

It would be worth getting up before dawn just to see the sunrise melt the mist that wreathed the spires of Angkor Wat, and set them all aglow. The soft light of morning is better for photography, too, and it's marginally cooler. But the other-worldly magnificence of the 12th-century Ta Prohm, whose ancient walls coexist inextricably with the thickly convoluted root systems of venerable jungle trees, was just as beautiful at noon. And there were no more than a dozen other sightseers admiring the 200 inscrutable faces carved into the Bayon, which is probably the second-most popular temple after Angkor Wat.



Friends and travel articles had warned of the need to be up and out with the sparrows to have any sort of view of the temples; they described long queues waiting to scale each monument. Roy is not one for traipsing about in the tropical heat, and he hates both early mornings and crowds of people.

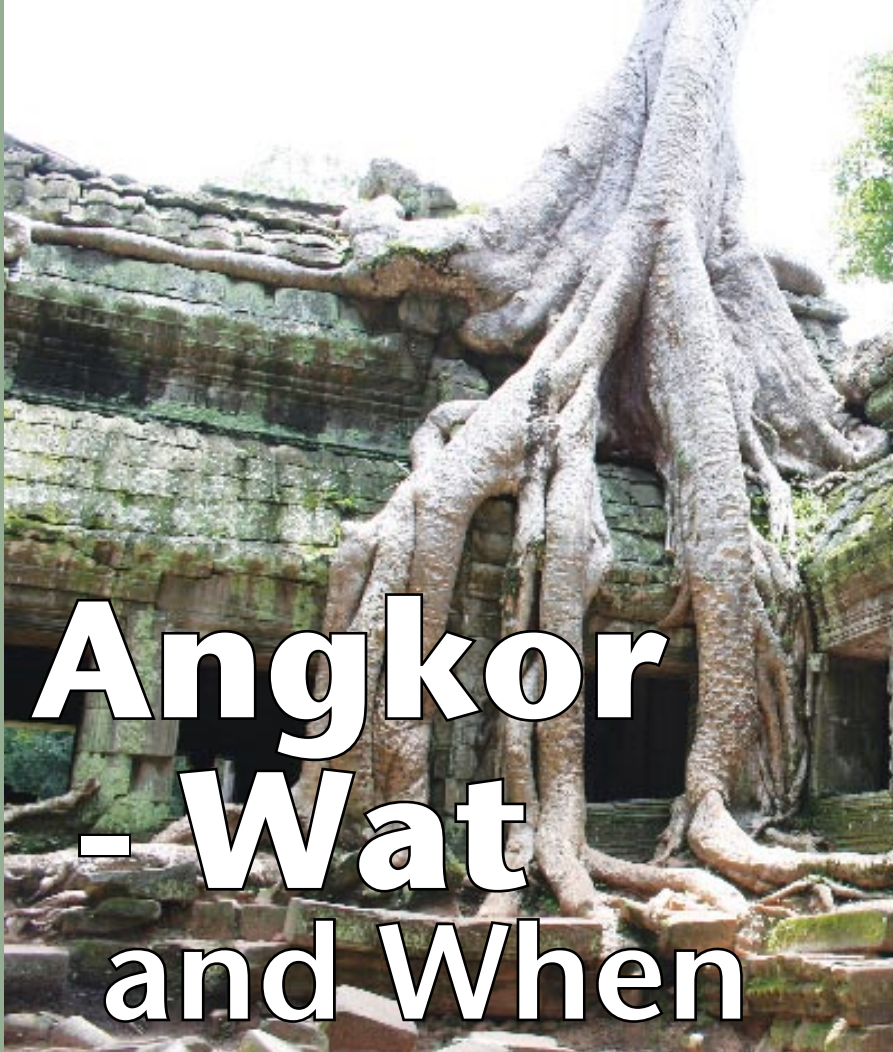
In the end, none of this was a problem, and all because we happened to go out of season, in September. The rainy season runs from April to October. June and September are the very quietest months: our flights there and back were half-empty and we never had to queue for anything.

In high season, we would not have been able to travel by *tuk tuk* to the small, intricately carved and beautifully preserved Banteay Srei, 37km from Siem Reap; it would not have been a safe nor pleasant option on roads clogged with tourist buses and choked with exhaust fumes. This form of transport brought us up close to the rural villages complete with grass houses on stilts, each house fronted by a water-lily pond (only during the rainy season), to the emerald paddy-fields and mud-wallowing water buffaloes. We pitied the occasional air-conditioned SUV or tour bus that hurtled by.

Our lovely tuk-tuk driver, Mr Hak, also took us on an afternoon outing to take in the sunset on Tonle Sap, the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia. (See Karen Renner's article on page 180 for more.) Once again, the open *tuk tuk* gives you a human-height, more personal view of the daily lives of the fisher-folk whose quaint houses line the route. In addition, the lake is at its fullest and most beautiful during the rainy season.

Siem Reap

The charming town of Siem Reap is situated on a lazy, brown river. Every afternoon, after school, a bunch of carefree boys assembled at one spot to hurl themselves gleefully into the river with the aid of a rope tied



Angkor - Wat and When





by Verne
Maree

to the branch of a tree.

It's fairly pedestrian-friendly, and *tuk tuks* are a good bet, too. The Old Market is interesting to stroll around, and conveniently close to a raft of good bars and restaurants that come alive at night. All have extensive cocktail menus (at US\$2 to US\$4 a go): try the outstanding tomb-raiders and *mohitos* at the Red Piano bar. The Temple Bar had a variety of Khmer food – our favourite was the Amok fish, with its great combination of chilli and creamy coconut; the whole crab was good, too.

Few visitors to Cambodia can fail to be moved by the plight of its people. Impoverished by centuries of war and economic exploitation, decimated and traumatised by internal strife and misery at the hands of the murderous Pol Pot and his infamous Khmer Rouge, the Cambodians are slowly rebuilding their society. Despite millions of dollars in investment aid each year, most notably from Japan and Korea, progress is slow and the poverty heartbreaking.

Shinta Mani

The act of visiting Cambodia is in



itself a way to contribute to the economy. And you'll contribute more, without even trying, if you stay at the lovely, 18-bedroom boutique hotel, Shinta Mani, because it is also a vocational hospitality institute that provides free training to 'at risk' young people. It is in the heart of Siem Reap's leafy French Quarter and less than 9km from Angkor Wat.

Derived from Sanskrit, Shinta Mani means 'the gem that provides everything one desires'; and it does, with spacious, comfortable rooms (the poolside ones are the best), friendly service, an excellent restaurant and a spa. Continental breakfast includes a selection of fruit juices squeezed to order, cut fruit with yoghurt, bread and pastries. The American option includes immaculately poached eggs Benedict or Florentine. Breakfast is available until 10am, so you could even have it after scaling a temple or two.

Shinta Mani also has a stunningly beautiful, 108-bedroomed sister hotel, Hotel de la Paix, just a minute's walk from the Old Market and the centre of the town's buzzing nightlife. We had a superb meal at its fine-dining restaurant, Merica.

The Programmes

You're welcome to visit the school and meet the students, whose education is funded by the operation of the hotel and by private donations. Chitra Vincent is both Academic Director of the Hospitality Institute and Community Director for Shinta Mani's outreach

programme for the desperately indigent families that live in the jungle beyond Siem Reap.

The third batch of 25 students will soon be graduating, she



says, and explains that they have been carefully selected from a pool of 200 applicants: each of them is either an orphan, has a single parent, comes from a large family or has a disability.

I sat in on a practical culinary class, where 16 chefs-in-training learned how to prepare a dish that called for spaghetti, tiger prawns, cream, brandy and freshly grated Parmesan cheese. They have to work especially hard at their studies, as most of them had never even heard of – let alone eaten – anything but the most basic rice dishes when they joined the programme.

You can sponsor a student for a term (US\$250) or for the full session (US\$1,000). “The training is tough,” explains Chitra, “but it’s worth it – every one of our past students is employed in a hotel or restaurant. We give them a future.”

Find out more about this life-saving programme on www.shintamani.com.



Quick Tips:

Jet Asia offers direct two-hour flights from Singapore to Siem Reap three times a week. It’s just a 6km taxi ride from the airport into town, or Shinta Mani will send a car for you at a cost of US\$8.

The local currency, the riel, is used interchangeably with US dollars. Take along a good supply of US\$1 notes: the standard price for a tuk-tuk ride, a cup of coffee, a mug of draught beer or a souvenir.

English is widely spoken, especially by the many children who will try and sell you postcards, bangles and guide books to fund their education, which costs them 500 riels (there are 4,000 riels to the US dollar) per day.

There is no dress code for the temples. Wear comfortable, cool clothing that you don’t mind sweating in and take sunscreen and insect-repellent.

Before you go, read up on the temples and on Cambodia’s appallingly brutal history; consult any good guidebook (such as Lonely Planet, Frommer’s or The Rough Guide).



There are many ways to help, some of which we have publicised before; on page 104 of this issue is a story about a drop-in centre that helps the street children of Cambodia’s Sihanoukville. Many of our international schools and other organisations in Singapore are doing their bit, even travelling to Cambodia to physically build houses.