

LIGHT + SHADOW IN SIEM REAP

FAR EAST

Streaks of sunlight draws strange shapes on the voluptuous bas-relief *apsaras* adorning the walls before me inside Angkor Wat. Are those lotus flowers on the heads of those bare-breasted celestial maidens? My musings on this interplay of light and shadow are suddenly abstracted by more recent—and much darker—remnants of Cambodia's complicated history. Five angry welts, unmistakable bullet impacts, scar the sandstone. They're brutal reminders of the Khmer Rouge's genocidal regime, which terrorized this Southeast Asian country from 1975 to 1979 in its failed attempt to create an agrarian utopia.

Khmer temples such as Angkor Wat and Ta Prohm, among others, riddle the jungles surrounding Siem Reap, some 320 kilometres northwest of Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh. These religious edifices, however, were not constructed for worshippers. Rather, they were sacred residences built for the gods and characterized by a series of shrines, often linked to or surrounded by galleries. >>

Young Theravada monks sit by one of Angkor Wat's four water basins

temple tripping

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Getting lost (and found) amid the temples of Siem Reap



hallowed ground

>> Angkor Wat is the world's largest religious site and was designed as a microcosm of the Hindu universe. Built during the reign of King Suryavarmen II (1113–1150), the city itself spans 200 hectares and is framed by a moat. I cross the floating walkway to reach the rectangular temple's atypically west-facing *gopura* (Khmer temples are usually oriented to the east), or entrance pavilion. The 82-hectare temple's five *gopuras* are set in a cruciform—one at each corner and the tallest in the centre representing Mount Maru whose summit is the home of the gods.

I lose myself in Angkor Wat's darkened corridors; its walls are pictorial pages that form a mythical memoir with a labyrinthine narrative I can't begin to decipher. Intricate scenes carved in stone depict sinners roasting in the hell of *Avici*, the military procession of Suryavarmen II, and the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, where *amrita* the elixir of immortality was produced. Visiting the Angkor National Museum in downtown Siem Reap primed me for pinpointing deities, such as four-armed Vishnu and motifs like *naga*, a multi-headed serpent. Leaving the sanctuary of the shadows, I step into the sultry afternoon heat and approach one of the temple's four water basins. A rivulet of sweat trickles down my back as I watch Buddhists kneeling in prayer before a shrine. Across the bone-dry basin, young Theravada monks with shaved heads and enigmatic faces sit swathed in burnt-orange robes, the folds of fabric radiant against the steely bands of stone. One monk gazes my way and our eyes meet for an ethereal instance. Or maybe it was my mind playing tricks, seeking a glimmer of certainty in this unknowable realm.

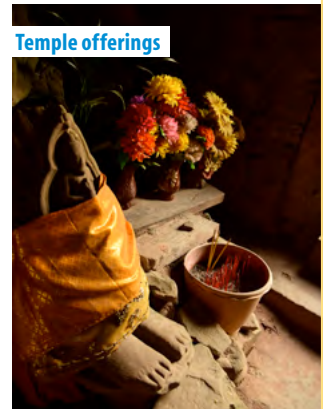
When I arrive at Ta Prohm, the Khmer temple-monastery (of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* fame; the 2018 reboot is filmed in South Africa and the UK), the sun had started its journey from heaven to earth, bathing the stone with a golden glow. Ta Prohm's huddled structures were constructed during the reign of King Jayavarman VII (1181–1220). Their outward appearance—crumbling bricks flecked with a patina of age and moss—is that of being left in ruins. In actuality, it's more a détente between humankind and nature. The jungle's silk-cotton trees and strangler figs squeeze their roots into the masonry, clinging to bas-reliefs and taking up residence on rooftops, simultaneously breaking it apart and gently securing the structures to ensure this sacred residence for the gods endures. — *Janet Gyenes*



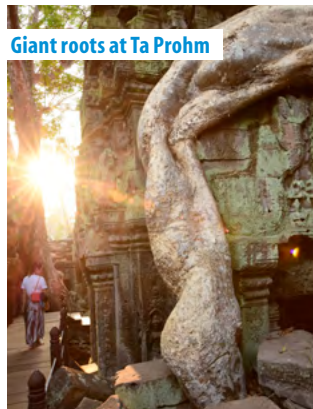
Angkor Wat at sunrise



Posing monkey at Angkor Wat



Temple offerings



Giant roots at Ta Prohm



Cambodian colour

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