

1 CAMBODIA

Our next trip was to Cambodia, and oh my! This country was for certain a sensory overload. We flew into Bangkok before taking a tiny plane to Siem Reap, our destination. The Bangkok airport was brand new, only two months old, and it was huge and not very well organized. We stood in the passport line for nearly an hour, then discovered that all our luggage was lost. Yes, the luggage for all nine of us on this trip was nowhere to be found. Airport personnel apologized profusely to our guide, who kept trying to reassure us that the luggage would be found “any minute.” Meanwhile, our guide talked a mile a minute with different airport people until someone in our group said, “My goodness, what is that language they are speaking?” Two different members of our group piped up, “Thai.” “Siamese.” Then there commenced a spirited discussion about whether the language of the people of Thailand should rightly be called Thai or Siamese. Myrtle suddenly burst into song, “We are Siamese, if you please; we are Siamese if you don’t please.” And she was loud, but she did stop the arguing. Unfortunately, because that tune is one of the catchiest ones on earth (just ask Peggy Lee and Walt Disney) it was only seconds before our whole group was belting out, “We are Siamese if you please...” (At this point I encourage all of you who are too young to remember the magic of the *Lady and the Tramp* to go immediately to watch that incomparable animated film in which Peggy Lee sings the Siamese song, which we were at that moment murdering.) That song was particularly fitting, it seemed, as we wandered around the airport looking at the sculptures and the art.



Eventually our luggage was found, and we gamely trooped after our guide to find our minibus that would take us to our hotel for the night because the little puddle-jumper we were to take to Siem Reap made only one flight a day. As our luggage was loaded into the cargo area of the bus, I noticed in panic that one of my suitcases was missing. That required another trip into the airport, which, as I mentioned, was monstrous. Even our guide, who was accompanying me back into the airport to try to identify my luggage, got lost. Well, we did locate the errant small suitcase and returned to our minibus where we found a group of cranky, grumpy, tired, jet-lagged people. Myrtle had saved me a seat next to her, but then she started haranguing me about how I could have done something so stupid as to lose my suitcase. Really! I could have bopped her! Altogether, it had taken two and a half hours for us to get out of that airport.

But when we finally got on the road and drove through the huge, sprawling, energetic city of Bangkok, everyone calmed down and looked around with interest. I saw a gigantic billboard with the king's picture on it, and dear reader, when I say gigantic, I truly do mean ginormous. That is an awful word, I know, and dear Miss Manners would find it offensive. But that billboard had to be at least twenty feet tall by fifteen feet wide! Right around the corner there was another giant billboard of the king, and I started counting. By the time we got to our hotel I had counted 25 giant billboards of the king! The guide was telling us that today is the king's birthday. I also counted 1000 Buddhist temples – just kidding! But our guide did tell us that there are over 400 temples in Bangkok, a city of twelve million people. And I swear that all twelve million of them were on the road with us, riding motorcycles.



A lovely dinner and a good night's sleep put our group to rights, and we were chipper as we returned to the airport to take the small plane from Bangkok to Siem Reap. It was a Bangkok Air propeller plane holding up to 80 passengers, flying at only 15,000 feet. The flight would be just under an hour, and despite that time barrier, the stewardesses (yes, dear reader, in those dinosaur days the inflight personnel were still called stewardesses) were able to serve us a hot, tasty, and totally wonderful inflight meal. Myrtle had the window seat on this flight, but from my view it seemed that Cambodia was all green and wet. That sort of turned out to be accurate. Our guide told us that Cambodia is one of the most wetland-dependent countries on earth, and about half of its people depend on the wetlands for their survival. Immediately my mind is thinking "Oh, dear, I think another word for wetland is snakes?" Just as though she could read my mind, which I swear sometimes she can, Myrtle piped up, "I know, JoJo, that Cambodia has a lot of snakes, and when I say a lot, I mean millions." Yikes! "But," she

continued firmly, "I really want to see Angkor Wat, and I have made up my mind that I will deal with the snake issue. Also, I have these trusty little helpers here (she pulled out a small bottle of pills) and I am sure I will be fine." And she stuck her nose in the air and turned to look out the window. I wanted to ask, "Are you looking for snakes, Myrtle?" but figured I'd best leave well enough alone.

Our guide told us a little about Cambodia as we drove from the airport to our hotel, the Khemara Angkor Hotel. "Siem Reap is the second largest city in Cambodia, with over 800,000 people. Phnom Penh, the capital, is the largest. Phnom Penh, unfortunately, has become associated in the memories of foreigners as the site of the Pol Pot atrocities. Those are indeed a part of the history of this city and our country, but Phnom Penh used to be called the 'Pearl of Asia' because of its colonial French architecture and Art Deco works. There is an interesting legend about Phnom Penh that our people like. In the year 1372 a wealthy widow named Penh was taking an afternoon boat excursion on the Tonle Sap River when a large Koki tree floated near her boat. One of her boatmen spotted something shiny in a large hole in the trunk of the tree and alerted his Mistress. She ordered the tree to be towed to dock, where her boatmen waded into the water and retrieved what was in the hole, four bronze Buddha statues and a stone statue of Vishnu. Lady Penh ordered that the statues be taken to her villa and that twenty village men come to help drag the tree onto the land to dry out. Then she spoke to the local Buddhist priest and ordered that village craftsmen should raise the hill northeast of her house until it was the tallest hill in the village, and they should build a temple on that hill with the Koki tree wood. That temple would house the four Buddhas. A shrine would be built lower on the hill to house the statue of Vishnu. The temple became known as Wat Phnom Daun Penh, from which the city eventually took its name."

The guide continued, "The national language of Cambodia is Khmer. You see here many rice fields and many large lakes. The rice is ready for harvest right now. Because there is so much water here, we can grow rice all year long. To grow high-yielding rice, each plant when it is about 10 inches tall must be pulled up, cut back, and replanted. This is the way to increase the yield. Water buffalo are used for heavy labor." Just then our minibus hit a large pothole. The guide took that in stride. "The road here is paved, but it is bumpy. There were a lot of land mines in this area after the war, and our country is still trying to get rid of them. They have killed many people and a lot of animals. Now we are at the hotel. I will distribute your keys and we will meet in the lobby in one and a half hours for our trip to the Wat Bo Temple."



I told Myrtle that before I could do anything else I needed to burn a CD from my camera card to free up room to take more photos. The guide had told me that I could walk downtown about twenty minutes to find a camera store. Myrtle decided she needed to come with me so that "you don't get lost." OK, whatever. We stowed our suitcases in the room and walked rapidly in the direction the guide pointed. We did find the camera shop and got the CD burned and all was well until we started walking back. Then we got so interested in the buildings and the people and arguing about this or that thing and suddenly I realized that we had walked way longer than we should have. We luckily found a shopkeeper who told us we had overshot the hotel by one kilometer, and the only way we would get

back in time for the tour was if we took a tuk-tuk to our hotel. The shopkeeper graciously helped us get a tuk-tuk and informed us what we should pay, and in minutes we were off. Now the tuk-tuk, dear reader, is a motorized rickshaw, which you probably know, and Myrtle and I absolutely adored it. She had been haranguing me about how it was my responsibility not to get lost, and how stupid I was to get lost this way, etc., etc., until I just wanted to bop her, or at least say snottily, "I thought you said YOU were coming along to make sure I did not get lost." But the minute our tuk-tuk took off speeding through those crowded streets, Myrtle shut right up about being lost and said, "This is so, so much fun! Isn't it wonderful we got lost so that we could take this tuk-tuk ride?" And she kept on that way using the work tuk-tuk like it was her new best friend. Honestly. Whatever. But we got back to the hotel with time to spare to have a quick tea and pastry before joining our group in the lobby, where we learned, (Hip, Hip, Hooray!) that we would be riding on tuk-tuks to go to the Wat Bo Temple.



The trip took about an hour and Myrtle spent about half that time elbowing me to whisper, "Isn't our driver just the cutest?!" Like all the Cambodians we met, our driver was friendly and happy. When we reached the Temple, I was transported by the forest of stupas in the gardens around the Temple, so while the group gamely followed our guide into the temple, I started wandering among these exquisite works of art in the gardens; and I unfortunately became so focused on getting yet another photo of yet another exquisite stupa that I confess I missed the inside of the temple itself, which our guide had told us was famous for its stunning works of art and architecture. Sigh. When the group found me still

wandering among the stupas, Myrtle was so stunned by these stupas that she forgot to tell me how stupid I was for missing the temple itself! So while the guide started to explain stupas to the group, I dashed back to the temple and stuck my head in and took this picture of the Buddha. So there! I knew there were many other works of art, but the stupas had captured me. A stupa, of course, is a burial chamber for bones or relics. The guide said stupas are very expensive, so the stupas are typically for monks and wealthier people.



This large crematorium is where the bodies are burned. I said to Myrtle, “Look! They even make their crematorium furnaces gorgeous!” She did not really share my enthusiasm. I think she has a thing about bodies burning. I reminded her that typically the body is put in a coffin for five years and then burned, and then the ashes are interred in the small openings at the base of the stupas. She responded with a small smirk, “And if you don’t have enough money for one of these beauties, JoJo, you can always put your ashes in the nun’s compound next door.” Whatever.

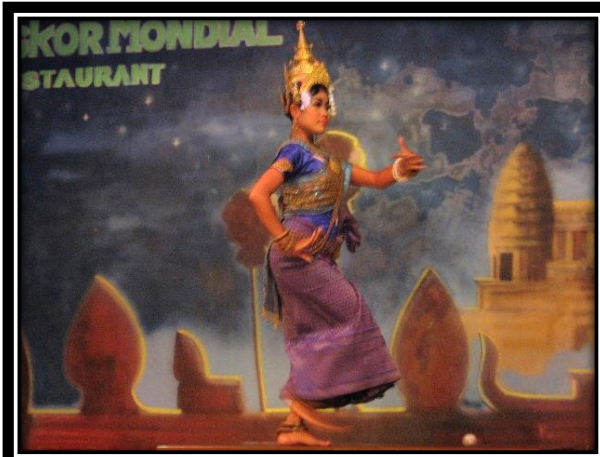




That night we went to an outdoor pavilion-style restaurant for dinner and a cultural performance. It was the apsara dance, and it was exotic and completely delightful. Myrtle was leaning so far forward to take in every nuance of every movement that I worried she might fall out of her seat. At one point she held her fork in midair for I swear a half minute before she put the fork back on her plate with a sigh. Food was obviously not in the same entrancement league as the apsara dancing, not even close.



When the dancers started to do their “balance on one foot routine,” Myrtle suddenly leaped up and stood on one foot with her arm extended and crooked at the elbow and her other foot extended prettily behind her. Unfortunately, it was extended prettily right into my lap, and I was sorely tempted to pull on it and make Miss Myrtle fall on her face. But my rational mind reminded me that this would get me as well as Myrtle in trouble. So I just slapped her foot instead. She did utter a tiny shriek, but she jerked her leg down and fell back into her chair with a plop and all was well.





We rode back to the hotel in a tuk-tuk, and that, dear reader, had both Myrtle and I giggling and mini-shrieking, “This is so much fun! This is just so much fun! This is SO. MUCH. FUN!” As you have gathered, we enjoyed our nighttime tuk-tuk ride. I especially enjoyed the fact that it took Myrtle’s mind, for five seconds anyway, off the apsara dancing. But of course, once we exited the tuk-tuk, her busy mind swarmed around the apsara dancing, and she determined that she and I would practice that dancing in our room. Now that, dear gentle reader, was something you probably would have enjoyed seeing, maybe even more than the

dancers themselves if you are in the mood for “Let’s do something really stupid, how about it?”

I politely told Myrtle to go first. Myrtle set her face into an appropriate mystical and serene expression. To me it looked like she was contemplating her navel, or maybe her next bowel movement, who knew? Then she started the dance, and oh my! She looked at various times like a demented monkey trying to stay on its branch or a praying mantis that had got into the bourbon or maybe a spider that somehow got stuck in its own web and was madly trying to extricate its eight legs. Take your pick. At one point I simply could not help it, and I guffawed. You must admit that when it comes to pointing out how ridiculous something is, a guffaw is much more effective than a mere laugh.

Well, that did not go over well with her highness, the new Royal Apsara Dancer. She turned on me with a huff and snarled, “You try it, if you think you are so smart.”

Dear Reader, this is one of those times when my better judgment went on vacation again. It does that occasionally, and usually at the most inconvenient times. I stood up, balanced on one leg, stuck my other leg behind me, bending it up prettily behind the knee and pointing my toes down, put both arms out in front of me, and did my best to push my palms out and turn up my fingers, which, by the way, refused to cooperate. I promptly started to wobble, tried unsuccessfully to untangle my legs, and fell over in a heap.

Unfortunately, the small table Myrtle had been using for her postprandial nip, got in the way of a graceful bellyflop. Myrtle dove for her all-important wine, I crashed into her, and she bopped me on the head while simultaneously (yes, don't ask me how she did this simultaneously, but she did) saved her bottle of wine *and* the glass still half-full.

Now, despite being a wee bit incensed by that time, I had to admit *THAT* was a feat! However, my kindly congratulatory feelings toward her did a decided nosedive when she then proceeded to throw the glass of wine into my face. Yes, MY face! She threw the wine into MY face! And I do not even like that particular wine!

Now I ask you, was this fair? Wasn't SHE the one who wanted me to do this stupid thing in the first place? Hmmmph!

I did not speak to her for the rest of the night, and I stewed all night long about what a royal pain she is. I was still stewing about it the next morning, and I did not sit with her at the breakfast table. Two of our travel mates looked at me with a bit of astonishment when I sidled my way in between them at table, but I tried so hard to be my most charming self, full of all good will toward men, especially those full of bonhomie themselves, that eventually they excused themselves, leaving me moping alone at my table, sending a few bitter glances Myrtle's way. She, of course, was the life of the party at her table and so full of bonhomie that my breakfast sort of curdled inside me.

I soon left and went back to our room, nursing my wounds. And what do you think I found there? Two of my favorite chocolate truffles on my bedside table! I struggled for a few minutes to try to figure out how and when she put them there, but finally gave up, chalking it up to "weird Myrtle stuff." So, once again, all was well.

Later that day on the bus Myrtle got into a conversation with our guide about the apsara dance. "The main thing to remember," he told her patiently, "is that to do the dance correctly, you must imagine yourself a lotus. You must have a strong mental image of yourself being a lotus. If you are truly successful at that, you will be able to dance the apsara." I happen to really like the lotus flower and extend to it my strongest accolades for it being a creation of greatest beauty, but the thought of turning myself into a lotus to do that dance correctly – well, dear reader, I, who prize myself on never giving up, admit defeat. I did find a beautiful lotus flower and took two pictures of it to help Myrtle's imagining. She looked at them briefly and sighed, and that was sort of the end of the apsara lovefest.



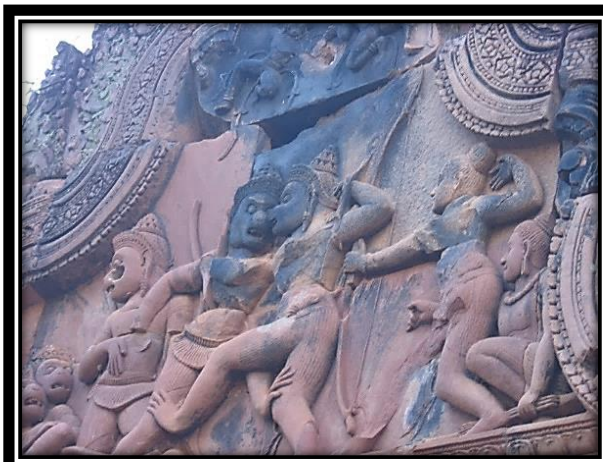
But we soon had other beautiful things to think about, because our destination that afternoon was the Banteay Srei Temple, which our guide told us he considers the most beautiful of all the temples because of its small and elegant size and its historic carvings. “Banteay Srei,” he informed us, “is a tenth century Hindu Shiva Temple built in sandstone. There are six small temples in the Banteay Srei complex, typically with three towers for the three gods, Shiva, Vishnu, and Brahma, the principal gods of Hinduism. The complex was discovered by the French in 1914. It was buried in the jungle and dirt and was excavated in the 1920s. The archaeologists found many sculptures and put some of them back, but they also took many artifacts. Some of the excavators were arrested and put into jail at Phnom Penh and freed when they gave back the artifacts. Some parts of the temple complex have been rebuilt, but all the carvings are original.”

In the Temple of Shiva we learned that Shiva was riding on his sacred bull Nandi, who cannot open his eyes or the world will end. In the Temple of Vishnu we saw Vishnu reincarnated as a holy demon with claws extended, the killing demon of Hindu mythology. We saw stories from the Ramayana, Sanskrit writing of the 10th century. We learned about Indra, the Hindu god of order who brings rain and sunshine so people can survive. We learned about some of the artifacts that had been stolen. “When looters tried to take the statue of the Holy Bull Nandi,” said our guide, “they found it so heavy they could not lift it, so they took only half of it.”





“This temple is very famous because it is so well preserved,” said our guide. “Originally this was all pink sandstone. There was no stucco on it. The colors are different today because of the stone being buried so long in the ground. The green color on the stone is from moss. Archaeologists today are still finding more pieces of the temples and the artifacts in the ground.”



Around 5:00 pm our guide recommended that if we wished to view the sunset from the top of a temple, we should climb one now because there were few people around and the climb would be safer. We all gamely climbed up to the top to enjoy the sunset and get photos. These steps were a challenge for everybody, and especially for Myrtle, who insisted she would do the climb despite her fear of heights. I stayed next to her on the climb, and I knew that from the bottom of the steps we were quite a sight, scrambling up basically like monkeys using our hands and feet both. But we made it! And our reward? Well, it was sort of what we had been seeing all along: wetlands and rice fields and more wetlands and more rice fields. But Myrtle and I high fived each other because we had made it to the top of the temple! As the sun began to sink lower in the sky, however, and we woke up to the fact that we needed to get back down those impossible steps, we did feel a bit of panic. We most assuredly HAD to do this before the darkness fell. At one point Myrtle got so distraught she said, "I need to ask the guide to carry me down." I pointed out that the guide was at that moment walking toward the bus with his phone at his ear. "We are on our own, dear Myrtle," I said, "now let's do this." We turned around like infants and crawled down those steps backward, dear reader, and our fear of the encroaching darkness and the possibility of snakes (!) powered us amazingly.



Our reward was a lovely dinner in a delightful French restaurant, and all was well.

To be continued . . .