

Cambodia

By Suzanne Wright

In the shimmering late afternoon sun, far, far from home, I hopscotch after two camera-carrying monks, their tangerine robes dancing against the ghostly gray ruins of Angkor Wat.

Utter Cambodia and most of us think of the Killing Fields and the bloody dictatorship of Pol Pot. But there is another Cambodia: a country of gentle, resilient people who, like a Buddhist proverb says, are “the lotus that blooms in the mud.” Cambodia began as a dream, a gentle dream, far removed from the travails of this Southeast Asian country.

I landed in Siem Reap, gateway to temple complexes of the ancient Khymer civilization. The cab threads through a sea of mopeds and motorcycles from the airport to the effortlessly elegant Sofitel Angkor, a resort-style property in the center of town. I see a sign for “internet access” draped across front of a dusty gas station. In the open-air markets, alongside typical produce such as dragonfruits and durians I spy baguettes—a reminder of the still-prevalent French influence.

It is still mid-morning, but it’s already hot even though it’s January. After checking in and taking a dip in the shimmering, amoebic-shaped pool set amid lush landscaping, I have a croissant in the cool lobby. I hear that Jean Arnaud, the French director, and his crew are staying here while filming *The Brother*. With the helpful concierge, I arrange a car and driver (\$30 for half a day for both) and head off to visit the floating village.

Tonle Sap Lake looks like an ocean and is home to the largest crop of freshwater fish in the world. It is also home to thousands of very poor people, many of which are refugees from Vietnam or Laos. When the Mekong River reverses its flow during the rainy season, the lake expands and rises, drowning trees and moving the modest bamboo and leaf homes miles from their current position. The waters are alive with commerce and we rent a boat to explore. Some merchants paddle, others ply the river in motorized long tail boats, selling produce or plastic ware. We pass pig and pungent-smelling fish farms. Kids bathe in the water, women do laundry or dishes. It’s both heartbreaking and a testament to the ingenuity of the human spirit.

Back at the hotel, I leave my film to be developed (about \$3 for 24 exposures) and enjoy a long, hot shower. Dinner is at Moughal’s Dream, where the talented chef prepares Khymer/French specialties including a prawn salad served in a pineapple shell and the famous black chicken. Cambodian cuisine is subtler than Thai food, less aggressive in its spicing. Over a glass of red wine, I review my pictures, reliving my day. When I return to my room, a single fuchsia orchid lays on my pillow, and cookies and chocolate on a banana leaf on the bedside table. I dream of the sacred buildings I will see tomorrow.

I start out around 8:30 a.m. for Angkor Thom, the first of the temple complexes. The Khymer built thousands of temples in an area the size of Manhattan when it reigned supreme in the Southeast Asia from the 9th-14th centuries. Influenced by Hindu traders

from India, the temples of both Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat feature carved sandstone bas reliefs that show the daily life of the one million residents of the kingdom (London had 35,000 residents during the same period). After passing through a gate flanked on either side by statues and peddlers selling t-shirts and postcards, you see 216 jutting faces pointed skyward. Angkor Thom features 54 towers each with a four-sided face—a melding of the benevolent faces of the Buddha and the king. Asparas—voluptuous dancers—are everywhere, as are elephants and garundas, sacred birds. There are throngs of Japanese, Cambodian and Korean tourists, but very few Westerners; we are all gaping, all snapping pictures wildly.

Angkor Wat means “temple of the capital” and it is one of the wonders of the world, a magnificent, sprawling monument that took 37 years to build and then was lost to the jungle for 500 years. The five towers of the largest sacred building in the world echo the shape of a closed lotus blossom. Surrounded by a moat once filled with alligators and reached by a long promenade, the complex is imposing and serene at the same time. I climb heavenward on countless steps as the priests did nine centuries ago and as saffron-robed monks do today. I try to conjure a scene of Khymer musicians and dancers, but I can’t get my brain around what I am seeing; it’s on a scale that is hard to fathom. Yet it is deeply moving to see this achievement.

Ta Phrom is where scenes of last year’s movie *Tomb Raider* were filmed. Here, the roots of giant sponge, gum and banyan trees have overtaken the temples, strangling the stones in an eerie display. Unlike Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat, the overgrowth has not been pruned; instead, these “jewels of jungle” are left in an almost petrified state. This is my favorite place, both spiritual and soothing. After sunset in quiet contemplation, I return to the hotel.

I’ve booked the *look pra kob* body treatment. In the outdoor VIP suite at the hotel’s spa, lotus blossoms dance on my closed eyelids, water gurgles in my ears and a fan whirls above my head as the massage therapist uses a blend of Asian oils to work my weary body (Angkor has thousands of narrow, steep steps; my thighs felt every one). Just moments ago I had a ten minutes in the sauna followed by a Khymer herbal mud wrap before showering off in the outdoor shower. There’s also a soaking tub and sauna in my pavilion, but I opt for tea and cookies afterward.

Later, journaling in my room, I realize I feel transformed both by the treatment and by what I have seen in this nation. Perhaps I, too, have blossomed in the mud.