

WORLD HERITAGE



I'm still not sure how I landed on the UNESCO World Heritage tour (good fortune smiled I'm sure), but it had something to do with yearning for years to see Angkor Wat!...and a cousin in Bangkok who said not to miss Luang Prabang, the former capital of Laos. Then Stephie e-mailed, mentioning her fabulous stay at Le Grand Hotel d'Angkor. So there I was, enjoying a welcome punch under slowly rotating fans on the verandah in a place right out of history.

Columned and arched doorways with generations of antique white paint led me to the elevator, itself timeless, and although the pool and spa were new, the hotel itself, like many exclusive historic Raffles hotels, carried a colonial charm,

from its architecture to its sterling service.



"I'm not a licensed tour guide," Sovoan explains when I ask if he'll be my driver for a couple of days, "but Phnom Bakheng's the best place for sunset." He drops me off, and I hike straight uphill for twenty minutes, arriving breathless on top with about fifty others speaking Japanese, French, Chinese, Spanish, English, Thai, and other languages I do not even recognize. This Hindu temple, dedicated to Shiva, was built at the end of the 9th century, during the reign of King Yasovarman. It's a view that could be fabulous, especially overlooking Angkor



¹ **Angkor Wat** is a temple complex at Angkor, Cambodia, built for the king Suryavarman II in the early 12th century as his state temple and capital city. As the best-preserved temple at the site, it is the only one to have remained a significant religious centre since its foundation – first Hindu, dedicated to the god Vishnu, then Buddhist. The temple is the epitome of the high classical style of Khmer architecture. It has become a symbol of Cambodia, appearing on its national flag, and it is the country's prime attraction for visitors.

Wat...if only the air were clean. Ever since Bangkok I've been stunned and saddened by the air quality over Southeast Asia. It is truly the worst I've ever experienced. But I digress. At the top, three monks sit alongside a voluptuous stone goddess, watching the spires of Angkor Wat below turn peach, then mauve as the sun's glow dims in the distance. There's a river below too and a lake and miles of Cambodian countryside, dotted by aging domes of temples and shrines. For a few bhat I ride an elephant back down the hill.

For the next three days I begin early and end late, visiting Angkor Thom, the Bayon, Ta Prohm, Preah Khan and numerous other sites quite unimaginable before my visit. The history, energy, spirit of these timeless works of art from previous cultures amazes me. As Bush prepares to launch an unprovoked attack on Iraq, I stand at the Bayon wall, well-known and richly decorated Khmer temple, and watch armies come on foot, on elephants, in boats. I light incense and pray before a seven-meter Buddha. Sovaan drops me at another site and warns me, "do not leave the marked trail...boom."

I walk through a carved wall to a path leading past a small band of young boys playing exotically beautiful music with homemade bamboo instruments. They are legless from landmines planted by the Khmer Rouge forty years ago. I pass children offering flutes, goatskin drums, postcards, and laughter, stopping for halting conversation and purchasing a few things from them. A policeman follows me for awhile, cornering me inside another massive stone doorway and asks me to buy his badge. "Good souvenir," he pleads. I try to imagine a New York cop selling his badge to feed his family.



The stone chambers feel cool in the mid-morning heat. I climb through one and notice huge spong trees also making their way through the ageless structure. I'm at the incredible Ta Prohm, where the jungle embraces the site, hosting an invisible noise and butterflies. Three young maidens play with a hose outside the temple, and a young woman sells me bananas from her bicycle while a wildly-colored parrot perches on her woven basket. Later I cross a moat on the royal road to Angkor Wat, where

serpents and lions guard bridges and portals, and endless doorways open to ancient hallways and courtyards. Gothic spans find inner chambers. Children egg their parents up the last hundred stairs, where Shiva dances on the stone wall with a thousand maidens. Finally a cross breeze, a lake, girls selling iced coconuts...with a straw.

Three days later enroute to Laos, I spend one night at the Amari Airport Hotel in Bangkok where I'm blessed with in-room broadband, CNN, a sushi bar. Then I catch an early morning flight to Luang Prabang, where – following a fleecing from customs agents – I share a taxi with two businessmen into a small, timeless town and I realize I'm at yet another World Heritage site. I love this place! Lying along the muddy Mekong, surrounded by verdant hills and spring mountains, the town rises early and stays up late.

At the former palace Pablo Casals plays cello on the previous king's Victor Victrola, and moon rocks are enshrined with a hand-written note from Nixon. Filled with wats and monks, tuk-tuks and chambos (even smaller, but still motorcycle-driven transport), and a market with hand-woven textiles, handmade paper, beaten silver and carved wood, it charms.

I visit two towns on a side trip, and neither has an ATM. But a friendly travel agent cashes money from my Visa and books a boat tour to the 'famous cave'. I am the lone tourist heading upriver for about forty-five minutes, passing lovely and remote country and watching people washing clothes, pots and children at the river's edge, working in rice paddies onshore, balancing baskets on their heads. As osprey and exotic birds lift overhead, memories of river rafting from Oregon days flood over me; then suddenly we're in a downpour. It isn't even monsoon season, still sheets of rain hit the river at 45-degree angles, and the other side of the river and distant mountains disappear as in a Chinese tapestry.

We take shelter in a cave with over four thousand buddhas, Pak Ou Caves (Tam Tinh Caves) as the boatman leaves to head north "for about twenty minutes" to take some market goods to his elderly mother. Six men – site employees wait patiently with me, taking refuge from the deluge in the chambers of the ancient shrine. No one speaks English, and I have fully explored the cave in thirty minutes. A creepy little fear fills me as I attempt to ask the one who seems in charge about my boatman, thinking I misunderstood what he'd said about his return. Another hour passed, and the cave of a thousand buddhas became filled with shadows, flickering from hundreds of candles throwing strange shapes on the cave walls.

I'm cold now, shaky, and wondering where my guide has gone. I am on an extended trip (since I can't go home) to shake off some vestiges of PTSD, acquired during a violent attack a year ago. This experience is not helping. Three hours later with dusk arriving quickly, the boat returns, I say a quick prayer for averting a meltdown, and we brave the rain back to town before nightfall. An hour later at the landing I catch a tuk-tuk to fabulous French restaurant to warm myself by a fire and enjoy a five-course Laotian prix fixe meal at L'Elephant. Then coffee...just the way I like it!





In the morning I climb Phousi hill for the view from the top and the Buddha within. I visit a friend of a friend, a woman from London, now living in Luang Prabang, retailing fabulous treasures from her tribe of weavers. I go to Wat Mai to see a monk, a friend of cousin Jim's from in Bangkok, to deliver a couple thousand baht. In flawless English Sayphone thanks me then tells me about his education after monkhood and asks if I'll write him, giving me his e-mail address. "I need to practice my English," he says, bowing. He invites me to temple for evening chanting where about thirty monks tone, interspersed with silence. It is enchanting.

I wake in a peach-colored room overlooking a lotus pond, rice paddies, early spring mountains. A quick flight from Luang Prabang takes me across rivers and hills, villages and borders to Chang Mai in northern Thailand. Bigger and busier than I expected, the city offers a smorgasbord of pleasures. I sign up for a cooking class, a daylong coconut and chili-tasting affair with new friends from around the planet. The elephants amaze me; temples intrigue. At the museum I spy a Buddha that looks exactly like one my mother found at an estate sale. 14th century, Ayutthaya. I spend a day at a day spa, where for about five US dollars I am scrubbed and soaked, massaged and thai-massaged, thoroughly pampered, rejuvenated, rejoiced. Did I mention the food? Another highlight in an otherwise extraordinary week. My World Heritage trip has been world class!