

## Angkor's Away

Forget the images of backpacks and guesthouses, Siem Reap has gone upmarket, so now you can visit Angkor Wat in style

It is a place that has been on your list of places you have to visit for a while now, but still you keep putting it off, associating it with roots, and ruins and backpackers. But if that is the case, book your flight now, as Cambodia's Angkor Wat is unmissable and the still-charming town of Siem Reap is moving upmarket, fast.

The tourist door was only opened again in the 1990s after it was slammed firmly shut by Pol Pot, and it is only relatively recently that Siem Reap has started to cater for the more discerning traveller once more. But Angkor Wat is one of Asia's must-see destinations, and with an ever increasing number of world-class hotels, restaurants and spas, Siem Reap is becoming far removed from the backpacking image of popular imagination, as the town's aesthetic consciousness has begun to awaken to all it has to offer.

The budget dormitories still exist, but Siem Reap now boasts several ultra-exclusive hotels; places such as the elegant and understated Amansara. Once King Norodom Sihanouk's guest villa, this quintessential 1960s compound of 24 private suites, 12 with private pools, a graceful round dining room and soothing green lawn, is a cool oasis of calm where the service is beyond compare.

La Residence d'Angkor is another leafy haven from the heat. Built around a stunning garden and pool, this classic romance of a hotel is all water and wood. Traditional silks





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complement spacious colonial-style rooms sporting mosquito nets and massive stone baths, and its prime location is right on the river, just minutes from the centre of town.

There is also Siem Reap's trendy answer to sheer modern pizzazz, the Hotel de la Paix. With an imposing entrance on a busy corner, the hotel's interior whisks you away from the hustle and dust with lofty ceilings and a stark palette of black and white. The central courtyard and its banyan tree are mesmerising, and it is here you will find the Meric restaurant's swing beds. The Meric is the best table in town and features a sophisticated dining room and adventurous modern Khmer cuisine.

Other dining destinations of distinction include the wicker haven around the pool at The Restaurant at La Residence d'Angkor, old style colonial splendour at the Restaurant Le Grand at Raffles Grand Hotel, and the fine

Italian fusion at Le Meridien Angkor Hotel.

All these high-end service-providers blend seamlessly into their surrounds, and it is easy to escape in their lush gardens, private courtyards or behind unmarked walls.

Nearby, tiny trendy boutiques like Senteurs d'Angkor opposite the Old Market, jostle with French bakeries, art galleries, busking musicians and the buzz of Bar Street.

It is not all smiles, however. The road to the newly remodelled airport is littered with monstrous hotels catering to package tours, which means if you want to view Angkor Wat without the hordes you will need to apply a little effort. The good news is that the effort is definitely worth it.

“Angkor Wat is unmissable and the still-charming town of Siem Reap is moving upmarket”

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1 Two of Bayon's some 200 faces

*This spread*

2 The entrance to Preah Khan

3 Amansara's dining area

4 Hotel de la Paix detail



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As you leave the town, the road leads you into the forest of giant trees that hide the ruins. There is a sensation of leaving the present and entering the past as the early morning chill and darkness intensify beneath the canopy of trees. Headlights illuminate the road ahead but even that disappears when you reach your destination and the engine is cut. The resulting silence has a slightly eerie feel in the approaching dawn.

It is traditional to start a tour of the Angkor complex, whether for one, three or seven days, with sunrise before the pools at the entrance to Angkor Wat. But to do this means ruining your first impressions with the daybreak squabble of cameras. Better to save Angkor's renowned halls and spectacular bas reliefs depicting the Apsara and demon-populated Churning of the Sea of Milk for day two, when you can simply poke your lens through a gap in the heads

to snap the deceptively peaceful sunrise shot of the monolith and its reflection, then you will be able to hurry inside, up the perilously steep steps, right to the top, where the blissfully empty corridors and halls will await you and be yours to enjoy alone.

On day one it is better to gain a sense of perspective on where you are. Better to watch the sun rise over Angkor Wat by making the 20-minute torch-lit walk up the hill of Phnom Bakheng. This will find you amid the ruins of this ninth century temple mountain, with a panoramic view of the jungle spread out before you from horizon to horizon, and to the east, Angkor Wat's towers, rising majestically from the seemingly endless sea of foliage.

Twelve hours later, this peaceful place will be set upon by flocks of squawking tourists simply because so many of the guidebooks suggest it as a great spot from which to view sunset.

Why the emphasis on dawn and dusk? Simply because it is at these times that the magic of the temples is felt the strongest: when the Bayon's 200 enigmatic stone faces seem to smile that much more widely, and the fig trees choking Ta Prohm imperceptibly tighten their grip. Another reason is that midday is, for most of the year, clothes-clingingly hot.

Although one advantage to braving the heat is that you are more likely to encounter only saffron-robed Buddhist monks wandering the temples. Most often teenage boys, they move comfortably between past and present, at ease with both their traditional clothes and their mobile phones.

Siem Reap can be visited throughout the year with each of the seasons having different advantages and disadvantages. While temperatures never veer far from a low of 20°C and a high of 35°C, November to February is cool, dry, and green after the rainy season: but crowded. March to May is hot, dry, dusty and crowded. June to August is hot and wet, while September to October is cool, wet and verdantly green, but you will need to be more conscious of snakes. The tourist swarms usually stay away during the wet season, although the rains usually only last for around 1–3 hours in the afternoon and are easily avoided, and the temples, glistening wet under forbidding skies, are at their most photogenic.

But no matter how photogenic and fascinating they may be, eventually you will find that you have reached your temple saturation point. Even on a three-day pass you may well find yourself needing a diversion from the ruins, or at least a new perspective of them. Get an aerial view from the tethered hot air balloon or one of the flight options offered by Helicopters Cambodia, which has a variety of options; from an eight minute scenic hop to all-day multiple landing tours. They can also take you to some of the more distant temples including the Roluos Group and even the breathtaking clifftop Prasat Preah Vihear, just across the border from Thailand.

Another classic diversion for the elite traveller is offered by the Victoria Angkor Resort & Spa who will transport you in their vintage Citroëns, a 1927 B14 Torpedo convertible and a 1931 C6 limousine to be



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exact, to a secret picnic spot near a hidden temple, or on a regal shopping spree to a working silk farm set amongst fields of mulberry trees.

Wiling away an afternoon at one of Siem Reap's excellent Spas is the perfect way to recover your composure and escape the heat. The Amansara Spa, Spa Indochine and Shinta Mani for instance, would not be out of place in any world city.

Excursion options include a private boat trip on the Tonle Sap lake to see the floating villages and fisheries, jeeping 30 kms to Phnom Kulen, Cambodia's holiest mountain, and hiking to see the once-raunchy “1,000 lingams” carved into the bed of a stream or hire a bicycle and explore the countryside. Or you could take fruit and gifts on a visit to an orphanage.

While Angkor Wat might be the diamond that is bringing riches in the form of tourist dollars to this country, impoverished for too long, it is the Cambodian people who have suffered so greatly, so recently, and yet are so welcoming to strangers, who are that diamond's sparkle. They are the country's true wealth and will bring people back again and again, even when every temple has long since been ticked off the list. ❧

## Hotels

**Amansara,**  
Tel: 063 760 333  
www.amanresorts.com

**La Residence d'Angkor,**  
Tel: 063 963 390  
www.residencedangkor.com

**Hotel de la Paix,** Tel: 063 966 000  
www.hoteldelapaixangkor.com

**Victoria Angkor Resort & Spa,**  
Tel: 063 760 428  
www.victoriahotels-asia.com

### Must-see temples

**Angkor Wat:** The grand dame of Cambodia's temples

**Bayon:** All eyes on you at this historic spot – sightless stone eyes that is.

**Phnom Bakheng:** Far from the madding crowds at sunrise, a perch for flocks of tourists at sunset.

**Ta Prohm:** Nature's power displayed at its strangling best.

**Preah Khan:** Shady, sprawling and dedicated to prolific builder King Jayavarman VII's father.

**Sras Srang:** This man-made baray used to feature an island where King Jayavarman liked to meditate. Great for reflection...

### Helicopter tours

**Helicopters Cambodia,**  
Tel: 012 814 500 www.angkorscenicflights.com