

The Angkor Wat and its surroundings exude an other-worldly feel.

Kingdom of the Khmers

By WAYNE JOHNSON

SIEM REAP is the gateway to one of the true Wonders of the World. The Angkor complex – particularly Angkor Wat temple itself – is one of the few places in the world which lives up to all the superlatives heaped upon it.

It used to sit at the heart of the largest city in the pre-industrial world, with over one million inhabitants, and it is today a source of great national pride to Cambodians. So much so, that the Angkor's jagged towers sit proudly with the national flag in their midst.

Siem Reap has undergone dramatic changes in recent years and the Wild West frontier town feel of a few years ago has been transformed into a busy town geared up to cater for the needs of travellers of all budgets. There are a number of attractions in the town and surrounding area but Angkor remains the No.1 reason visitors flock to Siem Reap.

The Angkor complex is huge and there are dozens of temples and other buildings to explore, so it's best to allow yourself a few days to do it properly, even if you are only planning to see the most famous temples. Fortunately, multi-day passes can be purchased for one, three or seven days, priced at US\$20 (RM62.60), US\$40 (RM125) and US\$60 (RM187) respectively.

Angkor Wat

The grand-daddy of them all is the temple named after the whole ancient region – Angkor Wat. Its iconic image seen in thousands of photos in the dayside coverage



Larger than life: Giant faces on the pillars of the Bayon Temple are said to represent King Jayavarman VII.

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photos is of a long wide causeway over a shimmering mass of water leading to the temple's gate and framed by three imposing towers.

In fact, there are five towers in total, built to represent the five peaks of mythical Mount Meru, the holy mountain at the centre of the universe and home to the Hindu God Vishnu. The complex also has three other entrances but it is this Western gate which is the most famous and most journeyed through.

Walking along it across the water, which represents the world's oceans, one can easily imagine the

thousands of people who must have travelled up and down this causeway during Angkor's heyday. And it is also easy to imagine just how awe-inspiring it must have seemed to them.

Once you have crossed the causeway, you'll find the interior of the temple to be equally impressive and that there are literally hundreds of things to explore. But a journey to the top of the central tower is not for the faint-hearted, as the steps are huge and steep, making you climb them rather than walk up them. This is deliberate, as the

faithful were required to prostrate themselves before this holiest of buildings.

Bayon and Elephant Wall

There is something slightly spooky, or smug (depending on your viewpoint), about the giant faces which adorn the pillars of the Bayon temple. The faces stare out from the stone in all directions and give the place an other-worldly feel.

Scholars are divided on who or what the faces represent, with some stating that they are representa-

tions of King Jayavarman VII who instigated its building in the 12th century. In any case, this is a fascinating temple to explore, even if it does feel like you are always being watched.

The King was also responsible for the nearby Terrace of the Elephants. Only part of it remains but it is still an impressive 350m long. The terrace is adorned with a parade of elephants and their riders, from whence it gets its name. Its original function was as a giant viewing platform for the King to watch parades and ceremonies.

Beware, though, that there is little cover here and if you have left this to the last stop on your tour, you will be mercilessly scorched by the sun. It would be better to come back and view it another day in the early morning.

Ta Phrom

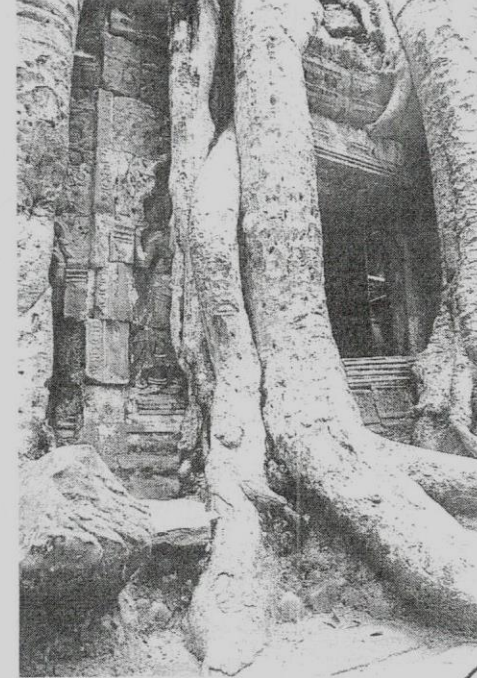
Nicknamed "the Tomb Raider Temple" and resembling something from this movie or even an Indiana Jones lost treasure quest is Ta Phrom temple. Lost to the world for many centuries, this crumbling



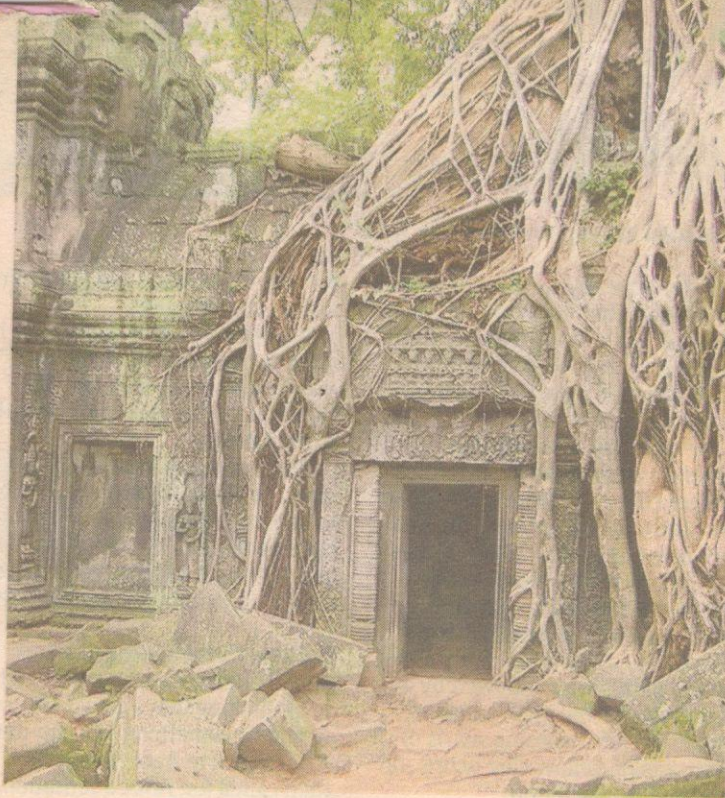
Angkor Wat is the grand-daddy of all temples in Siem Reap.



Buddha statue at Angkor.



Huge trees sprouting from the walls of the temple give it an eerie atmosphere.



This structure is like something from an *Indiana Jones* movie.

complex was re-populated by the jungle it had arisen from.

When the Angkor complex was "re-discovered" and cleared in the 20th century, this temple was left as it was found, as it was believed it had special atmospheric qualities. Journeying around its loose walls and peering down mysterious tunnels, one may forget one is in the 21st century with a busy town one hour away.

Giant trees sprout from the walls and roofs, and huge branches and roots protrude and twist through rooms. It is the perfect temple for photo opportunities, and the trick (as with all the temples in Angkor) is to get there very early before the organised tour groups arrive, so that you can just about have the place to yourself.

Do note, however, that it may not be as raw as it was in the past, as the Cambodian Government is repairing some of the more unstable sections, making parts of it inaccessible.

One way to glimpse the enormity of the Angkor Complex is to take a ride in the hot air balloon which is tethered about one hour from the entrance to Angkor. The balloon ascends to 200m and

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gives unparalleled views of the area and temples. Just remember to bring your binoculars.

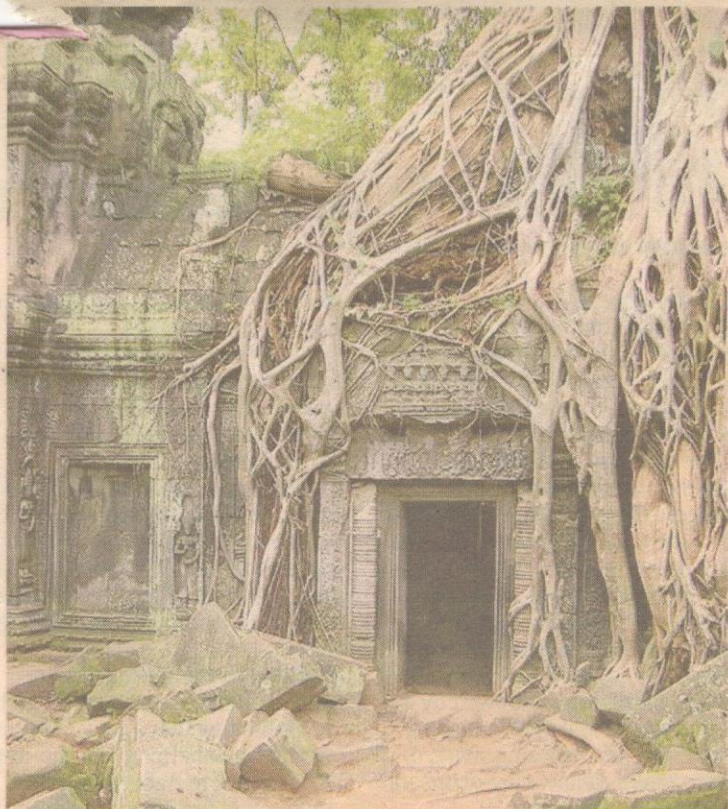
You will also witness a few elephants plodding around the Bayon temple or at the base of Phnom Bakheng where for about US\$15 (RM47), you could get a ride to the top of the hill to join the crowds to watch the sunset over Angkor.

A grim reminder of what life was like in the not-so-distant-past and something which still claims hundreds of victims every year is the Land Mine Museum. Located some 19km from Siem Reap, it is run by a former Khmer Rouge child soldier called Aki Rai and has a stockpile of hundreds of different mines. Proceeds from the museum go towards helping landmine victims.

For shopping opportunities, the Psar Chaa flea market is popular with tourists. There you will find stalls selling antiques, Khmer crafts and lots of Cambodian food to sample, including spiced frogs on French baguettes.

■ For more information, go to www.tourismcambodia.org/. Catch AirAsia Travelogue's segment on Siem Reap on TV3 at 7.30pm tomorrow.

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