Siem Reap travel guide

a travelfish efish

September 2006

BETA - “we’re still ironing out the kinks”
Siem Reap

Set in the northwest of Cambodia, Siem Reap is best known for being home to the incredible Angkor Wat, a sprawling World Heritage-listed complex of ancient temple ruins. While Angkor is surely one of the globe’s most amazing historical sites, Siem Reap province is also home to an array of other ruins, such as Beng Mealea and Banteay Srei, so if Khmer ruins are your thing, this province must be explored. Ruins aside, the province is expansive, running along the north coast of the Tonle Sap and north to Oddar Meanchey province. Few visitors get around here.

The provincial capital of Siem Reap is also a transportation hub, with many people coming through here en route to Phnom Penh, Poipet (then Thailand) or by boat to Battambang.

Siem Reap’s international airport now takes in more tourists daily than the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh. Mass tourism has well and truly arrived to this part of Cambodia.

Siem Reap town

Booming Siem Reap is the leaping off point for the magnificent temples of Angkor. In the space of a decade the town has exploded from a relatively small backwater to the fastest growing settlement in Cambodia. Set astride the Siem Reap River, the town is home to a couple of minor sites of interest, some reasonable shopping and hundreds of guesthouses and restaurants.

If you’re planning on seeing Angkor from anything other than your aircraft seat, you’ll be staying here. Take your pick from a full range of accommodation options, from $3 hophouses to $300-plus luxury hotels.

Most tourists tend to visit the ruins in the morning and late afternoon, taking a break in the middle of the day when the heat and poor light detracts from the temples. The easiest way to visit is to hire a moto by the day, although you can also go by bicycle, bus, car, helicopter and even hot-air balloon.

Aside from exploring the Angkor Wat complex, most people spend their time laying around their guesthouses and restaurants, sitting in one of the town’s many bars and restaurants, seeing the other minor sites and shopping. There’s enough to keep even those with a minimal interest in ruins occupied for a couple of days - while if piles of rocks are your thing, you could end up spending a month here.

Orientation

Resources

Online resources

AsianTravellish, the following websites are handy resources:

http://www.talesofasia.com

http://www.cambodiapocketguide.com

http://www.cambwy publications.com

Tourist office

There is a small tourist office opposite the Grand Hotel d’Angkor, but we’ve never managed to get anything useful out of them.

Free guidebooks

A bevvy of leaflets and mini-guides have flooded the market, including the Cambodia Pocket Guide and Carbery’s Siem Reap Visitor’s Guide though bear in mind the listings in the latter are all paid for.

Emergency

Medical care

In the unlikely situation that you need to be hospitalised, head to Bangkok. Otherwise a well regarded clinic and children’s hospital may be helpful.

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Naga International Clinic

953 Rd 6, Airport Rd, Siem Reap

T: (063) 964 500 F: (063) 963 274.

Angkor Hospital for Children

Achanaeen St, Siem Reap

T: (063) 96 3409 F: (063) 76 0452

admin@angkorhospital.org

http://angkorhospital.org/

Police

The Tourist Police have an office by the admission gate into the Angkor Historical Park.

Common needs

Banks

ANZ Royal has installed international access ATMs – both in Siem Reap and at the airport.

Acredit Bank

6 Route 6. T: (063) 963 660

ANZ Royal

566-570, Tep Vong Rd

Cambodia Asia Bank

Cnr Sivatha & Airport Rds T: (063) 964 741

Canada Bank

Old market T: (063) 964 808

SBC

18A Sivatha Rd. T: (063) 963 838

Union Commercial Bank

Old market. T: (063) 963 703-4

Post office

The main post office is on the river road, near the FCC Angkor.

Internet

Internet cafes are scattered all over Siem Reap, particularly in the old market area. Rates are extremely low – as little as 2.000 Riel per hour. Wireless access points are slowly becoming more common at cafes and some restaurants and bars.

Getting around

Siem Reap is small enough to be able to walk to most spots, but there’s no shortage of transportation to choose from.

Remorque motos

Best described as a motorcycle towing a chariot, remorque motos can be found on just about every street corner. Short hops around town shouldn’t cost more than a dollar, but if you’re planning on using these frequently, hire one for the day. They can comfortably seat two people and three or four at a squeeze.

Moto

Short hops around town shouldn’t cost more than a couple of thousand riel, with daily hiring starting at about US$6 depending on where you want to go. Bear in mind the driver will not have a helmet, for himself or you. You can pick motos up anywhere – just look for a Khmer guy wearing a baseball cap. Currently foreign tourists cannot hire motorcyles in Siem Reap.

Taxis

More expensive but more comfortable than other options, figure on US$25-30 per day for a Toyota Camry, more for a minibus. If you’re planning on visiting outlying ruins and have a few people to split the fare with, this can be a smart way to get there. Most guesthouses and travel agents will be able to sort out a car for you, or ask a moto driver and he’ll find you one.

Arriving / departing

Air

Siem Reap International Airport is seven kilometres outside town. There is a US$25 departure tax (ouch!) for international flights and a US$6 departure tax for domestic flights.


To get from Siem Reap International Airport to Siem Reap both taxis (US$5) and motos (US$1-1.50) are available. In both cases, the driver will hope to garner your custom for the duration of your stay.

Airlines serving Siem Reap include:

AirAsia (for Kuala Lumpur)

http://www.airasia.com

Bangkok Airways (for Bangkok)

571 Airport Rd, Siem Reap

T: (063) 380 191 F: (063) 380 191

http://www.bangkokair.com

JetstarAsia (for Singapore)

http://www.jetstarasia.com

Lao Airlines (for Pakse, Vientiane)

114 Airport Rd, Siem Reap

T: (063) 963 283 F: (063) 963 283

http://www.laoairlines.com/

Malaysia Airlines (for Kuala Lumpur)

35,6 Airlines Office, Siem Reap Int. Airport

T: (063) 964 780 F: (063) 964 760

http://www.malaysia-airlines.com/

PMT Air (for Ubonratchathani, Nong Khai, Udon Thani)

148 Sivatha Rd, Siem Reap

T: (063) 760 942 F: (063) 760 943

http://www.pmair.com

Siem Reap Airways (for Phnom Penh)

571 Airport Rd, Siem Reap

T: (063) 380 191-2 F: (063) 380 191

http://www.bangkokair.com

Silk Air (for Phnom Penh, Singapore)

Siem Reap International Airport, Siem Reap

T: (063) 380 389 F: (063) 380 390

http://www.silkar.com/

Thai Airways (for Bangkok)

Suite A15-A16, Republic Square, 294, Mao Tse Tung Blvd, Phnom Penh

T: (023) 214 359 F: (023) 214 369

http://www.thaiair.com

Vietnam Airlines (for HCM City, Hanoi)

342 Airport Rd, Siem Reap

T: (063) 964 488 F: (063) 964 489

http://www.vietnamairlines.com/

Boat

If you’re arriving by boat from either Phnom Penh or Battambang, you’ll arrive at Chong Khneas ferry dock, some 12km to the south of Siem Reap. Expect a moto to charge around US$2 to get into town while a car should cost about US$6. The trip takes about 30 minutes. The boat to Phnom Penh takes around five to six hours, the boat to Battambang four to eight hours (or more).

Bus

The main bus station is situated outside of Siem Reap at the taxi-park though many bus companies will offer to pick you up and ferry you out to the bus station. The best company doing the Siem Reap to Phnom Penh run is Mekong Express, which costs US$8 and takes around four hours. All buses break the journey for a snack at Kompong Thom. The Mekong Express buses have a toilet on board – other (cheaper) services often do.

Share taxi

The easiest and fastest way to get to the Thai border at Poipet is to take a share taxi from Siem Reap. You can either hire the entire car (US$30-35) or buy one (or two) seats in a car. Do not, under any circumstances, take an organised minibus to Bangkok. See Tales of Asia for coverage of this route. http://www.talesofasia.com
Where to stay in Siem Reap

If you're baffled by the choice of areas to stay in Siem Reap, don't fret -- it's a pretty easy call. Siem Reap is bisected by the Siem Reap River. East of the river is referred to as Wat Bo and is home to many of the town's budget guesthouses along with a smattering of mid-range resorts -- if you're after a cheap bed or a mid-priced pool, check out Wat Bo. West of the river consists of four parts -- the Old Market to the south, the French Quarter in the middle, the Airport Road to the west and towards Angkor to the north. The Old Market is the heart of Siem Reap -- a thriving area packed with guesthouses along with some exceptional mid-range resorts. The French Quarter has Siem Reap's mid-to-upper range hotels and resorts -- from classic colonial throwbacks to chic boutique affairs. While there is a smattering of budget options, the French Quarter is mostly given over to mid-range and above. The Airport Road which unsurprisingly runs out to the airport, is lined with cookie-cutter hotels and there's little to recommend this area, though if you've been booked in by a travel agent or tour group you may well find yourself out here -- if nothing else you're close to the airport. Heading out towards Angkor is the final choice, and while there's a handful of options, what you gain in proximity to Angkor you lose in being a fair hike from Siem Reap proper.

Accommodation

The Airport road

Convenient to your hotel and the airport -- that's about it. Lined with dozens of mostly characterless faux-touristy places, the Airport Road picks when it comes to fine lodgings. Most everything will be a motorbike or tuk tuk ride away, so if you're planning on staying out here to save money, you're better off staying closer to town.

Secrets of Elephants

Best on the airport road - funky 8/10

Airport Rd, Siem Reap

Tel: (063) 964 328; (016) 901 901

info@angkor-travel.com

http://www.angkor-travel.com

$40

This funky French-run place feels like a Franco-Asian boutique, with imaginatively decorated, stylish rooms and extremely friendly management and staff. Each room is a little different but they're all well-sized and comfortable, with the downstairs rooms concrete and the upstairs wooden. Try for an upstairs room if possible. A minor complaint is the lighting in the rooms, which is on the dim side. Among the places dotting the airport road -- meaning you're beyond walking distance of town -- this is easily the best choice. Highly recommended.

Earthwalkers Guest House

Great place, poor location 7/10

Sala Kanseng Village -- Sangkat No.2, (Just off the Airport Rd) Siem Reap

Tel: (012) 967 901

mail@earthwalkers.no

http://www.earthwalkers.no

Dorm $4 s 10-13 d 12-15

Despite this place being rather great, the location, near neither the temples nor town, is poor. Rooms, including an air-con dorm are clean and staff are friendly, offering an array of trips including some very interesting alternatives for the templled out. You do need your own transport if staying here, or else add the cost of a daily motodop to your stay. The place was started by a group of Norwegian hospitality students, and their expertise shows.

Apsara Angkor Guesthouse

Cheery backpacker haven 6/10

279 Rd 6, Siem Reap

Tel: (012) 777 678

apsaraagh@yahoo.com

US$5-10

Down a sidestreet off the airport road, this cheery spot is one of the better options in an area with a range of budget lodgings. The rooms are clean but plain, though only the crummiest ones have hot water. The restaurant has the ambiance of a bus shelter.

Journeys Within

Very friendly 6-10

Airport Rd, Siem Reap

Tel: (063) 964 748

andrea@journeys-within.com

http://www.journeys-within.com

$50-90

Well out on town on the airport road, Journeys Within run a successful regional tour company and this guesthouse serves as their Siem Reap hub. With very friendly and chatty management, you'll certainly feel like you're staying in a family home rather than a guesthouse or hotel. The rooms are very clean and reasonably sized, though when compared to some of the offerings in town they are somewhat overpriced. They also have an attached crocodile farm -- shame it's not a pool!

Apsara Angkor Hotel

Adequate, long way from town 5/10

Airport Rd, Siem Reap

Tel: (063) 964 998 F (063) 964 567

hotel@apsaraangkor.com

http://www.apsaraangkor.com

$140

A classic cookie-cutter hotel aimed at tour groups. Apsara Angkor has adequate rooms and the staff are helpful, but given the far better options closer to town, you've been well away by a greedy travel agent if you've ended up here.

Smiley's Guesthouse

Not worth your time 2/10

West of Sivathla Rd, Siem Reap

Tel: (012) 852 652; (012) 660 010

012582955@mobitel.com.kh

US$6-13

Ironically, Smiley's is one of the least smiley places in town. It's quite clean and the staff are friendly and polite. Be careful before accepting a room, the first two they showed were on the ground floor adjoining the restaurant. Only after refusing these two rooms did they offer us a better room on the first floor - at the same price 4/2005.

Wat Bo

The backpacker's heartland -- loads of good budget guesthouses along with some very spacious and very quiet places. The best places to stay that are within budget are a tad overpriced and generally under-frequented.

La Residence d'Angkor

Fabulous spot - huge baths 9/10

River Rd, Siem Reap

Tel: (063) 963 390 F (063) 963 391

angkor@pansea.com

http://www.pansea.com/

$285-440

This flashy five-star hotel is the most centrally located of the luxurious spots in town, though it's unlikely you'll be leaving often as La Residence d'Angkor is an extremely difficult retreat, with sprawling rooms boasting some of the biggest baths we've seen in a hotel. The rooms are all open plan with a contemporary Southeast Asian feel to them. The lovely pool might drag you outside. It's a fabulously looking hotel, but with their astronomical prices, anything less would have you begging for a refund. Rooms have choice of river view or pool view -- we think river has the edge. Be sure to check online for rates.

Borann

Pool is a big plus 8/10

Behind La Mocia, just off Wat Bo Rd, Siem Reap

Tel: (063) 964 740

Borann@bigfoot.com

http://www.borann.com

$33-44

The 20-room Borann is a lusciously quiet world away from the hustle of downtown Siem Reap, which is just a 15-minute walk away. Set in five, two-storey bungalows, the spacious shuttered rooms are tastefully decorated and have huge verandas with comfortable chairs for enjoying a sunset G&T with a view over the lovely gardens. All rooms have hot water but no TV or phone. A decent pool adds to the allure but the restaurant is a tad overpriced and generally under-frequented.

Peace of Angkor Villa

Spacious and spotless 8/10

1913 Slorkram Village, Siem Reap

Tel: (063) 760 475; (012) 447 346

peaceofangkor@yahoo.co.uk

http://www.peaceofangkor.com

$15 d $25-35

Located in what was previously the offices for the Victoria Angkor Hotel, Peace of Angkor has absolutely spotless and very spacious rooms -- the whole place feels like it is brand new. All rooms are fully kitted out and come with TV, hot water, and bathtubs -- a novel feature in Siem Reap. Downstairs has an again spotless common dining area. Deluxe rooms are larger and have more furniture. Peace of Angkor also offer a range of photography-focussed tours, ranging from one-day trips to Beng Mealea and Ban Teay Srei through to three-day tours of Battambang and Ankor Thom. Although a long walk from the centre of town, it is easily reached by bicycle or motorbike and is very quiet.

Two Dragons Guesthouse and Restaurant

Spots for a great deal of info 8/10

Airport Rd, Siem Reap

Tel: (012) 868 551

twodragons@talesofasia.com

http://www.talesofasia.com/cambodia/twodragons.htm

$5-25

The American/Thai owners of Two Dragons are also travel agents behind the Tales of Asia website -- one of the best Cambodia-focused websites online -- making this not only a good place to stay, but a great place to pick up information on travelling throughout Cambodia. There is even a small upstairs terrace well suited to picking their brains over a few ice cold beers. Rooms are spotless and comfortable, though a couple of the bathrooms are a little on the pokey side. The staff here are very friendly and welcoming. Downstairs has a large and very comfortable restaurant -- well suited to escaping the heat. Two Dragons can arrange private taxi transport from Poipet to Siem Reap recommended.
La Noria
Lovely gardens and a pool 8/10
Siem Reap Riverside Rd. Siem Reap
T: (063) 964 242 F: (063) 964 243
lanoria@bigfoot.com

La Noria shares the same owners as Borann (which lies a block further east) and it shows. Luxuriant gardens give the rooms a great degree of privacy and the lovely deep pool, while not huge, is a perfect escape from Siem Reap's near midday heat. Rooms are spotless and tastefully decorated with very clean bathrooms and very firm beds. The front courtyard restaurant and upstairs sala are both loaded with axe pillows -- perfect for escaping the hottest part of the day. Extremely friendly and helpful staff, we've received some very good reports about the Golden Banana since our last visit. Gay friendly. All rates include breakfast. Recommended.

Fantastic Rating: 10/10
The staff were great and had a wonderful stay there.

10/2005

Mysteres d’Angkor
A good mid-range option 7/10
235 Phum St. K. Bo, Siem Reap
T: (012) 885 366
info@mysteres-angkor.com
http://www.mysteres-angkor.com/
$34-40

This French-run boutique hotel is a good out-of-the-centre of Siem Reap choice, with the added bonus of a refreshing swimming pool. There’s also a comfortable bar and small restaurant on the second floor of a restored wooden Khmer house and a series of duplex bungalows spread through their lush and leafy grounds. Each bungalow building has four rooms, (two upstairs, two downstairs) and they are all tastefully decorated – a second floor room is generally a better option. One minor quibble is the number of doors for each room – each has an outer door, then screendoor, then inner glass doors, and on more than one occasion we found it a bit of a struggle to actually get inside! Doors aside, rooms are spotless, with good firm beds and immaculate bathrooms. Very professional management.

Golden Banana Bed and Breakfast
Excellent value 8/10
Phum Wat Damnak, Siem Reap
T: (012) 885 366
info@golden-banana.com
http://www.golden-banana.com/
$31-38

The Golden Banana has a bunch of tasteful cottages in a lush garden well away from the hustle and bustle of central Siem Reap. All rooms are air-con with hot water bathrooms and very firm beds. The front courtyard restaurant and upstairs sala are both loaded with axe pillows -- perfect for escaping the hottest part of the day. Extremely friendly and helpful staff, we've received some very good reports about the Golden Banana since our last visit. Gay friendly. All rates include breakfast. Recommended.

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Rosy Guesthouse
Improved riverside spot 7/10
Achassvar Rd, Siem Reap
T: (063) 965 059
info@rosyguesthouse.com
http://www.rosyguesthouse.com/
$5-12
This guesthouse has improved under the new English management with the pleasant streetfront bar being a good start. The well-sized rooms are clean and very well looked after, though some of the bathrooms are a little on the steamy side. For the standard, the prices are quite reasonable and we’ve heard some very good reports about here since our last visit.

Angkor Discover Inn
Spotless and quiet 7/10
126 Phum Stokkram, Wat Bo, Siem Reap
T: (063) 760 727;(012)598 281 F: (063) 963 692
angkordinn@camintel.com
http://www.angkordinn.com
$25-$35
This small hotel has spotless rooms in a mid-sized, two-storey house with a small but pleasant terrace and cafe out front. The rooms are a tad on the small size for the price, but they are immaculate and have small verandas, with some also having baths.

Sydney Angkor Hotel
Great value for a hotel 7/10
East side of the river, Wat Bo, Siem Reap
T: (063) 965 064;(012)543 152
info@sydneyangkor.com
http://www.sydneysangkor.com
$10-$17
The Sydney Angkor Hotel is on the east side of Siem Reap and represents very good value if you want to stay in a hotel rather than a guesthouse. The rooms are all very clean, well sized and come with a full complement of facilities. The staff speak good English and are quite helpful. It certainly isn’t overflowing with character, but if you’re after a comfortable cheap hotel, this is excellent value.

Sakura Village
Spotless rooms 6/10
House 455 Group 15 Wat Bo, Siem Reap
T: (012) 963 404;(012) 438 161
sakuravillage@everyday.com.kh
http://www.gocambodia.com/villagesakura
$25
This multi-storey guesthouse is spotlessly polished, but the wooden furnishings and balconies are a bit overdone. The second floor has a very spacious and comfortable terrace -- ideal for cooling off in the late afternoon.

Angkor Thom Hotel
Not character driven 6/10
18 Wat Bo, Siem Reap
T: (012) 895 144;(063) 964 862
angkorthom2003@yahoo.co.uk
$5-$12
This very long, running and popular spot has a ground floor restaurant serving backpacker food with a pool table and TV. Rooms are variable, with some quite grimy, but for the money it’s difficult to complain too loudly. Not a bad budget option, though be sure to ask to see another room if the first isn’t up to scratch.

City River Hotel
Spacious four-group hotel 6/10
0511, Siem Reap River Rd, Wat Bo, Siem Reap
T: (063) 763 000 F: (063) 963 963
info@cityriverviewhotel.com
http://www.cityriverviewhotel.com/
$45-$55
The City River Hotel has spacious, spotless rooms, with the ones on the top floor particularly bright and airy. Rooms have all the standard features, but the City River is primarily a tour group hotel and feels like it. Their rack-rates are inflated so be sure to ask for a discount.

European Guest House
Clean with good facilities 6/10
556 Wat Bo, Siem Reap
T: (012) 582 237;(092)811 871
sweethome@camintel.com
$6-$12
European Guest House has very clean, well-sized rooms in a large two-storey villa. The location is quiet and for the facilities, overall this is rather good value. The staff are friendly, though can get a little cagey if you start asking too many questions!

Lovely Guest House
Almost lovely 6/10
31 Wat Bo, Siem Reap
T: (012) 580 276
$5-$12
The main guesthouse building is set behind the cute wooden building in the foreground. The rooms are surprisingly good, very clean and well-maintained and the staff are helpful. Overall the place is lacking in atmosphere compared to some other spots in the area, but if you just want a cheap, clean place to sleep Lovely Guesthouse should suffice.

Home Sweet Home Guesthouse
A typical budget guesthouse 5/10
111 Wat Bo, Siem Reap
T: (063) 760 279;(012) 693 393
sweethome@camintel.com
http://www.catgen.com/sweethome/EN.html
$8-$15
This is a typical large backpacker guesthouse which is totally devoid of character and has a very turn over of guests. On the upside, rooms are spotless and very well-sized. There are far better places to stay in the area.

Home Stay Siem Reap
Charming small shop 5/10
1 Vithea Charles de Gaulle, Siem Reap
T: (063) 963 888 F: (063) 963 168
email: grandhotel@raffles.com
http://www.raffles-grandhoteldangkor.com
$310-$390
This hotel is a spectacular example of classic colonial architecture, right down to the tiny vintage elevator. The rooms are immaculate and seem slightly larger than those at sister hotel Royal in Phnom Penh. If you can afford this, go for it -- no other hotel in town comes near the ambiance and style here. Be sure to check for internet rates. Recommended.

Angkor Diamond Hotel
Bamboo obsession 5/10
Siem Reap River Rd, Siem Reap
T: (063) 380 038 F: (063) 964 449
angkordiamondonline.com.kh
http://www.angkordiamondhotel.com
$35-$50
Built by someone with an untreated bamboo obsession, the bungalows here are more of a longhouse and are not exactly well-sized or the most suited to a second-tier resort on Koh Samui. The rooms are clean, but not very private and generally uninspiring.

Marina Villa
Surdy staff 4/10
Wat Bo, Siem Reap
$5-$12
Marina is a typical budget hotel with staff that we found to be particularly surly -- though others have reported otherwise. The rooms are passable and reasonably well looked after, but there’s little here that stands out in the crowd.

The French Quarter
Between Sivatha Rd and the Siem Reap river, there’s some excellent mid-to-upper range options to choose from in this part of town, including some of Siem Reap’s most fabulous hotels. On the western side of Sivatha Rd though you’re back to backpacker and flashpacker lodgings -- none of which are the pick of the bunch.

Victoria Angkor Hotel
Simply outstanding 9/10
Central Park, Siem Reap
T: (063) 760 428 F: (063) 760 350
angkor@victoriahotels-asia.com
http://www.victoriahotels-asia.com
$299-$320
The French-managed Victoria Angkor is simply outstanding. Rooms are very generously sized and tastefully decorated, although the leopard print couch in one room may be overdoing it. Staff are extremely friendly, courteous and eager to please. The pool is a bit ostentatious, but it’s very well-sized. Except for the fact it’s quite new, it rivals the Grand just across the park. If its prices are within your budget, do consider it but be sure to check internet rates. Recommended.

Raffles Grand Hotel d’Angkor
Classic colonial hotel 8/10
1 Vithea Charles de Gaulle, Siem Reap
T: (063) 963 888 F: (063) 963 168
email: grandhotel@raffles.com
http://www.raffles-grandhoteldangkor.com
$310-$390
This hotel is a spectacular example of classic colonial architecture, right down to the tiny vintage elevator. The rooms are immaculate and seem slightly larger than those at sister hotel Royal in Phnom Penh. If you can afford this, go for it -- no other hotel in town comes near the ambiance and style here. Be sure to check for internet rates. Recommended.

FCC Angkor
Stunning rooms but overpriced 8/10
Pokambor Rd, Siem Reap
T: (063) 760 280 F: (063) 760281
angkor@fcccambodia.com
http://www.angkordiamond-hotel.com
$120-$140
An immaculate Grand hotel Rating: 10/10
I organise conferences and events and in the course of business, stay at five star hotels around the world, so was looking forward to stay at the Grand Hotel of Angkor. I was not disappointed -- The hotel is superbly maintained and my room was immaculately presented with many traditional features. The food in the dining room was excellent and provided a fine range of well kept French cheeses. Not a cheap hotel, but it’s quality, comfort and style you are after, this is the place to stay in Siem Reap 2/2004

www.travelfish.org
vacy. A lovely, well shaded pool sits as the centre of a lawn area and the spa here gets absolutely rave reviews. All that being said, it did strike us as a little overpriced, but if this is in your budget, the FCC Angkor is certainly worth considering. Rates include breakfast and are 4+.

Hotel de la Paix
Haute quality at high prices 8/10
Sivatheda, Siem Reap
T: (063) 966 000 F: (063) 966 001
http://www.hoteldelapaixangkor.com
$165-300
An inconspicuous edifice, Hotel de la Paix does its best to impress. By far the most boutique place in Siem Reap, it’s geared toward a urbane clientele for whom a hotel is just as important as the destination. There’s nothing remotely Cambodian about La Paix with the exception of their Merci restaurant, which serves up obscure Cambodian dishes. Rooms have subdued lighting and smell faintly of fresh paint. La Paix’s vaguely Art Deco design is continued with clean lines and luxurious materials in every room: polished granite, marble and wood. iPods are complimentary in every room, and feature lectures on Cambodian history along with their music selection. The serene swimming pool in the Paix’s courtyard is best at night, when lit from within by blue lights. There’s also a large, multi-level spa with both Thai and traditional massages available. Yoga and relaxation classes are offered in the private workshop. Though Hotel de la Paix’s rooms are over-priced, its Art Lounge and Merci restaurant are highly recommended; it’s a taste and a view of Cambodia that one is unlikely to find anywhere else.

Auberge Mont-Royal d’Angkor
Creature comforts without paying the earth 7/10
497 Taprobane, Siem Reap
T: (012) 630 131; (063) 964 044
mont-royal@mobitel.com.kh
http://www.auberge-mont-royal.com
$25-50
Family-run Auberge Mont-Royal sits away from the busier parts of Siem Reap and is a reasonable option for those looking for creature comforts without paying the earth. It’s a ten-minute walk from the old market area, which is the plain but do have some comfortable furnishings. If the owners doubled the size of their fish tank they’d have had a pool and this would be excellent value.

Shinta Mani
Very slick and stylish 7/10
Om Khun and 14th Street, Siem Reap
T: (063) 761 998 F: (063) 761 999
sanctuaryspa@shintamani.com
http://www.sanctuaryresorts.com/shintamani
$144-160
We’d say this boutique hotel is a little before its time and probably more suited to a beach on Ko Samui than a muddy backroad in Siem Reap. It does boast very slick and stylish rooms and offers a comprehensive range of spa and health therapies, though with a one-hour massage starting at US$30, it is a touch overpriced. The pool is a little small. Be sure to check for internet rates.

Naga Guesthouse
Clean but basic 6/10
Achamean Rd, Siem Reap
$5
Just up the road from Orchidea Guest House, Naga is cheap and the rooms are okay, but again the traffic noise is a pain so try for a room away from the road. Rooms are clean but basic.

Casa Angkor Hotel
Very pleasant 6/10
Oum Khun Rd, Siem Reap
T: (063) 963 658-9 F: (063) 963 657
angkor@casaangkor.net
http://www.casa-angkor.com
$80-70 d 80-90
Casa Angkor’s rooms are light and airy, and come with pleasant verandas and shuttered windows. Although overall it’s a bit overpriced, the deluxe rooms are certainly worth the extra $10. The terrace rooms however would be a little quieter. All are spacious and clean.

Ankgor Century Resort and Spa
Massive hotel 6/10
Komay Rd, Siem Reap
T: (063) 963 777 F: (063) 963 789
info@ankgorcentury.com
http://www.ankgorcentury.com
$250-555
This massive place is a marginal step up from a cookie-cutter tour group hotel. Featuring cavernous and oddly bouncy corridors and reasonably-sized rooms, it’s passable but given what its competitors offer in this price range it fails to win many stars. Look for a drastically reduced internet rate and it may be worthwhile. The pool, while big, has little shade.

Old Market
While a handful of budget lodgings lie around here -- some of which are very good -- the old market area is more of a shopping, feasting and drinking zone than anything else. You can choose to stay in the heart of the old market, or across Sivatha Road there’s a bunch of budget guesthouses.

Red Lodge
Good value and friendly 8/10
Stung Tha-mai, End of Rd to Les Artisans D’Angkor, Siem Reap
T: (012) 707 048
redodge_angkor@hotmail.com
http://www.redodgeangkor.com
$6-10
This multi-storey, friendly guesthouse is a five-to-ten-minute walk from the old market and is a very popular backpacker spot, boasting simple yet spacious rooms with high-ceilings. There’s also a small rooftop terrace, and a common area with a big screen projector for evening flicks. All rooms come with breakfast and bicycle hire -- the latter a real bonus.

Ivy Guesthouse and Bar II
A great backpacker choice 8/10
Near the river, Siem Reap
T: (012) 800 860
ivyasia@hotmail.com
$6-8
The Ivy Guesthouse and Bar II is related to the same-named popular bar and guesthouse in town. Set in a two-storey house, you’re only a five-minute walk from the old market area. Rooms are well-sized and clean, though they can be a little noisy around 4am when other guests’ alarms go off! Overall the whole place has a homely feel to it. Out front there is a pool table, pleasant restaurant and a large, airy area with comfortable reclining chairs and a pool table. The food is good backpacker fare, with the potato-cake-things great value and good hangover material. There is also an upstairs terrace with more lazy chairs and a mock. Very friendly staff. A good, very backpacker orientated spot. Recommended.

Golden Temple Villa
Excellent value 8/10
Off Sivatha Rd, Siem Reap
T: (012) 999 918
temple_angkor@hotmail.com
http://www.goldentemplevilla.com
s$9-15 d10-18 t12-23
Golden Temple is excellent value, boasting spotless and very comfortable rooms. Staff are chatty and although a bunch of brothels down the road brings the area down a notch in terms of classiness, it’s still a hassle-free part of town. The rooms come with clean, hot water bathrooms, and, as there are plenty of rooms here, this is a good option to try in high season when places are filling up.

Not recommended at all Rating: 2/10
We made an online booking through Travelfish. First, nobody picked up on our room was not properly cleaned and the internet wasn’t working long the entire time we were there. Also, they had a strange insistence on giving us an immediately-to-get-used-to-sit-in-the-bath-with-water - no ‘just in my room’. 1/2006
Molly Malone’s Irish Pub and Guesthouse
Excellent rooms 8/10
Just off South St Rd, Siem Reap.
T: (063) 963 533
info@mollymalonescambodia.com
http://www.mollymalonescambodia.com
$s20 or $30
While an Irish Pub may well be just about the last thing you’d expect to see in Siem Reap, the rooms at Molly Malone’s are an excellent choice for the mid-range traveller looking for clean and tastefully decorated rooms with four-poster beds and all are decked out with air-con, TV and hot water bathrooms. The location above the pub is handy as there are some very good eating options nearby. Recommended.

Ivy Guesthouse
Historic building, modern conveniences 8/10
Old market area, Siem Reap.
T: (012) 800 860
ivyasia@hotmail.com
http://www.talesofasia.com/cambodia-ivy-ivy.htm
$15-25
One of the most centrally located guesthouses in town now that the Red Piano has moved out west, the Ivy’s a comfortable place to spend time, both day and night. Ivy’s six rooms have a rare historic authenticity in a boom town where few buildings are more than five years old. Each room has floor-to-ceiling doors (painted ivy green, of course) that open to a rather noisy balcony. Still, the air-con drowns out most of the street noise from below. Rooms are dark, but well-ventilated and cool. Both small and large rooms are pleasant and offer the same amenities. The Ivy Bar downstairs serves good western and good Asian food. It’s a good idea to sit inside the bar area, rather than in the garden area, as local kids tend to beg or stick their heads through the ivy-covered trellises. Recommended for a place to get away from the chaos of downtown Siem Reap without actually leaving it.

Dead Fish Tower
Rooms with crocodiles 7/10
Sivatha Rd, Siem Reap.
T: (063) 963 060
deadfishtower@hotmail.com
http://www.talesofasia.com/cambodia-deadfish.htm
$s10-12/20
The Dead Fish has an eclectic mix of rooms, including some with crocodiles, varying considerably in size (the rooms, not the crocodiles), with some a little cramped. Some appear to have been furnished with the spoils of a 1970’s Cambodian retro sale. All are spotless, though the housekeepers are heavy-handed and the cleaner.

Cool scene but a little pricey Rating: 7/10
 Funky guesthouse on the main strip near ‘New market’. Well appointed rooms with brightly painted walls. Rates include free head massage, shave and 15 minutes of internet. Unfortunately the amount of street traffic and noise from the restaurant make it difficult to get a decent night’s sleep. If you are a white male, be prepared to be solicited by pimps at some point during your stay.
Expensive, but pleasant Rating: 6/10
First things first, Dead Fish is not great value for your money. However, if you have no problem paying $20 a night, you will get a room with a decently decorated room with AC and TV. We had no problems with any noise. The restaurant downstairs is rather over priced (7$ for set breakfast!), and while the architecture and general feeling of the place is really fascinating, I don’t recommend eating there. The staff are helpful, but not really too competent.

Mandalay Inn
Very friendly, good food 7/10
148 Sivatha Rd, Siem Reap
T: (063) 963 960
reservations@mandalayinn.com
http://www.mandalayinn.com/ $10-15
For the location and generous size of the rooms, Mandalay Inn isn’t bad value, though some of the bathrooms are a bit grubby, so ask to see a couple of rooms if need be. The Burmese restaurant outdoors is good. The staff here are very friendly.

Budget Rating: 3/10
Almost opposite to central market (not that there are lots of stalls there), Internet cafe nearby. Watch the floods in rainy weather...!!

The Red Piano
Very popular, very red 7/10
55m North West of old market, Siem Reap
T: (063) 963 240
redpianocambodia@online.com.kh
http://www.redpianocambodia.com/
$s18-22/20
The Red Piano opened their new guesthouse in late 2004 (the old guesthouse was on the top floor of their same-named restaurant) and while the location is not as convenient as the old, it remains very popular. Rooms are immaculate and very well maintained, all with air-con, TV, fridge and hot water. Aimed more at mid-range tourists than backpackers, the new guesthouse is very popular and reservations are highly recommended.

Great location Rating: 9/10
Spent 5 nights here quite happily. Rooms are new and well furnished. Hot water, AC, cable TV and a bar fridge were all included in the rate at night. You are close enough to walk quickly into the centre of town, but the street is quiet so that you don’t get woken too early. Would recommend it highly if you feel like splashing out a bit with your cash. 6/2005

Bakong Guesthouse
Very variable rooms 8/10
1 Sivatha Rd, Siem Reap.
T: (063) 380 126 F: (063) 963 419
http://www.bakong-guesthouse.com/
$20
The Bakong is more of a small hotel than guesthouse, with variable rooms - some are spacious and airy, others cramped coves. If you’re going to stay here, be sure to specify a room with windows. Popular with tour groups.

Comfortable stay Rating: 9/10
I had a nice & clean room with windows upfront. downstairs they have a neat bar and a sitting area, very enjoyable 9/2005

Ta Phrom Hotel
Tour group fav 5/10
Near the market, Siem Reap.
T: (063) 380 117 F: (063) 380 116
taphrom@casintel.com
$s35-40 d40-45
Nothing much to recommend at the Ta Phrom Hotel. The rooms are clean but featureless and appear to be mainly aimed at tour groups. The location very close to the market and lots of bars and restaurants is great, but it doesn’t justify their high rates.

Towards Angkor Wat
A few hotels are scattered further afield, particularly on the road to Angkor. This is a fantastic hidden-way spot, just across the river. The hotel does not have air conditioning, so in season a reservation is a very good idea. Set in a new wooden building, the rooms are very tasteful, with three-poster beds, one particularly fine. The upstairs area also has an excellent shaded veranda which is really fascinating, I don’t recommend eating there. The staff are helpful, but not really too competent.

La Villa Loti Coconut House
A fantastic hidden-way spot 9/10
River Rd, Siem Reap.
T: (012) 888 403
coconut@casintel.com
This is a fantastic hidden-way spot, just across the road from the river. La Villa Loti doesn’t have air conditioning, so in-season a reservation is a very good idea. Set in a new wooden building, the rooms are very tasteful, with three-poster beds, one particularly fine. The upstairs area also has an excellent shaded veranda with hammocks, making it a great spot to recover from a day of temple climbing. Very friendly, welcoming staff.

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Located well out of Siem Reap, but very close to Angkor Wat, this French-run place has a lovely little garden setting with clean and very tastefully decorated rooms with spotless bathrooms. The small on-site restaurant is good for breakfast. The main issue here is that while you’re very close to Angkor, you’re quite a way from everything else. A new attached resort adds another 20 rooms along with a swimming pool.

maurice Nicola Rating: 9/10
I have a wonderful stay at Pavillon Indochine. Staff are very helpful, the food is more than great and they have a wonderful swimming pool. It is full of charm and authentic. And location nice as well, you are far from town at all (only 5 minutes with tuk tuk), just behind 5 stars Le Meridien. For those who loves nature and prefer calm and serenity instead noisy city...! 11/2005

Eat & Meet
Central Siem Reap
The vast majority of places to eat and drink are clustered near the centre of old Siem Reap, on and around the road named Bar Street. A plethora of choices await, and looking at the construction in this area a lot more places are on the way. Expect to see a very western-oriented experience. If you want cheap Khmer food, head to the market.

Abacus
Simply outstanding 10/10
Oumnoun St, Siem Reap.
T: (012) 644 286
Abacus is simply outstanding – we’d say easily the best restaurant in Siem Reap. A combination of se- ductive leafy grounds spread around a traditional Siem Reap house, jovial host Renaud, exquisite food, prompt and very friendly service, the black and bouncy Osc- ar and above all the particularly reasonable prices, all add up for a perfect ten. At Abacus, Although priced above a backpacker budget, if you’re looking for a splurge on international cuisine (very meat focussed) then do not even consider anywhere else till you have eaten here at least once. Highly recom- mended.

Khmer Kitchen
Authentic Khmer Food 9/10
The Passage, Siem Reap.
Don’t be misled by the unassuming exterior - Khmer Kitchen has some of the finest Cambodian cuisine in town, with dishes full of complex flavour and textures. Service can be slow, but meals are worth the wait. The restaurant has a pleasantly run-down feel, with local artists’ works hanging on faded walls. At night, light- ing is very dim, and could be improved by tablet pendant candles. Khmer Kitchen is an alleyway running par- allel to Bar Street referred to as The Passage, a dining/gallery backstreet sandwiched between Pub Street and the Old Market. Excellent location and prices, too. Highly recommended.

Blue Pumpkin
Very popular 8/10
Between the old market and hospital, Siem Reap.
T: (063) 963 574
arnandcurt@hotmail.com
This cafe, restaurant and bakery is very popular and deservedly so, with a great menu of Asian and west- ern food making it a super escape from the midday heat. The nice bakery makes this a good breakfast spot. Their new premises will strike anyone from Bang- kok like a Bed Supper Cliffs and, while very com- fortable, with wireless internet access and a slick feel, the acoustics are awfully and eventually drove us out with a splitting headache. Very, very white.

Funky Munky
Comfort food, good company 8/10
Near the old market, facing the Siem Reap river.
ThisThough inconspicious during daylight hours, at night the place emits an eerie glow as light reflects off blue walls into the street. It’s located next to the Siem Reap river at the fringe of the ever-expanding old market tourist area. A favorite with both French- and English-speaking expats, mainly due to the adept min- gling skills of its British owners, one of whom is al- ways present. Decor is eclectic. Americania and movie posters line the blue walls and benches have been
softened by oversized handmade cushions. Their menu mainly features authentic western food, though Khmer dishes are available upon request. It’s an ideal place for travellers looking for a taste of home.

Ivy Guesthouse and Bar
Popular backpacker’s bar 8/10
Old Market area, Siem Reap
This very popular backpacker’s bar also has a typical western menu and Khmer traveller food on offer – the servings are very generous. The beers are ice-cold and this can be a very good spot to meet other travellers. Full bar and very friendly, professional staff.

Pissa Italiana
Top pizzai! 8/10
Bar Street
T: (012) 440 382
A great option for well-priced super-tasty pizzas. Some of the pizza toppings are a little cryptic, such as the Quatro Formaggi that comes with just three cheeses, but once you arrive, the names don’t matter! The Cambodian Updated is excellent. Service can be slow.

Red Piano
Great people watching 8/10
Bar Street
The Red Piano has good western and Khmer food, with very cheerful staff. Nothing Khmer about the Belgian Fries, but they are excellent. Snacks and chips aside, the newly-opened upstairs section offers great people-watching opportunities and you’re almost out of earshot of the plethora of tuk-tuk drivers and book vendors.

Laundy
Clean fun 8/10
Old market area, Siem Reap
Clean, fun club in the centre of town. Laundy opens as late as need be. Very good tunes, pool table, full bar. Great spot.

Temple Bar
Grub a veranda seat 7/10
Bar Street
The Temple Bar owned by the same mob behind the Golden Temple Guesthouse is popular for its happy hours and pleasant streetside seating. However, the service here can be very slow – spring-roll pancake for instance, twice we waited out after waiting 15 minutes to be served. If you’re patient, try for one of the two uppers veranda tables (there is more space here than but without views), where the view is good and the staff friendly and chatty.

The Balcony
Great coffee 7/10
This pleasant upstairs cafe and gallery has a very comfortable terrace and focuses on health food, serving no alcohol. Their coffee is excellent – best in Asia wrote one guest – but the food is a bit iffy and the menu is preachy to say the least.

The Soup Dragon
Roll Your Own 7/10
Near the market
T: (063) 964 933/(012) 725 438
soupdragon@camintel.com
The Soup Dragon’s three floors of indoors/outdoors balcony seating serve a comprehensive Vietnamese menu backed up by tasty Khmer standards. If you like playing with your food check out the beef or shrimp fondues. A mastery of chopstickmanship is like playing with your food check out the beef or shrimp fondues. A mastery of chopstickmanship is a necessity.

Laundry
Clean fun 8/10
Old market area, Siem Reap
Clean, fun club in the centre of town. Laundy opens as late as need be. Very good tunes, pool table, full bar. Great spot.

Madame Butterfly
Seductive ambience, but touristy 7/10
Airport Rd
Located well out of town on the Airport Rd, Madame Butterfly offers Khmer and Thai cuisine in a stunning wooden house. We found the food to be particularly good, though toned down for a tourist palate. The wooden house is a lovely example of old-style Khmer buildings and it is a crying shame so few remain. The restaurant attracts a lot of tourists and prices are inflated (including an odd $1 local tax). Overall it is a little overpriced, but worth a try for the house.

Sang Hi
Riverside Dining at Reasonable Prices 7/10
By the river, Siem Reap
A thatched open-air spot right over the Siem Reap River, Sang Hi serves an assortment of Khmer and Chinese food in three sizes, at all prices comparable to other restaurants in the Old Market area. Sang Hi’s small portion is adequate for one person and the medium for two. Service is prompt and enthusiastic.

Pantheon
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Angkor
Angkor is, quite simply, one of the most splendid attractions in all of Southeast Asia. Long considered “lost”, the ruins of Angkor were discovered by the Khmers, who, throughout their history have used the monuments as a religious site.

The myth of “The Lost Ruins of Angkor” is more suitable to an Angelina Jolie film that the history books. The story more or less begins with their being “rediscovered” by western explorers in the mid to late 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...

During the Khmer Rouge period, the ruins were largely left to their own devices, yet like most Khmers, even Pol Pot was unable to shake the power of the site, saying in October 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 the site every day, the sprawling Angkor Wat Historical Park remains an “absolute must see at least once in a lifetime” destination.

Sights and attractions
Angkor Wat
the masterpiece of an unknown Michelangelo 10/10
Described by the French officer Francis Garnier as “the masterpiece of an unknown Michelangelo” Angkor Wat, or the city that became a pagoda, is the single largest religious monument in the world and is considered by historians to be the penultimate example of classic Khmer architecture.

Built between 1113 and 1150 during the reign of King Suryavarman II, Angkor Wat took well over 30 years to complete and upon completion it was dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu. In size alone Angkor Wat is breathtaking. The outer walls stretch for 1.5 km east to west and 1.3 km north to south and the walls are encircled by a beautiful moat that is almost 200 metres wide – the entire site takes in some 200 hectares.

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

Opposite Angkor Wat
Tranquil Templing Break 9/10

The myth of “The Lost Ruins of Angkor” is more suitable to an Angelina Jolie film that the history books. The story more or less begins with their being “rediscovered” by western explorers in the mid to late 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...

During the Khmer Rouge period, the ruins were largely left to their own devices, yet like most Khmers, even Pol Pot was unable to shake the power of the site, saying in October 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 the site every day, the sprawling Angkor Wat Historical Park remains an “absolute must see at least once in a lifetime” destination.

Sights and attractions
Angkor Wat
the masterpiece of an unknown Michelangelo 10/10
Described by the French officer Francis Garnier as “the masterpiece of an unknown Michelangelo” Angkor Wat, or the city that became a pagoda, is the single largest religious monument in the world and is considered by historians to be the penultimate example of classic Khmer architecture.

Built between 1113 and 1150 during the reign of King Suryavarman II, Angkor Wat took well over 30 years to complete and upon completion it was dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu. In size alone Angkor Wat is breathtaking. The outer walls stretch for 1.5 km east to west and 1.3 km north to south and the walls are encircled by a beautiful moat that is almost 200 metres wide – the entire site takes in some 200 hectares.

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Like all temple mountains, Angkor Wat is a model of the divine -- playing out the Hindu mythology in both its construction and its spectacular bas-reliefs. At the centre of the Hindu (and Buddhist) universe sits Mount Meru -- a holy peak some 450,000km high on the mythical continent Jambudvipa. Atoip 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. This ocean is bridged by a naga bridge which allowed man to cross from the land of mortals to that of the Gods -- the sandstone causeway that runs across the moat from the west.

In walking across Angkor's naga bridge and entering the complex, 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 750,000km high -- 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 Royal palace. As these buildings were wooden, nothing remains, although some remnants of the road within the city were traced out as a part of restoration work. Angkor's most famous custodian, Frenchman Maurice Glazier comments that all of 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 ever since the mid 13th century, Angkor Wat has remained in use as a place of Buddhist worship -- a temple remains within its grounds to this day -- often supplying a steady flow of saffron clad monks for your holiday snaps.

When approaching from the west, one needs to cross the moat via the still-being-restored, sandstone causeway. This ocean is bridged by a naga bridge which allowed man to cross from the land of mortals to that of the Gods -- the sandstone causeway that runs across the moat from the west.

As with the Victory of Krishna over the Asuras, this 52m metre stretch is pretty ordinary when compared to some of the other reliefs and is believed to have been carved a long time after the other reliefs, perhaps by Chinese artisans. The relief depicts Vishnu fighting a legion of Asuras (demons). One point of interest is just north of centre is a group of unknowns fighting a legion of Asuras (demons). One point of interest is just north of centre is a group of unknowns.

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**Itineraries**

There are two main routes (or circuits) which have been popularised over the years -- the Petit Circuit (17km) and the Grand Circuit (28km). While any driver worth his mettle should know them off by heart, these routes are best used as a rough starting point from where you can mix and match your own plan for the monuments -- don’t let your driver steamroll you into a certain route he wants to do -- it’s your holiday -- not his!

**Petit Circuit**

Commencing at Angkor Wat, the Petit Circuit heads north to Phnom Bakheng, then Angkor Thom and all it contains (including the Bayon, the Elephant and Leper terraces and the Baphuon), then leaves via the vitory gate to Chau Say Tevoda, Thommanon and Ta Keo. After Ta Keo it strikes northeast to Ta Nei, before turning south first to Ta Phrom, then east to Banteay Kdei and Sra Srang. After Sra Srang it returns to Angkor Wat via Prasat Kravan.

**Grand Circuit**

The Grand Circuit is an add-on to the Petit Circuit where, instead of leaving Angkor Thom via the Victory Gate it instead strikes north via the northern gate first to Preah Khan and Preah Neak Pean, then east to Ta Som and south to Pre Rup. Following Pre Rup it loops around returning to Angkor Wat.

While few people follow the above blow by blow (they were originally done on elephant back), the above plans to cover most of the highlights of the monuments so you can easily pick the best from each and put together your own itinerary.

Many travellers busy themselves trying to scheme a way to dodge all the crowds, but in the end, there’s a reason why these places are so popular and on occasion it can be worth your while to put up with the crowds.

We’d suggest you bite the bullet and fit in at least one dawn or sunset at Angkor Wat, but the other monuments can easily be visited at other times of the day to dodge the hordes. Remember that the middle of the day is the quietest (and the hottest), but if you opt for covered sites at that time of the day -- Ta Phrom, Preah Khan and Banteay Kdei are all good examples -- then you’ll escape some of the worst heat.

Once you have finished with the last of the relics, 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. At the southern side of the central tower a railing and some extra steps have been installed to allow for the final climb up into the apex. The stairs are very steep and more than one person has tumbled down in a pile of broken bones or even death. Please 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.

At once the apex the views over the surroundings are spectacular.

**Bakheng**

**Hilltop mob-scene 6/10**

The Bakheng temple sits atop the highest point in the area midway between Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. From the 60-metre high summit enjoy spectacular views over Angkor Wat to the east and to the sunset in the west.

As the state temple of the first city of Angkor, Yasodharapura, Bakheng sat at the centre of an earthen-walled enclosure that was even larger than that of nearby Angkor Thom -- measuring some four km along each of its four walls. The ruler of the time, Yasovarman I, son of Indravarman I, moved the capital here from Roulos, some 13km to the southeast of Siem Reap. Work began on the Bakheng at the end of the ninth century and was finished some time after the year 907 -- only to be abandoned a mere 21 years later in 928.

The summit was originally crowned with a multilevel pyramid which was partly hewn from the mountain-top, partly built of stone. Atop the base sit five small terraces which were partly pulled apart in the 16th century in an attempt to build a large stone seated Buddha on the site. Unfortunately the Buddha was never completed.

The summit can be reached either by climbing the very rough eastern staircase that runs to the summit, or by walking with the elephants via the elephant trail that slowly winds up the peak.

Bakheng is an extremely popular spot for visitors because of the terrific sunsets that can be admired from here and it’s nothing short of a mob scene. Nevertheless, the hordes climb Bakheng for a reason and it is worth trying it at least one occasion. Try early morning for a very different experience.

**Angkor Thom**

Jayavarman VII’s state capital 7/10

One of the largest of the ancient Khmer cities, Angkor Thom (which means Great City) was the state capital of Jayavarman VII who ruled the Khmer empire from around 1181 to 1220, with the site remaining 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.

The walled in enclosure is thought to have once supported a population of up to one million people although the vast majority lived outside the city’s walls towards the East and West Barays and towards the Siem Reap River. As their houses would have been wood, nothing remains and the enclosure itself has been largely taken back by the forest.

The scale of Angkor Thom is daunting. It measures 3km in length on each of its four eight metre high walls -- all of which was once surrounded by a moat of up to 100 metres in width. While today much of the moat has been given over to rice paddy cultivation, it would be a safe assumption that the moat was once inhabited by something with a snappier bite than carp. There are five 20 metre tall gates, one on each of the south, west and north walls, with the eastern wall having two gates. The northernmost of the two eastern gates leads from the Royal Palace to the Eastern Baray. The centrepiece of Angkor Thom is the magnificent Bayon.

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are gods, to the right demons, all dragging on massive naga balustrades. Some of the slutes are replicas while others have been transported from the lesser used bridges. The bridge backs onto a splendid example of the four faced Bayon style gateways, which, with its imposing ten metres backing onto a leafy jungle backdrop gives visitors a fine idea of the site’s majesty and also makes for an excellent photo.

The popularity of the southern gate also has a down side – the traffic. In peak season waits of up to 20-30 minutes are not unheard of as buses, minibuses, cars, motorbikes, remorque motos and elephants (yes, elephants) jostle for passage through the narrow gate way. During the planning the Khmer architects had allowed for the height of an elephant with a howdah and parasols but unfortunately not for the width of two 80-seat tour buses passing side by side.

While the southern gate is by far the most popular, if time allows it is 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. One interesting option is to walk along the top of the wall from the southern gate around to the western gate, having your transport picking you up there. This route is great for bird watching and nature lovers.

Within its walls, Angkor Thom contains a number of temples including the Bayon, the Baphuon, Phimeanakas and the Elephant Terrace along with a swag of minor sites. Some of these predate the construction of Angkor.

The Bayon

A basket of bottles 9/10

Certainly one of the most written-about and photographed of the monuments at Angkor, the Bayon, state temple of Jayavarman VII and some of his successors, is one of the most unusual religious monuments in the world.

When it was first visited by explorers the site was totally overgrown and slowly but steadily it was being destroyed 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. Commaille was murdered by armed robbers in 1916 and was buried to the southwest of the monument.

Stripped of the overgrowth, the Bayon was revealed to be a three-tiered pyramid temple, with the central tower stretching 45m into the height. This central tower is topped by the largest of the four large seated Buddha statues. It sits just to the north of the Leper King Terrace.

The three-level and over 30 metre high Phimeanakas (meaning Flying Palace in Sanskrit) is close to the centre of the complex, and from its apex there are good views over the surrounds. Believed to have once been covered in gold, all four stairways are guarded by stone lions and the corners bear elephants.

Please note that while the steep staircases can be climbed to enjoy a fine view, after rain the climb can be treacherous -- be sure to wear proper footwear as the sides of the temple is your best bet, but be very careful with your footing.

Sitting to the north of Phimeanakas is Srah Srei (Wom- en’s Bath) -- a large pond that’s 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 bank of a royal pond.

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 north wall you can follow the trails for a back way to Preah Palay. Likewise the western most southern gate is a short-cut to the Baphuon.

Baphuon

The world’s biggest jigsaw puzzle 5/10

If it remained standing, Baphuon would be, by far, the tallest of the monuments at Angkor. Once a temple mountain, Baphuon was little more than a rubble moun- tain when restoration work at Angkor first begun.

Work commenced on the Baphuon in the 1960’s when the monument’s 300,000 stones were dismantled and each one’s unique position dutifully recorded by the Ecole Francaise d’Extreme-Orient (EFEO). Then the 70’s, the war and the Khmer Rouge came and for more than two decades work ground to a halt. During this hiatus, virtually all the supporting paperwork save photos of the temple were lost, leaving the restorers in the unenviable situation of trying to assemble one the world’s largest jigsaw puzzle.

Erected around 1060 during the reign of King Udayadityavarman II, the Baphuon was situated just to the south of the Royal enclosure and was easily the largest temple of its time. The Chinese diplomat Zhou Daguan, who visited Angkor in the 13th century, wrote “... rises the Tower of Bronze, higher even than the Golden Tower (Bayon): a truly astonishing spectacle”.

While a portion of the site was re-opened to visitors in 2006, much of the site remains off-limits and significantly less magnificent than when Zhou Daguan was in town. It will not be until at least 2008 that the entire site will be reopened to the public.

Terrace of Elephants

Lots and lots and lots of elephants 6/10

Running for a full 300 metres from the Baphuon to the Terrace of the Leper King, the Terrace of Elephants looks out over the Royal Square of Angkor Thom and as the name suggests, is carved with lots and lots and lots of elephants. 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 unfortunately in the wet season the ground near the terrace if often flooded and/or sodden.

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 deco- rated with elephants and their mahouts in hunting scenes along with a generous dose of guradas and lion-like creatures.

The Elephant Terrace once supported the royal recep- tion area and the many garudas and lion-like figures were intended to give the impression the royal entou- rage, shaded by their parasols and gold-topped pavil- lions, were being held aloft in the heavens.

Terrace of the Leper King

The legendary leper 7/10

Believed to date to the 13th century, the six metre high Terrace of the Leper King is so named for the unusual statue of Yama, the God of the Underworld, which sits atop the terrace.

Stark naked, Yama sits with one knee raised, survey- ing the Royal Square. Because it is tainted by discol- oration and lichen, the statue was believed to be one of a leper, and the name stuck. The statue is a rep- lica, with the original now held in the National Museum in Phnom Penh.

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 terrace also has a hidden rear corridor which can be entered from either the southwest or northwest and which zigzags behind the main temple. Along this secret passage the lower level of bas-reliefs repre- sent the underworld – keep an eye out for the particu- larly vivid expressions on some of the faces. Likewise watch out for the persistent children who will hassle you no end as they’re out of sight of the Apsara staff.

Tep Pranam

A minor attraction 4/10

Thought to date back to the 15th or 16th century, this large seated Buddha makes use of the stone blocks in its body. It sits just to the north of the Leper King Terrace and is worth a quick glance for its pleasant tree-filled setting. There’s an active Buddhist tem- ple at this site.
Preah Palilay
Very little visited 6/10
Decorated with many scenes from Buddha’s life and set amongst a stand of tall shade trees, Preah Palilay is one of the more under-rated sites within Angkor Thom.

The site is believed to take its name from Pariliyaka – a forest that features in the stories of Buddha. This theory is supported by the range of Buddhist icons throughout Angkor, yet Preah Palilay remained largely untouched.

As a site, surrounded by tall trees and nearly always devoid of other visitors, this is a pleasant spot to wander through either before or after Tep Pranam, which sits a short walk away to the south.

Ta Keo
A massive temple mountain 7/10
This massive temple mountain is almost 50 metres tall and was the first of the Khmer monuments to be built entirely of sandstone. One of the most striking facets of Ta Keo is its almost nude, entirely undecorated state. Although construction commenced during the reign of Jayavarman V (ruled from 968 to 1001), work ceased just after the carving began.

Despite its frills state, the temple is well worth visiting, particularly in the early morning and late afternoon when the light brings out the warm hues on 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.

The road passes by the south and western walls of Ta Keo and while the southern stairs are the most popular route, all the stairs here are very steep, so we’d suggest entering at the south, then taking a quick right and climbing Ta Keo from the west – if nothing else it is a little less crowded.

Ta Nei
An excuse for a bush-walk 5/10
This small, very rarely visited site is as much an excuse for a walk through the woods as an interesting site itself. Ta Nei is fairly level and was built with a mix of laterite and sandstone. The main point of interest are the often lichen-covered pediments and lintels, some of which remain in reasonable condition.

Ta Phrom
A crowd-pleasing favourite 9/10
For many the highlight of a visit to Angkor, the decision by the Ecole Francaise d’Extreme-Orient to leave Ta Phrom in its original state was inspired as although on places the trees are slowly destroying the monument, in others they’re holding it together. Over-run by silk-cotton trees and strangler vines, Ta Phrom is about as atmospheric as Angkor gets, and although there is a fairly well travelled pathway through the monument, there are no shortage of nooks and corners, alleys and backways to explore.

Built by Jayavarman VII for his mother, and consecrated in 1186, Ta Phrom was the centrepiece of a city of over 10,000 people and was also an active Buddhist monastery. While there are some interesting lintels and pediments distributed throughout the temple, 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 rooves that were once made of stone.

A favourite among both professional and amateur photographers, remember the monuments are well shaded when taking picks and although your guide may encourage you to do so, please don’t climb on the monument.

Ta Phrom, after Angkor Wat and Bayon, is probably the most popular monument, and while best visited in the early morning or afternoon, anytime is an interesting time. Take it slowly, finding spots to sit and take in the atmosphere as the crowds ebb and flow. Ta Phrom is large, so unlike Bayon it is more able to absorb large groups of people and it is rare that somewhere is crowded for more than five minutes – take your time and slowly absorb this splendid site.

A visit here is best combined with a trip to Srah Srang and Banteay Kdei – starting at Srah Srang, then walking through Banteay Kdei then entering Ta Phrom through its eastern gate.

Banteay Kdei
An under rated gem 8/10
Lying to the west of the royal baths at Srah Srang and to the southeast of Ta Phrom, Banteay Kdei is a fusion of Angkor and Bayon styles. In its semi-ruined state, set on spacious, well forested grounds, this temple remains one of the most under-rated of Angkor’s temples. As far fewer visitors make it here compared to nearby Ta Phrom, take advantage of the low crowds by spending more time here taking in the feel of the place.

Although the site was extensively cleared between 1920 and 1922, stands of tall trees remain, some still attached to portions of the building. A large site – the outer wall measures 550 metres by 700 metres, Banteay Kdei is believed to have been constructed in the late 12th to early 13th century, during the reign of King Jayavarman VII, atop a pre-existing site that dated back to the 10th century.

Banteay Kdei was a Buddhist monument and until the commencing of clearing in the early 1920s, a goda remained active at the site. Previously, during the reign of Jayavarman VIII the site was expanded and many of the Buddhist statues were vandalised or destroyed.

As with the other tree-sheltered sites an early morning or late afternoon visit reaps slight dividends due to the shade, so this is a good one to visit mid-morning or mid-afternoon. An ideal way to visit is to begin at Srah Srang, walk through Banteay Kdei from east to west, then turn north and follow the walk up to Ta Phrom, entering at the eastern gate, walking through there and having your transport pick you up at the western gate of Ta Phrom.

Srah Srang
Royal baths – no elephants allowed 7/10
(Transliterated as Royal Baths, according to one source, all creatures except elephants were allowed to bathe in Srah Srang, but today it is most popular as a refreshing dip for some of the local children.

Srah Srang is a medium sized baray running out to the east of Banteay Kdei towards Pre Rup. Some 700 metres long and 300 metres wide, the baray was constructed during the reign of King Jayavarman VII and has an almost sublime beauty to it – Angkor expert Maurice Glaise compared its majestic calm to that of Piece d’eau des Suisies at Versailles, yet many today give it but a passing glance.

The western end of the Srah Srang remains in the best condition, lined by a long stone staircase at its centre. The stairs are flanked by nagas and fearsome lions as they run down to the water’s edge. Down here is breathtaking and late afternoon is also particularly pleasant. As it is a reasonably flat time, you can walk all the way around its edge and there’s also a bunch of food and drink stalls here should you be in need of refreshment.

Pre Rup
Top sunset spot 8/10
Completed in 961 during the reign of King Rajendravarman, Pre Rup was constructed as his state temple following the establishment of a new capital on the southern bank of the eastern baray – Pre Rup sat at the centre of this new capital.

Pre Rup means ‘turn the body’ a reference to the funerary rite where a corpse is turned on the charcoal. This name supported opinions (not universally held) that the Pre Rup was used for a funeral – an explanation that is further backed up by the discovery of a small stone cistern to the east of the entrance that is thought to have had a funeral use.

Pre Rup is a temple-mountain with the central pyramid comprising three levels atop a larger two level base. Constructed mainly of laterite, brick and sandstone, the early morning and warming afternoon light can play beautifully on the temple’s hues and tones.

The main attraction for the casual visitor are the sunsets – Pre Rup makes an ideal alternative to some of the more popular sunset viewpoints. From the summit you can see Angkor Wat, and if you’re lucky enough to have the site to yourself, the serenity here, lapped by the jungle rambling off to Angkor Wat, is excellent.

Banteay Samre
The citadel of the Samre 6/10
Banteay Samre translates as citadel of the Samre. The Samre were a group of people who populated the Kulen hills, and legend has it, ruled from Banteay Samre.

The story goes that a poor Samre farmer by the name of Pou had a particular talent for growing sweet cucumbers. When Pou presented some of the cucumbers to the then King, the King 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 wet season, the King became impatient and snuck into the fields himself to try and source a few sweet cucumbers – unfortunately for the King, the farmer followed his instructions and speared the King to death with a lance. When he realised his mistake he buried the King in the middle of the field and hoped nobody would notice.

Of course a missing King got tongues wagging and when a new King couldn’t be decided on, the dignitaries went for divine inspiration and so brought in a divine elephant who would select the new King. The elephant walked straight to the farmer’s shack where it then saluted him, lowered its trunk between its knees, knocked on it, and encouraged him with its trunk and placed him gently on its back. Once King, Pou had the old King dug up and performed a proper funeral rites at Pre Rup, (fewer people 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, so in the end, Pou moved out to Banteay Samre and set up his court there.

Built by Suryavarman II and continued by Yasovarman II, Banteay Samre is believed to have been completed early in the 12th century. An extensive renovation from 1989 to 1992 was led by archaeologist Pierre Glaize and the results are impressive. With its tall, windowless, laterite walls, the temple is rather citadel-like (banteay means citadel), and while the central tower is of Angkor Wat, visitors who have seen the Khmer sites in Thailand will also notice the similarity to the temples at Phnom Rung and Phimai.

It is thought that the temple sat at the centre of a sizeable city as the eastern causewayway (which was once flanked by a naga bridge) runs for 200m and it's easiest to reach from the east side of the site. Aside from the imposing outer wall, another point worth mention are the unusually deep 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.

Preah Khan

Rambled and exquisite 9/10

Completed in 1191, the fascinating site of Preah Khan was built during the reign of Jayavarman VII and dedicated to his father, Suryavarman II. As his flashing sword falls on his enemies, defeating kings in battle, the right arm of the prince is long, strong and fearsome in battle.

Preah Khan was the state temple of Hariharalaya. The temple's plan is quite obvious. When you climb each of the five levels, make the time to 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.

When you reach 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.

The temple to the west, going straight down and you'll stumble upon the remains of Nandi (Shiva's favourite bull) — there is actually one at each of the cardinal points of Bakong, but the one at the west is the most bull-like, even if it still looks more like a cow.

Set a little over a kilometre off the main Siem Reap to Phnom Penh road at the 13km mark, Bakong is particularly splendid at dawn, and makes a fine contrast to the mob scenes you're likely to come across at Angkor Wat and some of the other more popular monuments.

Preah Ko

A minor stop 5/10

Built in 880, Preah Ko was the first temple Indravarman I built in Hariharalaya and what remains of it are six brick towers sitting on a sandstone base along with a handful of outlying buildings in various states of ruins.

The sides of the doors of all three front brick temples contain long inscriptions, but the big find here was the temple foundation stele which was found in the gopura of the first enclosure. While the stele has been removed from the site, part of the inscription is the etiology of King 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 approached by two enemies only, those who have their backs turned, and those who, valuing life, put themselves under his protection.”

The main point of interest here are the lime mortar lintels and other decorative work that was affixed to the brick towers. This is a site of ongoing reconstruction, so you cannot enter the towers.

Lolei

Only if you're in the area 3/10

You wouldn't know it when you're standing there, but Lolei actually sits atop an island in the middle of what was once a large reservoir measuring 3,800 metres by 800 metres.

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 King Yasovarman I, the bulk of the basework was done by his father Indravarman I. It was built on the dyke and placed the island, leaving his son to build the actual temple, which was completed in 893 — Sunday July 8th to be exact.

Lolei comprises four brick towers, none of which are in outstanding condition, varying from collapsed to the semi-restored. The highlight of Lolei are its lintels and door jams which remain in good condition, but more interesting perhaps is the site's location within an active wat.

Phnom Krom

Spectacular views 7/10

Set atop the small mountain near the ferry dock, and overlooking the Tonle Sap sits Phnom Krom, a 9th to 10th century temple built by King Yasovarman I. As you can't see the temple from ground level, the vast majority of visitors who arrive at Siem Reap via ferry whistle into Siem Reap oblivious to the site.

Phnom Krom sits within a 50 metre square enclosure, which is three ruined sandstone towers on a north-south axis. Running from north to south the towers are dedicated to Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma.

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 from the Tonle Sap to the Western Baray — are absolutely magnificent.

Phnom Krom is around 12km southwest of Siem Reap and can be accessed by either a long, steamy and sweaty climb up the stairs, or by road in a car or by motorbike — your choice.

Phnom Bok

Shaded by frangipani, terrific views 6/10

Around 25km from Siem Reap

Along with Phnom Krom and Phnom Bakcheng, Phnom Bok is the third of King Yasovarman I's hilltop efforts. Quite isolated, the highlight of a visit here are the views and, when in flower, the beautiful frangipani trees that appear to almost explode out of the tops of two of the towers.

Once used as a strategic military post, Phnom Bok sits at the summit of the highest hill near to Angkor. As his flashing sword falls on his enemies, defeating kings in battle, it is thought that the prince is long, strong and fearsome in battle.

Set a little over a kilometre off the main Siem Reap to Phnom Penh road at the 13km mark, Bakong is particularly splendid at dawn, and makes a fine contrast to the mob scenes you're likely to come across at Angkor Wat and some of the other more popular monuments.

Banteay Srei

Stunning carvings 9/10

32km from Siem Reap

Undoubtedly Angkor's most beautiful temple, the soft pink sandstone and exceptional carvings of Banteay Srei never fail to delight the visitor.

Consecrated in 967, during the reign of King Rajendravarman, Banteay Srei was never a royal temple. It is thought that he built it to house an icon of his mother. It is thought to have been built by an advisor to the King and it is believed that this lack of a Royal go-ahead is one of the reasons why this temple is one of the smallest at Angkor.

While Banteay may lack in size it more than makes up for in beauty. The name translates as Citadel of Women and some have suggested the temple was built by a woman who 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 particularly deep, giving them a three-dimensional appearance.

As with many Khmer temples, the main sections of Banteay Srei were built of laterite, but in an unusual departure instead of the carving being done into a plaster coating that was 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 there's 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 the earth. Nevertheless it didn't take them long to realise the site was stumbled upon. Despite the ancient wood being out-standing in fact that one French author, Andre Lallaux, 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 was sentenced to a couple of years prison (a term he never served) and the carvings were saved. Lallaux was later appointed Minister of Culture under Charles de Gaulle!

Banteay Srei is one of the most popular temples and...
particulars in the morning, it is over-run with tour bus upon tour bus. While early morning is a great time to visit as the sun shining direct on the temple really brings out all its beauty, we'd suggest trying mid to late afternoon (though not too late) to try to dodge the worst of the hordes.

The temple is some 32km from Siem Reap and your transport will expect a surcharge to cart you out here -- to be sure agree on a price beforehand.

**Phnom Kulen**

_Terrific views, shame about the admission fee_ 6/10

50km from Siem Reap

Located some 50km from Siem Reap the daunting Phnom Kulen sandstone plateau is considered by Khmers as one of the most sacred spots in their entire country. It was on this plateau that Jayavarman II was consecrated as the first God-King and it was from Phnom Kulen that he declared Cambodia to be an independent state.

Aside from providing a fantastic viewpoint, the plateau is also home to Cambodia's largest reclining Buddha, a pretty waterfall, a handful of Cham and Khmer temples, and, particularly well hidden away, a bunch of mythical stone guardians including a very impressive size of temple elephant -- you will need a guide and a motorbike to find the guardians.

The plateau is well wooded and due to its almost 500 metres in height the temperature is characterised by the plateau being well wooded and due to its almost 500 metres in height the temperature is characterised by the plateau being

**Kbal Spean**

_River of a thousand lingas_ 6/10

50km northeast of Siem Reap

Along with Phnom Kulen, Kbal Spean is regarded as a particularly auspicious location as it is from this hill that the Kbal Spean river flows down to join the larger Siem river which eventually empties out into Tonle Sap. Before it leaves the hill though, the water is blessed by flowing over some 100 metres of sacred lingas and Hindu deities that have been carved into its bedrock riverbed. Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma are all in attendance, and the Sanskrit name, Sahasralinga, or river of a thousand lingas indicates the quantity of lingas (though there's not really 1,000).

Best at the tail-end of the wet season (October to December), Kbal Spean is well worth a visit -- both for the intricate carvings and the very pleasing, verdant jungle setting. There's also a medium-sized waterfall nearby and a couple of small swimming holes if you feel you're in need of a bit of blessing yourself.

Located around 50km northeast of Siem Reap, the site is reached via a 1.5 km trail that winds up from the carpark to the riverbed. Your moto will expect extra payment to bring you here -- be sure to agree on a price beforehand.

**Beng Mealea**

_Spectacular jungle ruins_ 9/10

80km from Siem Reap

One of our favourite sites, Beng Mealea sits on the ancient royal road from Angkor Wat to Preah Khan (in Preah Virean province) and was built around the same time as Angkor Wat during the reign of King Suryavarman II.

With a similar totally overgrown feel as with 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 site which makes it more accessible and also allows for some rather unusual elevated views you wouldn't otherwise be able to enjoy.

Sadly looters did a fair degree of damage here -- 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 amongst the bare building blocks.

This area was heavily mined -- according to our guide the site had been mined by Lon Nol forces, Khmer Rouge and the Vietnamese -- considerably complicating the demining work. While the demining has been completed, this still isn't an area to go bush-bashing in.

Beng Mealea is not covered by the Angkor Pass and there's an admission fee of US$20 to enter, though unlike Phnom Kulen it's probably worth it.

**Spas, shopping and seers in Siem Reap**

Take your pick: spas, shopping and seers. Some super alternatives are springing up in Cambodia's Siem Reap so you don't have to feel too guilty for bowing out of rambling through Angkor Wat's endless ruins when you've had your fill.

As wondrous as Angkor's splendour is, different people have varying capacities for appreciation and after a few hours of intense concentration in the tropical blazing sun, I say it's time for some serious relaxation.

The swishest standalone spa for now - probably in the country - has to be the lush oasis of Visaya, set in the Foreign Correspondents Club complex by the river. It's priced to match, although by international standards, for the quality it's still a steal.

Whatever treatment you choose, make sure you arrive for your appointment an hour or so early so you can have a swim and a steam first. I slunk in a little late through their glorious amber-bead curtain - from the thick towels draped over me to the sumptuous decor and the therapist's skill, this was the sort of indulgence one seeks after days on Angkor's Grand Circuit.

Me? The pack of playing cards she dealt in all sorts of baffling combinations showed that my work colleagues were jealous of me at the moment and would be talking about me behind my back. If I could get through the next month, I might be alright. If your short-term outlook is as grim as mine was, she may offer to take you to a temple to be blessed by monks. I risked it.

Shinta Mani's Sanctuary spa is another splash-out option, set in the hotel of the same name. It's not quite the five-star lavishness of Visaya, but prices are lower and the 90-minute aromatherapy massage (42 dollars) I succumbed to was excellent.

Spa treatments here are akin to a five-star lavishness of Visaya, but prices are lower and the 90-minute aromatherapy massage (42 dollars) I succumbed to was excellent.

Sanctuary offers a large range of massages, scrubs, facials, baths and hand and foot treatments, but their half-day and full-day packages are again far better value - excellent justification for taking a day off sightseeing.

A budget but chic spa alternative is Frangipani, located on the narrow arthouse alley running behind the ever-popular bar street. They've been open for several years and also use Jurlique products, but their treatments are far more affordable. Their 15-dollar, hour-long aromatherapy massage in their open-air treatment room was great value.

Nearby, the homespun Opanissai offers treatments along with an array of natural health and beauty products. Their therapist's skill, on their four-dollar pedicure was just as good.

A long-time favourite is Artisans D'Angkor. Visit their workshop first, where you can see artists at work carving, sculpting, sketching and weaving their gorgeous masterpieces. Prices here are high, but the quality is exceptional. This is the spot to pick up a souvenir of your Cambodian trip that will last a lifetime.

**River of a thousand lingas**