

# SERENITY



Monks in the ruins of Angkor Wat



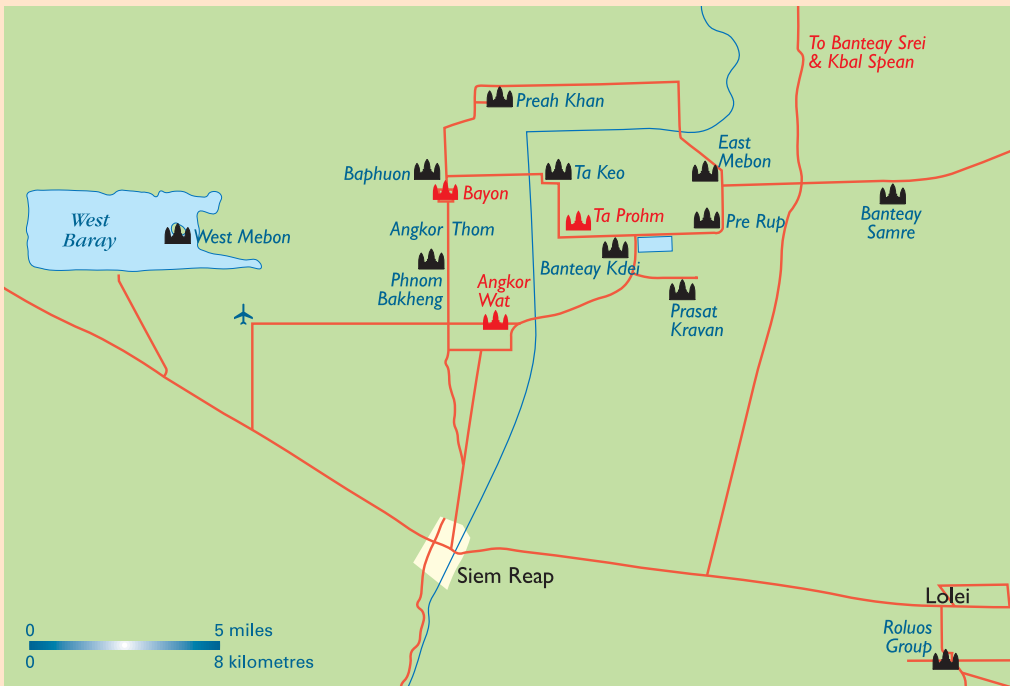
Faces at the Bayon

# of Cambodia's temples

*So famous is Cambodia's Angkor Wat on the World Heritage stage that the nearby town of Siem Reap saw nearly two million visitors in 2006. So how is it possible to experience Cambodia's wonderful temples and escape the crowds? Our Indochina Regional Manager, Catherine Garrett, explains...*

*“I love the look on the face of Audley guests when they visit Banteay Srei. I am very proud of the 'lady' temple and I love to see the reaction time and again of clients when they see the fantastic carvings on this red temple. The carving has to be the best workmanship to be seen anywhere.”*

Om, a tour guide in Siem Reap for the last fourteen years.



## Angkor Wat

One of the most impressive (and believed to be the largest) religious buildings in the world, Angkor Wat is simply overwhelming and arguably the most breathtaking of all the Angkor temples. Built sometime in the 12th century as a funerary temple for Suryavarman II, Angkor Wat stands proud as Cambodia's national symbol. From my first glimpse I was captivated by the symmetrical splendour and ornate decorative touches; indeed nowhere else has left me feeling so in awe of man's achievement. Despite the number of visitors I truly believe that everyone can have their own magical moment here by adopting a flexible approach - try staying over lunch when the tour groups head back to Siem Reap, or if the intense Cambodian heat is too much then stay within the confines of Angkor Wat at sunset in relative peace while the majority ascend nearby Phnom Bakheng.

## Ta Prohm

If there is one temple that has to be seen at dawn then it is undeniably Ta Prohm. A firm favourite of Audley's, Ta Prohm has been left to the ravages of the jungle, a temple that time forgot now encased by creeping strangler fig tree roots. What is truly mesmerising about Ta Prohm is that it remains exactly as when European explorers first discovered the site in the mid-nineteenth century. As the sun breaks the temple takes on a whole new persona - full of mystique as an eerily beautiful green light penetrates the tree canopy and rays of sunlight hauntingly highlight the moss-covered pinnacles and courtyards. Dawn here will be one of your most atmospheric experiences at Angkor, and you're early enough to beat the crowds - head back to your hotel for breakfast while others are just waking up! ▶





Ta Prohm



Angkor Wat

## Preah Vihear

Imagine a mountain temple over a thousand years old, presiding over stunning views of the Cambodian lowlands below and the Thai jungle in the distance. Imagine you are the only people there as the sun sets over the plains below, just the odd puff of smoke from distant fires rising against the sky. You are imagining Preah Vihear in the far north of Cambodia, a former sacred monastery begun in the reign of Yasovarman in the late 9th century and finished some two hundred years later by Suryavarman II. In moderate condition, the site consists of five gopura built on successively higher levels, representing aspects of Hindu mythology and incorporating some fine carvings and statues. The best of the gopuras is the last one, literally on the edge of the 500 metre-high promontory on which Preah Vihear sits. The journey here can be long and arduous but it's worth it - we can provide exclusive access to the site at night so that you and your guide and driver will be the only ones in the temple grounds once the border crossing with Thailand closes - a truly memorable experience.

“ My favourite temple is Angkor Wat but I think clients love Ta Prohm. It's great to see it very early because later it becomes crowded and the atmosphere at dawn is a lovely experience. ”

Polrith, guiding tours of Angkor's temples for a dozen years.

Stone carving at Banteay Srei, Siem Reap



## The Bayon

From afar the Bayon can look rather ordinary – you would not be mistaken for thinking that it is a little slap dash, an unstructured agglomeration of man-made stalagmites that initially pale in comparison to Angkor Wat's ordered, stylised beauty. But you'd be making a mistake if you failed to explore further, for the Bayon is a creative masterpiece, and the true personification of its architect, King Jayavarman VII. As you approach, the seemingly characterless rubble metamorphoses into a collection of 54 towers encompassing a total of 216 striking, smiling, enormous faces reminiscent of the King himself – not known for his humility! Personally, I would recommend a visit at sunset as the Bayon bathes in the beauty of the late afternoon sun.

## Beng Melea

Beng Melea is a cavernous network of corridors and towers, walls and walkways spanning a site the size of Angkor Wat. It's a tough decision to make but this spot has to be my personal favourite and is well worth the two-hour drive from Siem Reap, and a visit here easily renders Ta Prohm an aperitif to Beng Melea's main course. At Beng Melea the jungle has not just ravaged the temple, it has reclaimed its territory with unabated ferocity and the result is staggering. A wooden walkway constructed during the filming of the French film *Two Brothers* in 2004 makes for easy exploration but you may instead choose to wander off path and indulge your inner Indiana Jones (or Lara Croft of course). Few visitors make it out this way and I would suggest you combine Beng Melea with a trip to Banteay Srei and Kbal Spean for a fantastic day away from the well trodden paths.

## Kbal Spean

Otherwise known as the River of a Thousand Lingas, Kbal Spean is a great diversion from visiting the main temples. Set on a hillside and surrounded by jungle, you walk for about half an hour along a path randomly decorated with Hindu sculptures until you arrive at a river which flows under a natural sandstone bridge. Here you will find a succession of intricate lingas and representations of Rama, Hanuman, Lakshmi, Nandi and Vishnu carved out of the riverbed, with further animal carvings at the waterfall. I would recommend visiting this location from September through to February, as after this there is little water in the river and the impact is somewhat lost.

## Banteay Srei

A gem of a temple, Banteay Srei is one of the best-preserved at Angkor. When initially discovered, explorers believed the temple to date from the 13th or 14th century owing to its remarkable conservation. Incredibly, construction is now believed to have started as early as the 10th century. If being perfectly formed and encrusted with elaborate stone carvings were not enough, what makes Banteay Srei really stand out is the incredible pink sandstone from which it is made. I think the best time to visit is in the late afternoon, perhaps after Beng Melea and Kbal Spean, as at this time of the day the sandstone almost glows in the hues of the afternoon sun. For those seeking a little more adventure the wilds of the Cambodian jungle conceal a multitude of remote temples, accessible only by four-wheel drive on camping 'safaris'. Each location is unique but one of our favourites has to be Preah Vihear.



Buddhist Monks, Angkor Wat

Novice monks worship a giant Buddha image at Angkor Wat



Preah Vihear

*“I love taking people to Ta Prohm for the first time. The jungle temple at dawn will always be my most enduring memory and I take great pride in showing Audley guests the combination of natural beauty contrasted against man’s achievement.”*

Tra, one of Audley’s most experienced guides, and one of the first people to cut a path along the remote route to Preah Vihear.

## Staying in Siem Reap

Hotels range from simple locally owned properties like the Hanumanalaya to luxurious options like Raffles. Zoe Siu, one of our Cambodia specialists, was lucky enough to stay at the Amansara and she took one of their tuk tuks out to see Angkor at sunrise. “The silence was astounding as the engine was turned off and we made our way along the path in the dark towards the looming shape of Angkor in the distance”. She spent a further three days in the area and would recommend this as a minimum. “There is so much else to see, it would be a shame to miss out by having a shorter time here”.

Matt Callaway, another of our Cambodia specialists, saw more than just temples during his time in Siem Reap. He took a boat trip to Kompong Phluk to see the floating villages, and had lunch in a local house here. “Being the only visitor in the village was quite a novel experience after seeing so many westerners at Angkor. The locals were as interested in me as I was in them!” Having stopped at a nearby school to drop off some donations from the Audley office, he then went for dinner at Butterflies Garden Restaurant. This is one of many restaurants throughout Cambodia that help to train hospitality skills to disadvantaged children. The chefs come from the Shinta Mani Hospitality Institute and here are given mentoring and training to further develop their culinary repertoire and skills. “The food was amazing, and it was great to know that the owners are doing so much to help out in the local community. Every guest is given an ice cold foot bath which is a welcome relief after walking around the temples in the heat of the day!” There are lots of Responsible Tourism projects that you can get involved in throughout Cambodia.

A twelve night trip, including return flights, starts from £1,695 per person. This includes a full three days in Siem Reap exploring the temples of Angkor in detail. Safaris to outlying temples can be arranged at additional supplements. Please call our Cambodia specialists on 01993 838 160 for details.