



Ancient City of Angkor[1]

During the summer of 2014 I spent some time backpacking in Cambodia, a beautiful country in South East Asia with a turbulent past. The visit was incredible, from the charming chaos of the capital Phnom Penh, to the calm sandy beaches of Koh Rong Island. But one part of my trip stands out for me more than the others and that is Siem Reap and the ancient temples of Angkor.

The temples of Angkor have stood for as much as 1,000 years. They have survived wars both ancient and modern, as well as a period of obscurity when they were hidden by the jungle and all but forgotten. Now, as Cambodia enjoys a sustained period of peace and relative prosperity, Angkor Wat has become the symbol of the country and the pride of its people. Its image adorns everything from the national flag to beer and cigarettes, as well as souvenir T-shirts taken home by the rapidly-increasing flow of foreign tourists. Although I did not buy a souvenir T-shirt, my experience could be plucked from a similar catalogue of the one million visitors the temple has welcomed every year for the past decade. Being an architecture student allowed me to capture the experience with more enthusiasm than the average backpacker but for the most part my time in Siem Reap was very typical of my generation.

I left Phnom Penh early on the morning of Monday the 14th of July. I paid an extra 2 dollars to travel in a minivan instead of a bus. The service boasted extra comfort and a quicker travel time. The large chatty American next to me and the poor roads coupled with a lengthy stop half way into the journey proved both selling points were lies. I found out later that day from some seasoned backpackers that the only way to secure comfort while travelling in South East Asia was to ingest a few over the counter Valium before your taking your seat.

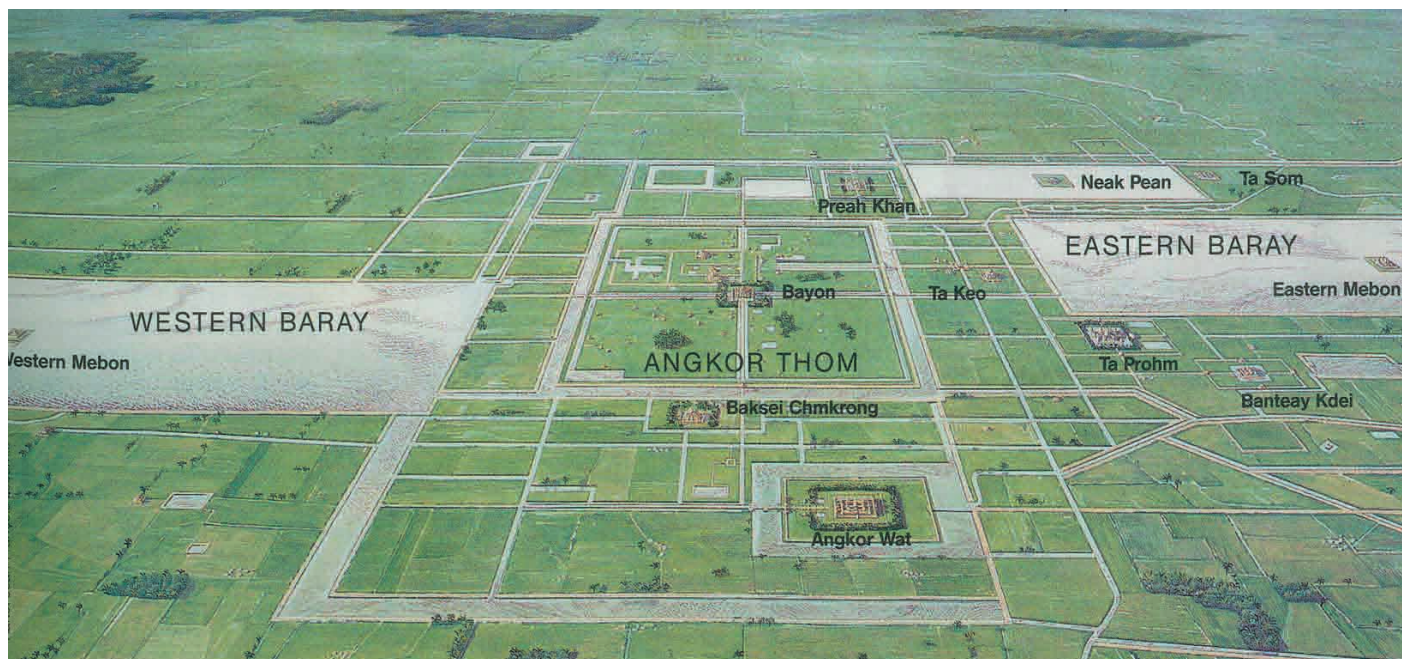
The journey took 5 hours and the roadside scenery of small chaotic towns kept me entertained until we reached Siem Reap, a fast growing tourist town that services Angkor Wat. It is full of international tourists and guest homes for the masses needing sleep after long days at the temples and the towns many bars. This is a safe and inexpensive town but it is not your typical Cambodian experience as it has been built for tourists. The van dropped us at the bus station where we were instantly bombarded by hordes of tuk tuk drivers. Tuk tuks were the cheapest and quickest way to get around. Back in Phnom Penh you could get anywhere for less than 3 dollars. I haggled my driver down to 2 dollars but felt he had bested me when the hostel he drove me to was just down the street. I was staying at the Mad Monkey which was described to me by a friend as a great place to meet other backpackers. They were not lying. I quickly met other people in my position and we assembled a crew to visit the temples the following day. It was suggested by most that you visit the temple twice. Once early in the morning to see the sunrise and then again during the day to see the rest of the massive complex. I spent the rest of the day taking in what central Siem Reap had to offer. A bustling souvenir market, cheap but tasty restaurants and the renowned "Pub Street" with its capital the "Angkor What?" bar.



My trip in Cambodia

Pub Street lived up to its name and sadly rendered us incapable of following through with our early morning plan of seeing the temple at sunrise. We were at Angkor What early in the morning but the extra “h” unfortunately led to a very different experience. It was mid-day when I finally left for the temple. My companions from the previous day had not surfaced yet but I was impatient. I arranged a round trip with a tuk tuk driver named Vuthy, a gentle Cambodian man in his late twenties with basic English. He was to take me to the all the temples in the ancient city of Angkor then then back to Siem Reap. Having a tuk tuk take you around the park was very necessary

as the ruined city was 20 kilometres across and too far to walk in the summer heat. Cycle tours were also available but I wanted a little more freedom. Vuthy took me to the park entrance where photo id passes were administered. Like everything in Cambodia it had a large picture of Angkor Wat on the front, but here it made the most sense I suppose. We then drove another five minutes into the park getting glimpses of other Khmer ruins here and there. I was slowly beginning to understand the vastness of this park. The tourist map I had, showed Angkor Wat, which was the largest and most famous temple, as a small plot in a very large expanse of temples and ruins.



Ancient City of Angkor[2]

Vuthy parked by the western bridge of Angkor Wat which was surrounded by a 190 meter wide moat. Including the moat, the complex was almost 200 hectares [3]. At the other side of the bridge there was a large wall that went all around the 82 hectares of the inner enclosure with the western entrance or Gopura in the middle. The Gopura itself was very impressive. Built in the same style as the temple and large enough for vehicles (or elephants when it was built) to enter. The Gopura had three large but somewhat ruined towers distinguishing it from the rest of the wall. I imagined that many visitors might mistake the entrance for the temple itself due to its scale.



Moat Bridge



Western Gopura



Naga balustrade

I was told there would be massive crowds around the temple. There were plenty of people but I would not have called it busy. The fact that it was mid-day and very warm is what I decided kept the numbers down. I was approached by a slim Cambodian named Mr. Tol. He was a tour guide with good English and won my fair by offering me a cold bottle of water as soon as I stepped onto the bridge. He gave me a brief introduction to the temple and explained that it was built during the reign of Suryavarman II, between 1113AD and 1150AD, both as the capital of his Khmer empire and as the state temple dedicated to Vishnu [4]. It took 300,000 men and 6,000 elephants to construct the masterpiece and its symbolism is quite amazing. The whole site encapsulates the Hindu Universe. The moat represents the mythical oceans surrounding the earth and the temple towers are Mount Meru, home of the Gods [5].



Aerial View of Angkor Wat[6]

We walked along the bridge that was partially collapsed in places. The length of the bridge created quite a long walk to reach the Gopura. I felt as though this was intentional, as if to build suspense and wonder. I imagined that if you were walking across this bridge 900 years ago it would really be an incredible experience for what lies ahead would be unfathomable for the time.

Once across the bridge we walked up a small wooden stairs covering the original steps and into the Gopura. We were flanked on either side by an intricate balustrade depicting a Naga, a seven headed serpent from Hindu Mythology. I was just beginning to understand the detail of this temple. Mr. Tol showed me the 8 armed statue of Vishnu to the right of the Gopura entrance. A few Buddhist monks in bright orange robes lingered nearby. Cambodia is a predominantly Buddhist nation and Angkor Wat has been a Buddhist temple since the 13th century. I didn't stay long by the statue as I was eager to reach the main event. The inner temple. I stood in the doorway and gazed along the 350 meter causeway at the temple or the metaphorical mount Meru. The doorway framed a beautiful view on the slightly overcast July afternoon. The vast expanse before the temple was surprising. I didn't understand why so much space was needed to divide the Gopura from the main temple but Mr. Tol explained this area was once full of settlements and was a small ancient town. The remains of some smaller stone buildings were still visible at either side of the causeway.



Angkor Wat from causeway



View from Gopura



View from pond

We began walking toward the temple. Each step bringing us closer to an ancient Hindu heaven. With the high sun beating down on us every step brought the temple more into focus. As we got closer Mr. Tol ushered me to the left and off the causeway to the bank of a pond in front of the temple. The 5 towers of Angkor shimmered in the shallow water. It was a beautiful view. I knew this was the most popular spot for photographs, especially at sunrise. I made a mental note that I would probably be in this exact place again within 24 hours, the view would be very different but equally stunning. We stayed here for a while soaking in the unique view. The heat was taking its toll on me now and we made our way to the North West corner of the temple outer terrace. The entire terrace is a gallery of bas reliefs. There are well over 600 meters of intricate wall carvings in total. It was incredible. Each wing had told a different tale from Hindu legends and Khmer history, from the churning of the sea of milk to battles depicting Suryavarman II leading his people. There was just too much to see in this temple, let alone the whole ancient city of Angkor, compared to the time I had allocated for walking around that day. We looked at the closest bas relief showing the battle of Lanka. The detail was astounding, there must have been thousands of figures in the heat of battle carved into the wall. I couldn't comprehend how long it must have taken.



Bas relief of Suryavarman II [7]

We walked south along the terrace to the central Gopura. This was closed off and being renovated. The temple has had different elements constantly under renovation since the early 20th century. The site was much more of a ruin when it was first revealed to European travellers centuries ago. Time had allowed the jungle to claim much of the city. Looters and general wear and tear left the towers crumbling in places and much of the statues had pieces missing. Some stones were tarnished with bullet holes accredited to the horrors of the Khmer Rouge in the late 1970s. The temple had many stories to tell, from prehistory to present day. And it would have many more to tell. The Cambodian people had such pride for their national icon. It was on everything from their flag to their money. I could understand why they wanted it restored to what it was envisioned to look like upon completion. For aesthetic purposes and for safety. The amount of tourism the temple generates for Cambodia is staggering. But a part of me was very envious of the explorers who found it in the jungle truly as a ruin.

We walked further into the maze of courtyards and up to the second level. We entered an area known as the hall of a thousand Buddhas. Very few Buddhas were left and Mr. Tol explained that most of them were removed for safe keeping during the Khmer Rouge reign of terror. We emerged into a courtyard and to the spectacular view of the central five towers rising from their large plinth. We walked to the south west for the best view. With the summit of Angkor Wat towering over us it really did feel as though we had made a great journey to the base of a sacred mountain. It did feel like a fitting climax to a Buddhist's pilgrimage whether it happened today or centuries ago. Steep stone steps led up to the top level inside the towers but they were closed off, we had to move around to the east side to take the retrofitted wooden steps. At the foot of the stairs Mr. Tol informed me that the tour was over and left me to explore the higher levels alone. I didn't mind. I enjoyed his knowledge of the site but was looking forward to ambling about with my thoughts for a while.



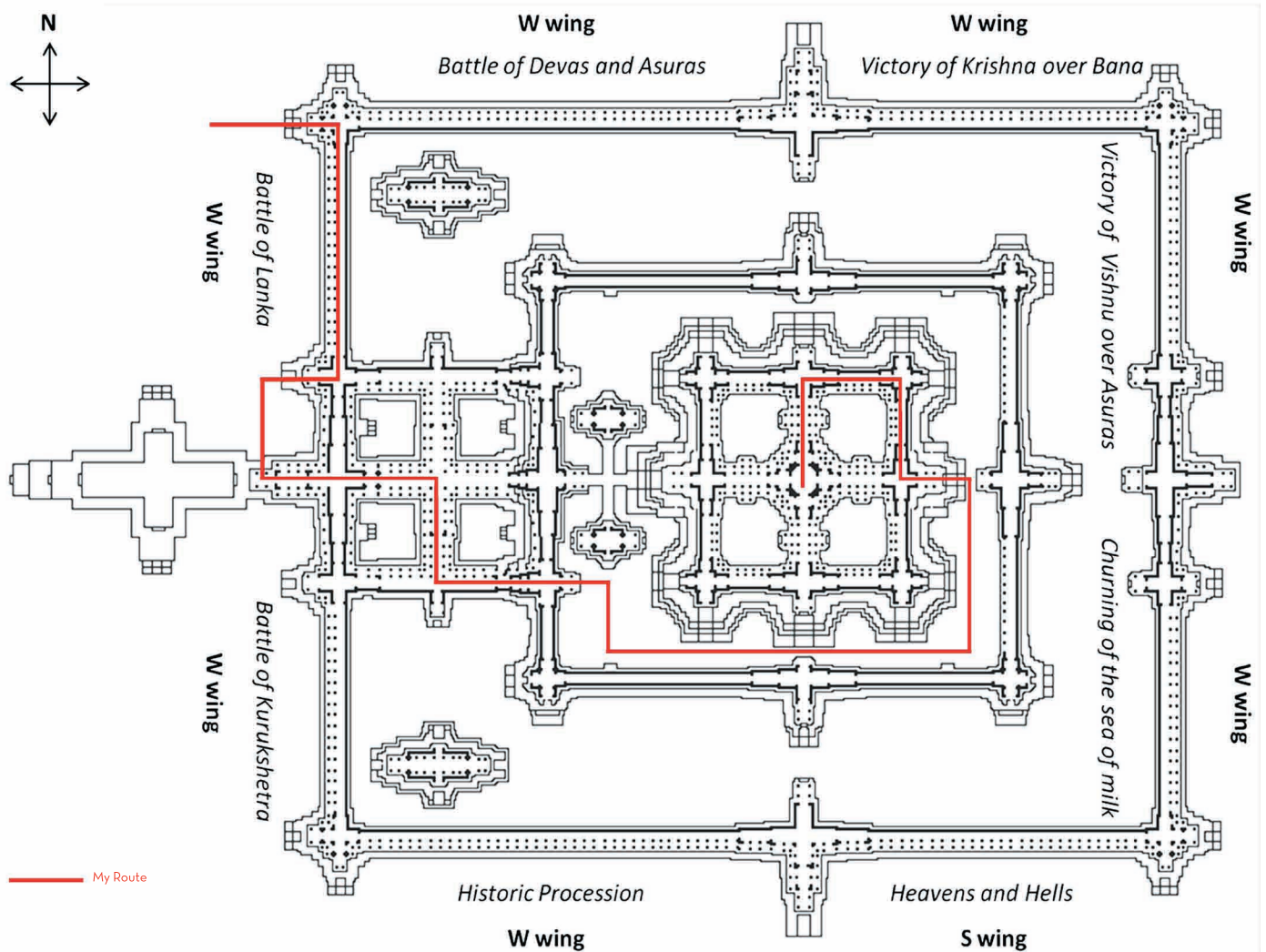
View of “Mount Meru” from south west courtyard

The upper levels provided a great view of the flat surrounding landscape. Nothing but jungle and ruins for miles. When the temple was a thriving settlement only the king was blessed with this view. Now centuries later, with Suryavarman II's remains housed meters below my feet, anyone willing to climb the steps could gaze out upon the ruins of one of Asia's great empires.



Views from the upper levels

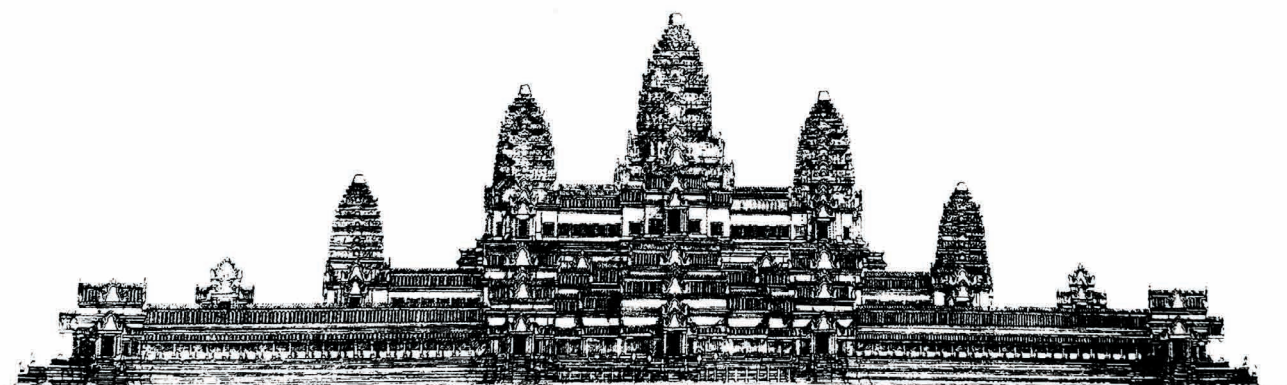
I relaxed and watched the crowds build up. It was still warm but the afternoon tourists were pouring in. Once my solitude was compromised I slowly made my way back down to the lower levels. I had been in the temple for nearly two hours at this point but I still wasn't ready to leave. It was another 30 minutes before I crossed the bridge back to Vuthy and his tuk tuk. He handed me an Angkor beer from a cooler under the seat. He drove me to some shacks at the north of the ancient city where food was served. There was a lot of people around now. Drove from all over the world were walking from ruin to ruin. I spent the rest of the day ambling about the other sites Angkor had to offer. From the stone faces of the Bayon temple to the overgrown forest temple Ta Prohm, made famous by the Hollywood movie Tomb Raider. There were many temples to see or even name and after a while all of the ruins began to blend together. Every site was a composition of weathered sandstone



My Route around the main Temple

which became repetitive after five hours wandering about Angkor. I asked Vuthy to drive me back to Siem Reap. He gave me another beer for the drive. It was six in the evening when I arrived back to the Mad Monkey. I found a familiar group in the hostel bar. They too had went to the city during the day and we exchanged experiences. We made unbreakable plans to return to Angkor Wat for sunrise and solidified the deal with the bars signature shot, the grenade. Probably not the best beginning to a plan aimed at not repeating the previous night's folly.

The following day a single tuk tuk brought the four of us to the temple in the dark. I found it strange that there were more people on the bridge at this hour than when I arrived the previous day. It was a strange experience traversing the moat in the pale morning light. It was half five in the morning. We made our way to the pond in front of the temple. The spot I had selected the day before was occupied by a large group of Chinese tourists. We sat in the grass near them and waited.



0 5 10 20m

Elevation of Temple [8]



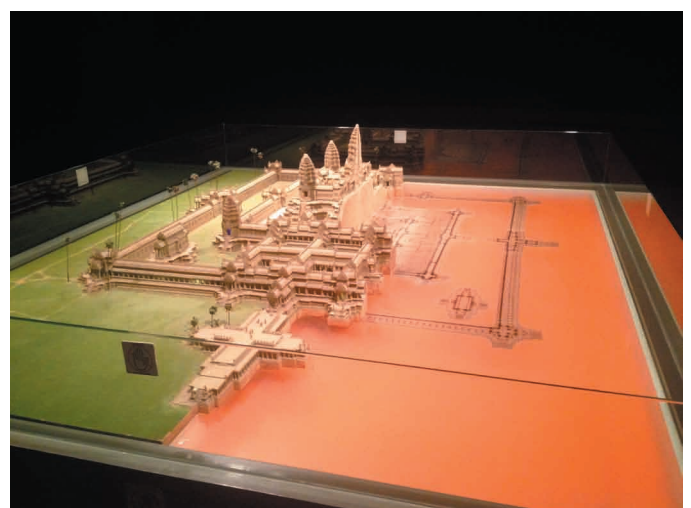
Angkor Wat at sunrise

The morning got brighter and brighter and the view of the temple got more and more beautiful. The colourful sky backdrop to the intricate silhouette of the ancient ruins was truly amazing. The reflection in the water created a viewing symmetry that I don't think can be matched anywhere on earth. I felt at peace in this moment as I thought this view, with the darkened temple contrasting the sky, probably hasn't changed much over the past millennium. The Khmer people who would rise early and walk to this pond to collect water during the time of Suryavarman, would have a very similar vision of beauty to what laid before me that day. Sitting there I decided that the morning view was more stunning than the afternoon. But I was glad I experienced both as the afternoon walk was much better for taking in the rest of the sites. We stayed for over an hour talking and soaking in the picturesque scenery. We walked about the temple some more and returned to our tuk tuk, passing some orange clad monks on the bridge reinforcing the hazy idea of being lost to the centuries. Reality flooded in swiftly as we arrived back to a busy Siem Reap.

That evening I left for Battambang in the west to continue my travels, but my mind was still on the awesome temples of Angkor. The topics covered in the hostel that night proved that I was not the only traveller moved by the sites I had seen that morning and the day before. Angkor Wat had such resonance around Cambodia. I cannot think of another landmark that has such a monopoly on a country. It marks the start of Cambodia, putting itself on the map with the Khmer empire. Its architecture and symbolism has been adopted all over the country, from the royal palace to the beer cans. It has been used for almost a thousand years as a capitol or a temple or a nation's main source of income. But with the throngs of people clambering over the ruins every day I wonder what the temple's next thousand years will hold.



My Angkor Pass



Sectional Model of Angkor Wat in Angkor Museum



- [1] M. Freeman & C. Jacques, *Ancient Angkor*, (Thailand 1999), p 9
- [2] M. Freeman & C. Jacques, *Ancient Angkor*, (Thailand 1999), p 46
- [3] M. Freeman & C. Jacques, *Ancient Angkor*, (Thailand 1999), p 47
- [4] W. Pryce, *World Architecture The masterworks*, (London, 2008), p 102
- [5] M. Freeman & C. Jacques, *Ancient Angkor*, (Thailand 1999), p 48
  - [6] M. Albanese, *Archaeology from above*, (London 2010), p 65
- [7] M. Freeman & C. Jacques, *Ancient Angkor*, (Thailand 1999), p 52
- [8] M. Freeman & C. Jacques, *Ancient Angkor*, (Thailand 1999), p 55