

3 ANGKOR WAT

There was no Angelina Jolie nor any other distraction the day we went to (Drum Roll, please) yes, the BIG DEAL, Angkor Wat, which was, of course, the primary reason Myrtle and I were in Cambodia in the first place. We were so psyched the night before that we had to talk each other down just to get some sleep.

On the bus, our guide told us about this famous temple. “Angkor Wat is the soul of the Cambodian people. It is a World Heritage Site and one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Tourism is 50% of the Cambodian economy, and much of that importance is due to Angkor Wat. Today a private petrol company runs Angkor Wat. About two million people visit Angkor Wat every year, but the petrol company doesn’t pay enough to the government. The government is corrupt.

Angkor Wat is a temple, not a place to live. It’s like a home of the gods. It is a pyramid-based temple with three levels. Only the High Priest was allowed on the top level. Some monks live here now to take care of the temple. Angkor Wat is the only temple that is well preserved, and that is because the monks live here. When the temple was discovered, it was hidden by vegetation but typically not the giant trees that engulfed the Ta Prohm temple. The covering vegetation at Angkor Wat was smaller, with lots of vines. The jungle actually helped protect the beautiful bas reliefs that are over 900 years old. They are different colors because Indian archaeologists started cleaning them. The movie *Raiders of the Lost Ark* was filmed here.

The bas relief in the first gallery of the temple, showing monkeys fighting demons, has a black shiny surface. That is from years of people touching it. Now it is forbidden for visitors to touch anything. All the bas relief sculptures in the temple depict Hindu legends. The temple converted to Buddhism in the 16th century. There used to be a gallery of the Thousand Buddhas, but most of the Buddhas have been looted. There is some lightning damage to a part of the temple, so there are lightning rods on the temple now.”



When we got our first glimpse of this iconic temple, Myrtle and I both squealed a little. But, dear reader, nobody minded, because I think everybody felt like squealing. They were just too shy to do so. As we approached the temple, my camera trigger finger kept clicking and clicking and I thought it might be on auto pilot. I ended up with about a million photos of the exterior of Angkor Wat.





Some visiting monks were waiting in line to enter the temple, and I was surprised that they did not get preferential treatment. Myrtle smirked, “Looks like the petrol company is not a fan of the monks. If this were a nightclub, the monks would get in first, and they would get in free!” Inside the temple there was a giant statue of the supreme god Vishnu with six arms. Our guide had told us that Hindu deities often have multiple arms or heads to symbolize their immense power. Some of the visitors worshiped at the feet of the god, and some only wanted to take photos.



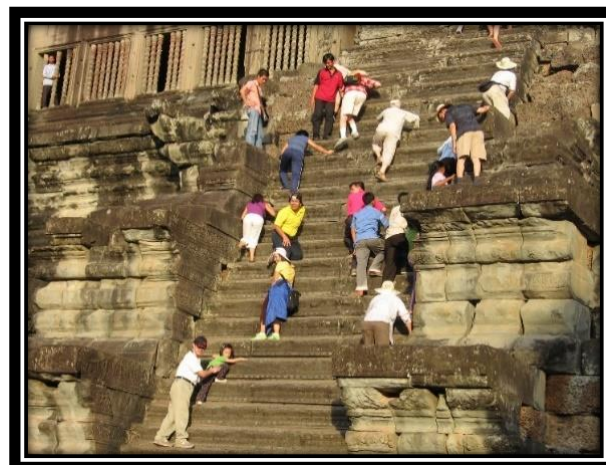


Unfortunately, my camera started acting up inside the temple and I got only a few photos of the treasures inside. Myrtle said piously, “You offended the supreme beings here when you took a gazillion photos of the exterior of their temple without their permission.” Then she laughed and said, “At least you got the most important photo, the Naga Princesses!” When we came to the part of the temple where tourists were climbing the steep steps to the third level, where only the High Priest used to be allowed, our guide cautioned us, “It is true that there is a panoramic view from the top of this temple, but if you climb up, it may take you an hour to get back down safely.”



Our guide continued, “You see that the steps are exceptionally steep, and there are no handrails. When the temple was built, only the high priest was allowed on that third level of the temple. Tourists always think they must climb to the top to get the best view. The truth is that the view is not that much different than the view you saw from the top of the temple at Banteay Srei. If you feel you want to climb to the top of this temple, you are free to do so. I feel I must also tell you that I do not encourage you to do so because of the danger and the time involved. If you watch the climbers, you see how slowly they are climbing, as though they are literally crawling, and they get tired and must stop to rest. When they try to come back down, they go even slower because we all know that it is harder coming down than going up. I have had some tour groups where it took three hours for people to go up and come back down. One time I had to leave two people here and take the rest of the group for our dinner reservation and then come back for those two.”

A man in our group asked, “When you say danger, do you mean that people get hurt here?” “Yes,” replied our guide. “Every year there are tourists who get hurt here and there are tourists who die here, falling to their deaths.” There were astonished gasps among our group. “But you don’t hear about that,” said one woman. Our guide responded, “No, it is bad for tourism, so you will not hear much about that. The accidents usually happen because people are careless or lose their balance. That happens most when there are big crowds and people bump into each other. Once three people went down that way.”



Everyone in our group chose not to climb up this temple. I was glad, especially when, shortly after I took these photos, a busload of those pushy Korean tourists came swarming to the steps. “Yikes,” I thought. “I wonder if there will be an accident today. Oh dear.” Myrtle, who was still in a snarky mood about that pushy woman who shoved her out of the way to get a photo, said, “Well, if that pushy woman goes down, I will not cry.” OK, then.



Several of us had signed up for a hot air balloon ride over Angkor Wat, and three of us left the group to do that. The balloon ride was quite different from other balloon rides I have taken, where the balloon does, as you might expect, fly through the air. Not at the speed of a plane or a bird, for sure, but it does move. The balloon here at Angkor Wat did not move horizontally. Basically, the balloon went up a little less than 400 feet and stayed up there for ten minutes and then was pulled back down. The gondola was so large it would hold 20 passengers, and frankly, I was astonished that the balloon made it off the ground with all that weight! The balloon remained tethered to the ground the whole time by a thick cable that was let out to allow the balloon to rise and then pulled back in to bring the balloon down, like reeling in a fish. A few on the ride grumbled that that was a bit wimpy in their opinion. One even mumbled something about asking for his money back. I thought that was cheap and uncalled for. I was happy with the ride because I managed to get a true panoramic photo of the area around the Angkor Wat complex.





When our group was all reassembled at Angkor Wat, our guide and driver took us out to the west moat wall for what they called an “Angkor Wat Sunset Special.” We sat on the wall or lotus style on the ground and watched the sun set on this incomparable temple while sipping strong Cambodian wine and eating fried frog legs, peanuts, and raw mango with salt.



As the sun sank lower in the western sky and dusk stole over us, the sporadic conversations among us dwindled and died, until there was only silence. Myrtle’s hand found mine, and when I looked at her, her eyes were closed and tears were sliding silently down her cheeks. We sat like that for long moments, until the watery reflection of this ancient temple sank into darkness and there remained only the clouds above Angkor Wat still lit by the disappearing sun. Our guide rose quietly, and we followed him to our bus, Myrtle still holding tightly to my hand.



To be continued . . .