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*AirAsia*

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Creating Wings for

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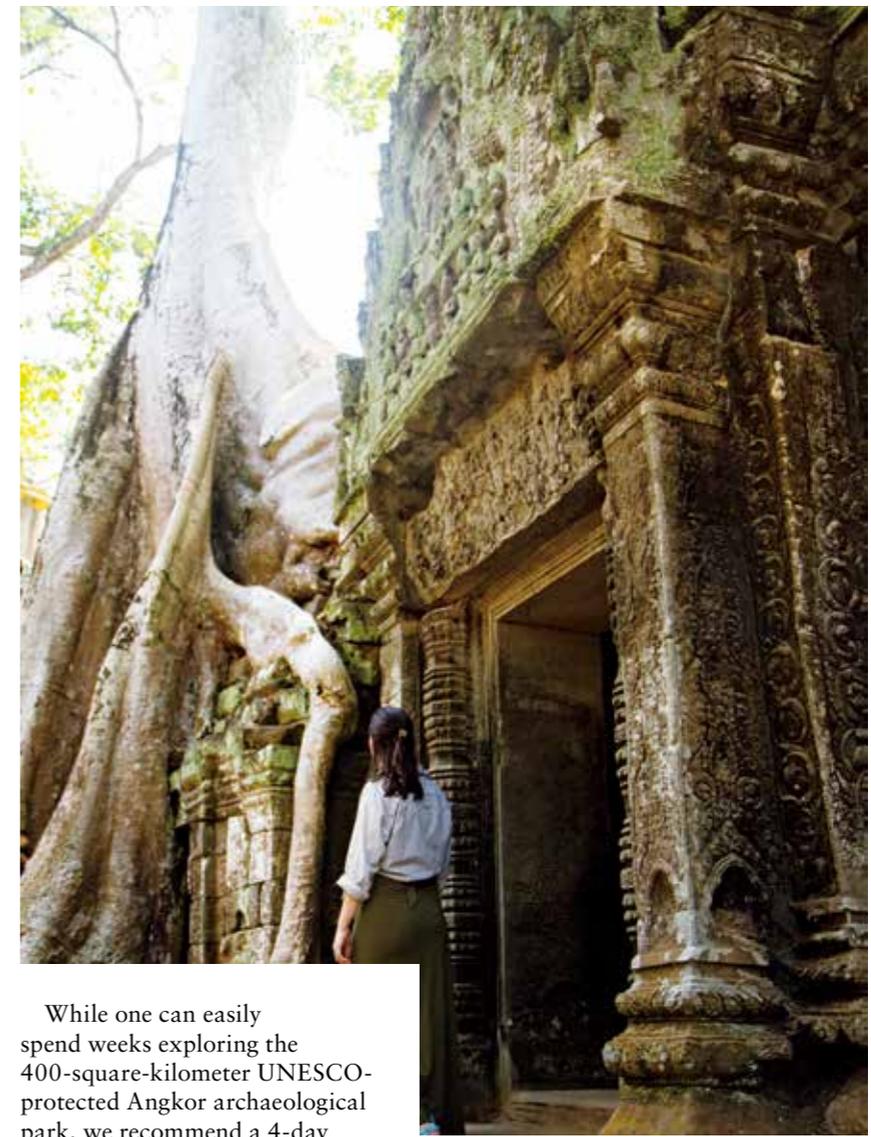
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# *The Sun Also Rises Over Siem Reap*

Text Josephine Tee



Much more than a tropical resort town, Siem Reap is the cultural gateway to the powerful Hindu-Buddhist Angkor Empire (or Khmer Empire), which ruled Southeast Asia for centuries and preceded the modern Thai and Vietnamese civilizations. Despite a complicated past filled with foreign incursions and internal strife, Cambodians are proud to share their legacy with guests as not only ambassadors of Khmer, but also that of a profound culture that has absorbed the bespeckled influences that have formed its richly textured society, particularly in architecture and gastronomy.

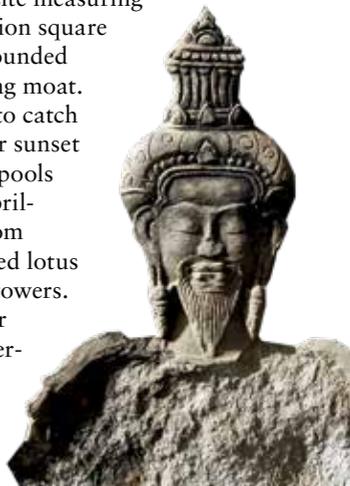


While one can easily spend weeks exploring the 400-square-kilometer UNESCO-protected Angkor archaeological park, we recommend a 4-day weekend trip that strikes a satisfying balance between archaeological spelunking, resort lounging and indulgent dining.

## **Ruins of Angkorian Splendor**

Spirituality in Siem Reap runs deep, as the former Angkor Empire celebrated the Hindu and Buddhist metaphysical intersection, which is evident by the hundreds of historical ruins near the city. While one can delightfully lose oneself in the never-ending nirvana of temples, those on a full itinerary must reserve at least half a day to visit Angkor Wat, Bayon and Ta Prohm, the quintessential trio of archaeological wonders that puts Siem Reap on the map.

Angkor Wat is the largest religious monument in the world, as it rests on a site measuring over 1.6 million square meters, surrounded by a 5km-long moat. Many come to catch the sunrise or sunset as reflecting pools capture the brilliant hues from over the famed lotus bud-shaped towers. Licensed tour guides, conversant in different languages such

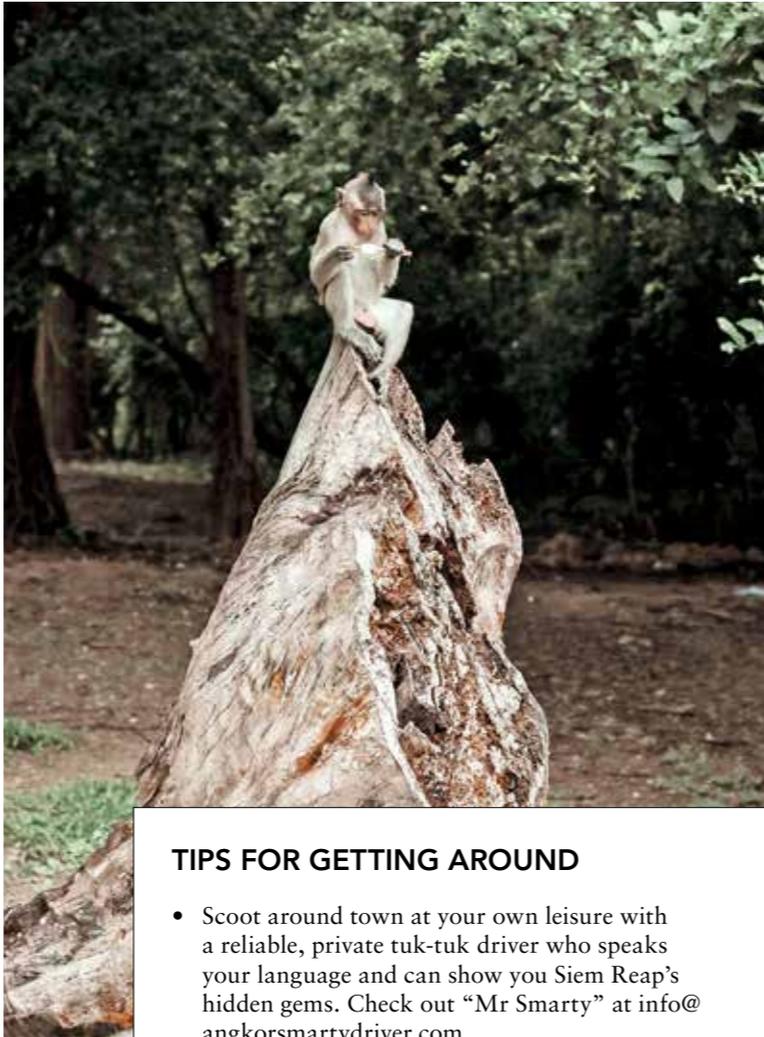


as English and Chinese, can be hired on-site to provide detailed accounts of the temple's design and history as well as guide you to the best, IG-worthy photo spots.

Colloquially referred to as "Tomb Raider Temple" by locals, Ta Prohm was commissioned in the late 12th century by King Jayavarman VII as a monastery to honor his family, and more recently served as the mystical backdrop for Angelina Jolie's Lara Croft: Tomb Raider. When the Khmer Empire fell in the 15th century, the abandoned temple became overgrown with the local flora, particularly silk-cottonwood trees, whose roots became entangled with the ruins as their trunks seemingly grew out of the temple to form the iconic look of Ta Prohm today.

### Resort to Calm

After an invigorating trek through iconic ruins and centuries of Khmer history, it is essential to bask in the comfort of one of the city's many sprawling resorts. We opted for the Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor, as its tastefully luxurious accommodation is only surpassed by its institutional significance within Cambodian history.



#### TIPS FOR GETTING AROUND

- Scoot around town at your own leisure with a reliable, private tuk-tuk driver who speaks your language and can show you Siem Reap's hidden gems. Check out "Mr Smarty" at [info@angkorsmartydriver.com](mailto:info@angkorsmartydriver.com)
- Tipping is expected in hotels and restaurants so bring small bills in US dollars, which are accepted everywhere
- Apply and pay online for an E-visa. Bring a printed copy for the customs officer
- Purchase 1, 3 or 7-day passes in advance to visit Angkor Archaeological Park. In addition, respect local customs by covering your shoulders and knees with appropriate clothing when visiting religious sites

Opened in 1932, the celebrated resort stands as a relic of French colonial rule and invokes a romantic, bygone era with its raised portico at its front façade, white-and-black marble floors and ornate, wrought-iron antique lobby lift. Esteemed guests have included Charlie Chaplin, Jacqueline Kennedy

and Michelle Obama, who were undoubtedly captivated by the hotel's old-world charm. Nevertheless, timely renovations over the years have introduced many state-of-the-art facilities, including a sprawling pool inspired by the bathing pools of Khmer Kings, a tennis court, private villas and an indulgent spa. While it was difficult to leave

the comfort of our Personality Suite, which featured an original, antique bathtub and a balcony overlooking a sumptuous view of the pool, we made sure to enjoy a host of complimentary activities (Raffles Curated Program) on the property. Guests are offered memorable 15-minute sessions in lotus folding, a Buddhist monk blessing or a mixology class in the



resort's Elephant Bar.

Siem Reap's grande dame of hotels is also renowned for its patronage from Cambodian royalty, particularly its new fine dining restaurant 1932, which exclusively serves recipes from the Royal Khmer kitchen.

### Journey Through Khmer Cuisine

Following the elevated culinary experience of 1932, we

#### ADDRESSES

**Angkor Wat:** Krong Siem Reap, Cambodia

**Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor:** 1 Vithei Charles de Gaulle, Siem Reap, Cambodia, [raffles.com/siem-reap/](http://raffles.com/siem-reap/)

**Embassy Restaurant:** Street 27, King's Road village, Siem Reap, Cambodia, [embassy-restaurant.com/](http://embassy-restaurant.com/)

**Kanell Restaurant:** 7 Makara Street, Near Angkor High School, Siem Reap, Cambodia, [kanell-siemreap.com/](http://kanell-siemreap.com/)

**Champey Cooking Class:** Behind U-care pharmacy, beside Preah Prom Roth Pagoda, Siem Reap, Cambodia, [champeycookingclass.com/](http://champeycookingclass.com/)

**Psar Chaa (Old Market):** Psar Chaa Road, Siem Reap, Cambodia

**Pub Street:** Street 08, Siem Reap, Cambodia

were keen to experience more Khmer cuisine, which predates that of its better-known Thai and Vietnamese siblings.

Led by local culinary rock-stars, the female-duo "Kimsan" Twins, Embassy proved to be the skilled, much-needed ambassador to Khmer food and culture that we were looking for. The restaurant dishes out Michelin-quality tasting menus, featuring indigenous ingredients presented with fine dining techniques.



Culture



An inviting French colonial bungalow houses the excellent, all-female staff that were happy to share with us the stories of origin for each carefully prepared dish. Our envoys gracefully imparted their knowledge of locally sourced red Kampot pepper, Ratanakiri coffee and Tonle Sap lotus root all expertly combined with Takeo River lobster, duck, and pork ribs to create a unique six-course experience with well-curated wine pairings.

The ubiquitous Kimsan Twins also provide their steady culinary hands at the nearby dinner and cultural show, Kanell Restaurant. The restaurant offers a set Khmer dinner menu to complement a 1-hour program of traditional dances and martial arts performances. We particularly enjoyed the show's finale, a traditional Apsara Dance personally choreographed by a Cambodian princess, which was previously only performed for the Royal Court by a small troupe of dancers draped in elegantly designed costumes.

## A Walk Through the Markets

Exploring Siem Reap's food culture inevitably leads you to its vibrant, open-market bazaars. Phsar Chas or "Old Market", mentioned above, opens at the crack of dawn to sell fresh produce, wet and dry foodstuffs to locals as well as Siem Reap's best chefs, who come for their morning shopping. Avoid the market's outer edge, which hawks typical tourist items such as faux antiques, mass-produced stone carvings and unlicensed DVDs. A few blocks away from Old Market lies its evening counterparts, Angkor Night Market, the city's sprawling, original night market, and Pub Street, the neon-lit throbbing home of Siem Reap's expat and backpacker nightlife.

For a comprehensive, yet authentic, local market experience we recommend Phsar Leu ("Upper Market"), which is the city's largest market and sells everything imaginable. Similar to "Old Market", the morning market is

teeming with produce, fresh fish and meats, and buckets of prahok, a beloved fermented fish seasoning widely used in local dishes. Nearby clusters offer traditional garb and wedding dresses, gold jewelry, as well as everyday items and services for residents.

If you are craving authentic street food, Road 60 Market is a dusty street flanked with food stalls that local families come to for an evening picnic of tasty and affordably priced comfort food. Although there are vendors offering exotic, fried insects, we recommend ordering the Cambodian omelet *banh chao*, barbecued quail, sliced fruit and steaming bowls of soup noodles.

## Waiting for Another Sunrise

In our brief but impactful tour of Siem Reap, we departed with an appreciation for the historical city's profound culture that transcends its status as a Southeast Asian resort town. Its monumental architecture and nuanced food are testaments to the depth of Cambodian civilization, which bears the mark of its storied Khmer history as well as the influences that have shaped it.

# PEOPLE

