log video on YouTube. One year, we missed Christmas Day altogether when we flew the day before, crossed the international date line while in the air, and didn't arrive in Singapore until the 26th.

But we had never started with a Buddhist blessing. Of course, we planned it this way. Since we were staying in Singapore anyway and no one could visit, we decided to check off one of the leading sites to see in Southeast Asia: the ancient ruins in the northwest Cambodian city of Siem Reap.

The area around Siem Reap used to be the capital of the Khmer Empire. Called Angkor, the city flourished in the couple of centuries before and after 1,000 CE. One group of researchers has concluded that Angkor was the biggest pre-industrial city in world history, with a population approaching one million and covering an area about the size of Los Angeles. During this heyday, the Khmer Empire built the spectacular set of stone temples, building complexes and reservoirs that we still see today. After the empire fell, many parts of Angkor were overrun by forest. A French naturalist is credited with rediscovering the ruins in 1860, but that claim is controversial. It's not clear whether the ruins were ever actually "lost", as the locals likely knew about them all along. But either way, since the 19th century, Angkor has been internationally famous. In 1992, the entire area was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site and that agency manages and protects the region today.

We planned a four-day trip to Siem Reap – a half day for travel and getting settled in, two full days of temple exploration, then a final half day of touring. We were satisfied at the end of that quick trip that we had seen the major tourist sites and gotten a sense of the area. It helps that the flight from Singapore is only two hours long, so that travel time really isn't an issue. It also

helped that we used a guide and driver. That sped up our touring quite a bit, since the car was always waiting for us when we finished with a location. We saw other tourists riding bikes or riding in tuk-tuks. This might feel more "authentic", but I think you would also need to add more time to see the sites if you go that route.

We checked into our hotel late in the afternoon on the first day. Siem Reap is a bustling, entertaining Southeast Asian city, with many tourists everywhere. We were encouraged that evening to walk over to Pub Street, a popular strip of bars and restaurants. I can't report on what it's like, unfortunately. We decided, as a family of middle-agers and teenagers, that we were both too old and too young for that scene. But it often gets positive reviews online.

Day two started with dawn at Angkor Wat, the most famous temple complex in the region. Thousands of people come out to see the sun rise over the stone ruins. Touring Angkor Wat was fascinating and only took half a day. For the second half of the day, we drove south of Siem Reap for a boat tour of the giant freshwater lake Tonle Sap and the fishing villages there. I always like the opportunity to get on a boat, but the best part of this excursion was seeing how Cambodians in the area live.

Day three was Christmas, starting with that water blessing. From there, we took a tour of the Cambodian countryside. We met a family and did some handicrafts while drinking from a coconut. We greatly enjoyed an oxcart ride, which my one son described as a ride in a two-ox open cart, instead of the one-horse open sleigh from Jingle Bells. We took a short boat ride across the Western Baray, one of the enormous ancient reservoirs built by the Khmer, and then toured a small Cambodian village. We spent the second half of Christmas Day touring more ruins. This time we were in the Angkor Thom complex, which we enjoyed much more than Angkor Wat. A highlight of the entire trip was the Bayon, a temple covered with carved stone faces. We also enjoyed the Death Gate, a stone archway with faces similar to Bayon that's far out in the woods. We hiked from there to the nearby Victory Gate. We also visited

many other, smaller ruins sites – more than I can list here. Ruins are simply everywhere you look.

Our final half day was great fun, as well. We toured a bit by bike, which our sons enjoyed immensely, including the well-known ruins at Ta Promh. These are famous for the ways that tree roots have infiltrated the stone and "flow" down the sides of the temple. (It is also famous for being used as a filming location for the movie *Tomb Raider*, starring Angelina Jolie.) Eventually we ended up at another highlight of the trip – the ruins at Ta Keo. In order to protect many of the sites, platforms and stairs have been laid over the stones. But here, we could climb on the original stone stairs to the top. Even after all of this, we had plenty of time to get to our afternoon flight.

We greatly enjoyed our trip to Siem Reap, and I have several recommendations if you plan to go. First, bring US dollars to pay for activities and tips. Cambodians infinitely prefer it to their local currency. You'll need plenty of small bills. Also, and this is important, bring plenty of strong bug spray. Whenever I travel in Southeast Asia, it always makes me appreciate Singapore's effort at mosquito control, but the bugs in Cambodia seemed even more voracious than usual. Also, make sure to only travel to Cambodia during the dry season. The country gets a proper monsoon, and you will be outside all day. Finally, as I hinted at above, I would recommend getting a guide. You don't need one, but for a short trip, I feel it made a big difference. We used a travel agency, Country Holidays, to book this trip and they found us a great guide.

Good luck on your adventures, whether they happen on Christmas or on the holiday of your choice!

*Bill Poorman is a writer living in Singapore, who somehow did not get one single bug bite while in Cambodia and is eternally thankful to his unfortunate family, who seemed to catch every bite meant for him, as well as plenty of their own.*

*Pictures courtesy of Bill Poorman*



