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Angkor

Cambodia's **Angkor** is, quite simply, one of the most splendid attractions in all of Southeast Asia. Long considered “lost”, the ruins of Angkor were never really lost to the Khmers, who have used the monuments as religious sites throughout their history.

The myth of the lost ruins of Angkor is more suited to an Angelina Jolie film than the history books. The story more or less begins with their being “rediscovered” by Western explorers in the 19th century, beginning with the French botanist Henri Mouhot who stumbled across Angkor Wat in 1860. Few remember though that Mouhot was led to the site by a Khmer guide and that when he arrived, he found a **flourishing Buddhist monastery** within the temple grounds.



Remember there is more than just Angkor Wat.

During the Khmer Rouge period, the ruins were largely left to their own devices. Like most Khmers, even Pol Pot was unable to shake the power of the site, saying in 1977, “If our people can make Angkor, they can make anything.”

Never lost, lost then found, found then lost then found again—today it doesn't really matter. With thousands of people visiting daily, the sprawling Angkor Park remains a see-at-least-once-in-your-life destination.



The kind of place where even a door frame is beautiful.

Angkor refers to the entire 400 square kilometre Archaeological Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site packed with historic temples, hydraulic structures such as reservoirs, ancient highways and forest. [Angkor Wat](#) is the iconic temple with lotus-like towers at the heart of the park while [Angkor Thom](#) is the ancient walled city, within which many more temples are found.

Overcrowding

While not quite at a Venetian level of overcrowding, Angkor is not far behind and the times of wandering ruins all by your lonesome are sadly long gone. Aiming for pretty much any of the top shelf moments—dawn across the ponds at Angkor or sunset at [Bakheng](#) for example—largely fall into the simple don't bother category. With some ingenuity and imagination you'll be able to dodge some of the crowds—Bakheng in the middle of the day is often pretty quiet for example—but for the most popular monuments, they are now very popular indeed—to the point of being downright unpleasant.



Exploring the ruins of Preah Khan.

Allow yourself plenty of time. Set aside enough time to [Ta Phrom](#) for example to allow for you to wait out the ebb and flow of the bus loads, or, as already mentioned, visit at off-peak times to dodge the worst of the hordes. Or, if you really want to eschew the crowds, concentrate on the minor sites. Yes they'll be smaller and perhaps less spectacular, but they'll also be quieter.

Food and accommodation

Most of the nearest accommodation is in [Siem Reap](#), while for food and drink, there are some snack stalls set up by Angkor Wat. They'll offer basics like baguettes and noodle soup and much-needed bottles of water at slightly inflated prices, as do the row of restaurants running alongside to [Srah Srang](#)—don't expect haute cuisine, and you will not be disappointed. Alternatively Angkor Cafe, opposite the front entrance to Angkor Wat, offers air-con, a gift shop and Western fare. Unless you're in a rush, in the middle of the day you're best to head back to Siem Reap for a rest and a meal—Siem Reap has some outstanding restaurants.

Ticketing and passes

Passes to the park cost **US\$37 for one day, US\$62 for three days of visits within a week and US\$72 for seven days of visits in a month**. Ticketing is operated by privately owned Sokimex Corporation. The process takes a few minutes and they take your photo and print it on the ticket, so don't hope to share a week's pass with a fellow backpacker unless you bear an uncanny resemblance.

Only the main entrance issues tickets, despite there being other roads that enter the park. Tickets are checked at almost every temple too, including the ones further afield. The ticket sales booths open at 05:00, though if you are intent on jostling for the best spot for sunrise and plan to leave earlier, it is possible to buy your ticket the evening prior—after 17:00. It is also free to enter without a pass at all after 17:30, but given the sun sets early in Cambodia be prepared to return in the pitch black. The temples are not lit at night, so there's nothing to hang around for.



A rare quiet moment at the Bakheng.

Transport to and from

Transport to the park for the day is relatively easy. The going rate for a day-long tuk tuk ride through the park is \$15. This price includes Angkor Wat, [Bayon](#), and all the temples in the immediate surrounds. For longer distances, expect to pay more. Trekking out to the [Rolous Group](#) of temples about 13 kilometres away will cost around an extra \$3, while prices for trips to [Banteay Srei](#) and even farther temples can range wildly depending on your driver's willingness to make the trip. The roads are all flat so it is easy to cycle—as long as you can cope well with heat and avoid the steady stream of tour buses on the main routes.

Guides

An English-speaking guide costs \$30 a day—a rate set by the Khmer Angkor Tour Guide Association. It will cost more for guides speaking other languages. Some of the best tour guides can charge more than this as they are in high demand. **A good guide is**

recommended if you really want to understand the thousands of carvings adorning the buildings and get pointers on what time of day to visit the various sites. We also have a [list of recommended reading](#) for those hoping to self-guide.

About this guide

This Travelfish.org guide was researched in person, on the ground, by a Travelfish writer. Travelfish.org always pays its way. No freebies. No discounts. No exceptions.

Links are to other pages within the document, or to external websites, so you will need to have internet access enabled for the latter to work. If you're accessing this on a tablet or iPhone, please note that the links do not work in Kindle Reader for Android and iPhone. They do work in other PDF readers though, such as iBooks.

We've made the text large to make the guide easier to read on portable devices, so if you're planning on printing this off, please consider printing two pages per page (most printers allow this).

This guide may include links to Agoda, Booking and other affiliate programmes. If you click on one of these links and make a reservation, we may earn a commission.

Got an idea on how to improve this guide? See something that is incorrect or out of date? Please let us know by emailing stuartmcdonald@travelfish.org or sambrown@travelfish.org.

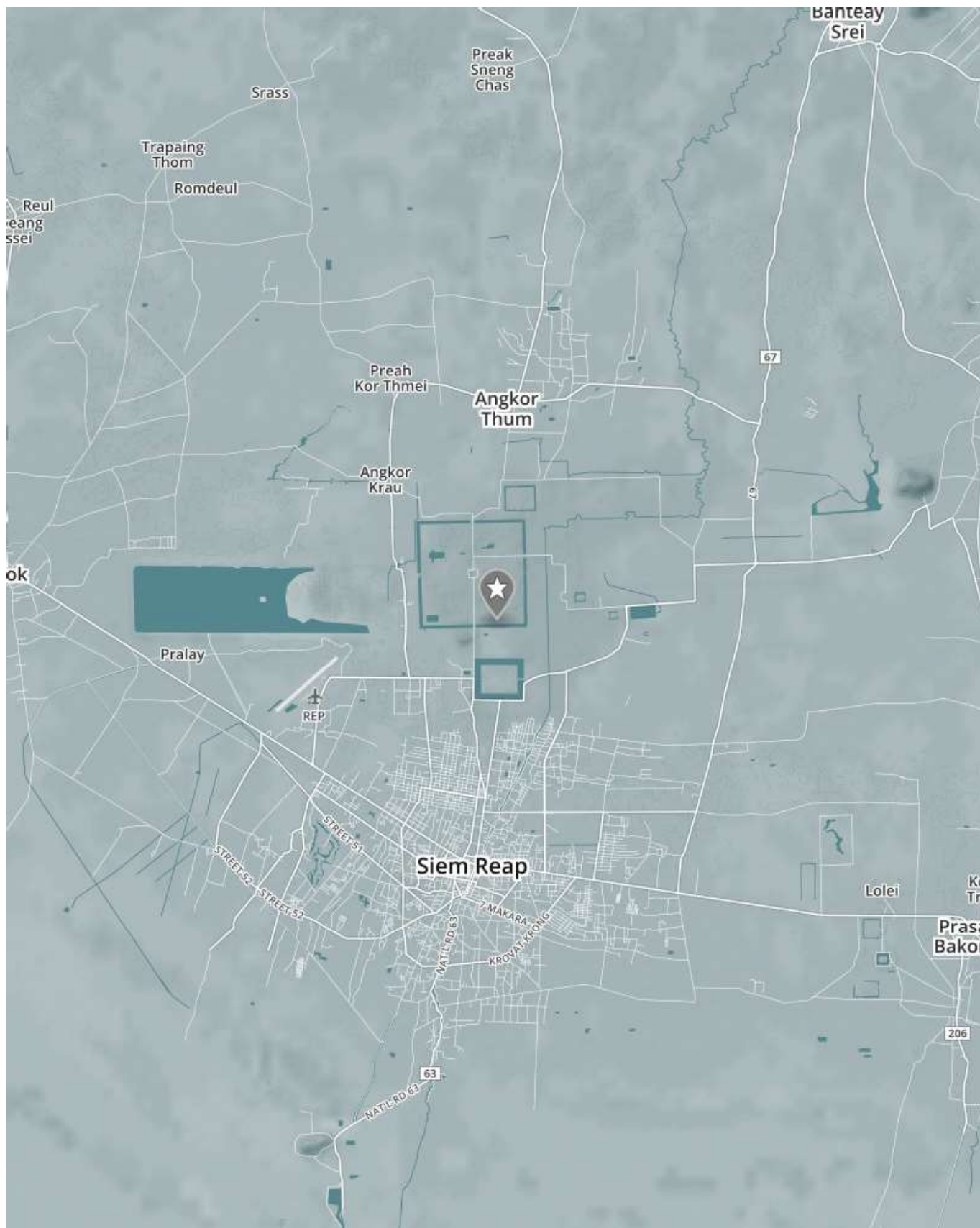
Like the guide? Please spread the word!

All Map data © OpenStreetMap contributors, [Mapbox](#).

Good travels,

Sam and Stuart

Map of greater Angkor



The above map is intended to give you the general lay of the land. Many individual listings in this guide each have their own map showing you where they are. [Open this map in Apple or Google maps](#)

Sights and activities

General activities

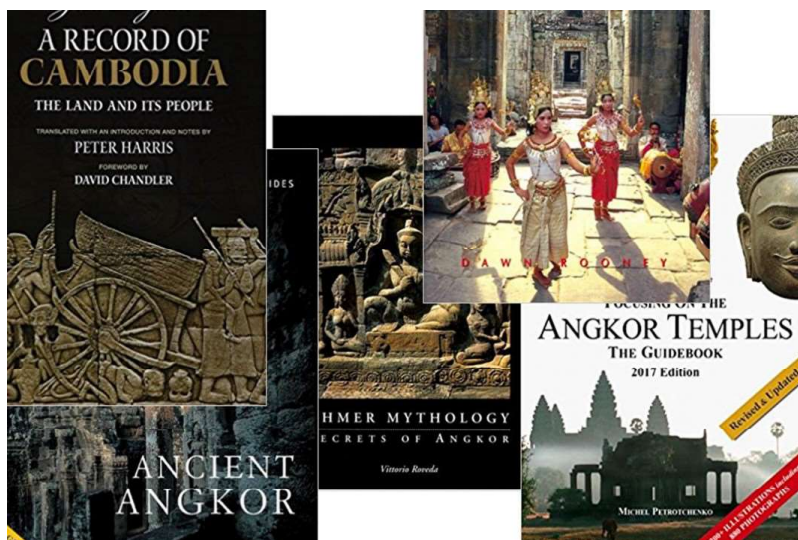
GUIDEBOOKS TO ANGKOR

A few suggestions for your shortlist.

If you wander into Monument Book Store on the riverside to the south of Old Market, you'll discover, among many others, about half a dozen shelves piled high with **guidebooks to Angkor**—but which one should you get? Here are a few that belong on your shortlist.

A Record of Cambodia—The Land and its People

This is a translation by Peter Harris of the accounts of a Chinese emissary who visited Angkor in 1296, when the empire was still at the height of its reach and strength. Zhou Daguan spent a year in Angkor and carefully recorded details of daily life, from the architecture, the customs and religions, trade, the natural world, holidays, agriculture and much more. His is the **only surviving witness of daily life at Angkor** and his perspective is fundamental to much of what we understand about the capital of the Khmer empire at this time. Some of his accounts will shock you, while you can still see scenes that he described more than 700 years ago being acted out today. [See more on Amazon](#)



Some of the pick of the crop.

Khmer Mythology—Secrets of Angkor

The temples of Angkor are renowned for the unique beauty of the carvings that adorn them. The ancient Khmers excelled at this art form, employing a complexity and artistry that is unparalleled anywhere else in the world. The carvings depict scenes from the Hindu epics, especially the Ramayana, the Buddha's life and Buddhist legends as well as representations of great battles and ordinary scenes from daily life. The best account and explanation of all these can be found in Vittorio Roveda's book, *Khmer Mythology—Secrets of Angkor*. He carefully describes the legends involved, and the elements and symbols employed by the Khmers, in a way that will add another dimension to your experience of the temples. [See more on Amazon](#)

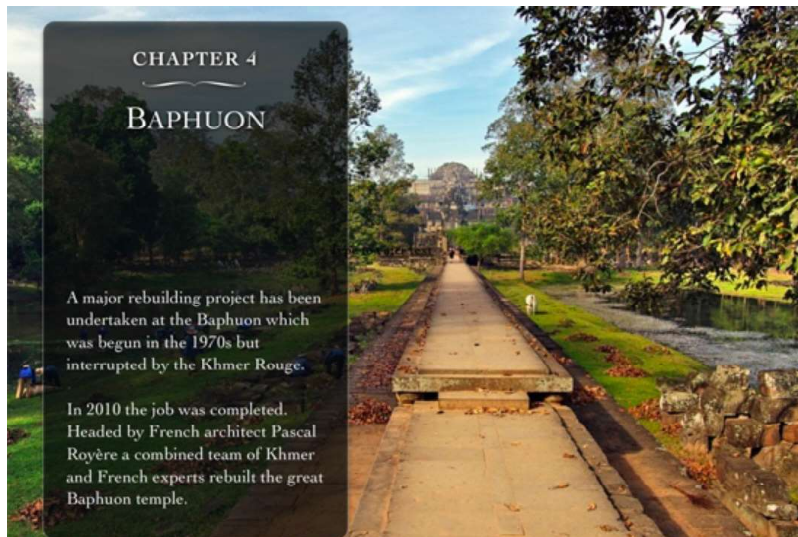
Ancient Angkor

With *Ancient Angkor* Claude Jacques and Michael Freeman have produced a lovely, insightful

guide to the temples that fully employs Jacques' academic expertise and Freeman's photographic skills. The text is authoritative and lively, and beautifully illustrated. Lightweight and easy to carry even in a pocket, it is one of the most popular guides to the temples available. [See more on Amazon](#)

Angkor: Cambodia's Wondrous Khmer Temples

Dawn Rooney is an art historian who has focused on Angkor, and other parts of Southeast Asia, for more than 30 years now. *Angkor: Cambodia's Wondrous Khmer Temples* is her principal guidebook and is regarded as one of the most authoritative on Angkor, providing a richly detailed account of the history, art and architecture of the temples. Her large book may be a little heavy for porting around the Angkor Park, and there is a lighter version with condensed descriptions that may be more convenient. [See more on Amazon](#)



For the iPad enabled.

Focusing on the Angkor Temples

The latest to be produced is a work by Michel Petrochenko. No historian or academic, he is in fact a photographer for whom the temples have evidently become an object of fascinated devotion. His book, *Focusing on the Angkor Temples*, was 10 years in the making and it shows. It adroitly presents an enormous wealth of information in a way that is engaging, easy to consume and absolutely teeming with fascinating little nuggets of information. It's what every guidebook should be like, appealing as it does to almost every conceivable customer, without alienating anyone either. Whether you're an academically minded nerd, a geek who loves random bits of esoteric information, an aesthete, or simply looking for superficial little bits and pieces that will enhance your connection to what you're seeing at the temples, this book will work for you. It's all there, and very easy to navigate. Temple plans are broken down and colour coded making it easy for readers to situate themselves and hunt out the interesting little details that he illuminates. [See more on Amazon](#)

An Interactive Guide to Angkor

Archaeologist Dougald O'Reilly collaborated with noted Southeast Asia scholar [Professor Charles Higham](#) of the University of Otago (who provides the voiceover) to create *An Interactive Guide to Angkor* which should appeal to the iPad-enabled traveller. At 88 pages in length, it covers many of the sites most travellers to the region would be interested in, is illustrated with excellent photos, 3D interactive renderings of some of the main sites, maps, plans and even a "traffic map", which illustrates the best time to visit any of the monuments. Professor Higham narrated large sections of the book, which are accessed by touching an

icon corresponding to a particular part of the monument. This means you can be standing at the southeast corner of the Bayon, tap the voiceover icon and the guide will talk you through exactly what you're looking at. This is ideal for solo travellers who can just plug in a set of headphones, but would also work for small groups as the voiceover is clear and easy to follow. While the selection of monuments isn't exhaustive, many of the favourites are included. [We paid A\\$9.99 for the app via the Apple AppStore](#) .

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HOW TO AVOID THE CROWDS AT ANGKOR

You can do it!

With more than two million visitors a year flocking to Angkor—a number increasing annually—savvy visitors looking to avoid the crowds quickly realise that what makes the difference between a packed-out temple versus a people-free one comes down to a combination of the right timings and the right sites.

It is all too easy to get caught up focusing on Angkor Wat alone and forget the enormous scale of the Angkor Archaeological Park. While there are ways to avoid the worst of the crowds at the “big three” (Angkor Wat, Ta Prohm and Bayon), it's surprisingly straightforward to find less crowded moss-swathed temples, if you're prepared to make only a little extra effort.



*Angkor Wat gets **way** more crowded than this.*

[Angkor Wat](#) is never going to be deserted at sunrise, but that doesn't mean you can't at least start with a serene impression of this archaeological wonder. Entering via the east (back) gate in the pre-dawn is an **oasis of calm** compared to the chatter at the front as crowds gather round the ponds. Once everyone has tired of pressing the click button and the sun has risen, the big tour groups go back to their hotel for a late breakfast. Now's the time to **make a dash for the temple**—it is at its quietest in the early morning. Others may beeline for the apex. Wander the galleries a little first in peace before climbing to the summit.

Another iconic temple, [Ta Prohm](#), similarly has scant moments of desertion. Around 06:30 till 07:00 is your best window of opportunity to get photos of the twisting tree roots taking over the temple, before everyone else has the same idea. **Getting up early** pays off at any of the temple sites when it comes to avoiding the crowds, with the added bonus of the temperature being a little cooler.



Just amazing.

[Bayon](#) is also always busy, except at the very end of the day when everyone else is flocking to [Phnom Bakheng](#) to catch the sunset. Take advantage of this and do the reverse—as the crowds pour out, you can step in.

As for sunset at Phnom Bakheng, **seriously don't bother** unless you like queuing, feeling packed like a sardine, enjoy so-so views and get a kick out of a tuk tuk traffic jam as everyone then tries to leave at the same time. Visiting in the daytime, however, is well worth it and it'll be almost impossible to imagine the mass tourism mecca it transforms into.

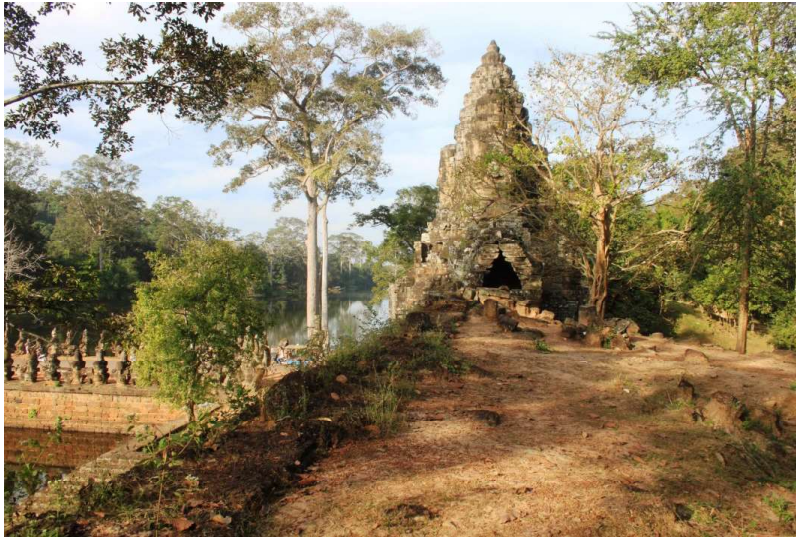


Tumbledown in places.

This [Angkor Sunset Finder](#) has suggestions of **alternative places to enjoy the sunset**, from paddling the North Baray on a boat to taking in the views over the Tonle Sap from the hilltop temple of [Phnom Krom](#). We also recommend walking to the temple on the southwest corner of Angkor Thom—up on the laterite wall—overlooking the moat. Bring a torch, as the paths and roads at Angkor aren't lit and the light disappears quickly.

Be sure to visit **Angkor's more minor sites** as they have a noticeably reduced footfall, not featuring in the cookie-cutter itineraries. Lesser visited doesn't have to mean remote, either. Walking on top of the laterite walls of the city of Angkor Thom takes you around the heart of the park, yet a world away. The [Khleangs](#) are opposite major temples like [Baphuon](#) and the [Terrace of the Elephants](#), but devoid of people. [Baksei Chamkrong](#)—between Phnom Bakheng and the South Gate of Angkor Thom—is often forgotten. From here you can walk along a forest path to Prasat Bei, parallel to the moat of Angkor Thom. It's hard to believe it's only a

matter of metres from the busy South Gate, given the contrast.

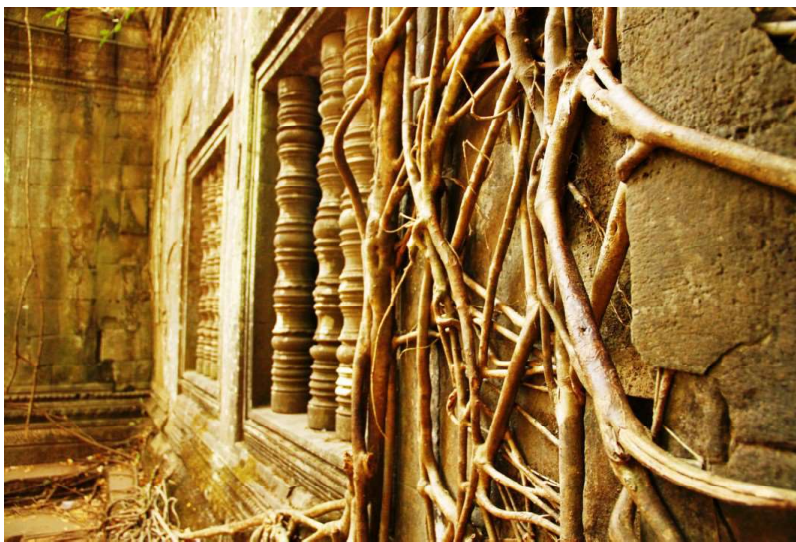


Exploring atop the wall.

At some point you will pass through the South Gate, but in terms of photo opportunities we strongly recommend heading over to the West, East or Victory Gates; it's as picturesque—if not more so—and without any traffic.

Another crowd-avoidance tactic is to head to **sites that vehicles can't reach**—[Ta Nei](#), [Banteay Thom](#) and [Prei Monti](#) are some such examples where you'll need to use your feet or pedal a bike to get there.

A general rule that benefits independent travellers is to do anything in reverse or the opposite to the big tour groups. At [Beng Mealea](#) groups all stick to the wooden walkways. Follow these in parts, but break the mould and also clamber over the stones and create your own route to play at being Indiana Jones. An exception would be following the marked route between Baphuon and the Royal Palace area, which is logical and doing this in reverse would still hit upon the same crowds. However, few continue over to [Preah Palilay](#) through the tranquil, green section that takes you along shaded paths—a gorgeous walk in the woods, and not how you probably imagine Angkor.



Atmospheric.

Whichever temples you choose to visit, it also helps to walk to the back of them. There is usually a main entrance in use today—usually closest to the road—so they will always be quieter at their other entrances/exits.

Finally, when it comes to avoiding the crowds, money is well spent in **enlisting the services of a first-rate tour guide**. A tuk tuk driver might not be familiar with some of the more minor sites and it might even stretch the knowledge of an average tour guide, who all learn to follow the same identical routes and will just copy what everyone else is doing. The best tour guides know the Angkor area like the back of their hand and will help you get to the right places, at the right time.

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WATCHING OUT FOR THE FUTURE OF CAMBODIA'S PAST

An interview with Dougald O'Reilly

Dougald O'Reilly is an archaeologist and the founder and director of **Heritage Watch**, a non-profit organisation dedicated to the preservation of Southeast Asia's cultural heritage. We chatted with Dougald by e-mail in a conversation that traversed looting, antiquities trafficking, Cambodia's struggle to preserve its history and, well, he did mention Tomb Raider once.

What is Heritage Watch's raison d'être?

[Heritage Watch](#) was founded in 2003 due to the alarming rate of heritage destruction in Cambodia. This seems to have been initiated by the illegal excavation of a site called Phum Snay. The finds at Snay led others around Cambodia to look for ancient burials and a massive trade in carnelian and agate and other artefacts grew. The organisation is dedicated to slowing the trade in antiquities and the looting of archaeological sites in Cambodia, both temple sites and archaeological sites older than the Angkor Civilization.



Priceless.

How does looting take place today in Cambodia? It's not just above-the-ground, is it?

Looting is still prevalent in Cambodia, even though the Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts (MoCFA) has made good efforts to stop it. There are so many sites and not enough resources to stop impoverished locals digging ancient sites. In fact, most of the looting is sub-surface although temple sites are still targeted.

What is the most brazen looting occurrence you're aware of?

Perhaps the most brazen incidence of looting occurred at [Banteay Chhmar temple](#) in Banteay Meanchey Province when in the mid-1990s a huge section of wall was stolen. Several metres of the wall, part of the outer enclosure of the Jayavarman VII temple, depicted a multi-armed

Avalokisvara. Fortunately the truck carrying the wall was stopped at the Thai border before it left Cambodia and now rests in the National Museum in Phnom Penh.

Presumably laws are in place to stop looting, but what is enforcement like?

Cambodia has many laws pertaining to looting and many other laws that could be deployed to discourage looting and export (these have been collated by Heritage Watch's Deputy Director, Terressa Davis and many international volunteers). Enforcement of the laws is another matter but recently the MoCFA and police officials arrested nine looters in Banteay Chhmar and their cases shall go before the courts soon. A sentence of several years is expected.



Don't mess with these demons.

How do you manage to reach Cambodians to educate them about the value of their archaeological history?

Over the years, Heritage Watch has used many tools to get the preservation message across from local training sessions, the publication of posters, pamphlets and even a comic book ([Wrath of the Phantom Army](#)). We have also run TV and radio ads imploring locals to report looting to the MoCFA and Ministry of the Interior/Heritage Police.

How can people make a positive difference in terms of preserving the past while they are holidaying in Cambodia?

One thing many tourists do is take a souvenir from Angkor, small stones and pieces of pottery. This is quite detrimental and dangerous as if caught they will face prosecution. It is a good idea to "Take only pictures, leave only footprints". Using local businesses too is a good idea and businesses that support the arts and culture.

If people want to buy antiques, can they do so responsibly? Or should they just seek reproductions?

It is always best to buy reproductions as even the big auction houses have, in the past, sold illegally acquired pieces. Most antiquities, even fairly recent Buddha statues, are sometimes stolen from actively used wats. Most of the stores filled with antiquities in Cambodia, Thailand and Singapore are filled with looted goods but buyers are always told it is no problem to export them. Many Western countries have stepped up their vigilance and are seizing and charging importers with antiquities trafficking.



Count your lingas.

What are your favourite ruins in the country?

There are many beautiful temples in Cambodia but some of the best are the least visited. I really appreciate [Sambor Prei Kuk](#), a series of brick temples dating to the 7th century (some of Cambodia's oldest) are nestled in the cooling forest. Other highlights are of course [Banteay Chhmar](#) and [Banteay Srei](#) in the Angkor region. Also worth a visit for the natural beauty of the area (there is a ruin there but not spectacular) is atop the [Kulen mountains](#), where the river bottom is carved with lingas and a lovely picnic area is found beside a waterfall (part of [Tomb Raider](#) was filmed there).

Can you suggest some out-of-the-way places that travellers might want to seek out for an alternative experience to Angkor?

Although becoming more and more popular the floating villages are really worth a visit and should people go they shouldn't miss a trip atop Phnom Krom with a wind-worn ruin on its peak overlooking the Tonle Sap lake.

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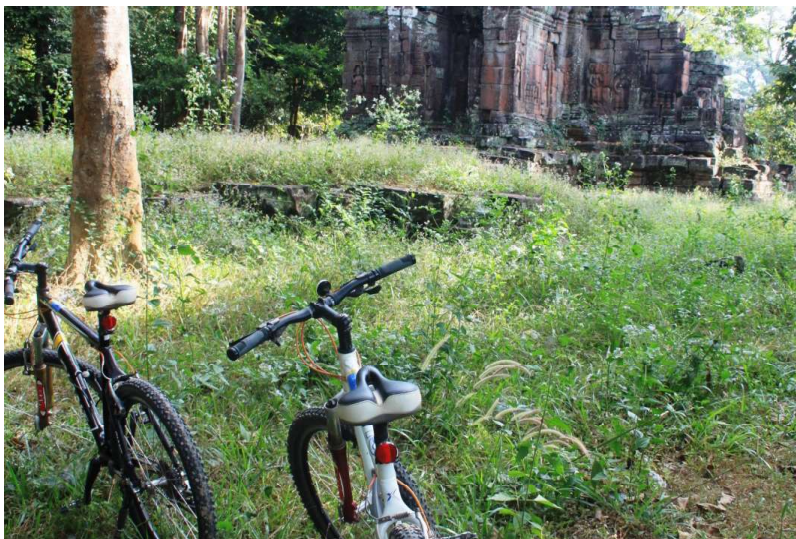
Hiking, walking tours and itineraries

AN ANGKOR CYCLING GUIDE

The cruisiest way to explore.

The multitude of temples at Angkor represent a true challenge to even a dedicated temple fanatic. Hundreds of temples lie in wait, some buried in growing jungle, while others sit conveniently right off the main road.

With so much to see, a seven-day pass is clearly the best choice, buying ample adventure for US\$72. While a million various routes exist, we took ones that balance chronology with grandiosity, postponing the giants until the third day of the tour. After all, once you've seen Angkor Wat and Bayon, it's a little harder to appreciate sites like Bakong and Pre Rup.



The wheels go round and round.

All of the traditional Grand Circuit is covered, albeit over several days with a bit of overlap, as well as plenty of places much less touristed. One day is done by van, to see some temples that sit beyond cycling range, but everything else is covered in rides no greater than 47km. The popular sunset locations are included in Angkor Wat and Phnom Bakheng, as is the far less visited Phnom Bok, and the one brave sunrise is on the non-cycling day—it's a bit daunting to ride for 30 minutes in the dark with tuk-tuks and vans zooming by. Between the heat of the day and darkness lie the prime operating hours of this guide, as experiencing Siem Reap's nightlife is arguably preferable to its early mornings. This tour could certainly be completed in much less time, but the idea is that a slower pace means increased appreciation.

Day One (32km)

Recommended Temple Order: Lolei, Preah Ko, Bakong

Located 13km east of Siem Reap, the [Roluos Group](#) represents the origins of religious stone construction in the Angkor area, so these temples are the early models for the later greatness of Angkor. The road is smooth and well-paved, with plenty of regular traffic, so looping back along the rural dirt roads makes for a less stressful return. Overall an easy day of cycling and good preparation for the humid dense jungle riding where the main temples sit.



What an approach.

Day Two (47km)

Recommended Temple Order: Prasat Kravan, Banteay Kdei, Srah Srang, Pre Rup, Banteay Samre, Phnom Bok

This day concludes with a long ride home in the darkness, well worth it after a relaxing sunset at the hilltop temple on Phnom Bok. Along the way plenty of worthwhile stops are available once branching off from the main Angkor road. The side of Angkor Wat's massive moat gives way to a few kilometres of jungle before [Prasat Kravan](#) emerges from the high walls of green. Smaller enclosures hold a few remaining brick carvings, a contrast to the massive crumbling sprawl of [Banteay Kdei](#). The baray of [Srah Srang](#) holds some prized moments of peace, away from the hordes of sellers around most temples. Before turning east into the countryside, the massive towers of [Pre Rup](#) hold an excellent view over the terrain. [Banteay Samre](#) lies past a crossroads, but then hundreds of stairs await before the final destination. [Phnom Bok](#) is not home to an unobstructed sunset, but the light reflecting onto its ruins, with trees emerging from a pair of buildings, is a wonderful setting for a private Angkorian moment before a relaxing, but dark, return back to Siem Reap. Don't forget your headlamp, relying on approaching headlights might be a tad dangerous.

Day Three (13km)

Recommended Temple Order: Angkor Wat

A simple day in that there's only a single destination, but the views and hallways, the spires and shadows, and the galleries and carvings of [Angkor Wat](#) can all consume quite a lot of time. Plus the crowds can be thick, meaning patience is required to take some pictures, and most of the temple isn't exactly quiet. But as the sun drops down, the backside of the temple finally clears out, and the stone and sky both start to change colours. Trailing at the end of the Angkor Wat horde can result in some fantastic, though rushed, photographs. The short ride home, albeit alongside plenty of other vehicles, flies quickly by with your mind still soaking up all that it's seen.



There are quiet corners though.

Day Four (28km)

Recommended Temple Order: Ta Prohm, Baksei Chamkrong, South Gate of Angkor Thom, Bayon, Baphuon, Terrace of Elephants, Phimeanakas, Terrace of the Leper King, Preah Palilay, North Gate of Angkor Thom, Preah Khan

After a few quick stops at some minor temples, the magnificence of [Bayon](#) truly begins the

day, more than 200 faces stare forever outwards silent and strong (there were originally 216, a significant number in Hindu mythology). Plenty of carvings abound on the lower level as well, so be prepared to spend a lot of time in awe of King Jayavarman VII's efforts. [Angkor Thom](#) includes plenty of other wondrous sights, most notably the [Terrace of Elephants](#), [Preah Palilay](#), its entry gates, and [Baphuon](#), whose restoration was completed in 2012. The day's finale is found in [Preah Khan](#), a large complex of convoluted paths, many collapsing despite ongoing restorations. There's a rather unique two-story building towards the back, which supposedly once housed the king's sword, and plenty of strangler fig and silk cotton trees blending with and disrupting the temple's stone.

Day Five (28km)

Recommended Temple Order: Ta Prohm, Ta Keo, Spean Thmor, Thommanon, Chau Say Tevoda, Victory Gate of Angkor Thom

Another renowned temple, [Ta Prohm](#), gets virtually its own day, as the set of Tomb Raider is packed with astounding trees and equally astounded tourists. For better or worse, wooden walkways guarantee that nothing will be missed, and while popular photos may show increasingly large crowds, the jaw-dropping scenery more than makes up for it. Honestly the interaction of nature with stone is more impressive than the temple alone, as Ta Prohm is rightfully famed for its serpentine roots and branches. As daytime comes to an end, plenty of temples line the road towards the Angkor Thom's Victory Gate, including [Ta Keo](#) and [Thommanon and Chau Say Tevoda](#).



Straight from the set of Alien.

Day Six

Recommended Temple Order: Angkor Wat, Banteay Srei, Kbal Spean, Beng Mealea, Phnom Bakheng

This is a long day by van starting at 5am, when the sunrise is cool and peaceful at [Angkor Wat](#), with silence somewhat prevailing despite the crowd. [Banteay Srei](#) is next, a smaller temple that has some of Angkor's best carvings. Then [Kbal Spean](#), the river of 1,000 lingas, rewards a 1.5km uphill walk with some impressive images of the gods carved into the riverbed. After a long ride, the isolated and overgrown [Beng Mealea](#) lies in wait. Perhaps its trees are not as dramatic as Ta Prohm's, but the temple holds some fantastic secrets for those willing to crawl around its collapsing walls. [Phnom Bakheng](#), back near central Angkor, is an overly-popular sunset location, but the herds of tourists and elephants at least create a

miniature carnival as the sun goes down.

Day Seven

Recommended Temple Order: Western Baray or ...

The final day is really up to your discretion. Assuming temple burnout has been avoided, the whole [West Baray](#), a vast man-made reservoir, awaits, though the temple per kilometre ratio isn't the best. Otherwise the main three temples, Angkor Wat, Bayon, and Ta Phrom, are all worthy of another exploratory visit. A sunset at [Phnom Krom](#), south of Siem Reap, is possible, or a journey out to the somewhat isolated [Chau Say Vibol](#) could be equally rewarding. Or you can just relax at your hotel, relishing the fact that you've already seen many of the finest religious sites in the world...

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Angkor: Small Circuit

ANGKOR WAT

The masterpiece of an unknown Michelangelo

Angkor Wat is a ubiquitous image across Cambodia, from its position on the national flag to local currency. Cambodians are proud of Angkor Wat, and rightly so. It will not disappoint.

Built from 1113 during the reign of King Suryavarman II, Angkor Wat took well over 30 years to complete and was dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu. In size alone **Angkor Wat is breathtaking**. The outer walls stretch for 1.5 kilometres east to west and 1.3 kilometres north to south, and the walls are encircled by a beautiful moat almost 200 metres wide—the entire site takes in some 200 hectares.



Iconic Angkor Wat.

Unusually for a Khmer temple, Angkor Wat is orientated to the west. As the west is symbolically associated both with death and Vishnu, some debate has flared over the purpose of the complex—**tomb or temple?** The prevalent opinion is that Angkor Wat was both—a temple to Vishnu and a tomb for its creator, Suryavarman II.

Like all temple mountains—Angkor Wat being the most impressive built by a Khmer king—it is a model of the divine, playing out Hindu mythology in both its construction and spectacular bas reliefs. At the centre of the Hindu (and Buddhist) universe sits **Mount Meru**, a holy peak

some 750,000 kilometres high on the mythical continent Jambudvipa. Atop the mountain sits the home of Brahma and other gods of both religions. At Angkor Wat, this mountain is represented by **Angkor's central tower** which in turn is surrounded by smaller peaks, then the continents are represented by the outer courtyards and finally the ocean is illustrated with the moat. A **naga bridge** allowed people to cross from the land of mortals to that of the Gods—the sandstone causeway that you see today running across the moat from the west.



Get lost in the galleries.

In walking across Angkor's naga bridge and entering the complex from the front, you are traversing the ocean from the real world to that of the gods—stepping from continent to continent and then scaling a peak some 750,000 kilometres, and there's no escalator.

At the time of its construction the outer walls would have encircled not just the central temple but also **a city of considerable size** along with the palace. As these buildings were wooden, nothing remains, although some remnants of the roads within the city were traced out as part of restoration work. Angkor's most famous custodian, Frenchman Maurice Glazier, commented that of all the Angkorian monuments, Angkor Wat, protected by its large moat, was the best placed to withstand the onslaught of the jungle. This protection was further assisted by the fact that since the mid-13th century, **Angkor Wat remained in use as a place of Buddhist worship**. A temple remains within its grounds to this day, supplying a steady flow of saffron-clad monks for your holiday snaps.



Try to avoid some of the crowds by walking the paths parallel to the causeway.

When approaching from the west (the main entrance), one needs to cross the moat via the

sandstone causeway to the outer (western) gopura. Before entering the gopura, take a quick diversion to the south where a **grand statue of Vishnu** stands. With its saffron drapery, it's particularly photogenic in late afternoon. After passing through the gopura, you reach the most stunning of Angkor Wat's many viewpoints. Delayed until the last moment, as you step through the doorway you're treated to an absolute visual feast as the central temple is revealed in all of its splendour. From the western gopura, walk down the central walkway which is flanked by two libraries and to the two ponds.

If you're arriving for dawn, the **view from the northwest corner of the northern pond** is the better of the two pond views—though be prepared for **jaw-dropping crowds**. We often hear tourists bemoan the unsightly green plastic covering the scaffolding on Angkor Wat, but be mindful conservationists have to rotate this around the temple precisely to protect and conserve it. Even with some scaffolding, Angkor Wat is a sight to behold.



Beautiful bas reliefs — but don't touch!

For sunrise—or even later in the day—you can also consider asking your tuk tuk driver to drop you off at the back, the east entrance, and walk along the forested path and around to the front of the temple. The benefit is not the view since it will still be reasonably dark pre-dawn, but rather the serene and peaceful atmosphere of Angkor Wat seemingly deserted, before reaching the camera-toting crowds that arrive by bus at the front (western) entrance.

Twice a year around the equinoxes—near the end of March and September—the sun will position itself over the top of the central tower for a perfectly aligned photograph. No matter what month you visit in, however, **expect Angkor Wat to be packed at sunrise**—you will never be alone to capture the quincunx of towers. Rainy season is more likely to provide dramatic colours thanks to clouds forming in the sky and casting their reflection, though the heaviest rainfall, usually in October/November, might provide nothing but rain.



Angkor Wat gets **way** more crowded than this.

Following dawn is the best time to explore the temple, as this is when most tour groups head back to town for breakfast. Those who do linger tend to hustle into the central temple and climb to its apex. We'd suggest you instead do a loop through the galleries that encircle the monument first, saving the climb for later. Not only will you have the galleries without all of the hordes, but by the time you've finished (a full circuit at a slow pace takes an hour or so) the interior central temple may not be as crowded as many will have moved on.

The galleries display some of the most beautiful and intricate of Angkor's carvings and as with the Bayon, this is a good spot to have a guide to take you through the blow by blow details of the reliefs. Look out in particular for the beautiful **Heavens and Hell, Churning of the Sea of Milk** and **Battle of Lanka**, though it's all interesting (and makes for good exercise too).



There are quiet corners though.

In summary, the main galleries are as follows.

Western wall, southern section: Battle of Kurukshetra

This 49-metre-long stretch follows the battle of Kurukshetra—a prominent Hindu epic between the sibling clans of Kauravas (from the left) and the Pandavas (from the right) for the throne of Hastinapura. It has been theorised that the battle took place in the modern state of Haryana in India around 3067BC and ran on for centuries. At each end of the relief note how orderly the two military processions are while towards the centre things get increasingly out of hand, culminating in much death and mayhem. Look in particular for the

chieftains carried in chariots and on elephant-back.

Southern wall, western section: Historical gallery

This 90-metre gallery is dedicated to the creator of Angkor Wat, Suryavarman II, and follows a regal procession which transforms into a military parade before changing again to a religious procession. Note how early on the relief is in two parts with the royalty and hangers-on in the top half while the palace women parade on the lower half. When the theme switches to become more militaristic, look for the many chiefs on elephant back—their rank is marked by the number of parasols that surround them. The king, Suryavarman II, is on the 12th elephant. Later the soldiers disperse to be replaced by Brahmin priests with little bells, while at the far end march some Siamese (who were Khmer allies of the time). Note their distinctly different manner of dress, somewhat wild look and their casual style of marching.

Southern wall, eastern section: Heavens and Hell

One of our favourite sections, the heaven and hell relief goes through the judging of the good and evil. Heaven may well look rather dull and boring, but it is certainly a better option than hell. The further along you wander, the more and more awful the punishments become. Tongues are pulled out, bodies torn to pieces or boiled alive, and nails are driven into bodies—just a few of the punishments that wait for bad Khmers. The carvings are particularly graphic—note the emaciated state of those in hell as they are thrown around by demons and whipped into (or out of) shape.



Churning the sea of milk.

Eastern wall, southern section: Churning of the Sea of Milk

Another spectacular piece, this 49-metre panel tells a part of the story of the eponymous Hindu creation epic. In this epic, the gods (to the left) and the demons (to the right) agree to cooperate to churn the sea of milk. Churning it for 1,000 years creates an elixir that causes immortality, and the gods and demons agree to share it. Although not depicted in the mural, as soon as the elixir starts to flow the gods renege on their part of the deal while the demons try to steal it. Note at the central part of the relief, towards the bottom, all the sea life being cut to pieces by the force of the churning. Just above them is a turtle (a vehicle of the Hindu god Vishnu), which supports the mountain when it threatens to sink into the sea. Above the mountain Vishnu directs operations. This is a fascinating relief and catches the morning sun beautifully.

Eastern wall, northern section: Victory of Vishnu over the Asuras

This 52-metre stretch is somewhat ordinary when compared to some of the other reliefs, and

is in fact thought to have been carved a long time after them, perhaps by Chinese artisans. The relief depicts Vishnu fighting a legion of Asuras (demons). One point of interest is just north of centre, where there is a group of unknowns mounted on gigantic birds.

Northern wall, eastern section: Victory of Krishna over Bana

As with the Victory of Krishna over the Asuras, this is a poorly finished set of reliefs that stretches for 66 metres. Depicting another battle scene, many of the key deities can be picked out but the carving is so poor, you're better off continuing quickly on to the next section where the quality of work improves considerably.

Northern wall, western section: Battle of Devas and Asuras

This 94m-long panel depicts a series of battle scenes between 21 of the most prominent members of the Hindu pantheon and their opposing demons. Some of the characters include Kubera, the god of wealth, mounted on a peacock Skanda the god of war, Indra on a four-tusked elephant, four-armed Vishnu upon Garuda, Yama the god of the dead in a chariot drawn by oxen, Shiva with a drawn bow and also in a chariot, Brahma upon a goose, Surya the sun god and lastly Varuna, the god of the waters with a five-headed tethered naga.

Western wall, northern section: Battle of Lanka

This 51m-long panel is one of the most outstanding, depicting a legendary battle in which Rama and his monkey-allies defeat Ravana in order to rescue Sita. The attention to detail is excellent and the monkey faces, some biting legs and arms of the enemy, really add to the relief. Note some of the weapons used include tree trunks, stones and monkey teeth.

Once you have finished with the last of the reliefs, re-enter the western gopura and continue on to the central temple. This leads you upstairs through darkened passages to the central sanctuary, where again the views are breathtaking—particularly from any of the corners.



Fabulously detailed.

At the southern side of the central tower a railing and some extra steps have been installed to allow for the final climb up to the apex, where there is often a queue throughout the day since numbers are limited to ascend at any one time, for a duration of 30 minutes. The stairs are very steep and more than one person has tumbled down in a pile of broken bones. Exercise care—the view is indeed very fine, but those with a fear of heights should consider carefully before climbing. The western stairs are not as steep, but lack a handrail. Wheelchair users can make it to the level before the apex with assistance—it is worth enlisting the help of a reputable tour company that has experience in arranging this.

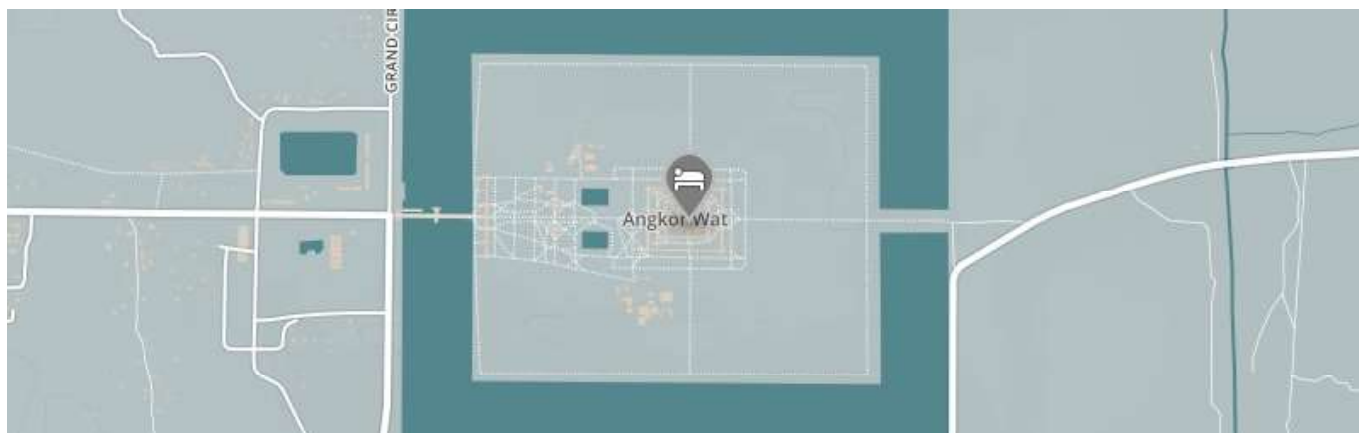
There is an enforced dress policy for climbing to the summit so do be sure to **cover your**

shoulders (not just with a scarf) and knees; remember this is a sacred religious site and really modest dress should be adopted at all the other temples, even though not required to gain entry.



You'll be lucky to see Angkor with this few people. Photo from 2007.

Furthermore, the summit is closed not infrequently following the lunar calendar and religious holidays (which tend to land on the former), usually four times a month: full moon, new moon, half moons. A lunar calendar will show a picture of a meditating Buddha on these holy days. Get your hotel/guide to check so as to avoid disappointment. Once at the apex the views over the surrounds are spectacular.



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BAKHENG

Prepare for the crowds

It's best known as a viewing point for sunset at Angkor Wat and if you're fond of battling your way through the masses, all with cameras surgically attached to their faces or at a constant arm's length from their body as though it's in control of them and not they in control of it, then feel free to join them. The sunset climb of **Bakheng** should hardly be described as a unique and meaningful experience though.

Just eight kilometres from [Siem Reap](#), **Phnom Bakheng** was the first temple to be constructed at the site we now call Angkor, known as Yashodharapura at the time after the king who built it, Yasovarman I, who reigned from 889 to 915. The temple was undoubtedly

sited where it is because of the **fantastic views** to be obtained from the top of the 70-metre hill (*phnom* is Khmer for hill or mountain). Today, the view of the lotus-bud towers of Angkor Wat are considered the primary attraction, but Phnom Bakheng has far more interesting things going on than being simply a nice place to look at something else. It is also a **giant astrological calendar**.



The summit is not always a madhouse.

First and foremost, Bakheng was built as an earthly representation of **Mount Meru**, home of the Brahmanical gods and centre of the physical, metaphysical and spiritual universes. Other temple mountains of this kind, which are unique to Khmer architecture, include [Bakong](#), [Phimeanakas](#), [Ta Keo](#), [Pre Rup](#) and, of course, Angkor Wat.

Bakheng is designed as follows: it is a four-sided pyramid on seven levels. The east-west axis is as usual tilted slightly towards the northeast, while the stairs on each flank are directed towards the cardinal points (with a slight deviation on the north-south stairways). Five tiers, not including the base and the top platform, each have 12 towers with one on each corner and one on each side of the stairways, making 60 in total. On the base, 44 brick towers surround the monument while, on the top platform, five towers form the distinctive quincunx which is a feature of Angkorian temples, with one tower at the centre and the other four making a square defined by the mid-cardinal points. In total there are, or rather were, 109 towers.



Jungle views.

It is hard to see many of these towers now. Many of them were **dismantled by Buddhist**

monks in order to construct a giant seated Buddha which surrounded the quincunx on the top platform. The Buddha statue was not completed and collapsed under its own weight. The bricks were cleared by French archaeologists during the 1920s.

Jean Filliozat, a French author, wrote that when viewed from any one of the cardinal points, the temple always presents 33 towers, corresponding to the number of gods that live in Mount Meru according to Hindu and Jain mythology. Mount Meru, according to the Brahmanic traditions, is the central axis of the universe, at the centre of the terrestrial, astral and spiritual worlds.

The central sanctuary tower at the summit of Bakheng is surrounded by 108 towers which radiate out from it uniformly. One hundred and eight is a celebrated number in all the Brahmanic traditions—for example the Hindu deities have 108 names—and each sanctuary tower would have had a divinity installed in it.

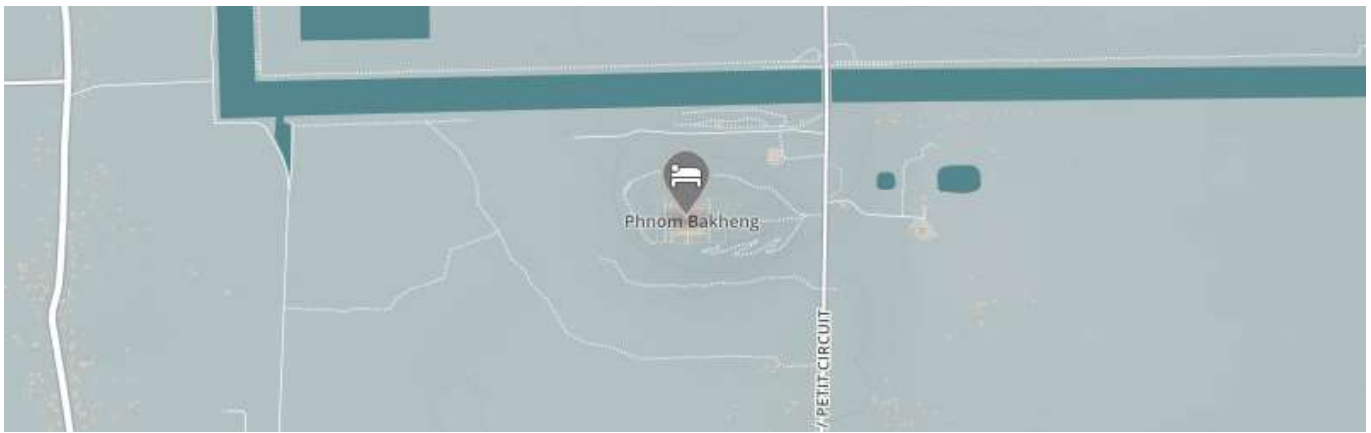


Wandering the top level of Phnom Bakheng.

An academic writer from the University of Chicago, Paul Wheatley, notes that the 12 towers on each level may represent the 12 year cycle of Jupiter. According to him, Jupiter's cycle was regularly recreated in multiples of five (e.g. the five tiers of Bakheng's pyramid) as a dating method from as early as the fifth century CE. Moreover, each side of the pyramid presents 27 towers, which corresponds to the number of 'mansions' in the Hindu lunar cycle.

Angkor Wat also has many features that correspond to astrological measurements. For example, the distance between the floors of the north and south libraries equates to the length of a month in the lunar calendar, 29.53 hat (*hat* is a Cambodian unit of measurement); the wat is riddled with similar measurements that correspond to the length of the year, months, days and lunar cycles.

In order to appreciate the construction of Bakheng, it's better to **visit in the morning**. You can explore, and then from the summit enjoy the view that stretches from [Phnom Khrom](#), on the Tonle Sap, to [Phnom Bok](#) in the northeast—on both of which Yasovarman also constructed temples. You can also see the [West Baray](#), the forests of Angkor Thom and, of course, the glorious towers of Angkor Wat too.



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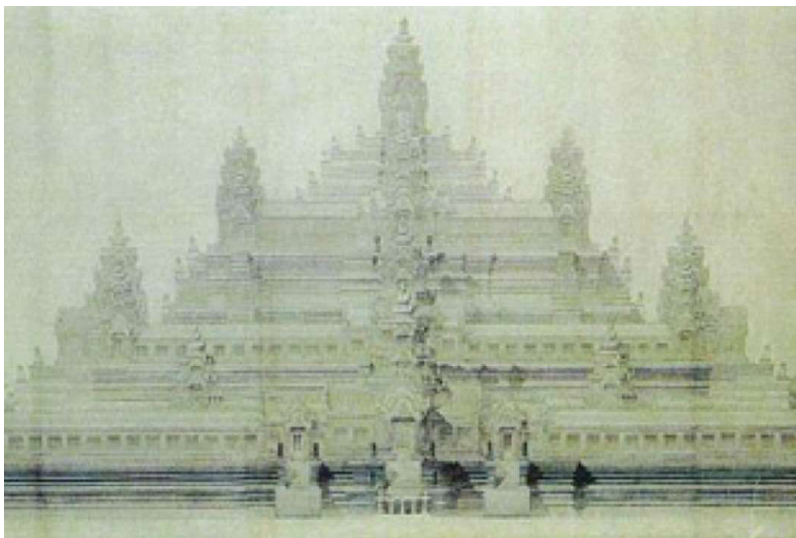
BAPHUON

The world's biggest jigsaw puzzle

400m north of the Bayon, to the west

On July 3, 2011, Cambodia's King Norodom Sihamoni and French Prime Minister Francois Fillon were in Siem Reap for a special ceremony to mark the official opening of the restored **Baphuon** temple.

The opening was the culmination of nearly 100 years of work, punctuated by wars, conflict and occupation, made possible by the tireless dedication and optimism of the workers. The final stage, over the last 16 years, has seen a 300-strong team tackle what had become the **largest three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle in the world.**



Baphuon, as imagined by Lucien Fournereau in 1889.

Baphuon temple, though less famous than [Bayon](#), was once described in terms that totally outshone its more famous neighbour; Bayon clearly has a better PR team. Zhou Daghuon, the 13th century Chinese emissary on whom we count for so much information about Cambodia's history, talked of a "tower of bronze, higher even than the golden tower [Bayon]; a truly astonishing spectacle".

Unfortunately, by the time the early French explorers were setting about recording and restoring Angkor, Baphuon had entirely lost its lustre. Overgrowth, collapses and a remodelling in the 16th century had left the temple looking like little more than a misshapen,

grassy mound of which, one commentator noted, “so little of orderly beauty remains that many slight it”.



Plenty of space to explore.

The principal difficulty with Baphuon was the limitations in the knowledge of those who originally constructed it. A temple mountain composed of three increasingly tall layers should have been constructed with increasingly thick walls in order to hold in the sand at the core. Unfortunately, perhaps because it was difficult to get the thicker stones needed up as the temple grew in height to its final 34m height, the walls became thinner, and the seeds of Baphuon’s fall were sown.

In the middle of the last century a new restoration technique was introduced to Cambodia. **Anastylosis** involves carefully taking a structure apart, marking and recording the location of every single piece, thus allowing the core to be strengthened before it is all reconstructed once more.

The French team involved in doing this worked through most of the 1960s and up to the early 1970s. But war intervened and they were forced to leave Cambodia in 1972. In 1975, as the Khmer Rouge overran Cambodia, the offices of the Ecole Française de Extrême Orient were ransacked and the plans for Baphuon’s reconstitution were destroyed.



A grand approach.

Twenty years later, a new team headed by a young French architect, Pascal Royère, found themselves facing a pile of rocks and stone, surrounded by a forest in which lay 300,000

pieces of the temple they were tasked with rebuilding. The job was already a daunting one, made all the more so with no key to where anything went, and with no real idea of what the temple would look like when it was finished.

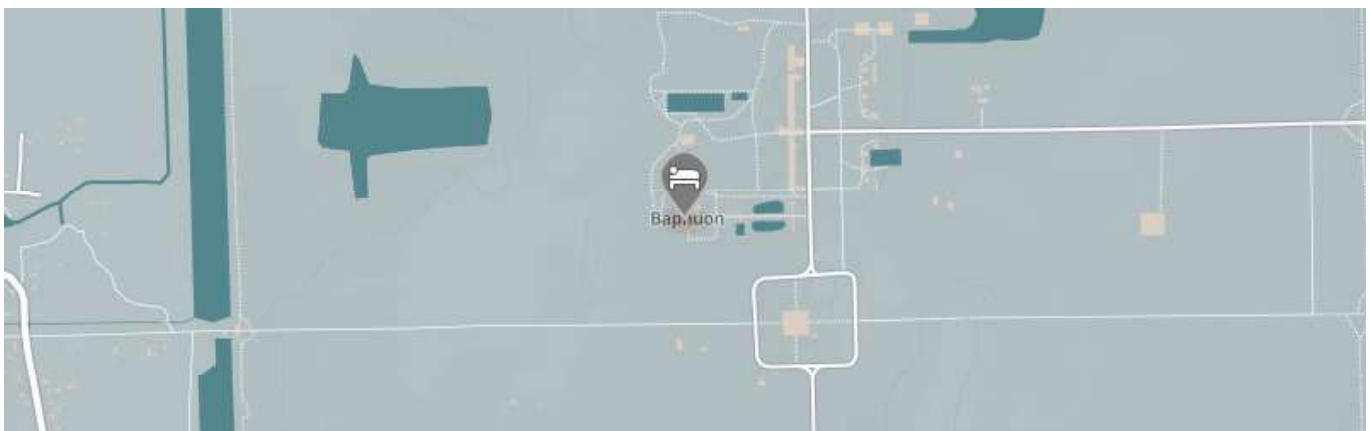
Not only was the scale of the job huge, but it had to be undertaken with meticulous care. Not one single out-facing stone in the temple was uncarved, and every one had to go back to where it was before. The carvings proved helpful in putting the jigsaw back together again, and as they were, they started to tell their own tales from the ancient Hindu myths. **The carvings are considered amongst the finest at Angkor.**



Late light to the summit.

Visitors to the temple approaching from the east side may find themselves under the false impression that the restoration cannot be complete as it appears that many galleries are missing, but this is thanks to a 16th century remodel, which occurred after Buddhism had taken real hold in Cambodia. Devotees took apart the galleries and recycled the stones to construct the reclining Buddha on the west side of the temple, one of the largest in Southeast Asia.

When Royère was asked if he ever felt daunted by the scale of the task facing him in 1995 he said no, never. “You cannot look at it as a whole,” he said. “With such a big task, you can only take it piece by piece, and resolve each one as you go along.” Wise words.



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BAKSEI CHAMKRONG

Small but delightful

About 300m south of Angkor Thom's south gate, on the west side of the road

A small but delightfully proportioned pyramid temple, **Baksei Chamkrong** is well worth a quick stop if you're passing by.

Set among tall trees between Phnom Bakheng and the south gate of Angkor Thom, it's an oasis of tranquility—with often plentiful birdlife—before you reach the hectic south gate. It is possible to climb the stairs—with some 60 degrees of steepness no less—to the top where there are inscriptions on either side of the doorway. You're best off using the staircase at the back (west) and do so at your own risk, of course.



So attractive yet so little-visited.

Baksei Chamkrong is one of the few constructions dating to the short reign of Harshavarman I (910 to 922), and was built in honour of his parents—being aptly situated at the foot of his father's greatest achievement, the temple of [Bakheng](#). There are some well-preserved sandstone carvings including an impressive lintel of Indra riding the three-headed elephant Airavata.

The temple was repaired and re-consecrated by Rajendravarman II in 948 after a period of civil war had caused extensive damage to the capital of Yasodharapura. Once enclosed by a brick wall and an imposing gopura guarded by lions, only traces remain today. You can still see what is left of the lions though.



The writing is on the wall.

The temple is slightly set back on the left from the main road leading to the south gate of [Angkor Thom](#). You can exit the temple from its north side along a short forest path which delivers you in just a matter of metres to **Prasat Bei**, a similarly small, and little-visited temple. Walk parallel to the moat of Angkor Thom and you will loop back to the south gate of Angkor Thom—having experienced a blissful few moments of peace and quiet without the crowds.



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ANGKOR THOM

Jayavarman VII's state capital

Angkor Thom's southern gate is around 2km north of Angkor Wat's west gate

Jayavarman VII ruled the Khmer empire from around 1181 to 1220 during which time he decided to strengthen his capital and protect it from further attacks—leading to **the walled city of Angkor Thom**.

Surrounded by moats, an imposing laterite wall and five gates to enter and exit from, the site remained in use for hundreds of years after his death. Work commenced on the city more or less as a rebuilding project after the previous state capital was sacked by marauding Chams.

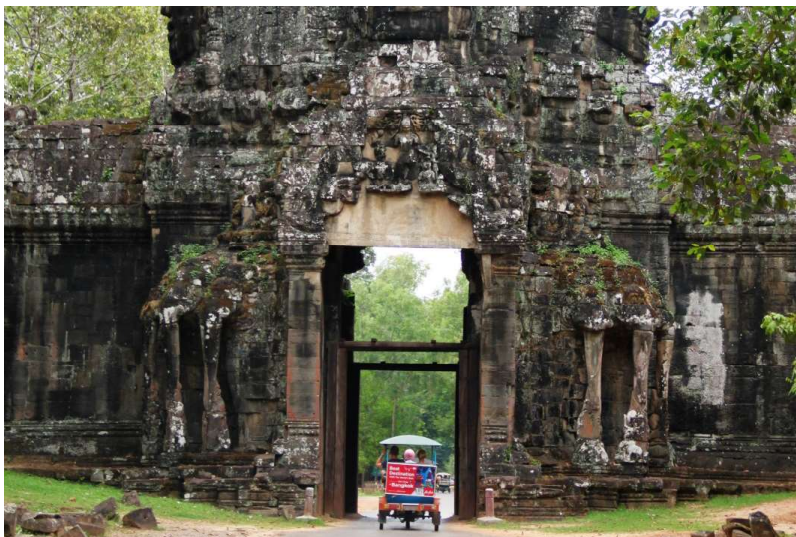


No more crocs ...

The vast majority of people would have lived outside the city's walls—a huge low density population spread out towards the East and West Barays and Siem Reap river—though

nothing remains of their wooden dwellings and the enclosure itself has been largely taken back by the forest. Research in 2013 using LiDAR laser scanning technology confirmed the walls did not enclose the downtown area and that in fact the entire landscape was **more complex than ever before known by researchers**, with satellite cities connecting to the central metropolis.

The scale of the city of Angkor Thom is daunting. It measures three kilometres in length on each of its four eight-metre-high walls. Approximately, at least—it isn't exactly a perfect square and is one degree off being positioned precisely north, but not a bad effort for builders of the time. All of this was once surrounded by a moat up to 100 metres wide, which formed part of the city's elaborate hydraulic network. While today much of the moat has been given over to rice cultivation, it would be a safe assumption that the moat was once inhabited by something with a snappier bite than carp. These days you can enjoy relaxing—though expensive—gondola boat rides along the stretch of the moat between the South and West Gates, which is particularly picturesque come sunset.



Not peak hour.

There are five 20-metre-tall gates, one on each of the south, west and north walls, with the eastern wall having two—Victory Gate and the East Gate, the latter also known as Death Gate possibly because convicts were sent here to be executed. The northernmost of the two eastern gates leads from the Royal Palace to the [Eastern Baray](#); a man-made Angkorian reservoir that is now dry, unlike the soggy [West](#) and Northern Barays.

Most enter Angkor Thom via the southern gate—in the best condition of the five—as it's the closest to the main entrance to [Angkor Wat](#). As with all five bridges, the bridge here is flanked by two sets of statues recreating a scene taken from the legend of the Churning of the Sea of Milk. To your left are gods and to the right demons, all dragging on massive naga balustrades. Some of the statues are replicas while others have been transported from the lesser used bridges. In 2014 a tourist accidentally knocked off the head of a replica here. Best not to lean on these. The bridge backs onto a splendid example of the four-faced Bayon-style gateway, which with its imposing 10 metre backing onto a leafy jungle backdrop gives visitors a fine idea of the site's majesty, and also makes for an excellent photo.



The wall has largely survived the torments of time.

The popularity of the southern gate also has a downside—the traffic. In peak season waits of up to 30 minutes are not totally unheard of as buses, minibuses, cars, motorbikes, remorque motos and elephants jostle for passage through the narrow gateway. During planning the Khmer architects had allowed for the height of an elephant with a howdah and parasols, but not for the width of two 80-seat tour buses passing side by side.

If time allows, it's worth trying some of the other gates for a bit of peace and quiet, and also to garner a glimpse of the site in its more natural, semi-ruined state. The West Gate is relatively little used—we've not even seen a ticket guard on duty here—while the East Gate is especially photogenic thanks to having more of a track, rather than road, running through it.

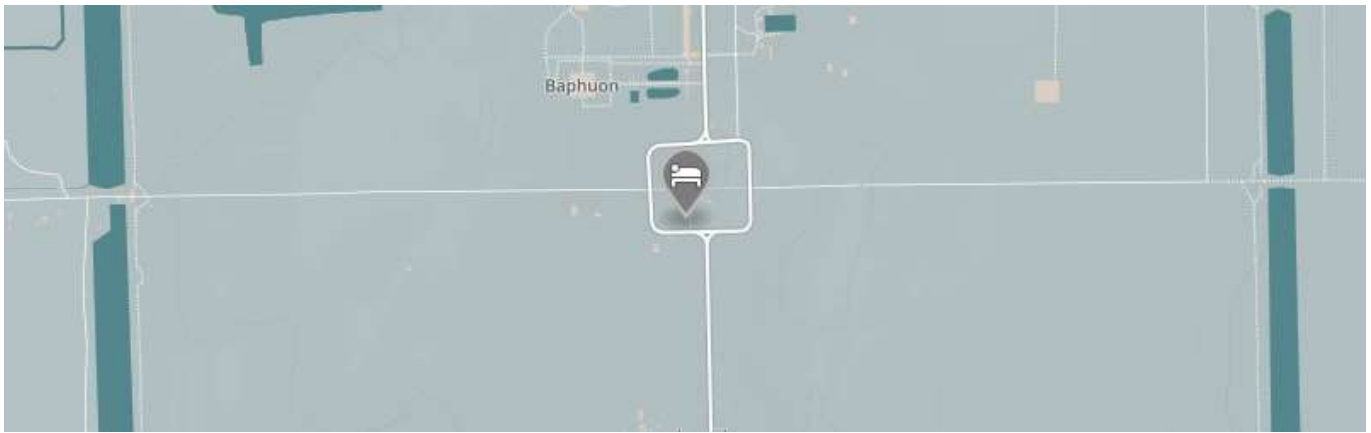


Exploring atop the wall.

Few tourists realise that you can escape the bustle of the South Gate by walking up along the top of the laterite wall (access is possible from any of the gates). You can either walk or cycle round the entire perimeter, safe in the knowledge that with an (almost) uniform shape you're not going to get lost. There will be some areas where the wall has crumbled a little, so you may have to get off your bike and walk short stretches. With shady forest paths and a small temple—Prasat Chrung—on each corner of the four walls, this is an easy way to get away from the crowds. Nature lovers and bird watchers should enjoy this route. If you don't want to stretch your legs too far, simply arrange for your driver to pick you up at the next gate.

Within its walls, Angkor Thom contains a number of significant temples, including the [Baphuon](#), [Phimeanakas](#) and the [Elephant Terrace](#), along with a swag of minor sites. Some of

these predate the construction of Angkor Thom. The centrepiece of Angkor Thom is the magnificent [Bayon](#) with its beatifically smiling faces.



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BANTEAY KDEI

An under rated gem

Close to Siem Reap, with its own unique appeal and much quieter than your average Angkorian ruin, **Banteay Kdei** offers the perfect antidote the crowds at Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom and Ta Prohm.

It is also conveniently close to the Big Three so you can easily add it to your one-day itinerary, enjoy a little solitude and impress your friends with photos of more than just the usual tourist traps.



A good choice to dodge the crowds.

Banteay Kdei is located just beyond [Ta Prohm](#), heading in the direction of [Banteay Samre](#). It is also close enough to visit by bicycle from Siem Reap if you are reasonably fit and want to save on transport costs. Do note however that while it is possible to bypass the main temples entirely to get here from Siem Reap, unless you already have your temple pass you will still need to go to the Apsara Authority booths on the road to Angkor Wat to **buy your ticket first**.

Many visitors choose smaller temples for their **sunrise tour**, simply to experience daybreak in a more peaceful setting than the free-festival atmosphere of Angkor Wat. In fact if you

arrive at any of the main attractions and find they are just too busy, then you may be advised just to get back into your car or tuk tuk, or on your bike, and head straight for the relative **tranquility of an outlying temple**. You can then return to the tourist behemoths later in the day, when visitor numbers may have dropped, even if the temperature will have risen. Banteay Kdei and the nearby lake of [Srah Srang](#) provide one of those great early morning alternatives. Srah Srang was built as a vast royal bathing pool by Jayvarman VII in 953, and its stepped sandstone terraces with sculpted lions and nagas provide a peaceful spot to watch the sunrise, or even have an early picnic. From here it is a gentle stroll to Banteay Kdei.



Strike a pose.

Similar in layout to **Ta Prohm**, but less overgrown, and always anything but overcrowded, this 12th century temple is all on one level and was originally built as a monastery, hence the name, which translates as **Citadel of Cells**. The walk to the entrance is shady, and although you will probably find more hawkers than fellow tourists, it is cool and usually peaceful—unless, as we were, you happen to be treated to the sound of what is undoubtedly one of the loudest insects known to man. A **species of cicada** lives in the trees here which, when excited, emits a sound not dissimilar to a 100 decibel car alarm. Strangely, it is much less annoying when you know that it's an insect rather than your neighbour's Lexus. It is impressive.

Entering the temple you pass a **small shrine** guarded by a Buddhist monk or nun who will offer you their blessings and the obligatory thread bracelet in return for a small donation. The blessing and the donation on the other hand are not obligatory so you can always quietly slip by either side of the shrine if you prefer.

From here you are free to wonder the length of the main passageway with the tumbling and overgrown **courtyards and halls** either side. Lichens and oxidation add splashes of colour to the stone carvings which you can photograph to your heart's content without having to queue up behind amorphous tour groups.

If you were excited at the prospect of the loudest cicada on earth, then you will be positively thrilled by the prevalence of large and exotic **arachnids**, some of which we discovered purely by chance, others which were shown to us by a very enthusiastic hawker. We were more than happy to tip him in return for leading us like the children of Hamelin along dark, narrow corridors in search of ever fatter beasts, rather than having to buy his souvenirs.



Not as overgrown as Ta Phrom, but getting there.

At the far end of the temple is a handful of **stalls** selling wood carvings, stone rubbings, and other assorted trinkets, many of which are of decent enough quality and definitely worth considering for your haul of mementos. Be prepared to haggle politely however, as prices here may quickly tumble, given that you can find very similar souvenirs at lower prices elsewhere.

From Banteay Kdei you have a world of options open to you, from **other crowd-free temples** to the iconic 'Tomb Raider' temple of Ta Prohm, and from the delicate loveliness of Banteay Srei to the sobering exhibits at [The Landmine Museum](#). Whatever you decide to combine with a trip to Banteay Kdei, you are unlikely to be disappointed by its understated and underrated charms. And for now at least, you will almost certainly have visited somewhere that few other tourists will have ticked off their Angkor checklist.



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BAYON

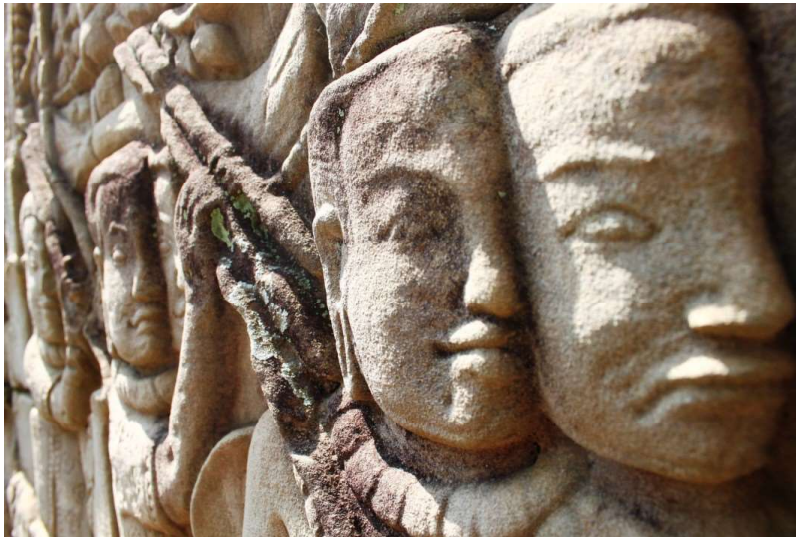
A basket of bottles

At the absolute centre of Angkor Thom

The Bayon was the state temple of Jayavarman VII and some of his successors, located at the centre of Angkor Thom and when it was first visited by Western explorers the site was totally overgrown, slowly but steadily being reclaimed by the jungle.

Under the guidance of the first Angkor Conservator, Jean Commaille, the site was cleared

between 1911 and 1913. At the time he lamented that “Every month, perhaps every day, some stones would fall. The complete ruin of the temple was only a matter of time, and it was necessary to consider how to halt it without further delay”. While the restoration indeed saved the monument, some chose to not spare those behind it, labelling the ruins a “basket of bottles” once the clearing was complete. Commaillie was murdered by armed robbers in 1916 and is buried to the southwest of the monument.



Bayon's famous reliefs depict scenes of everyday life.

Stripped of the overgrowth, the Bayon was revealed as a three-tiered pyramid temple, with the central tower stretching to 45 metres in height. This central tower is topped with the largest examples of the all-facing, all-seeing enigmatic faces that litter the temple throughout. Originally the Bayon was comprised of 54 towers, each of which supported four faces—one looking to each point of the compass. Today, 49 towers remain. These are simply stunning and make Bayon worthy of its “must-see” status.

Theories behind the meaning of the faces have flourished. Who do they represent? Buddha? Brahma? Hindu deities? Jayavarman VII himself? George Coedes, an archeologist who worked on Angkor in the 1930s, surmised that the sculptures represented King Jayavarman VII as a god-king. It has also been suggested that the 54 towers represented the 54 provinces of the realm, with the king's face looking over the entire country. Research continues. We may never know and can expect the meaning behind the faces to remain a mystery.

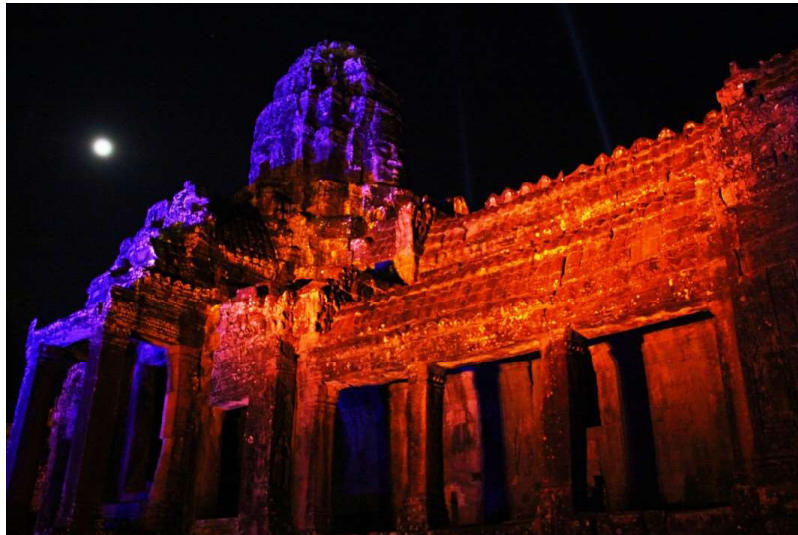


Entering the basket of bottles.

While the monument feels quite cramped, the layout is pretty simple and you can admire the

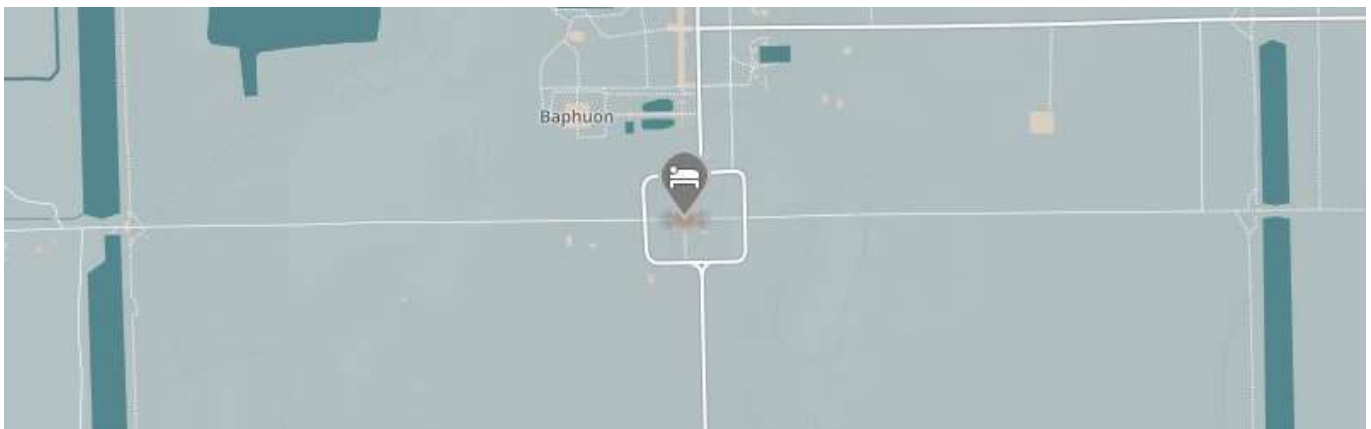
majority of the many beautiful bas-reliefs by exploring in a circular fashion. Known as “the one with the faces”, this is in fact the last complex temple built by a Khmer king and the bas reliefs mean you should allow more time than it takes to snap a selfie. The carvings encircle the entire monument and if you really want to get a good understanding of the bas reliefs, a guide is a fine investment. From depictions of royal processions to epic battles, from legends to scenes from daily life, those with a serious interest in history could while away a lot of time here.

Be sure to allow sufficient time to wander through—some of the finest bas reliefs are on the outer wall of the southeast corner but other areas, particularly the rear, are very interesting and far less busy as the tour groups tend not to last that far.



Lit up at night for Khmer New Year 2014—a rare spectacle.

One of the additional charms here is that different times of day do different favours for the temple. You can come here at almost any time of the day and find an interesting quarter worth exploring. It is busiest in the morning when the tour groups descend and quietest at the end of the day when the crowds start to hit the popular sunset spots, like [Phnom Bakheng](#). Temples such as Bayon were once lit up at night fairly regularly. No more, since it damages the stones. Fancy lighting is only brought out if you’re lucky (or rich) enough to attend a temple gala dinner—Bayon is one of a handful of temples available for venue hire—or for special holidays, as was the case for Khmer New Year 2014.



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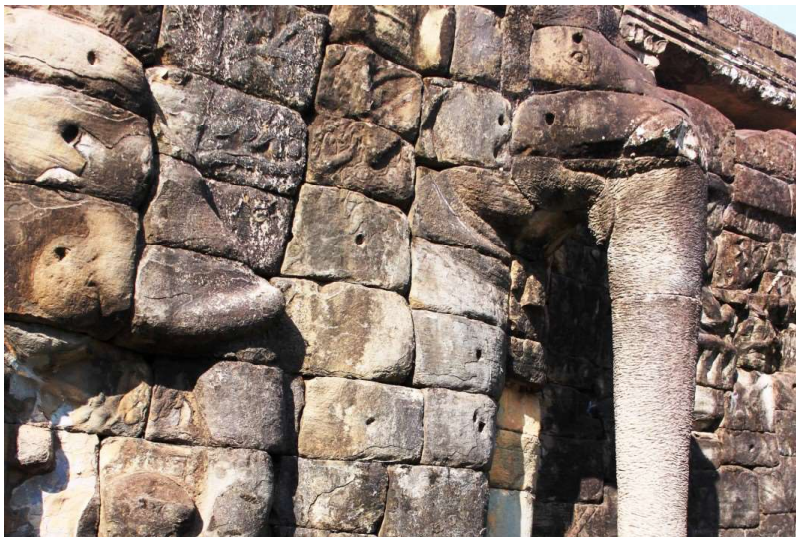
TERRACE OF ELEPHANTS

Lots and lots and lots of elephants

Immediately to the north of Baphuon

As the name suggests, **The Terrace of the Elephants** is carved with lots and lots and lots of elephants and along with the Terrace of the Leper King, comprises the Royal Terraces. Try to visit here in early morning, when the elephants catch the morning light nicely.

Built during the reign of Jayavarman VII and added to by Jayavarman VIII, the Elephant Terrace makes for an interesting stroll, though during the monsoon the ground near the terrace is often flooded or at least sodden so you will want to stick to the top.



The elephant in the room.

The three-metre high terrace includes five staircases: one at the north and south end and three running along its length, with the central set of stairs being the largest. In between the staircases, the wall is decorated with elephants and their mahouts in hunting scenes, along with a generous sprinkling of garudas and lion-like creatures.

The Elephant Terrace once supported the royal reception area and the many garudas and lion-like figures were intended to give the impression that the royal entourage, shaded by their parasols and gold-topped pavilions, were being held aloft in the heavens. It is understood that in front of the terrace events like army parades would have taken place which royals would have watched over. There would have once also been many wooden structures attached to the terrace, creating a very imposing sight.

Walking along the Terrace of the Elephants starting from the south end by [Baphuon](#) leads into the northern section which is located next to the [Terrace of the Leper King](#), a shorter, elaborately decorated terrace; the northern section of the Terrace of the Elephants and the Terrace of the Leper King are best visited at the same time. Just remember not to walk along the entire length of the terraces and forget [Phimeanakas and the Royal Palace](#) hidden behind it, offering a shadier walk.



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PHIMEANAKAS AND THE ROYAL PALACE

Picnic by a royal pond

To the west (behind) the Elephant and Leper King Terraces

Phimeanakas sits just about at the centre of what was once the **Royal Palace compound**, which likely began with the construction of the temple around the mid-10th century.

Attributed to either Suryavarman I, Rajendravarmān II, or Harshvarman I, laterite walls surrounded by moats mark the boundaries of the palace area, within which sit several large ponds. While the palace remained in use till the mid-1500s, today little remains but the foundation work and a couple of ponds. The palace would have been made from wood, as would the living quarters of anyone else knocking about at the time, such as servants, wives and concubines. The exact position of the palace is unknown and, like all the wooden structures from the era, it has not survived.



A low key yet sprawling site well worth your time.

Despite its largely ruined state, the royal enclosure remains a fascinating area to walk through as the setting is lush and overgrown, yet very accessible. Contrast that with an image of it teeming with life in its heyday—when there also wouldn't have been any trees!

The three-level **Phimeanakas** (meaning “flying palace” in Sanskrit) soars more than 30 metres high and is close to the centre of the complex—located just off to the south—and from its apex there are good views over the surrounds and to neighbouring [Baphuon](#).

Believed to have once been covered in gold, all four stairways are guarded by stone lions and the corners bear elephants typical of 10th century design. Legend has it that King Suryavarman used to sleep here with his lover, a serpent woman. The Chinese diplomat Zhou Daguan, who visited Angkor in the 13th century, called this the “**Tower of God**”.



Take a picnic lunch beside Srah Srei.

An inscription in the temple’s sanctuary refers to the date 910—perhaps reused from an earlier temple?—and there are theories the temple may have been built as early as the end of the eighth century as opposed to the 10th. Nobody quite knows for sure.

Only the rear staircase is accessible, where a wooden staircase with a handrail has been built atop the worn stone steps.

Sitting to the north of Phimeanakas is **Srah Srei** (Women’s Bath), a large pond worth more than a cursory glance. Look for the **detailed sea life** carved into the walls of sandstone that form the edge of the pond. Creatures include crabs, giant lizards and fish, along with the mandatory crocodiles. You’re not permitted to swim in the pond, though the rule doesn’t appear to extend to the local kids who don’t mind a splash. Pack a picnic lunch for a midday break on the banks here.

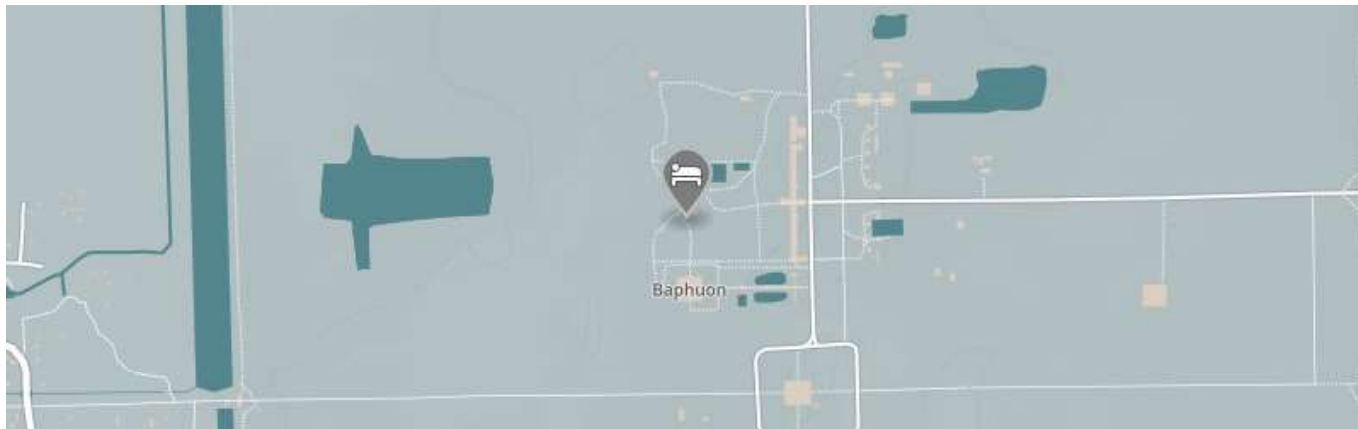


Beasties.

The royal enclosure has five main gates, two on the north and south walls and one main gate on the east. If you take the westernmost of the two gates on the northern wall you can follow the trails for a back way to [Preah Palilay](#). Likewise the westernmost southern gate is a

shortcut to the Baphuon.

There are signposts indicating the “way of visit”, intended to help with the flow of visitors, beginning at Baphuon, on to Phimeanakas and the Royal Palace then through to Preah Palilay. Though not compulsory to follow for independent travellers, this is actually a logical path, though a bit tricky with bikes between Baphuon and Phimeanakas. Since it’s such a pleasant walk you’re better off parking them opposite Baphuon and walking back to them later.



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TERRACE OF THE LEPER KING AND TEP PRANAM

The legendary leper

North of the Elephant Terrace

Commencing where the Elephant Terrace left off, and believed to date to the 13th century, the 6m-high Terrace of the Leper King is so named for the statue of Yama, the God of the Underworld, atop it.

Stark naked, a statue of Yama sits with one knee raised atop the terrace, surveying the Royal Square. Because it is tainted by discolouration and lichen, the statue was believed to be one of a leper, and the name stuck.



Impressive carving effort.

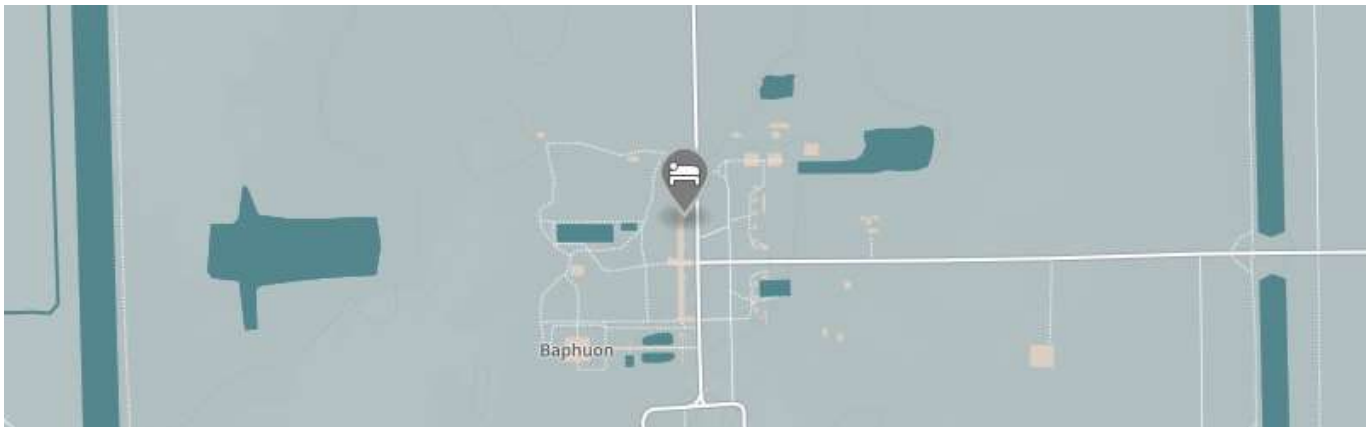
The statue you see today is a replica, with the original now in safe-keeping at the [National Museum](#) in Phnom Penh. Yama aside, the Leper King Terrace is decorated with seven levels

(the top level is almost all gone) of bas relief carvings. Three of the four walls (east, north and south) are carved with very deep bas reliefs. The carvings on the north wall are among the best; keep an eye out for the sword swallower.

The level of detail along with the volume of carvings you see on the interior walls, walking along wooden boards between the dark, narrow passageways with their high walls, is a truly impressive sight. These internal walls would have been buried at one stage. The terrace also has a hidden rear corridor which can be entered from either the southwest or northwest and which zigzags behind the main terrace. Along this secret passage the lower level of bas reliefs represent the underworld; keep your eyes peeled for the particularly vivid expressions on some of the faces.

You can walk the length of the [Terrace of the Elephants](#), starting immediately north of [Baphuon temple](#), which will then bring you to the Terrace of the Leper King.

Continue on to the north and you'll reach the small **Tep Pranam** which boasts a 75-metre long laterite causeway, at the end of which sits a large seated Buddha. The site is dated to around the ninth century, when a Buddhist temple would have sat atop a 30-metre by 30-metre platform, only the base of which remains today. Various additions, such as the balustrades and lions, are thought to have been made in the 12th and 13th centuries. The five- or six-metre tall Buddha is in the subduing Mara position, and is made of repurposed stone. Tep Pranam is worth a quick glance for its pleasant tree-filled setting. An active Buddhist temple remains at the site.



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PREAH PALILAY

Very little visited

About 200m to the northwest of Tep Pranam

Preah Palilay is believed to take its name from Parilyyaka, a forest that features in the stories of Buddha.

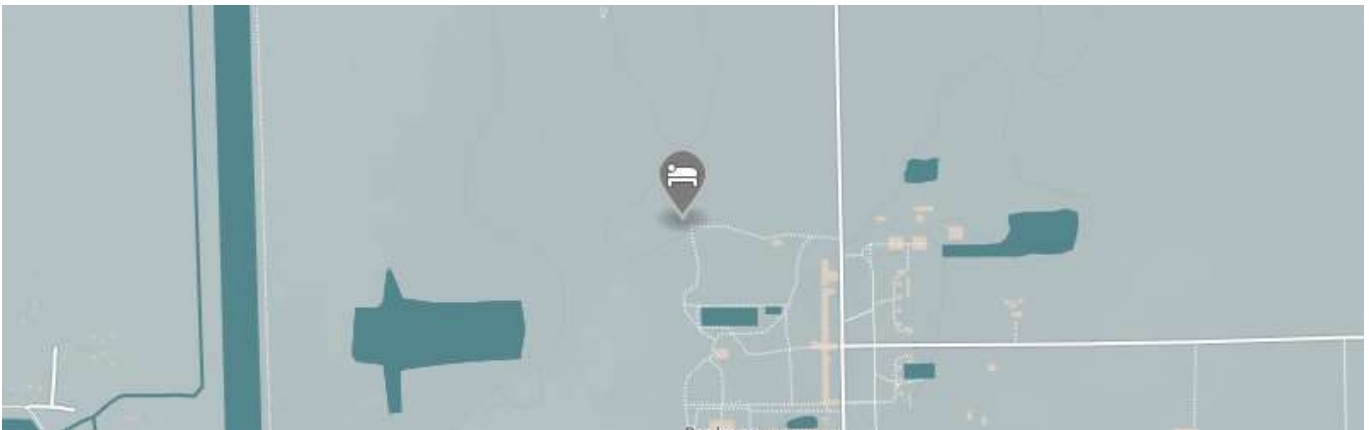
This theory is supported by the range of Buddhist carvings at the site, including one of Buddha calming an enraged elephant and another depicting the offering of forest animals like monkeys, elephants and birds.



Whatever you do don't lean on it.

Thought to date back to the reign of Jayavarman VII, Preah Palilay remains a bit of a mystery. With its wealth of Buddhist iconography, it's considered highly unusual that the site survived the period that followed the death of Jayavarman VII. Instigated by his Hindu successor, Jayavarman VIII, a programme of sanctioned vandalism saw the destruction of many Buddhist icons throughout Angkor, yet **Preah Palilay remained largely untouched.**

With its unusual (and wobbly looking!) chimney-like tower and surrounded by towering trees Preah Palilay is worth stopping by, even if for just a quick wander around the site. It is nearly always devoid of other visitors, making for a pleasant spot to wander through either before or after [Terrace of the Leper King and Tep Pranam](#), which sits just a short walk away to the south. There is a Buddhist monastery only a few metres away from the site.



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SUOR PRAT AND THE KHLEANGS

Temple of the tightrope walkers

Opposite the Elephant and Leper King Terraces

The dozen towers that comprise the **Suor Prat towers** stand directly opposite the Royal Palace enclosure and are placed symmetrically on either side of the royal road leading from the Victory Gate to the Elephant Terrace.

Really only of interest to those who have a pressing need to closely examine every single Angkor site, Suor Prat is believed to date to the early 13th century during the reign of

Indravarman II. The purpose of the towers remains unknown.



True purpose unknown.

The name Prasat Suor Prat means "temple of the tightrope walkers" and one story suggests that the towers were used for conflict mediation. Squabbling parties were required to sit in separate towers, apparently for days, until whichever party was in the wrong got sick, while the party in the right would display no signs of sickness.

Another story suggests the towers were used as anchors for tightrope artists and other performers, though building a dozen brick towers to support a tightrope performance seems excessive—even by Angkorian standards.

Behind the Suor Prat towers, you'll find the **Khleangs**. While the two appear to have been constructed as a set, that isn't the case. The northern Khleang was built first, by Jayaviravarman, with the southern following later during the reign of Suryavarman I, but it was never finished.



The northern Khleang.

As with Suor Prat, their actual purpose is a bit of a mystery, though given the name means "storeroom" it has been suggested that they were used to, well, store things—perhaps even people in the form of visiting foreign dignitaries. These are not really worth going out of your way for though the northern Khleang contains some heraldic style lintels in reasonable condition.



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PREAH PITHU

Deserted but unusual

About 100m north of the Northern Khleang

Preah Pithu is a collection of five temples, huddled to the north of the northern Khleang, (more or less opposite Tep Pranam), which is largely ignored by most Angkor visitors.

However, if time allows, it is well worth a wander through, and you'll have the advantage of having the place pretty much to yourself. The partly forested and monkeyed location with small moats and ponds dotted around makes for a great setting for some unusual little temples—even if their origin and purpose remains a mystery.



Cross the naga bridge.

They clearly date from different periods yet were all built close together in a relatively small area close to the centre of [Angkor Thom](#), so were obviously of great significance to the rulers who built them. Some of the later Pithu temples are among the last stone constructions to be found at Angkor and some were added to as late as the 16th century. Many are now in a fairly ruinous state though they contain interesting carvings—lots of which are just lying around on the ground.

The earliest seems to be **Temple Y**—situated on a small hill—which is in the style of Angkor Wat so provisionally dated to the reign of Suryavarman II, though no inscriptions have been found at any of this group. Several interesting lintels representing scenes from Hindu

mythology survive.

Temple U appears to date to the same period, with typical Angkor Wat period subjects for its carving subjects, though it is significant that the Churning of the Sea of Milk depicted there runs from East to West rather than North to South—a total Hindu faux pas which is difficult to imagine Suryavarman letting his workers get away with! The high and steep sandstone base for Temple U is also Angkor Wat style though it may well be a case of a later, unknown king copying his more glorious predecessor's work.

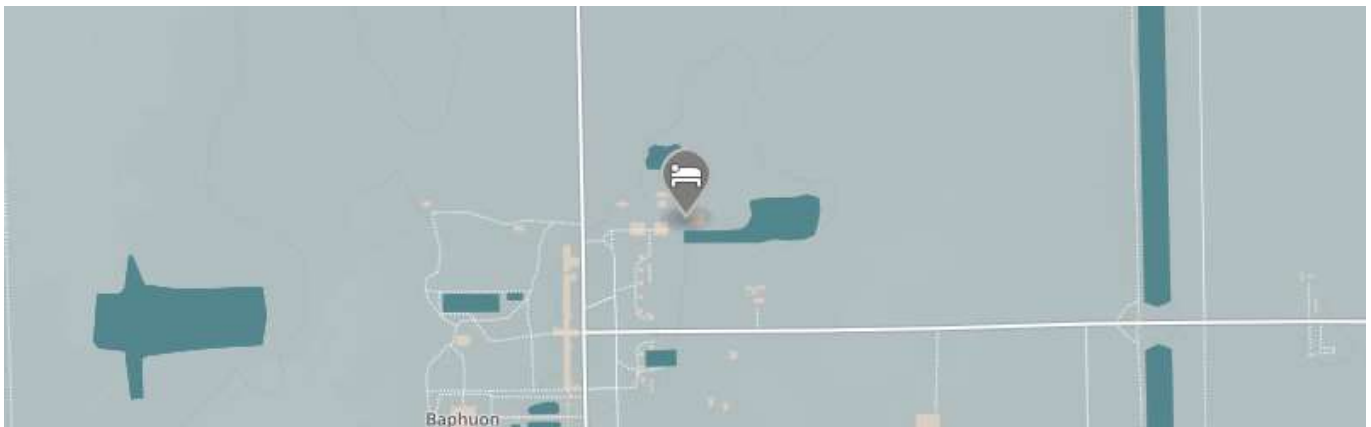


Rows of seated Buddhas.

Temple T, also on a high sandstone base, is equally difficult to date, possessing some Bayon-style features, apsaras with some classic Hindu mythological images again carved in unorthodox ways. It also has the classic naga-lined entrance platform typical of late Bayon and Indravarman II period. As with the other temples in the group it appears that they were added to and “upgraded” over time by different kings which emphasises their importance.

Temple V seems to be of a later date—even post-Bayon, and with its Hindu themes may possibly be one of the rare constructions from the reign of Jayavarman VIII. It is also pretty ruined and again set on a high sandstone base. (You get some good views from the tops of some of these temples.)

The most recent of the group is **Temple X**—a single sandstone tower built on a massive sandstone platform. Whenever the initial construction was made, the carvings are now exclusively Buddhist at this temple and of a late Thai-style period (14th to 16th century) making this a unique temple at Angkor in that it is the only one obviously belonging to the Theravada rather than Mahayana Buddhist faith. Check out the central shrine where the interior is covered in seated Buddhas!



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PRASAT KRAVAN

The real attraction lies within

Set just off the road from the east gate to Angkor Wat to Banteay Kdei, with its five squat brick sanctuaries **Prasat Kravan** looks like a bit of a drab affair, but the real attraction is within.

Rare for Khmer art, the interior of the sanctuaries contain brick bas reliefs of an outstanding standard. At the time of construction, Khmer brickies didn't use mortar but a vegetable compound instead. This has allowed the bricks to sit very close together and further accentuates the appeal of the bas reliefs. The temple is also unusual for its layout—having five brick towers in a single row.



The temple has an unusual layout.

If you see the occasional CA (it stands for “Conservation Angkor”) on some bricks, you’re looking at one of the bricks that formed a part of the restoration that took place in the late 1960s. The name Prasat Kravan means “**Cardamom Sanctuary**”, a reference to a large cardamom tree that once grew on the grounds. Conservation and restoration efforts continue.

Prasat Kravan has a twin temple, [Prasart Neang Khmao](#) (Sanctuary of the Black Maiden) near Takeo (to the south of Phnom Penh), which also has some very impressive brick bas reliefs.



It's what's on the inside that counts.

There's a large platform on one side and a pond on the other, where you may spot the occasional frog fishing, as we did on our last visit.



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TA PROHM

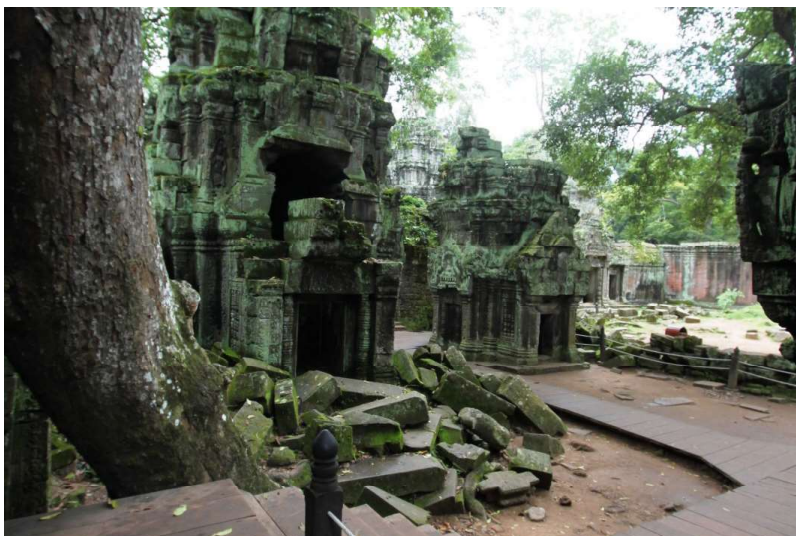
A crowd-pleasing favourite

Ta Prohm, of Tomb Raider fame and often referred to as the “one with the trees”, is a phenomenal example of the interplay between man and nature and should not be missed. The decision by the Ecole Francaise d’Extreme-Orient to leave Ta Prohm in its original state was inspired, as although in places the trees are slowly destroying the monument—with some having to be chopped down in 2014—in others they’re holding it together. Although well-travelled wooden walkways meander through the monument, plenty of nooks and crannies, alleys and backways are around to explore.



Straight from the set of Alien.

Built by Jayavarman VII for his mother, and consecrated in 1186, Ta Prohm was the centrepiece of a city of more than 10,000 people and was also an active Buddhist monastery. While some interesting lintels and pediments are distributed throughout the temple—keep your eyes peeled for a medallion that oddly looks like a stegosaurus—for the casual visitor here, the main attraction are the trees. In some places they've displaced the walls completely, leaving their roots to form the archways and roofs that were once made of stone. Ta Prohm is a favourite among both professional and amateur photographers. For the serious shutterbug, rising early and exploring the temple before 07:00, the only time it is close to quiet, will pay dividends, otherwise you may have to wait around for crowds to move out of the way of your shot. Be aware that although postcards show images of the temple and trees au naturel, since tourism management action began, there are now several wooden platforms and ropes (more were added in 2014), which keep visitors from clambering on the sites, but also make it a little trickier to replicate those images exactly.



Lucky to get Ta Prohm this quiet!

Ta Prohm, after [Angkor Wat](#) and [Bayon](#), is probably the most popular monument, and while best visited in the early morning or afternoon, any time is interesting. Take it slowly, finding spots to sit and take in the atmosphere as the crowds ebb and flow. Ta Prohm is large, so unlike Bayon it is more able to absorb large groups of people and there is usually a short window between groups when you can take a moment to get your photos and admire the temple in a momentary serene state.

A visit to Ta Prohm is a must see along with Angkor Wat and Bayon for any **first-time visitor to Angkor**. Yes, it's a heavily visited site, but despite visitors flocking here it hasn't lost all the magic—there's a reason this temple is memorable. Practically everyone enters the temple from the west entrance, but those in the know will head in through the less-frequented **east entrance**; you can ask your driver to meet you at the west on exiting.



Enticing meets ever so slightly creepy.

The site combines well with a trip to [Srah Srang](#) and [Banteay Kdei](#), which are close by. Start at Srah Srang, then walk through Banteay Kdei before entering Ta Prohm through its eastern gate. If twisting tree roots and moss-swathed ruins sound appealing, then you're likely to also particularly enjoy [Preah Khan](#) and [Beng Mealea](#).



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TA KEO

A massive temple mountain

The unfinished massive temple mountain of **Ta Keo** is almost 50 metres tall and was the first of the Khmer monuments to be built entirely of sandstone.

Some say construction may have stopped due to a lightning strike—taken as a warning sign to not continue—others put forward the death of Jayavarman V as more likely rationale.

Whatever the reasoning, the sudden stop is clear from all the undecorated facing stones—door supports and lintels all lay in place, waiting for the carvers to show up.



Note the un-carved decorative stones.

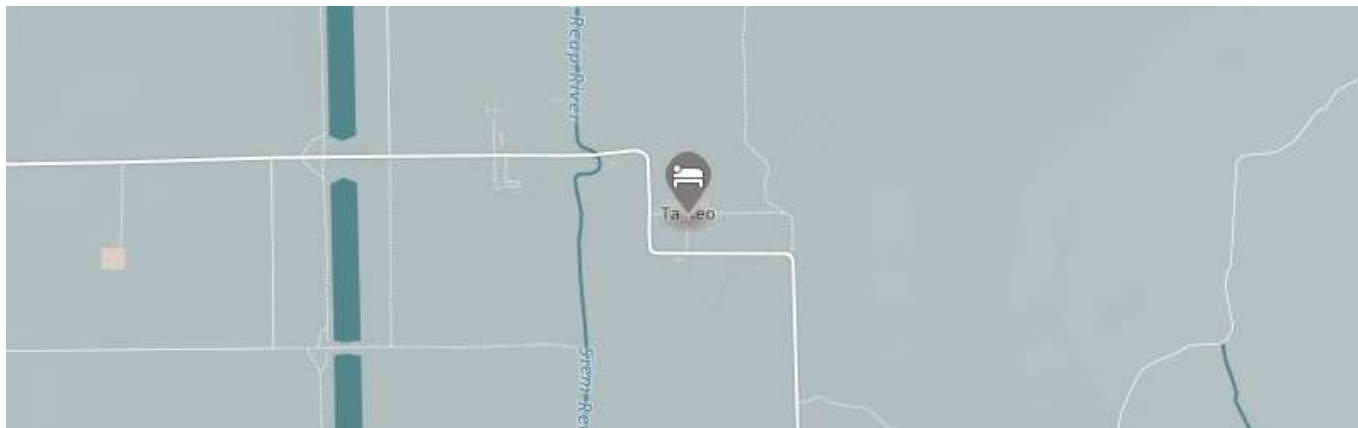
Despite its no-frills state the temple is well worth visiting, particularly in the early morning and late afternoon when the light brings out the warm hues in the sandstone.

The upper levels of the pyramid are so narrow that it's almost impossible to walk around them. In contrast, the top level is refreshingly spacious and decorated with four corner towers and a larger central tower. The views over the surrounding forest, in all directions, are terrific.



Do watch your step.

The road passes by the south and western walls of Ta Keo. The southern stairs are the most popular route but all the stairs here are very steep, with warning signs accordingly. You need to be reasonably nimble to ascend.



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TA NEI

An excuse for a bush-walk

Built in the late 12th century during the reign of Jayavarman VII, **Ta Nei** is fairly small and was built with a mix of laterite and sandstone.

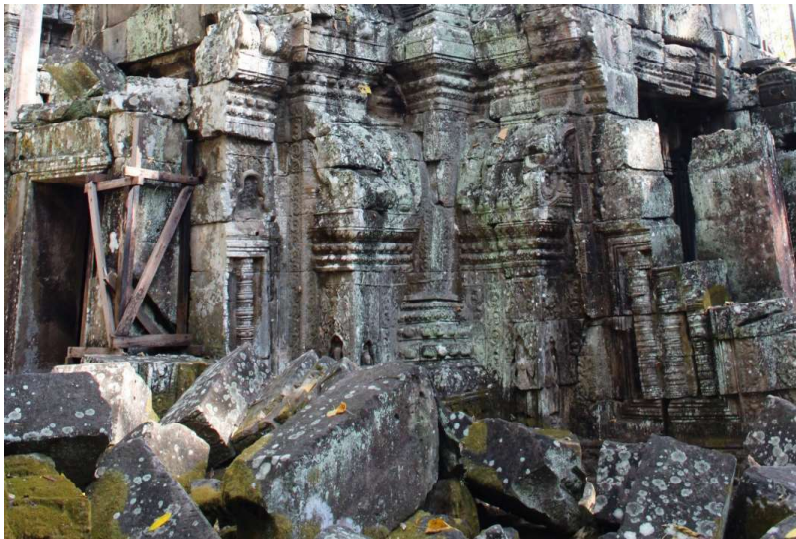
The main point of interest is the often lichen-covered pediments and lintels, some of which remain in reasonable condition, and the shady forest setting. Relative isolation—cars/vans can't access the temple via the forest paths—means there are no large tour groups traipsing about; though some tour companies bring couples and families here for its 'lost in the woods' feel, you can expect it to be **quiet any time of day**.



Not just a pile of rocks.

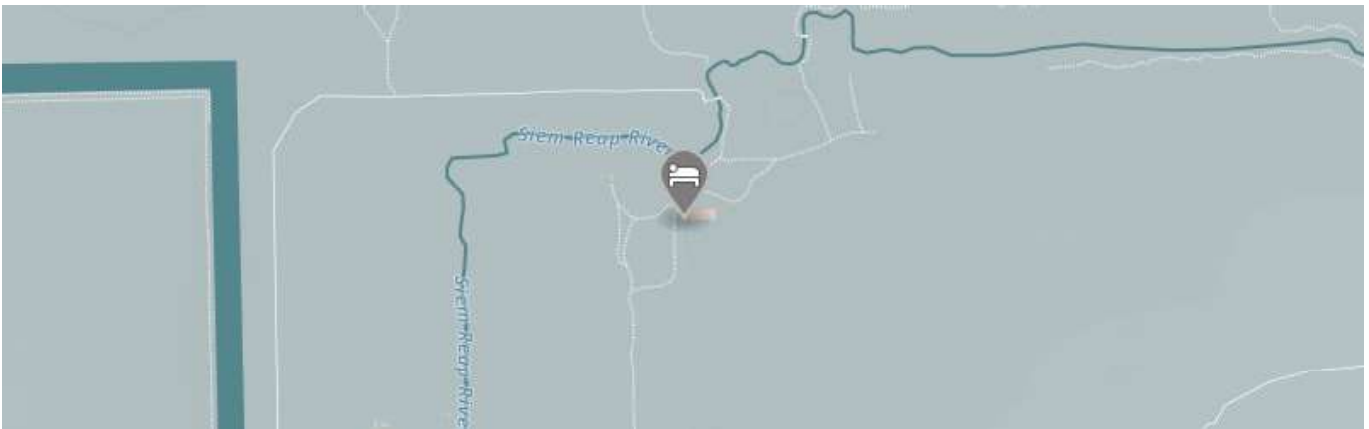
Another notable feature of Ta Nei is the layout. The architects presumably had a change of heart and felt something wasn't working, as half way through the main section to the temple was extended, rather than finishing it with a gopura. The result is that there's a **sanctuary that stands alone**, unattached to anything else, within the walls of the temple. Instead the gopura was built on the new, extended section. This isn't something we expect you'll spot on site by yourself unless you're truly down with Angkorian temple design knowledge. So there you have it.

You can access Ta Nei by two routes. One option—suitable on foot or pedal bike—is to exit [Angkor Thom](#) through the little-visited Victory Gate and take the dirt road to the left. You will see a couple of buildings—one marginally more official looking with a flag pole outside. The narrow sandy track straight ahead will lead you there. It will fork to the left a few hundred metres later but keep straight. Head over the bridge and walk along the river bank to reach the temple. A guide will likely come in handy since there are no sign posts.



Some work required.

Alternatively, there's a trail east of [Ta Keo](#). Ta Nei is also situated very close to the welcome centre for the [Angkor Zipline zip lining experience](#)—so worth adding on if you're making your own transport arrangements, since a temple visit is not included in their package.



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THOMMANON AND CHAU SAY TEVODA

In remarkable condition

Thommanon underwent a major reconstruction thanks to the Ecole francaise d'Extreme-Orient (EFEO) and is now in remarkable condition.

Like many monuments this was originally a walled-in structure, but the outside wall has largely collapsed leaving the gopuras standing alone almost like mini-temples in their own right. Chau Say Tevoda, also a flat temple with a similar layout, sits opposite Thommanon to form a pair.



Many tick off Thommanon in 10 minutes.

Probably started by Jayavarman IV and continued by Dharanindravarman I, it seems to have been completed by Suryavarman II around the middle of the 12th century. (Dharanindravarman's influence is shown by the presence of some Buddhist imagery at this temple.)

Thommanon is a flat temple, with all elements on one level and a dominant tower. Many of the site's lintels are worn but the site is noteworthy for some of the female devatas with their fancy headgear that flank some of the sanctuary walls.

Just over the road, **Chau Say Tevoda** is worth a look if you can spare the time between the more famous temples—but if you only have time for one then check out Thomannon for its superb lintels and pediments.



Taking a break at Chau Say Tevoda.

Slightly later than Thomannon, Chau Say Tevoda may still have been begun by Dharanindravarman since it too has several explicitly Buddhist carvings, before being continued by Suryavarman II and perhaps Yasovarman II. The temple features a couple of libraries as well as a long causeway which leads to a terrace—beyond that, the Siem Reap River.

Restoration work was carried out between 2000-2009 with restricted access, but it's fully open now and to the untrained eye the new blocks no longer stick out like they once did.



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QUIETER ANGKOR TEMPLES

A few sleepy options

The Angkor Archaeological Park is littered with hundreds of temples that are not on the hordes' itineraries, where you can take time, and space, to wander, appreciate and enjoy the handiwork of the Khmer Empire—**without huge crowds**. Here are a few.

Three of them are **Preah Palilay**, **Ta Nei** and **Banteay Samre**, each unique in their own way and each worthy of a visit. [Banteay Samre](#) is the furthest away, past the gorgeous, jungle villages that line the road running east from [East Mebon](#). The small temple has been beautifully restored, though its remote location means that it has unfortunately suffered from extensive looting.



Wandering Banteay Samre.

The path to **Banteay Samre** from the road comes from the north but you're better to avoid the steps in front of you and turn east (left) in order to approach it from its proper direction. On the eastern side, you'll find a long causeway and a cruciform terrace that is guarded by stone lions. It's a lovely, tranquil spot and worth spending a moment before heading in through the gopura, or gateway. Inside you'll find yourself within a small temple made of two laterite enclosure walls that surround the inner sanctuary. Unusually, the area between the outer and inner enclosure walls was once an internal moat. The stone work on the inner sandstone gopuras is gorgeous as well. Banteay Samre's carvings depict scenes from the

Hindu epic, the Ramayana, and are noted for being particularly fine as well as showing scenes not often found in other temples.

Most people suggest [Ta Prohm](#) as the place to go if you want to imagine how the temples may have looked when the early French explorers rediscovered them. However, much of Ta Prohm's charm is being lost to ongoing restoration works, and the crowds. Far better to seek out the nearby but relatively remote temple of [Ta Nei](#). It is the **archetypal jungle temple**, lost in the forests to the north of Ta Prohm. Ta Nei is small and difficult to access thanks to the tumult of fallen stones (you should preferably visit wearing sensible shoes, and exercise caution as you go), but it is beautifully entwined with its environment notwithstanding that the area around it has been cleared. It is a very romantic spot whose tone is set by birdsong and chanting from the nearby pagoda rather than the 'clink, clink' of hammers on stone.



Blending into nature.

Just to the north of the Royal Palace and [Elephant Terrace](#) is a small path that leads you from the main road past a working pagoda (Wat Tep Pranam) towards [Preah Palilay](#), a small temple whose construction date remains unknown. It is a very peaceful setting, and there is something about it that provokes a **contemplative mood**. Not a great deal remains: a small, but attractive cruciform terrace (with a recently added statue of the Buddha), which links to the eastern gopura. This is inaccessible, but you can climb over the wall to the left. In front of you is a tall tower which forms the central sanctuary, which was actually much higher than today.

The gopura features some lovely **carvings from Buddhist mythology** which are definitely worth a look, while the central sanctuary features both Buddhist and Hindu imagery. As with Ta Nei, there is a distinct possibility that the soundtrack to your visit may be the sound of monks chanting from the nearby pagoda, adding a depth of experience that is hard to achieve at the bigger, more well-known sites.

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Angkor: Grand Circuit

THE GRAND CIRCUIT

Choose your own adventure

The central temples of Angkor are ostensibly split up into two routes—not that you are bound

to tour them as such—consisting of the Small Circuit and the **Grand Circuit**.

The Grand Circuit is in fact just an extension of the shorter Small Circuit loop, taking in a few more sites. Both are on good, sealed roads which collectively knock off most of the key temples of interest within the vast Angkor Archaeological Park, excluding remote places like Banteay Srei, Beng Mealea and Kulen Mountain.



Hard to get a drink around here.

While there are more temples than you'll ever manage to squeeze in to your first visit to Angkor, picking a few from the collection of temples that sit on the Grand Circuit fits very well into a half-day tour and should be high on your list of places to visit after the big three ([Angkor Wat](#), [Ta Prohm](#) and the [Bayon](#)).

The main temples of the Grand Circuit are: [Preah Khan](#), [Neak Pean](#), [Ta Som](#), [East Mebon](#) and [Pre Rup](#). This handful should help form the focus of your Grand Circuit tour, being the most interesting historically and visually with a variety of architecture. They also tend to be the only ones the tour companies take in or that tuk tuk drivers would think to stop at on the circuit.

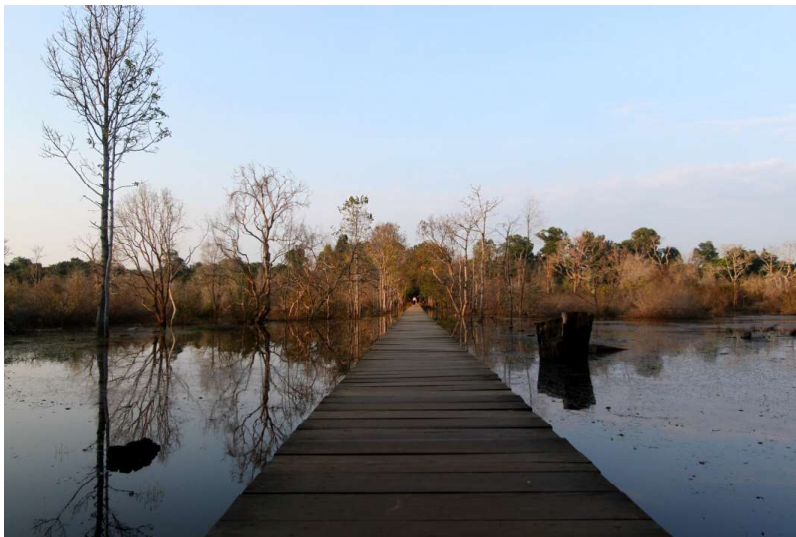


Preah Khan, the Sacred Sword.

Preah Khan, meaning the “sacred sword”, is the crowning jewel and highly recommended even if you don't make it to any other temples on the Grand Circuit loop. With twisting tree roots that recall [Ta Prohm](#) but without quite so many bus loads, detailed carvings, a more impressive Hall of Dancers than found at Ta Prohm or [Banteay Kdei](#)—Preah Khan has it all

and it is easy to while away an hour here walking around and taking photos.

Another of the main temples on the Grand Circuit is **Neak Pean**. An island temple sitting on a baray (reservoir) it is reached via a wooden walkway over the water. The temple itself is very small, taking only five minutes to look at. Nearby **Ta Som** has a photogenic tree though features heavily in large tour group itineraries, so this is one we'd actually skip out of the Grand Circuit when whittling down our options. You can find impressive trees easily enough elsewhere, like Preah Khan.



Photogenic.

East Mebon and Pre Rup are both increasingly popular sunset viewpoints so although touring the Grand Circuit in the morning or afternoon works equally well, and they can be taken in either clockwise or anti-clockwise, if you're heading out later in the day you can time it to end up here when the lighting is excellent for photography. Bear in mind others will have the same idea, making this pair of temples two of the busiest at sundown.

Nonetheless, other smaller temples also lie en route that scarcely get a mention elsewhere and as a result are practically devoid of visitors: [Banteay Prei](#) and [Krol Ko](#). We've met tour guides who've done their jobs for years and only once, if that, stopped by these. So why visit? Small in scale, there's nothing that discernible between these lesser-visited sites to pick one over the other, but we'd recommend pulling one out of a hat to complement some of the main temples on the Grand Circuit if only for the contrast in visitor numbers. Blissfully quiet, there will likely not even be an Apsara guard in sight and they're easy to get to—set back from the road no further than the bigger names of the Grand Circuit.



Few have heard of Banteay Prei.

It's simple enough to extend your route by picking and choosing from the temples that sit on the Small Circuit since you'll be passing some of these anyway to get to the Grand Circuit offerings. With the Grand Circuit fitting neatly into a half-day tour in terms of timings, you could spend the other half of your day visiting the [Roluos Group](#) of temples (or if you have very limited time, instead of taking in the Grand Circuit). Alternatively, combine them with more remote sites that will take you further away from Siem Reap town, such as [Banteay Srei](#).

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PRE RUP

Top sunset spot

Rather than letting the heaving sunset crowds get you down, mix your temple touring up a bit and include some of the lesser known and consequently quieter temples on the Angkor circuit, like the delightful and much underrated **Pre Rup**.

Built in 961 AD as a temple to the **Hindu deity Shiva**, Pre Rup's five towers rise over a pyramidal structure representing Shiva's home, the sacred Mount Meru. The name, meaning "turning the body"—part of an ancient funeral ritual—was only applied relatively recently due to the unproven belief that Pre Rup was originally a burial site. With its ancient plasterwork now eroded away to reveal the bare brick of the towers, they bear more than passing resemblance to **giant brick kilns** and the overall impression is ironically—given its name—of an elaborate **Angkorian crematorium**.



Stripped brick is impressive in its own way.

At 12 metres in height the upper platform of the temple affords a **360 degree panorama** of the forested countryside surrounding the site. As well as great views, a small **Buddhist shrine** sits at the summit which is a handy place to say a few prayers and make an offering before you start your descent. While the upper platform is mostly level, the steps leading up to it are very steep, making climbing up a feat of fitness and descending a combination of both patience and bravery. It is certainly not recommended for **vertigo sufferers**.

Early morning or late afternoon light is best for admiring the view and temperatures are better suited to the climb, but do bear in mind that from May to November there is a much higher risk of cloud and rain in the afternoon which can spoil the view and render the laterite steps treacherous. The upper platform is a popular place to watch sunset and it can get rather crowded, although a photographer friend assures me that you get much better shots of the temple with a **warm sunset glow** from ground level, as all you can see from the summit are shadowy trees and sky.

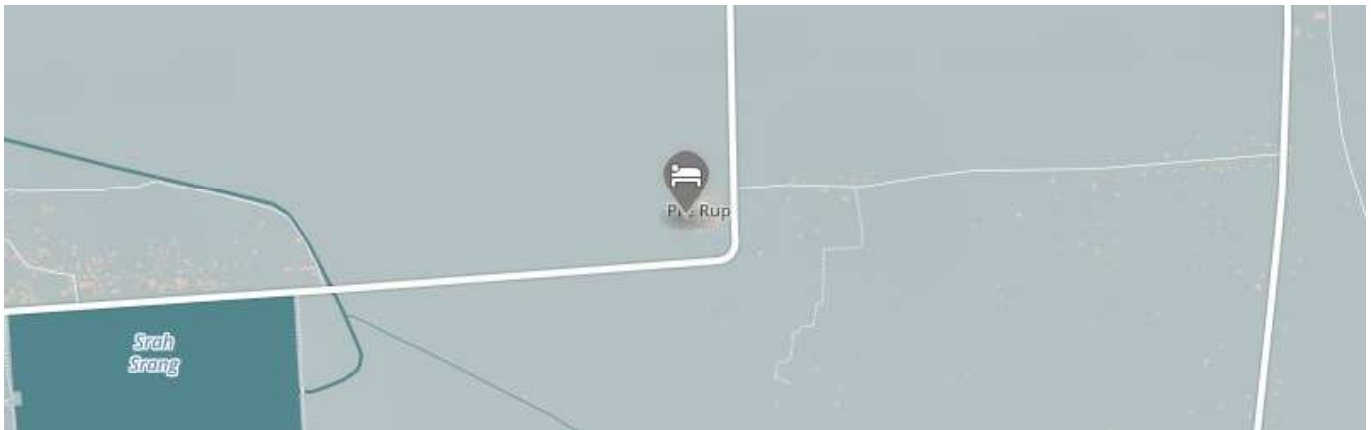


Without the stucco it almost seems nude.

Located less than half an hour by tuk tuk from central Siem Reap, Pre Rup is an easy add-on to a visit to [Ta Prohm](#), or [Banteay Kdei](#), as well as being particularly photogenic when viewed at sunrise across the royal bathing pool of [Srah Srang](#). It's also a good stopping point on the way to or from the pretty temple of [Banteay Srei](#) or the [Landmine Museum](#).

If you do decide to visit any of the smaller temples without going to "the big ones" and you don't have a multi-day pass, you will need to visit the Apsara Authority ticket booths on the

main Angkor Wat Road first as tickets cannot be purchased at the smaller temples. And if the appeal of visiting a temple simply because it is not overrun by tour groups is not enough, you would also be doing your bit to **preserve the more famous sites** by reducing the pairs of feet tramping all over them by one.



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PREAH KHAN

Rambling and exquisite

Crumbling ruins, photogenic trees, imposing causeways, an impressive Hall of Dancers, a columned building recalling Roman architecture, detailed carvings, quiet corners... We could go on. **Preah Khan**, the highlight of the Grand Circuit route, has it all. And with large proportions, its charm is relatively unaffected by its popularity.

Completed in 1191, the fascinating site of Preah Khan was built during the reign of Jayavarman VII and dedicated to his father (he dedicated nearby [Ta Phrom](#) to his mother).



Keep a look out.

Inscriptions also make reference to a lake of blood, which could refer to a battle in the area during the expelling of the Cham from Angkor. (The Cham king was killed where Preah Khan now stands). Thought to have been a **religious university**, when completed Preah Khan was home to in excess of 1,000 teachers, and had its own baray which ran out to the east of the site, but which has since run dry.

Sitting among the ruins here, watching the sun set through the trees surrounded by bird-filled

skies, can be truly magical. The inner sanctuary, like many of Jayavarman VII's creations, is a hodgepodge maze of ponds and shrines, and while there is a straightforward path that you can take walking due east or west, there is no shortage of minor trails and pathways that you can wander through.



Watch your step.

Some of the apsaras here remain in excellent condition as do a couple of the lintels. The central stupa that sits in the central sanctuary is particularly photogenic. Most people enter Preah Khan from the west, but it is easily done from the east as well. Whichever way you do it, it is a good idea to ask your moto to wait for you at the other side to save you having to walk back.

There are several impressive trees, the best of all the other temples to rival Ta Prohm. However, they similarly are facing the chop over time to help preserve the site. If push came to shove, after the main three temples—Angkor Wat, Ta Prohm and Bayon—we think we might recommend this next as a must see for the first-time visitor to Angkor. Allow about an hour to visit the temple.



Rambling and ruined.

If you're approaching Preah Khan from Angkor Thom's north gate, keep an eye out for the signs to **Krol Romeas**. Situated in a wooded area just to the right of the road after leaving the north gate on the way to Preah Khan, Krol Romeas is not a temple and instead is thought to have been constructed as an arena of some sort, perhaps for taming wild elephants. However, as "romeas" means rhinoceros, while "damrei" means elephants, the name doesn't

really make much sense. All that can be seen today is a deep laterite walled enclosure or pit with obvious evidence of additional wooden constructions. It was within easy distance of the parade ground and royal palace area, but just outside the populated area of downtown Angkor Thom.



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NEAK PEAN

An artificial island temple

Just off the Grand Circuit between Preah Khan and East Mebon, **Neak Pean** is an artificial island temple—a hospital built by Jayavarman VII in the middle of the Northern Baray. Its interest lies in its picturesque setting and unconventional design, consisting of a series of complex ponds within the confines of the square laterite wall.

Today only the **central pools and sanctuary** can be seen. Easily identifiable is the dominant central shrine on a circular island located within a pool—probably representing Mount Meru surrounded by the sacred Lake Anavatapta believed to cure all illnesses—with four small chapels at the corners of the pool. Neak Pean was likely a pilgrimage site with the belief the waters could cure the faithful.



Makes for some interesting photos.

The four chapels each have a large head of a king, lion, horse and elephant respectively, from which water passed from the central pool to the smaller basins. The central sanctuary is encircled by a naga which is where the temple gets its name from—*neak* is the Khmer for the

Sanskrit word naga.

Being surrounded by a pond, **Neak Pean** looks a lot better during the rainy season, but being small it can also get quite crowded at busy times of the day. There is a barrier for visitors— it is not possible yet to walk around the site—so groups tend to bunch up a bit here. There are two ways to access the temple. The first is by road, then walking the last 500 metres on a wooden walkway over the water, which makes for a change to climbing up steps at many other temples. The alternative is by boat—the only option that would have been around for the Angkorians.



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BANTEAY PREI

The work of a local ruler?

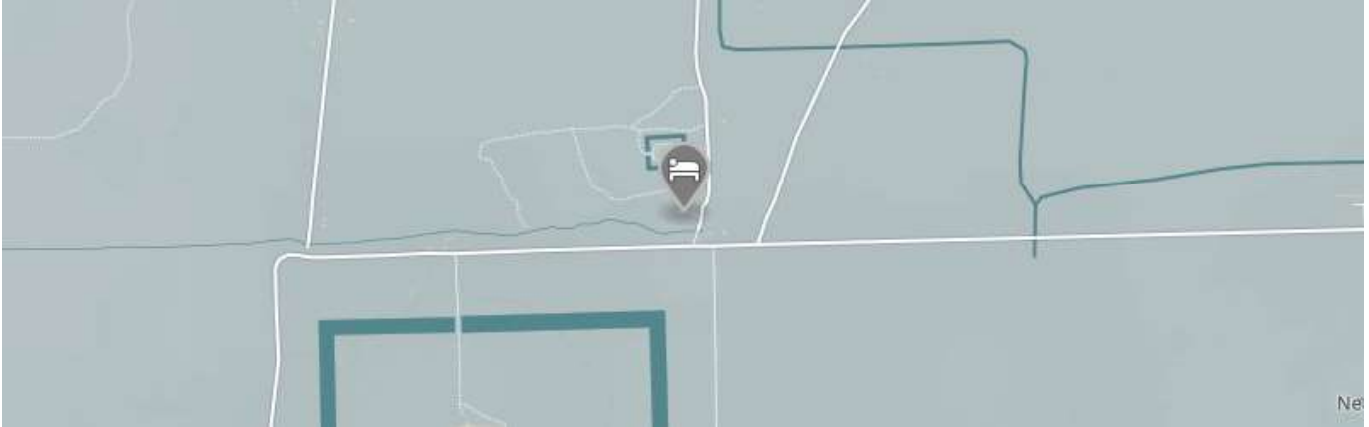
Banteay Prei would have once overlooked a water-filled Jayatataka Baray and for this and its peaceful wooded location with some interesting carvings it's worth a quick peek if you're passing by.

You'll find Banteay Prei slightly to the northeast of Preah Khan with Krol Ko and Ta Som further east. The site includes a central sandstone-clad tower with some interesting lintels, and there's two secondary laterite shrines plus the remnants of a surrounding wall. Towering trees which rise out of the temple add to the appeal. Very few tourists visit here so if you're wanting to dodge the hordes, this is a great temple for avoiding them.



Not a soul in sight.

Banteay Prei is yet another Jayavarman VII era temple, though as with [Banteay Thom](#) which lies a stretch to the northwest from here, this one would have been situated in the suburbs or surrounding villages of Angkor Thom and so may well have been the work of a local ruler.



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KROL KO

Another suburban temple

Set north of Neak Pean, overlooking the Jayatataka Baray, the very little-visited **Krol Ko** falls firmly into the “if you’re in the neighbourhood” category of Angkor sites.

There are a few sites scattered near Neak Pean on the Grand Circuit. Krol Ko lies to the north, [Ta Som](#) to the east, [Banteay Prei](#) and [Preah Khan](#) to the west and [Ta Nei](#) to the south—all coming together to indicate that perhaps once, many moons ago, this was a heavily populated area clustered around the baray. An Angkor Thom suburb if you will!



Small temple, the exact purpose unknown.

This is a small but cute temple set in a very quiet wooded location. The centrepiece rests on a laterite platform, there’s a laterite and sandstone wall and gopuras, with a tumbled down central sandstone tower. As with nearby Banteay Prei, Krol Ko is orientated east but would also have had a splendid view to the south across the Jayatataka Baray. The structure is fairly ruined but some interesting carvings remain, though most of them now lie on the ground.

It only takes a few short minutes to have a quick wander around before moving on to one of the other nearby temples.



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Ta Som

Compact and scenic

Ta Som is a compact temple—laterite enclosure wall, reasonably well preserved gopuras and central shrine—all recently renovated.

A satellite temple of [Preah Khan](#), this is the third Jayavarman VII temple in a row along the north side of the Grand Circuit road, but this one's a bit larger, a bit more popular and does possess postcards, cold drinks and bamboo flutes as opposed to the previous two, which are devoid of any vendors.



Woods and walkways.

In Michael Freeman's *Ancient Angkor*, he suggests Ta Som may be the temple referred to in an inscription at Preah Khan at "Gaurasrigajaratna" or "The Jewel of the Propitious White Elephant" ... though it is commonly referred to as Ta Som today. Tongue-twisting names aside, of particular note here is the much photographed eastern gopura covered in tree roots—make sure you walk to the very back of the temple to look back at the tree-framed door.

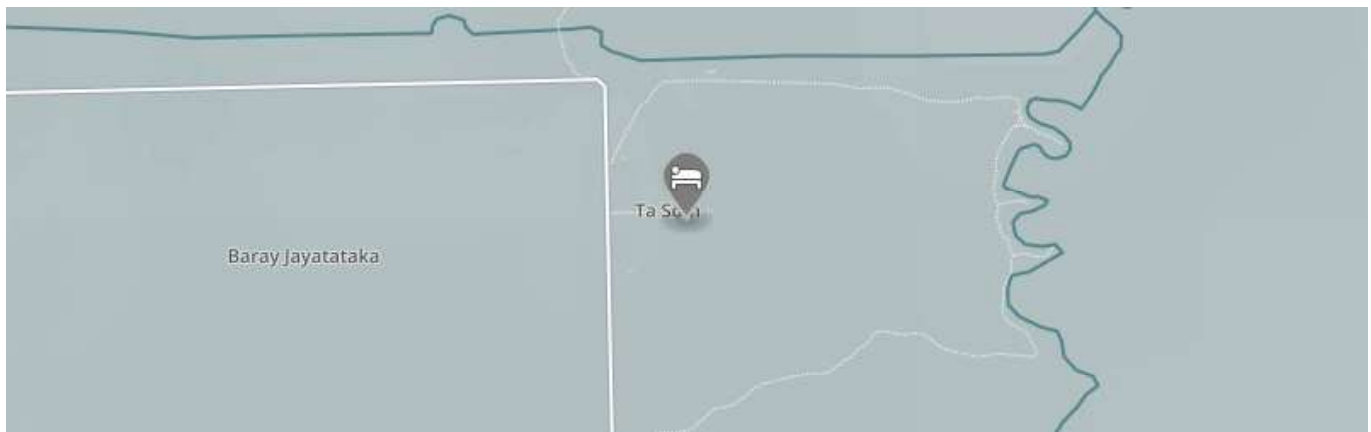
This site is all very scenic but it is increasingly popular with large tour groups, which makes us less inclined to stop here if you're touring the Grand Circuit, as picturesque trees can be found elsewhere at sites like [Ta Prohm](#) and [Preah Khan](#), while other small sites offer a greater chance of a people-free visit, including [Banteay Prei](#) and Prasat Prei on the Grand Circuit, or a

quiet site like [Ta Nei](#).



Now that is a doorway.

Still, if you are in the area, Ta Som is worth a look in.



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EAST BARAY

Now dry and easy to miss

The **East Baray**, a reservoir built due east of Angkor Thom, is an impressive 7.5 kilometres long by almost two kilometres wide.

Despite its size, it's a feature of the Angkorian landscape many tourists are utterly unaware of as it's almost impossible to notice on ground level to the untrained eye—it **has since dried up**. It's well worth looking at on an aerial map and satellite images for a better sense of the scale and diversity of the Angkor area as it once was—it was not all about temples.

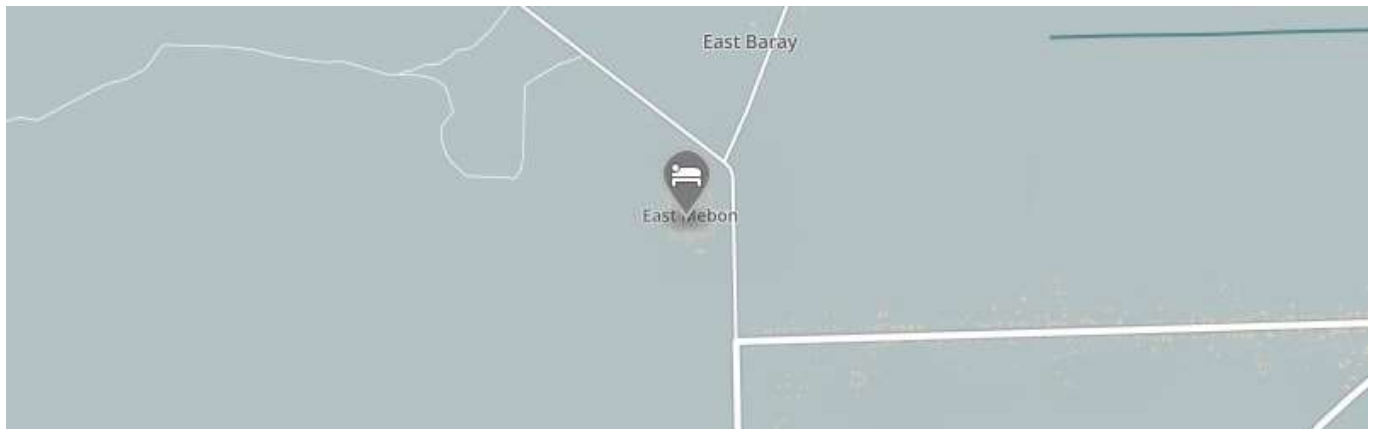


Some imagination required.

After completion, the baray was fed its water via a canal from the Roulos river that emptied into its northeastern corner. When full to a planned depth of four metres, the baray held a massive 55 million cubic metres of water, forming an integral part of the complex hydraulic system that ensured rice irrigation to support the population at the time (at least according to one school of academic thought).

Today there is no water to speak of—but towards the centre sits the [East Mebon](#) on a purpose-built elevated temple island. What a splendid sight it must have been when the baray was full, arriving here by boat across what must have felt like much more than an oversized lake.

The East Baray today is grassland and farmland—hamlets are scattered across the site where sandy tracks weave across the terrain between paddy. Today visitors head to the water-filled [West Baray](#)—a popular local spot—or to the North Baray which was re-filled with water only in recent times, which help provide an understanding of how the East Baray would also have once been.



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EAST MEBON

Look for the elephants

When you look at **East Mebon** today, surrounded by grass, trees, a road a matter of metres away it is hard to imagine that when it was actually in use, East Mebon would have been

surrounded completely by water and foot access would simply not have existed.

Built under the eye of Rajendravarmān II, East Mebon was dedicated in 953 AD and has landing stages at its cardinal points where other temples might have causeways; it sits in an area that was formerly the East Baray—ancient Angkorian reservoir—which has since dried up.



Another impressive outlook.

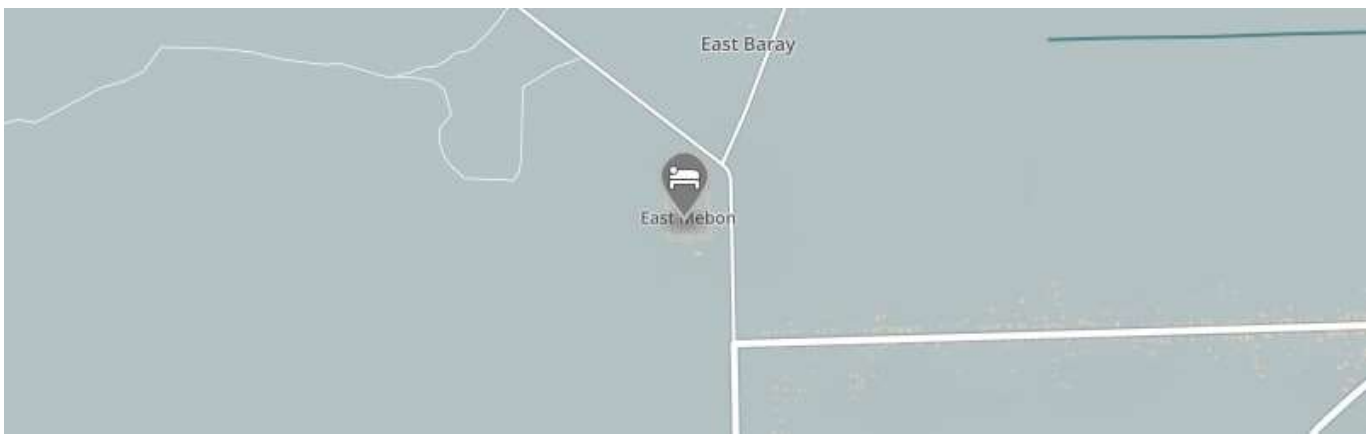
The three-tiered temple, with five brick towers on a sandstone base, is not as steep as mountain temples or with as many levels to it—likely because it was built on softer foundations, which wouldn't have taken such weight—but nonetheless was similarly meant to be a representation of Mount Meru.

East Mebon is especially noteworthy for its **large elephant statues** positioned at the corners of the pyramid's levels; in particular the one at the southeast corner of the second level. These outward-facing elephants were placed to act as temple guardians. The lintels found in the sanctuaries are another draw thanks to their excellent condition.



Must have been spectacular when the baray was full.

Nearby [Pre Rup](#) temple was built by the same king, also in the former Baray. More head to Pre Rup for sunset, but East Mebon offers a similar atmosphere.



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SRAH SRANG

Royal baths

Srah Srang, meaning “royal bath”, is a mid-sized baray opposite the east entrance of Banteay Kdei that runs out towards Pre Rup.

Some 700 metres long and 300 metres wide, the baray was dug out in the mid-10th century but then built in the 12th century during the reign of Jayavarman VII. It has an almost sublime beauty to it—Angkor expert Maurice Glaize compared its majestic calm to that of Piece d’eau des Suisses at Versailles, yet many today give it but a passing glance.



Take a walk on the south side.

The western end of the Srah Srang remains in the best condition, lined by a long stone wall with a terrace and staircase at its centre. The stairs are flanked by nagas and fearsome lions as they run down to the water’s edge, but they don’t put off the local kids who are often found splashing around here. The reservoir is semi-filled; when the water levels drop you can make out temple ruins that once would have sat in the middle.

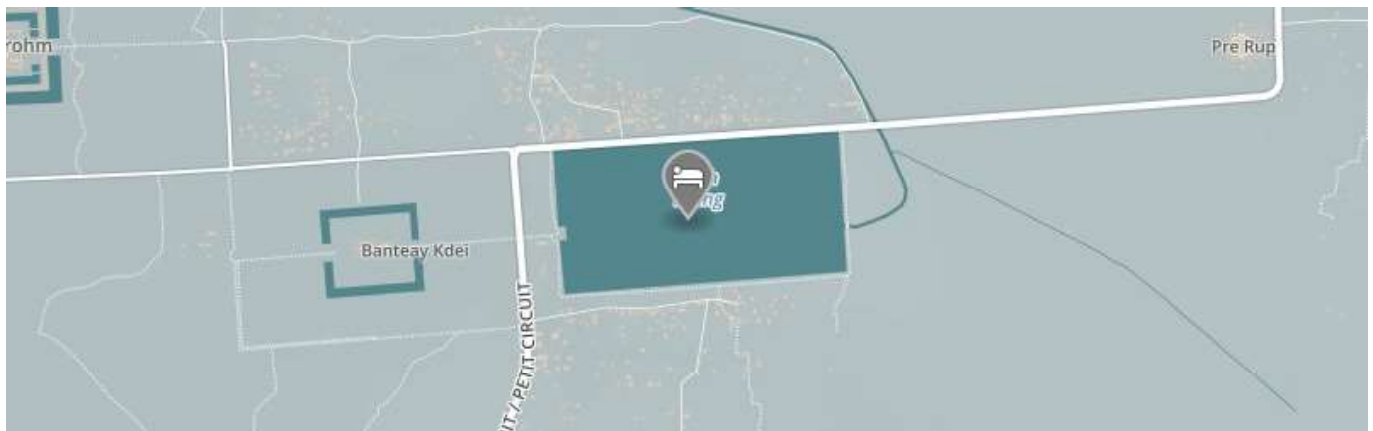
Dawn here is breathtaking and late afternoon is also particularly pleasant. If you rise early it is easy to take in sunrise from the landing stage at Srah Srang then head over to nearby [Ta Prohm](#) before the crowds arrive—this is the **best alternative to sunrise at Angkor Wat** and will particularly appeal to keen photographers. There is an impressive stillness in the early morning light—thereafter the surrounds are less quiet, since Srah Srang is located by

the main road, with the intersection east to the Grand Circuit, west to Ta Prohm and returning south to Siem Reap.



Cool off.

Should you have ample time, you can walk all the way around its edge; on one side runs a series of restaurants for tourists, the other is home to a small village. At the main platform there are also drinks vendors and a couple of local restaurants should you be in need of refreshment. However, some fairly strong-willed kids will also try to sell you trinkets and postcards—don't promise to buy something from them later if you don't mean it, as they will hound you.



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Angkor: Other

WEST BARAY

A great spot to swim and picnic

There may be no beach in Siem Reap, but we do have a *baray* which, when you look into it, is arguably much cooler. The **West Baray** is an enormous reservoir that was most likely constructed during the 11th century.

At 8,000 metres long and 2,100 metres wide, the West Baray is equivalent in size to more than 2,000 football pitches, and was built by hand. Before you totally freak out at the concept

of digging 2,000 football pitches by hand, in the case of the West Baray, they built up rather than down, constructing a series of dykes that held the water in rather than digging a hole—smart.



Little remains standing.

A small island sits in the centre of the *baray* where you'll find the dilapidated remains of [West Mebon](#). The temple is built in the same style as [Baphuon](#), beside [Bayon](#), hence the assumption that the Baray was built during the 11th century. Otherwise, we know very little about why it was built. Theories have suggested that it was used for irrigation, though this has been largely discarded, or for ceremonial purposes, or for flood management.

Today though the baray it is used mostly for leisure purposes; you can chill out in a hammock, swim in the water, enjoy a delicious picnic of barbecued chicken or fish, and take a ride across the water to the island on one of the boats. Though less well documented than the law on gravity, the law that **picnics taste better on islands** is considered by experts to be equally well-established.



Taxi!

The boat hire is a little pricey, at \$20, but you can easily fit about eight people into one which makes it work out a little bit better if you're running in a pack. The hammocks however are a bargain at 5,000 riel.

If you're not into any of that, there's a reasonably nice walk around the levee that functions as a dyke around the baray. It's 20 kilometres all the way around, so unless you're feeling

really ambitious, **don't plan on circumnavigating the whole thing**. It's a good idea to bring water and sunscreen no matter how long you're planning to walk for though.

The *baray* is down a tarmac road that turns off just about six kilometres to the west of Siem Reap, and getting there by tuk tuk or moto is a simple matter.

It's a very popular family leisure spot with locals as well, so even if you are planning on a swim please remember to [respect local customs and dress modestly](#).



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WEST MEBON

Little left to see

Built atop an artificial island in the waters of the West Baray, other than two still-standing gopuras there isn't all that much else left to see of the original **West Mebon**.

Built upon the orders of Udayadityavarman II, on an island at the centre of the [West Baray](#), it is thought that the central sanctuary here was made up of three pavilions, perhaps constructed partly of wood, as that would explain why there is so little left today. What remains leans towards the trees with building blocks scattered around the grounds of the island along with some simply fashioned rows of stairs.



Boats lie in wait for the run over to the West Mebon.

The pavilions, with a sandstone platform at their centre, would have enjoyed impressive views out over the baray, and it shouldn't take too much imagination to conjure up the

setting, especially in the wet season when the baray is brimming with water. The island would have originally have been connected to the shore by probably an earthen causeway, but today it is reached by boat, which can easily be arranged upon arrival.

In 1936 a massive bronze statue of a reclining Vishnu image was discovered at the West Mebon, apparently after a local villager had a dream of finding a statue on the island. Only the upper portion of the torso, head and some arms (all in a single piece) were recovered and it is believed the original statue would have been around six metres in length. Today it is stored in the [National Museum in Phnom Penh](#).



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Ak Yum

Impressive during its prime

A small, crumbling ruin, the temple of **Ak Yum** lies just off the track along the southern embankment of the West Baray and was clearly heavily damaged during the lake's construction.

An inscription from 613 AD has been found at the site, indicating that probably the first temple here dated to either the reign of the great Ishnarvarman himself or his father Mahendravarman, though it was during the later seventh, early eighth century and the reigns of Jayavarman I and his daughter Queen Jayadevi that the capital was moved to this site. Ak Yum more than likely became the state-temple of their city Aninditapura.



Precious little remains of Ak Yum.

Though now all that can be seen is the remains of a laterite step platform surrounded by a few piles of bricks, it must have been a lot more impressive in its prime and was certainly the first ever step pyramid-type temple constructed by the Khmers. The sparse remains seen today presumably date from an upgrade during Jayavarman II's occupation of the area. Note there are no guardians at this temple so most likely no Angkor pass is needed.

It's not worth going out of your way to find Ak Yum, but if you're cycling around the [West Baray](#) it makes for interesting feature to pause at en route.



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BANTEAY THOM

Lovely and remote

2-3km to the northwest of Preah Khan's west gate

Banteay Thom is a charming temple where the principal appeal is its rural setting; it's reached only by sandy tracks through paddy and scrubland where you're likely to bump into a farmer, ox-cart or nobody en route. Locating the temple is not that easy, but the reward is an **Angkorian temple to yourself**.

Head past Preah Khan's west gate then follow the signs down a track to the left to the village of Nokor Krao. Once there, park and follow a footpath for a kilometre or two until you hit the temple. It isn't easy to find but the villagers will guess why you're there and will point you in the right direction if you ask for "Prasat Banteay Tom".



Ramshackle.

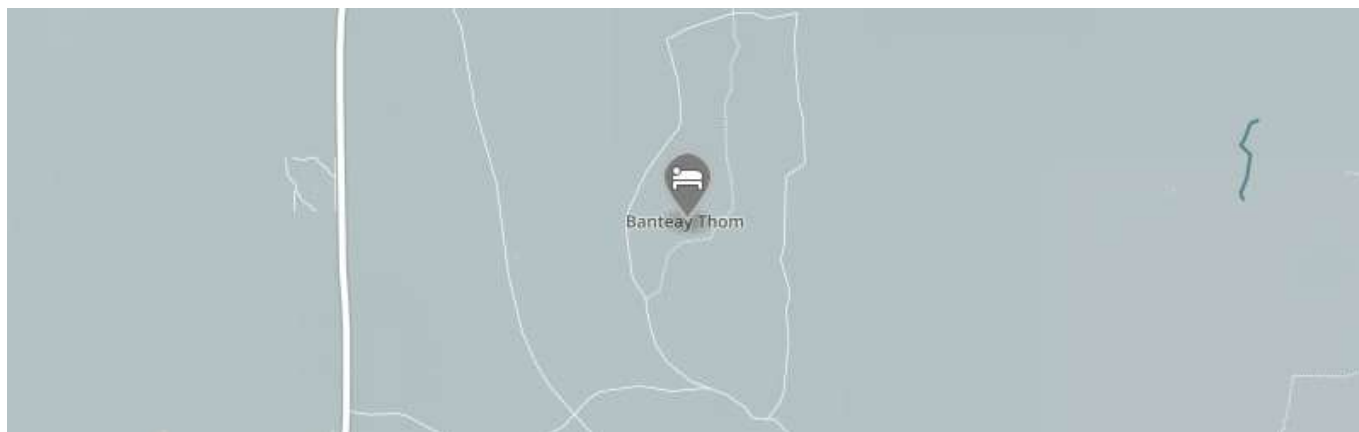
Alternatively, driving or cycling out of the West Gate of [Angkor Thom](#), turn right on the sealed main road. There'll be one bend and continue straight (north) for around three kilometres. You'll then need to turn right off the road down a narrow sandy track on foot or bicycle—a tuk tuk won't get down here—that runs parallel to a villager's house. You're going to need to bump into someone and say the temple name so they can point you the right way; enlisting the services of a guide will make things easier.

The temple itself, built during the Jayavarman VII period, is in a fairly ruinous state but two central towers still survive along with a ruined library, an eastern gopura in good condition, apsaras and tapestry reliefs and a surrounding covered walkway with some roof sections. A couple of good lintels and some carvings are lying on the ground though you can see evidence of **recent looting** at this remote site.



Peak hour.

Despite its remoteness, bring your temple pass along as there's sometimes a temple guard on duty—a couple of niche adventure companies started bringing guests here, but in such small numbers and with rarity that you can expect to find it empty. If you're visiting in wetter months by bike, there may be very short stretches where the paths are under shallow water and you'll need to walk.



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Angkor: Roluos Group

ROLUOS GROUP

An easy half-day tour

The Roluos group of temples consists of Bakong, Preah Ko, Lolei and Prei Monti, making for an easy half-day tour from Siem Reap either in the morning or afternoon. The remnants of the first Angkorian capital, Hariharalaya, the temples are found near the contemporary town of **Roluos** which lends the group its name today.

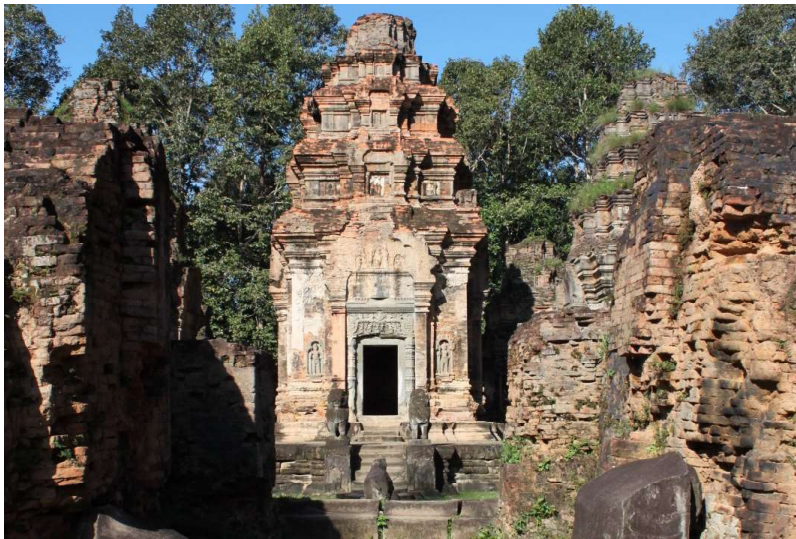
Located out of the central Angkor Park the temples are found north of Siem Reap, though easily accessible along National Road 6—well past Psar Leu wholesale market. Although it's a straight cycle on a good, sealed road, it's not particularly scenic and the quality of driving can be unnerving. You're best off taking a tuk tuk for the 30-minute journey. Make sure you already have a temple pass—bought from the **main ticket office which is not located near Roluos**—as it will most likely be checked at all the sites.



What an approach.

[Bakong](#) is the highlight of the group, with its majestic moat and tiered structure providing views of its surrounds. Allow the most time here to take in the fine details at all levels, as well as the modern pagoda in the grounds. Quad bike tour companies incorporate a loop around the walls on some of their itineraries. Outside the walls you can find a couple of small brick towers—one will be impossible to miss in the middle of the road, another is set back essentially in someone's back garden. [Preah Ko](#) is the next most visited of the group, with six sanctuaries.

Once located around Angkor's first significant baray—a reservoir—there's little left to remind visitors that the small, crumbling temple of [Lolei](#) would once have been an artificial island. Most skip Prei Monti in the group since it is harder to access, but if you want to shave off a temple and save time **we'd instead skip Lolei**, since there's not much to look at.



The primary approach.

Prei Monti is formed of three brick sanctuaries. Small in stature and historically with less to say for itself than Bakong, it is well worth scouting if you're making the trip to the Roluos group and fancy more of an adventure, due to its tucked-away location off the main road. Behind the back of Bakong (the west), walk around 250 metres down the road then you will see a helpful sign stating "Prei Monti". From here follow the windy, sandy trail—only accessible by foot or by bike—less than a kilometre and you'll hit the ruins. It is bordered by farmland, with tall trees casting their shadows over the jungle-clad temple. This site is well away from the tourist crowds. Back on the main road, it is possible to follow the rusty-coloured track most of the way back to Siem Reap—it runs parallel to National Road 6 where you'll get views of the countryside instead of buses and lorries.

Around Bakong there are numerous drinks vendors though we've yet to find any food worth eating in this area, so plan accordingly. To help ward off temple fatigue you can make a quick stop at **Prolung Khmer Pottery and Weaving Centre**, on the main road to Bakong when you turn off National Road 6. The two workshops have demonstrations of pottery making and weaving on traditional looms. The kramas—traditional Cambodian colours—come in fun colours and make for great gifts. Alternatively, on the opposite side of the road, you can take a look at **traditional puppet making**.



Gorgeous lintels.

To extend a visit to the Roluos group into a leisurely day tour from Siem Reap either head back to the main temple complex where the Grand Circuit of temples is one example that fits

nicely into a half day, or consider hiring a car for the day and heading out past Roluos to [Kompong Khleang](#) floating village on the Tonle Sap.

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BAKONG

A great dawn alternative

Roluos Group

The highlight of the Roluos group of temples, those who come to **Bakong** are rewarded with sweeping views from a stunning temple complex surrounded by a peaceful moat.

Before its reconstruction little remained of Bakong aside from a pile of rubble atop a small hill—the entire central sanctuary, which today stands tall, was collapsed. Initial clearing work didn't commence until 1936 and the eventual reconstruction under the direction of Maurice Glaize (the conservator of Angkor from 1937 to 1945) took around seven years to complete.



View from the top.

Consecrated in 881 AD during the reign of King Indravarman I, the construction of the Bakong is believed to have been initiated by Indravarman's predecessor, Jayavarman III and became the state temple of Hariharalaya (near modern-day Roluos). The layout of the site closely follows the principles of modelling Mount Meru with the moat surrounding the inner sanctum of five levels, with eight small brick temples surrounding a tiered tower whose spire resembles the turreted, curved points of Angkor Wat. From the apex of the site, the model plan is quite obvious. The central sanctuary is believed to have been re-built in the 12th century.

Potted plants and flowering bushes line the path that leads over the moat and into the temple complex. The grounds within the moat include a collection of smaller buildings in variable states of repair and the view from the northeast corner takes in the whole complex pretty well. Allow time to take in the eight towers at ground level before climbing to the top—their detailed lintels are particularly noteworthy.



Pause for peace and calm.

When you climb each of the five levels, walk all the way around before continuing up to the next level. Note the little elephants on each corner; even the harness details are still visible on some. On the fourth level, be sure to walk around to the south side where a fine fragment of bas relief remains, illustrating apsaras fighting a losing battle.

At the top level, turn and look back to the east for a tremendous view that illustrates the plan of the complex very well. To the west side we're told you can see Angkor Wat, but we couldn't—perhaps with binoculars it's possible. Exit the temple to the west, going straight down, and you'll stumble upon the remains of Nandi, Shiva's favourite bull.

Outside the temple walls, across the moat, would have stood twenty brick sanctuaries. Most are now rubble though one can clearly be seen on the road.

After scaling the temple, be sure to stroll over to neighbouring Bakong pagoda. This active Buddhist temple has undergone comprehensive renovation and the transformation is quite remarkable. The murals inside were first created in the 1930s and '40s and were gracefully restored in 2011-2012 by a team of Khmer, Thai and French artists using soft, luminous colours rather than the garish ones found in many modern pagodas. Note the images of Japanese and French war planes interspersed among typical scenes from the Buddha's life—the original Khmer painter was taught by a French art teacher who fought in World War II. Apart from the curious war scenes, the French teacher himself is depicted receiving teachings from the Buddha.



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PREAH KO

*A minor stop
Roulos Group*

Preah Ko—The Sacred Bull—is one of a handful of sites that make up the **Roluos** group of temples, moments from impressive Bakong.

What remains of it today are six small brick towers in two rows of three, sitting on a sandstone base along with a handful of outlying buildings in various state of ruins; it was home to one of the first libraries built during the Angkor era. Each tower is dedicated to one of Indravarman's ancestors, including Jayavarman II, considered to be the founding father of the Khmer empire.



The main affair.

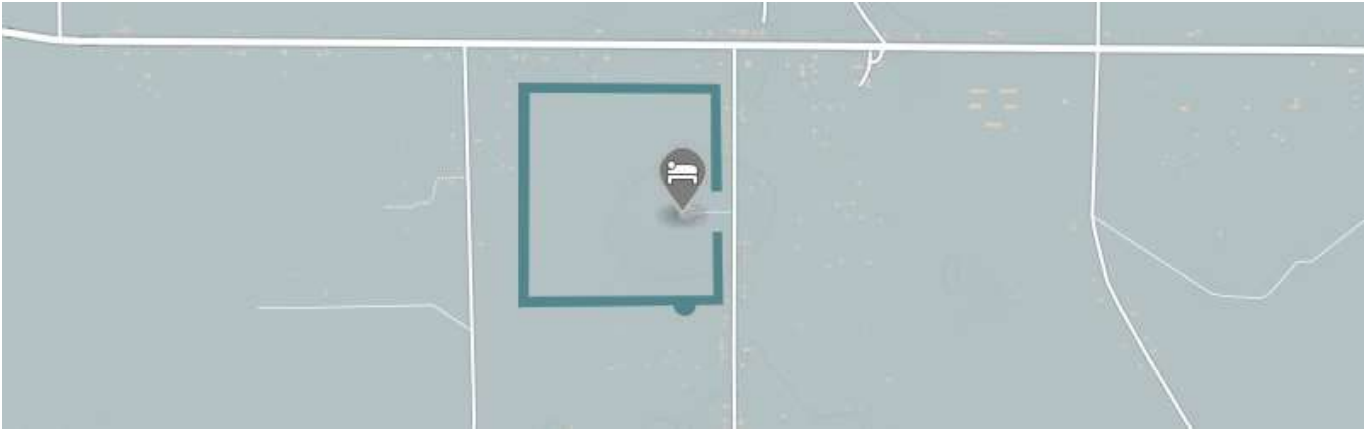
The sides of the doors of all six brick temples contain long inscriptions, but the big find here was the temple foundation steele in the gopura of the first enclosure. While the steele has been removed, part of the inscription is the eulogy of Indravarman I and reads, according to G. Coedes in Maurice Glaize's *Angkor*:

"The right arm of the prince is long, strong and fearsome in battle as his flashing sword falls on his enemies, defeating kings in every direction. Invincible, he can be appeased by two enemies only—those who have their backs turned, and those who, valuing life, put themselves under his protection."



Stucco decoration.

For unknown reasons the six towers are a bit off kilter, unequally aligned. The main point of interest here are the lime mortar lintels and other decorative work that was affixed to the brick towers. Each of the six towers has a small, active shrine inside. It will only take a few short minutes to visit this site.



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LOLEI

Only if you're in the area

Roulos Group

Lolei is a small temple worth stopping by briefly if you're visiting Bakong and Preah Ko—the main temples in the Roulos group—on a half-day tour from Siem Reap.

Today the reservoir has been drained and is used for rice cultivation but the island still hosts Lolei and an active wat. While credited to Yasovarman I, the bulk of the basework was done by his father Indravarman I, who built the dyke and placed the island, leaving his son to build the actual temple completed in 893 AD—Sunday July 8, to be exact. The temples were once all painted white, and you can see traces on some of the apsaras still.



Brick balancing game.

Lolei comprises four brick towers, none of which are in outstanding condition, varying from collapsed to the semi-restored. The highlight of Lolei is its lintels and door jambs, which remain in good nick. Inscriptions on the door jambs explain the date of construction and the division of tasks of the hundreds of servants dedicated to each temple.

More interesting perhaps is the site's location within an active wat. A school is next door and students and teachers actively solicit donations on the temple grounds.



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WAT ATHVEA

Compact and scenic

Wat Athvea isn't located in the central area of the Angkor Archaeological Park, lying just outside Siem Reap town in the direction of Chong Kneas floating village on the Tonle Sap Lake.

The temple itself is reasonably large and after being restored is in very good condition. Built during the reign of Suryavarman II, Wat Athvea bears a passing resemblance to [Banteay Samre](#) and easily identifiable with the Angkor Wat period, though it is devoid of any reliefs except for a couple of lonely apsaras. It also features a large laterite enclosure wall with sandstone gopuras and towers in the Angkor Wat style.



Little in the way of decoration remains.

Within the temple grounds sits an active monastery, so you're likely to bump into a monk or two here. There's also a school next door and a few fields—typical Cambodian scenes in a concentrated area.

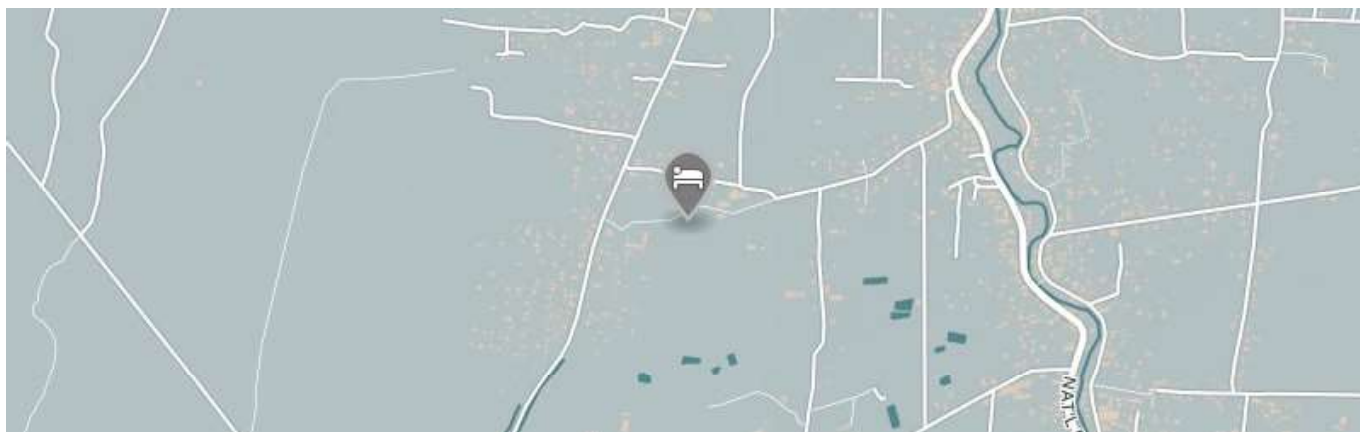
Though a more isolated temple, it is easy to reach turning right off the main road that leads from Siem Reap to the Tonle Sap and [Phnom Krom](#)—this means the temple combines well with those sites but that you may also occasionally see a small trickle of other tourists here.

Happy Ranch Horse riding also pauses here in one of their routes.



Still worth a quick wander through.

Please note that despite the location of Wat Athvea, it is still part of the Angkor park and an Angkor pass is required to visit; Apsara Guards are usually on site checking tickets.



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Angkor: Remote

BANTEAY SREI

Stunning carvings

32km from Siem Reap

The temple of **Banteay Srei** or the Citadel of the Women, boasts superbly well-preserved and highly intricate stone carvings that adorn the pink-hued sandstone of the delightfully small and intimate site.

Inside the volcanic laterite outer walls, virtually every available surface is covered in carvings with a predominance of **apsaras**—celestial nymphs in Hindu tradition—from which the temple takes its name. It has its own picturesque lotus bud towers too, but what makes Banteay Srei all the more remarkable is that it was completed some 150 years before Angkor Wat in the year 967.



Welcoming.

Banteay Srei, never a royal temple, is thought to have been built by a guru of the king and it is believed that this lack of a royal go-ahead is one of the reasons why it is so small. What Banteay Srei may lack in size it more than makes up for in beauty. Some have suggested that the temple was built by women as no man could have created something so beautiful and with so fine a hand. The carvings cover an incredible amount of the temple's surface and the reliefs are often deep.

As with many Khmer temples, the main sections of Banteay Srei were built of laterite, but instead of the carving being done into a plaster coating normally layered onto the stone, the temple was faced with pink sandstone and the carvings done into that. The results are breathtaking. Throughout the monument are lintels, door jambs and window columns all layered with amazingly well executed and preserved carvings.

When the French came across the site in 1914 it was totally covered by forest and partly buried by earth. It didn't take them long to realise they'd stumbled upon an outstanding find, so outstanding in fact that French author Andre Lalraux decided to take a chunk of the temple home with him. He cut out over a tonne of the finest apsaras and other carvings and carted them back to Phnom Penh where he planned to surreptitiously freight his plunder back to France. Fortunately he was arrested and sentenced to a couple of years in prison (a term he never served) and the carvings were saved. Lalraux was later appointed Minister of Culture under Charles de Gaulle.



A rare moment of calm.

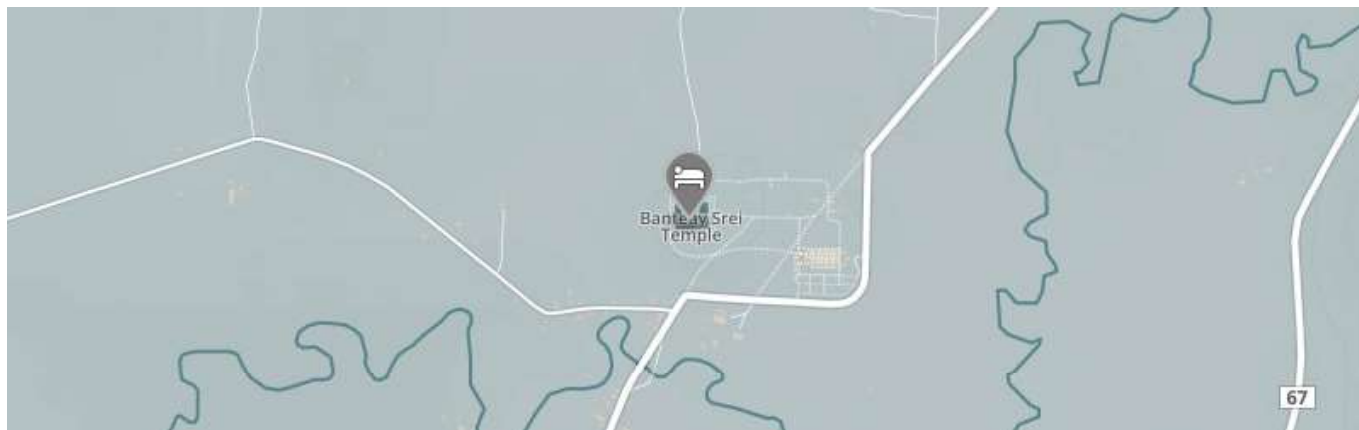
At about 25 kilometres from town the journey in a tuk-tuk should take less than an hour each way and cost you in the region of \$20-\$25 including any stops you might make en route. If you splash out on a car with **English-speaking driver** you can expect to pay **up to \$40** for the privilege of **air conditioning**, some useful words of guidance and a cooler full of bottles of iced water. It's best to check exactly what is included when you book your driver.

On arrival you may be pleasantly surprised to find a very well organised complex with a large car park, official gift shops, wall-mounted site plans, clean, modern toilets, souvenir stalls and restaurants. If you want to stay for lunch, restaurant menus include all the usual Khmer rice and noodle staples, and although prices were listed from \$5 upwards, on my recent visit we were instantly offered "anything on the menu" for just \$3.

Early morning or late afternoon are the best times to visit to avoid any tour buses but if the temple entrance looks busy when you arrive, turn right instead of left and take the short circular walk around the small **wetland nature reserve**. It's a haven of **birdlife**—at the right time of day and year—and provides a peaceful and shady walk along good paths with various viewpoints on wooden piers constructed over reedy lakes.

The path from the lake to the temple also takes you past a small raised platform that gives you a clear view over the temple's outer walls and moat for a good chance of capturing that elusive stranger-free photo.

You will of course need a temple pass to access Banteay Srei and unfortunately the only place you can buy one is at the main **Apsara Authority ticket office** on the road from Siem Reap to Angkor Wat. Which is not exactly the most direct route from town to Banteay Srei.



[Click here or on the map above to see the location in Apple or Google maps.](#)

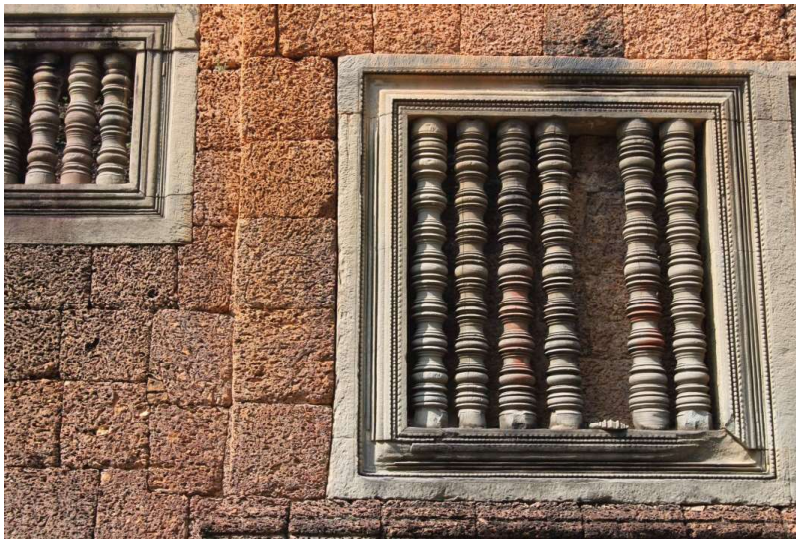
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BANTEAY SAMRE

The citadel of the Samre

Built by Suryavarman II, **Banteay Samre** is believed to have been completed early in the 12th century, and has an interesting tale behind its construction.

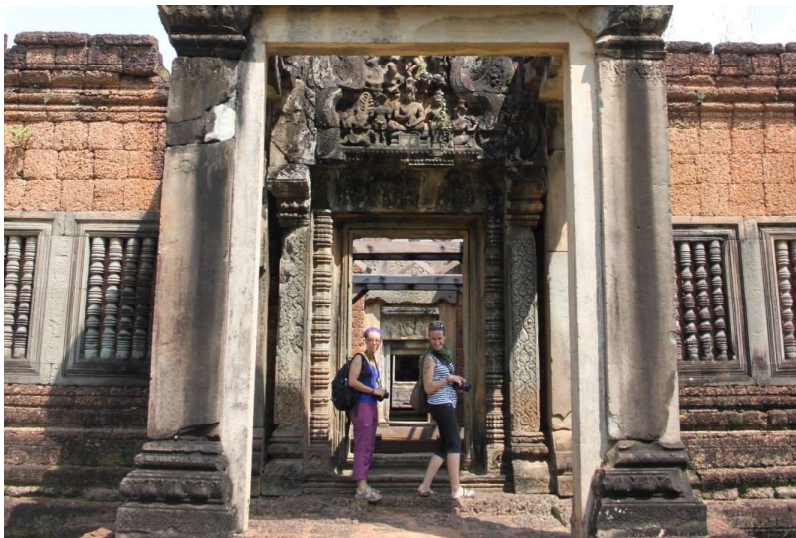
The story goes that a poor Samre farmer (Samre were a group of people who populated the Kulen hills to the northeast of Siem Reap) by the name of Pou had a particular talent for growing sweet cucumbers.



Almost a window, but not quite.

When Pou presented some of the cucumbers to the then-king, he was so taken with them he secured the exclusive rights and commanded Pou to kill anybody who tried to enter his cucumber fields without permission. When cucumber production dropped off during the monsoon, the king became impatient and snuck into the fields himself to try and source a few of the delectable cucumbers—the farmer followed his instructions and speared him to death. When he realised his mistake he buried the king in the middle of the field and hoped nobody would notice.

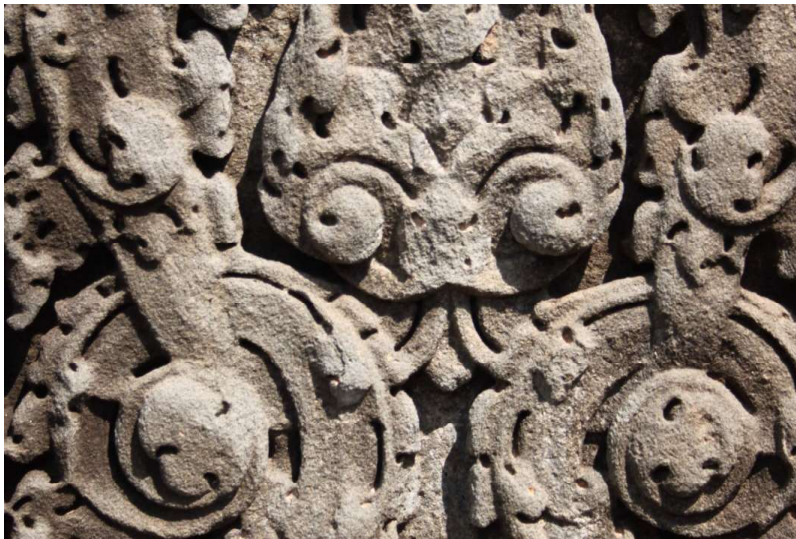
When a new king couldn't be decided upon, the dignitaries consulted a divine elephant to select the new monarch. The elephant walked straight to the farmer's shack, where it saluted the farmer, knelt and then encircled him with its trunk and placed him gently on its back.



Smile: You're on Travelfish camera.

Once king, Pou his predecessor dug up and performed proper funeral rites at [Pre Rup](#) (guides more often tell this story at Pre Rup than at Banteay Samre). His subjects were a bit put out being ruled by a Samre, and despite all his efforts he couldn't get the respect he deserved. In the end, Pou moved out to Banteay Samre and set up his court there.

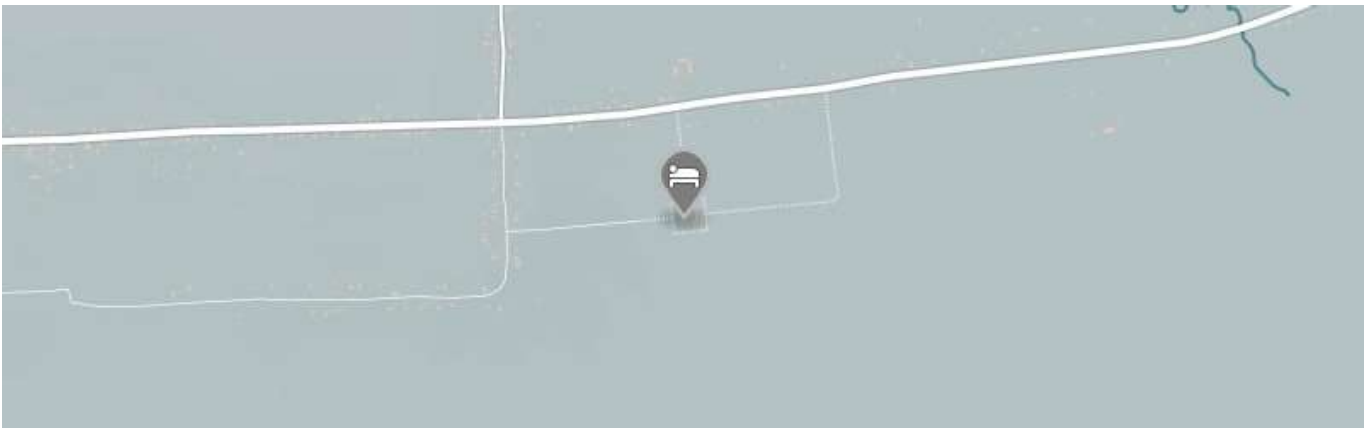
An extensive renovation from 1936 to 1944 was led by archaeologist Maurice Glaize and **the results are impressive**. With its tall and windowless laterite walls, the temple is rather citadel-like, and while the central tower may remind you of Angkor Wat, visitors who have seen the Khmer sites in Thailand will also notice similarities to the temples at [Phanom Rung](#) and [Phimai](#).



Ancient and delicate.

It is thought that the temple sat at the centre of a sizeable city as the eastern causeway (which was once flanked by a naga bridge) runs for 200 metres and it's easy to imagine a city surrounding it. Aside from the imposing outer wall, another highlight worth mentioning are the unusually deeply carved lintels and pediments—while not as spectacular as [Banteay Srei](#), they are nevertheless very attractive.

Best viewed in the early morning or late afternoon, many choose to combine a visit here with the trek out to [Banteay Srei](#), in which case you are best to visit Banteay Samre before Banteay Srei to avoid disappointment. Banteay Samre, though not as far out as Banteay Srei, is not in the central Angkor complex and not worth cycling to, though it's reachable by tuk tuk. One of the appeals of Banteay Samre is that **tour groups don't visit this temple (yet!)** so it is relatively quiet throughout the day.



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PHNOM KULEN

Terrific views, high admission fee

40km from Siem Reap

The low-lying sandstone plateau of **Phnom Kulen** is 40 kilometres away from Siem Reap and the main Angkor Archaeological Park, taking around two hours by car or van. It offers both popular and less-popular ruins, some waterfalls and some terrific viewpoints.

Sprinkled with many hard to reach crumbling ruins, the intrepid traveller can reach the less

visited sites by moto. However, the key attractions are all easily accessible by road, which winds its way up to the top with some impressive viewpoints on the way up worth pausing for.



Count your lingas.

The main draws are the cooling cascades of the waterfall, the reclining Buddha—the largest in Cambodia—at Wat Preah Ang Thom pagoda and the 1,000 linga river carvings. Phnom Kulen attracts locals and tourists alike since this sacred mountain is the birthplace of the Khmer Empire and an important religious site. Crowds can be particularly busy on public holidays and weekends.

The **waterfall** has two levels; the upper is about five metres high, the lower about 20 metres. To reach the latter you descend down a not especially sturdy wooden staircase, which is not engineered for very young, elderly or the less nimble. But by making it down you are rewarded with a wide waterfall that you can swim in. Get changed in simple cubicles at the top and please do remember to dress appropriately. Whether you find the waterfall to have an incredible jaw-dropping wow factor is not guaranteed, but it still makes for a very pleasant compliment to temple sites with its lush jungle setting.



Now that is a waterfall.

The river of 1000 lingas, Angkorian carvings carefully etched into the riverbed holding religious significance, rest just a few centimetres below the water's surface when levels are low; they're not so easily seen when the water is high. They are not to be confused with those at [Kbal Spean](#), which makes for a good alternative to Kulen Mountain. Like Kulen

Mountain, Kbal Spean can similarly be combined with a temple visit to create a full day's excursion.

Check out the active pagoda, home to the **reclining Buddha**, which really only takes a few moments to visit. There are plenty of local restaurants around since Phnom Kulen is a popular picnic spot for Khmer friends and families.



Rest your head.

The most visited of the lesser visited sites is **Srah Damrei** meaning “Elephant Pond”. There's no longer much water here, where impressive elephant and lion statues now commandeer this jungle hideaway; wandering through the trees you can peek out and see the panoramic plains below. If you've not got time for a full moto tour but want to venture beyond the otherwise busy tourist sites of Kulen, this is the one.

Continuing on from there you reach the **bat cave**. Orange-clad monks stationed here will be glad to assist with a torch—essential—and act as a guide. Delve into dark depths of the cave, a place of worship and, as the name suggests, home of many bats. Shine your torch upwards to see them flutter overhead. Climbing up above the cave reaches just one of the many viewpoints to be found up on Kulen.



I spy with my little eye, something beginning with 'E'.

Other temples crumbling on Kulen include **Aran Rung Chen** and **Pa Oung**; it's true that none are as impressive as those found in the central Angkor complex, but they offer a charm of their own in their dilapidated states, offering the closest you'll get to a **sense of first-**

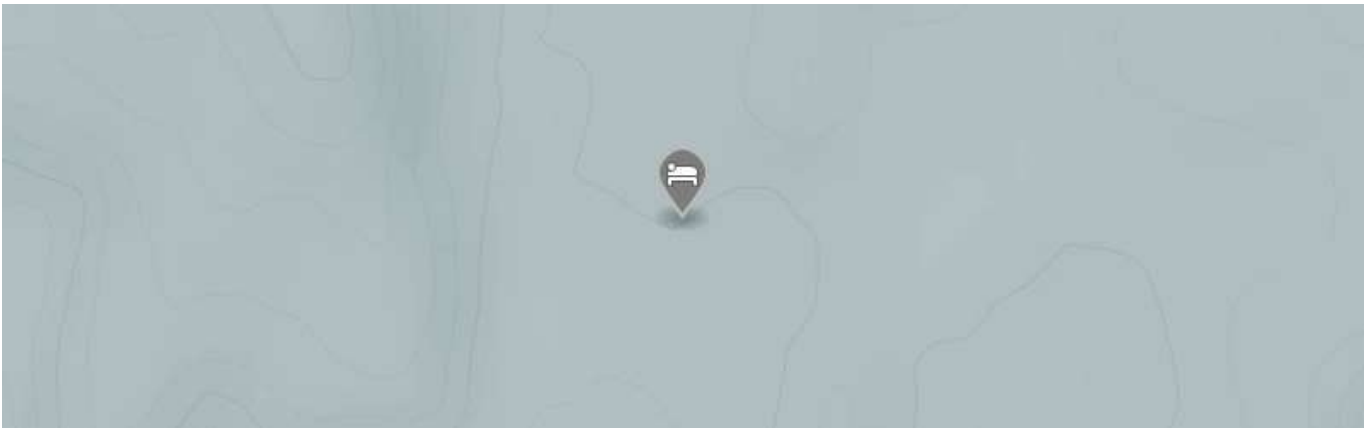
time discovery. In fact, the plateau has been confirmed as the site of the so-called “lost city” of [Mahendraparvata](#), a former ancient Khmer capital believed to be the birthplace of the Empire, proving that there’s more to Kulen than first meets the eye. A motorbike tour also typically encompasses a stop at the modern cliff top pagoda **Wat Preak Krau**, another great viewpoint.



Sufficiently blurred to trick you into thinking the ride is smooth.

To access Kulen Mountain you need to pay US\$20, on top of your standard temple pass required to visit any of the sites in the main park on the same day. This means visiting Phnom Kulen is not a particularly budget day out, but it is one that delivers contrasts. Combine a visit with further afield temple highlights such as [Beng Mealea](#) or [Banteay Srei](#) to create a full day itinerary.

A moto tour of Phnom Kulen’s less visited sites is not an activity for those who need to travel in comfort or are super short on cash – you’re going to need to pay a vehicle to get you to Kulen and back, the rather pricey entrance ticket, moto driver (US\$13-15 per person) and guide hire (plus their moto!). When taking on the services of a guide it is worth checking they have been to the lesser visited sites before—they’re so well off the beaten path that some have not. But this is precisely the reason it is worth the effort to visit.



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KBAL SPEAN

River of a thousand linga

50km northeast of Siem Reap

Up amid the jungle on the Kulen Mountain Plateau lies **Kbal Spean**, not a temple but a natural bridge which lends its name to the river it crosses and the Angkorian site found here, where sacred linga are carved deep into the bedrock riverbed.

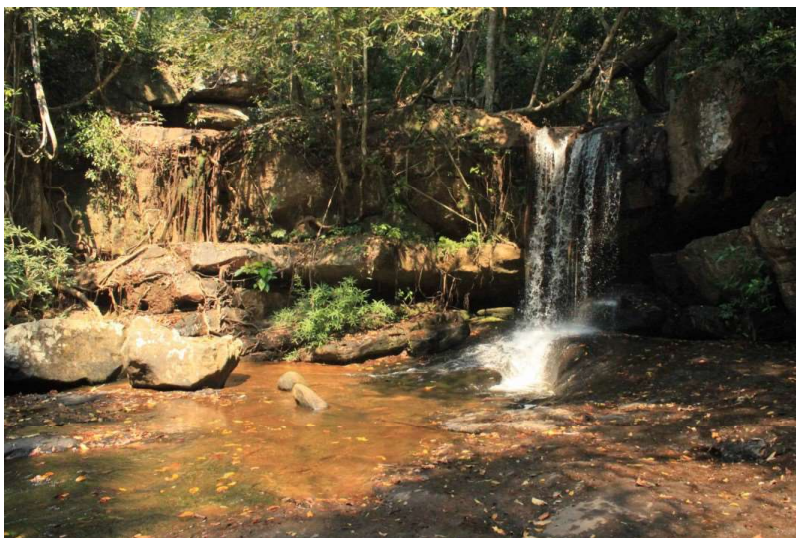
The linga — a phallic symbol of fertility representing Hindu god Shiva — along with Hindu deities are blessed by the water flowing across them, which eventually passes downstream once sanctified and into the fields around Angkor and the Siem Reap river. The site was “discovered” in 1968.



River of a Thousand Linga (but not actually a thousand).

Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma are all in attendance and the Sanskrit name, Sahasralinga, or “river of a thousand lingas”, gives a hint of the linga abundance going on (though there’s not quite actually a thousand of them). For the most part, the circular top of the linga has been carved, rather than the full 3D effect, sometimes along with the female counterpart of square symbolic yonis.

Kbal Spean also features a small, attractive waterfall – though not as impressive as [Kulen Mountain](#); it’s more for feet-dipping than swimming, as are the couple of small water holes nearby if you feel you’re in need of a bit of blessing yourself. The linga carvings, however, are extensive and split across different levels, as well as there being various sculptures and inscriptions to spot.



The small waterfall.

Aside from the historical interest of the site and the appeal of understanding all the phallic symbolism going on here, Kbal Spean is great for those who want a little more adventure. Located around 50 kilometres northeast of Siem Reap, the site is reached via a 1.5 kilometre trail (one-way) that winds up from the car park to the riverbed commencing on a sandy path before turning its way up alongside tree roots and vines and over large boulders. Around half way up there are scenic views across the jungle - though don't expect any from the top. This 45-minute hike won't pose a challenge for the fit and active, but proper shoes are worthwhile since you do clamber over a few rocks. Another reason it may appeal to nature lovers is that **Angkor Centre for Conservation of Biodiversity (ACCB)** is at its base, where visitors are welcomed.

Kulen Mountain also has linga carvings in the river bed, though not nearly as many or as impressive. In short, think better carvings at Kbal Spean with some exercise to get there, better waterfall at Kulen Mountain with fewer carvings and no walking. It's only worth visiting **either Kbal Spean or Kulen Mountain** - there's no real need to see both. Kbal Spean, unlike Kulen Mountain, is covered in the Angkor Pass for the Park.

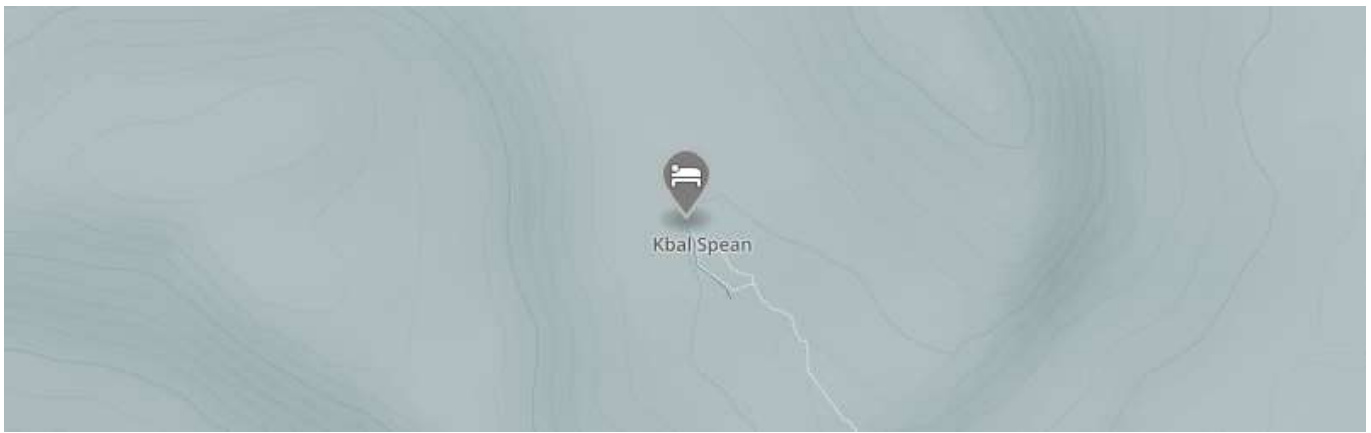


All in a bit of a jungle setting.

Due to the location of Kbal Spean it combines very well with [Banteay Srei](#), which sits outside the central Angkor Area. In a single day there would also be enough time to add on another temple, such as [Banteay Samre](#) or head further afield to [Beng Mealea](#) for what would then be a long day out.

There are a handful of restaurants and souvenir sellers at the car park for Kbal Spean; drivers require a supplement charge to account for the extra distance covered to get here - you'll need to hire a car for this trip.

Best at the tail-end of the monsoon (October to December) when there's water but not too much, Kbal Spean is well worth a visit, both for the intricate carvings and the very pleasing jungle setting.



[Click here or on the map above to see the location in Apple or Google maps.](#)

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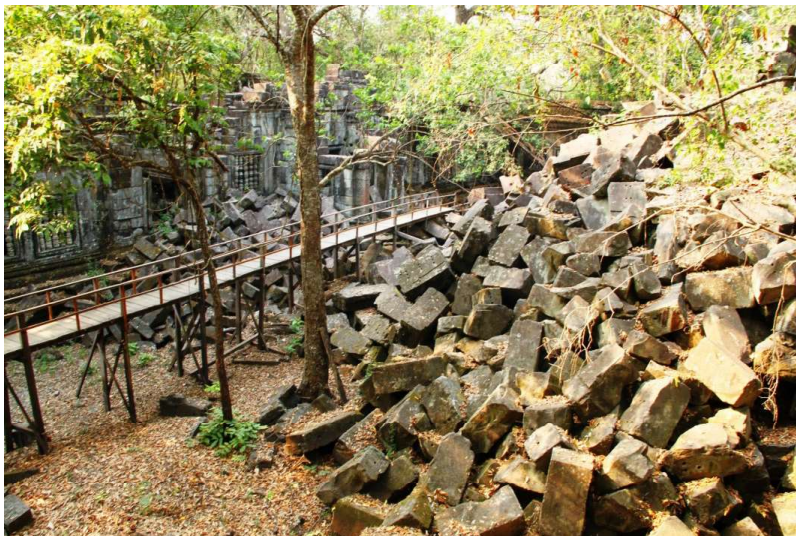
BENG MEALEA

Spectacular jungle ruins

80km from Siem Reap

With a similar overgrown feel to Ta Phrom, the atmosphere at **Beng Mealea** (which means Lotus Pond) is like no other—don't be surprised to see Tomb Raider or Indiana Jones on site.

Badly ruined in places, an elevated wooden walkway has been built throughout the crumbled central sanctuary which makes it more accessible and also allows for some rather unusual elevated views you wouldn't otherwise be able to enjoy.



Giant game of Jenga went wrong.

Sadly looters did a fair degree of damage here. Similar in scale to [Angkor Wat](#), the temple has largely collapsed in on itself. We were told the central tower was dynamited in order to get at certain pieces for private collectors. Many pieces lay atop one another in chaotic piles of moss and lichen covered stone, but upon closer inspection you'll see many a decorative piece among the bare building blocks. The naga balustrade is well preserved thanks to the fact it lay underground—unharmd—until 2009.

The dates of the temple's construction and which king it is attributed to is unknown. Some have described it as a **blueprint for Angkor Wat** or a 'flat' version of Angkor Wat; others suggest it was built after. This simple adds to its air of mystery.



Legless.

With ever-increasing tourist numbers to Cambodia, Beng Mealea is no longer the same deserted, jungle-clad ruin it once was—despite only being re-opened to tourists in the early 2000s following years of mine clearance. Nonetheless, its twisting tree roots and eerie crumbling stones still retain a feeling of adventure. The tour bus groups tend to stick to the wooden walkways, all following the same route. You don't need to. Clamber over ruins and you'll be sure to find quiet, tucked-away corners you can enjoy to yourself. If you arrive early in the morning or late in the afternoon—out of sync with the main tour groups—the place is simply serene and great fun for keen photographers.

Beng Mealea is **not covered by the Angkor Pass** and there's an admission fee of \$5 to enter, though unlike [Phnom Kulen](#) it is undoubtedly worth it. There is a ticket office before Beng Mealea which provides Western-style bathroom facilities. There are also a handful of local restaurants in front on Beng Mealea with slightly inflated prices for tourists.

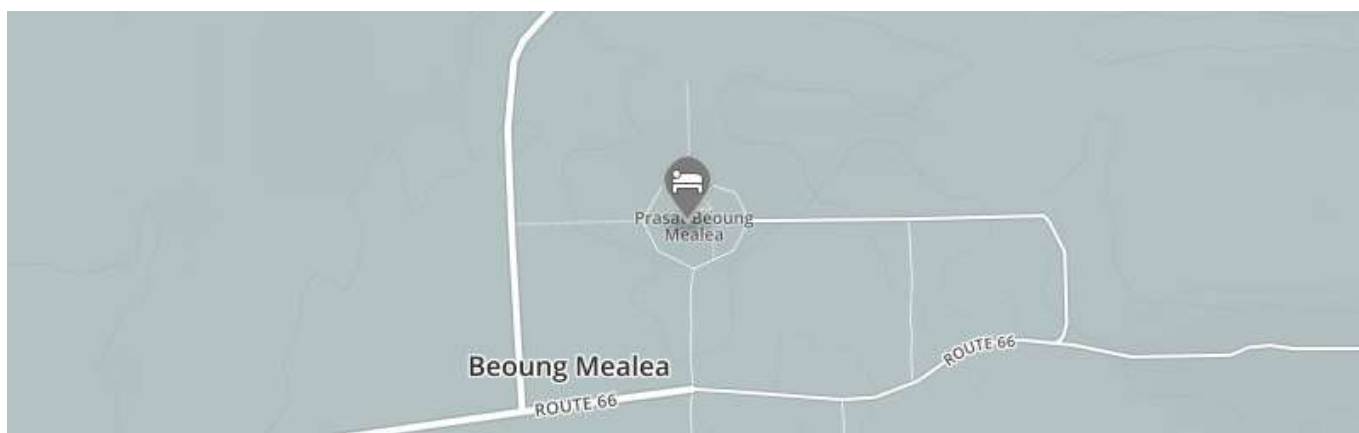


Quiet corners can be found.

To get to Beng Mealea it is possible to travel by tuk tuk and take the backroads through the countryside (though that can get dusty!) for the some 80 kilometre journey. We've tried it out by bike (there and back) and stayed in the one homestay in the village—but it's signless, nobody speaks English and the restaurants all close around 18:00. So if you want to get active we recommend using a locally based operator which offers the trip as a one-day tour—they drive you back.

The best option is by car, required if combined with more remote temple [Koh Ker](#) for a one-

day trip from Siem Reap. Alternatively Beng Mealea combines well with [Banteay Srei](#) and/or [Phnom Kulen](#) due to the location of these sites, which lay outside the central Angkor Park.



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CHAU SAY VIBOL

Compact and scenic

A remote, very rarely visited but atmospheric site quite unlike any of the other temples in the Angkor area, **Chau Say Vibol** (also Chau Srei Vibol) must have been a large, imposing and important site in its day.

Now it's a total ruin. The fact that it was clearly a strategic point, guarding the approaches to Angkor as well as the roads to [Beng Mealea](#) and [Koh Ker](#), along with its fortress-like construction, seems to indicate destruction at the hand of humans rather than nature alone. Huge piles of massive sandstone blocks litter the ground on the top of the hill and ancillary buildings within the large complex lie in shattered mounds.



Rarely visited but atmospheric.

Some towers in the central complex do remain and the outer enclosure wall in laterite is still relatively intact, with four gopuras still evident. If you look carefully among the rubble you'll find some carvings with Hindu themes but basically this one is worth visiting for its unusual construction and atmosphere. Don't wander too far off the beaten track, be prepared for a lot of clambering over stones and watch out for snakes!

Chau Say Vibol is accessible by bicycle, motorbike and on a good day tuk-tuk or car. Take the

road to Phnom Bok then hang a right — you may have to ask the locals for Prasart Chau Say Vibol. There's a rough track, which may or may not have been upgraded by now, which heads south passing through some scenic villages and eventually hitting the main Siem Reap-Phnom Penh highway near Rolous. The temple is situated on this track at the point where it hits the old Angkor to Beng Mealea road.



Largely smashed. Do watch your step.

Road conditions permitting you should be able to do a loop and return to Siem Reap from Rolous making for an interesting and off the beaten track [Phnom Bok](#), Chau Say Vibol, [Rolous circuit](#).



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PHNOM KROM

Spectacular views

12km from Siem Reap

A hill top temple with the same layout as Phnom Bok, also built by Yashovarman I, **Phnom Krom's** temple may be less spectacular today due to its more ruinous state, but the vantage point overlooking the Tonle Sap Lake provides a good reason to visit.

Phnom Krom sits within a 50-metre-square enclosure, upon which are three ruined sandstone towers on a north-south axis. Running from north to south the towers are dedicated to **Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma**. As you can't see the temple from ground level, the vast majority of visitors who head out for a tour of the lake to [Chong Kneas](#) floating village or

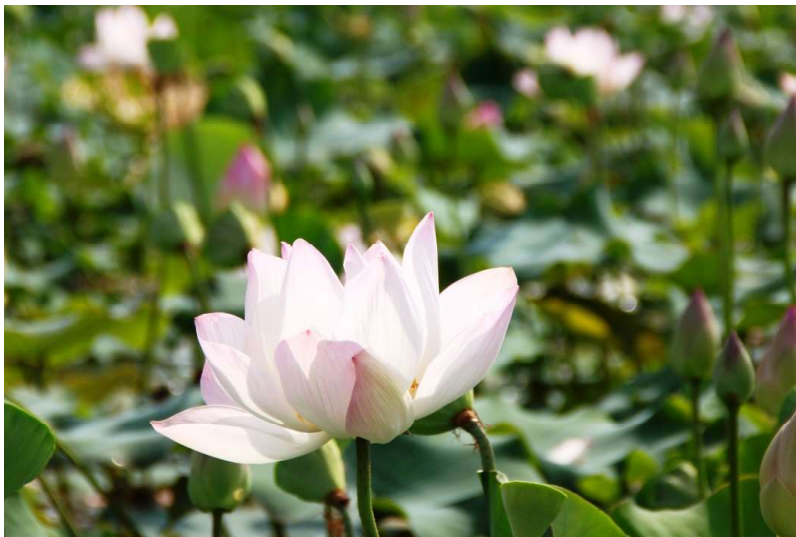
arriving by ferry into Siem Reap are oblivious to the site.



Just a wee hill.

Partly due to age, partly due to the use of sandstone and partly due to the prevailing strong winds that blow off the [Tonle Sap](#), the decorative works throughout this site are in very poor condition. Nevertheless, the site is not a complete loss as the views—all 360 degrees of them, taking in the Tonle Sap to the [West Baray](#)—are **absolutely magnificent**, especially when the lake has flooded and creeps up ever closer to the foot of the hill. **The best time to visit is late afternoon.**

Phnom Krom can be accessed by either a long, steamy and sweaty climb up the stairs, or by road in a car or by motorbike. On the road there is also a lookout point halfway up. A temple pass is required to make the ascent.

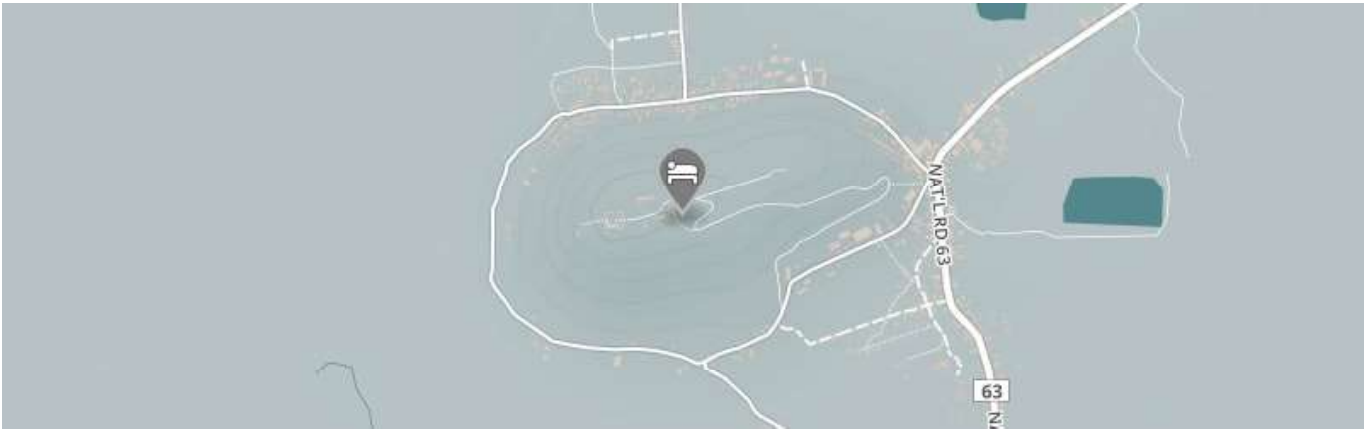


Oh so pretty.

It takes about 20 minutes by tuk tuk to get here from Siem Reap. Most visitors driving down this road are headed to the port for a boat trip to Chong Kneas, which is a stone's throw from the base. If visiting on a bike or in a tuk tuk, it is worth **doing a loop circling the base of Phnom Krom**. Not only will it provide an escape from the mass tourism mayhem at Chong Kneas, but it provides an opportunity to visit a village for a quick insight into local life, with rice paddy one side and the lake to the other. Cars and buses can't fit on the track and few tourists do this.

To extend your visit to Phnom Krom—if you're not visiting Chong Kneas—grab a drink and

enjoy a sway in a hammock in one of the many local restaurants on stilts located on the road leading up to Phnom Krom (you won't be able to miss them). Depending on season, on the right hand side there will be fields of lotus flowers which are picture worthy. There is also a [Lotus Farm](#), from fair trade textile company Samatoa, which provides a short educational diversion.



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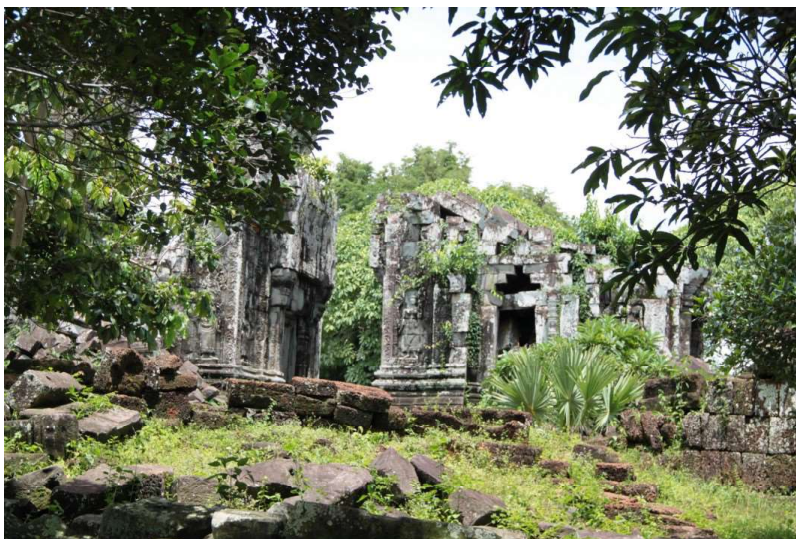
PHNOM BOK

Shaded by frangipani, terrific views

Around 25km from Siem Reap

After Phnom Krom and Phnom Bakheng, **Phnom Bok** is the third of Yasovarman I's hilltop efforts from the early 10th century.

Once used as a strategic military post, Phnom Bok sits at the summit of the highest hill near to Angkor. At well over 200 metres high, this is considerably higher than Phnom Krom (140 metres) and Phnom Bakheng (a mere 70 metres). It makes for a wonderful change to the otherwise pancake flat terrain.



Take time to explore. And get your breath back.

While the views here once had considerable military value in ancient and more recent history, today they're far more valuable to the trickle of visitors that make it out here as you can see out as far as the Tonle Sap lake and the plains that lie before it on a clear day.

There are six sandstone towers at the summit and the remains of two brick libraries. There's

also a pagoda and a four-metre-high linga, the biggest found in Cambodia, which is now broken and lies in pieces at a separate tower located some 100 metres from the main temple.

While Phnom Bok is officially controlled by the Apsara authority and comes under the Angkor entrance pass, it is guarded by non-Apsara soldiers/guards who will happily show you around without asking to see your pass. While ticket inspection is not strictly enforced, if you attempt to climb it without you face the risk of a fine when you descend (we've heard reports of the soldiers telephoning Apsara but we've also heard of people visiting without this happening).

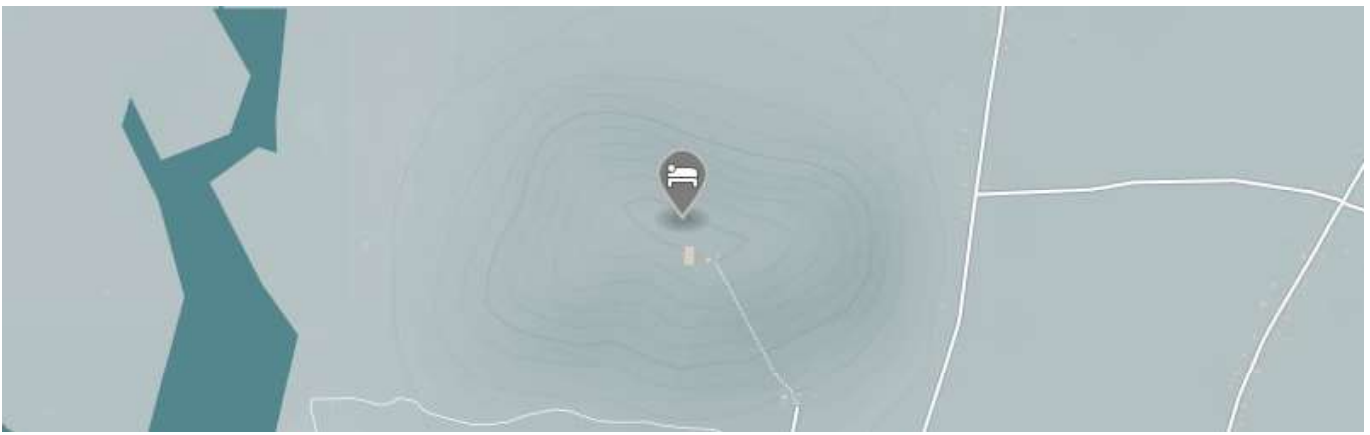


Left right left right...

There's usually a guard at the base who will follow you up—no doubt laughing to himself as you stop for a rest every few steps, while he fails to break a sweat—and gesture where to go to find the linga (get to the top, head left) and ruins. There's no requirement, but a small tip doesn't hurt if he takes the time to show you around.

With 633 steps to reach the summit, you're best off avoiding this in the middle of the day unless you take pleasure in suffering from heat exhaustion. There is a handrail for small patches of the ascent. Alternatively, before the staircase starts there's a path to the left that makes a more winding route up—this may be easier on the legs. As you climb, spare a moment's thought for the workers who had to lug the stones up to the top.

Phnom Bok is reached by a road that splits off from the main drag to [Banteay Srei](#). It's around another eight kilometres from the main road. You can use the Western bathroom facilities here for free if you do have a temple pass, otherwise a few riel is required. Given its out-of-the-way location, it's worth combining with other sites. There is also a drinks vendor—no food besides from crisps/snacks—at the base and at the top, but no hard sell as they're often asleep in their hammocks.



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Transport

Getting around

The admission gates are around 3km from Siem Reap, and the temples are spread over a substantial area beyond the gates. Angkor can be explored by car, minibus, bicycle, motor-bike or even on foot -- however you choose to explore them, take your time -- see a couple in the morning and a couple in the afternoon and rest in between. Most opt for touring either by moto or remorque moto. Rates are up for negotiation, for motos in the past we've always got away for \$6 a day, though the last trip paid more due to the continuing increase in the cost of petrol. Your

driver will expect extra to take you to Banteay Srei or Phnom Kulen, though you should be able to wangle the Roulos group for the same fee.

Where possible, try your driver out before booking him for a few days -- gauge his language abilities and more importantly his driving abilities. If you are planning very unusual itineraries that will involve a lot of driving, mention it to the driver before-hand.

At the moment foreign tourists are not permitted to hire a motorbike in Siem Reap without a driver. If you want to do it solo, you need to do it by bicycle.

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