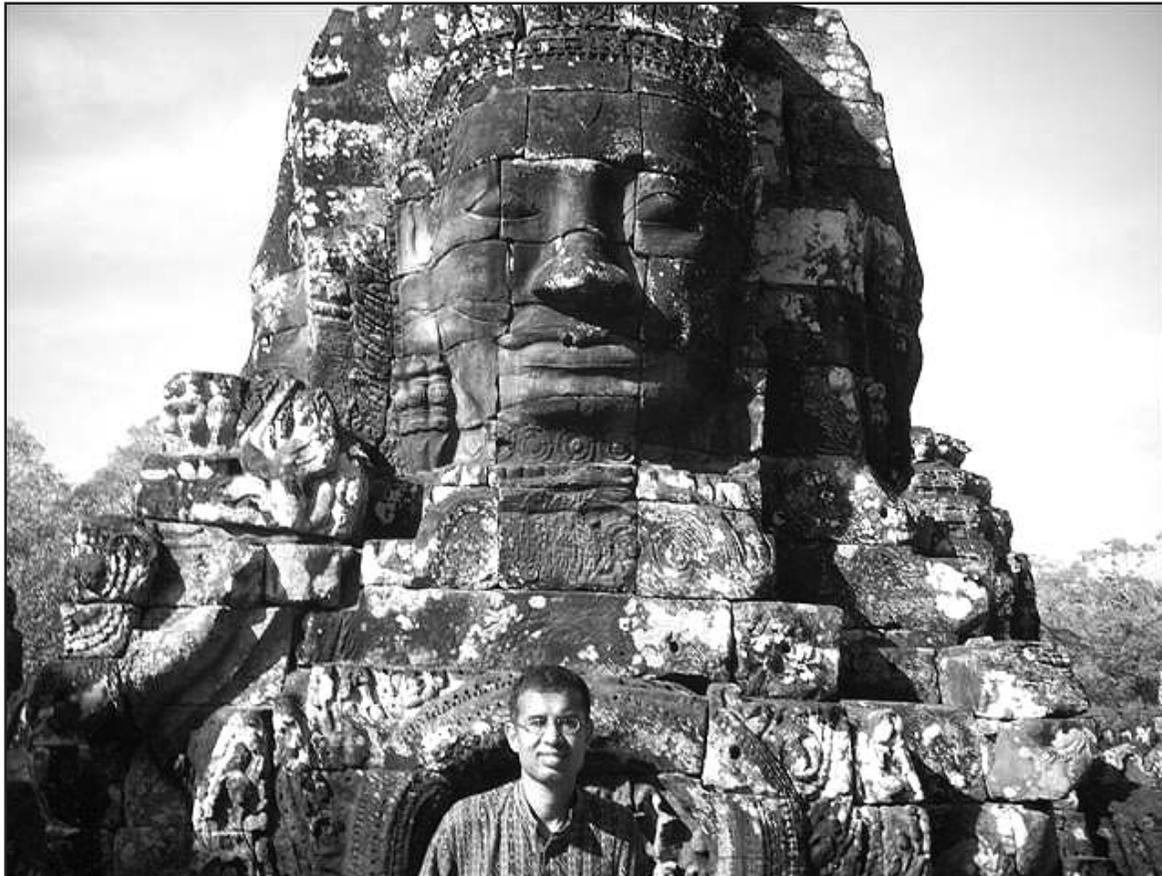


Angkor Wat and the many faces of Vishnu



A humbling experience at Bayon.

by Murli Menon

Angkor Wat is a temple at Angkor, Cambodia, built for King Suryavarman II in the early 12th century as his state temple and capital city. As the best-preserved temple at the site, it is the only one to have remained a significant religious centre since its foundation—first Hindu, dedicated to Vishnu, then Buddhist. The temple is the epitome of the high classical style of Khmer architecture. It has become a symbol of Cambodia, appearing on its national flag, and it is the country's prime attraction for visitors.

I reached Angkor Wat some months ago, with funds low but morale high. In a very meaningful coincidence I met two NRIs, one from Australia and the other from New York, both travelling alone who wanted to know more about India to jointly explore with me the 50 odd temples that are existing here in return for me telling them something about India as both of them were born abroad to Indian parents and have never been to India even once.

All my travels in Angkor were in their limousine.

The most incredible proof that destiny wanted us to meet at Angkor is that all three of us are born on the same date : 15th of December. We compared our passports as we ourselves could not believe that we are together in a one in a billion coincidence. Three people living in three different continents meeting at Angkor and being born on the same day between 1962 and 1970!

At Angkor you see what resemble the stone sculptures scattered at Easter Island off Chile and step pyramids which are not dissimilar to the step pyramids of Guatemala, Mexico and Peru.

The most exciting part of going to Angkor Wat is to experience the architectural beauty of the temples combined with the beauty of nature. Several temples are viewed best before sunrise or sunset. This gives one an opportunity to enjoy the changing phases of the sun and also study the changing colors of the temples under various shades of light. Some of the temples of Angkor have been purposely left exactly as the explorers found them. This is a good thing as one can see the giant silver cotton trees growing throughout the temple and giving it a wild look. This also ensures that one has to trek on foot through thick forests to enjoy the beauty of these temples which were abandoned to the elements. Even for a cursory visit to all the major temple complexes of Angkor could take almost three to four days. One can spend a considerable amount of time at the major temples if one stays at Angkor for at least seven days.

Bayon is just one of the over 50 temples that exist in the 50 km radius around Seam Reap town. Every step inside the ancient complex of Bayon is no short of a miraculous experience. The sound of the rainforest pervades the temple. The chirping of birds and shrill cries of macaques rent the air and in the center of the wilderness, stands a black pagoda with giant sculpted faces! The effect of the first morning light on Bayon is an incredibly touching moment. The most unbelievable part of one's visit to Bayon is that the faces look different at different times of the day and is a photographer's dream. Each face is worth a million pictures and each picture speaks more than a million words. The language of stone defeats the language of man!

As one explores the temple complex at Bayon, one is perplexed by the mysterious smile on the face of Vishnu. The answers to the riddle of the construction of Angkor Wat has left scientists searching for answers. Scientists are dumbstruck on the technology used by the Angkorian kings to haul thousands of stones weighing hundreds of tons and transport them over hundreds of kilometres across several cities stretching from Thailand to Vietnam. How were these stones sculpted to depict scenes from the Mahabharata, Ramayana and thousands of birds, plants, animals, deities, devatas and apsaras? How have these ancient monuments survived to this day without much damage though they were left to the elements for a thousand years! The silent faces of Bayon mock the achievements of modern science. There is no better proof of the power of ancient wisdom, than a visit to the hundred temple complexes strewn across Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

Walking around these giant sculpture almost instils a sense of timelessness. One could easily be a villager of the 10th century, or a French explorer of the 15th century who accidentally stumbled into these pristine remnants of an ancient civilization. Dumbfounded, astounded, stupefied and awestruck, one lingers around these blocks of stone assembled painstakingly as a tribute to the elements. The most amazing fact about Angkor is that these temples have not only survived the ravages of time, fire, water, earth, plunderers, international smugglers, idol thieves and civil war but continues to exist as it did when it was built! This itself is a proof of divine intervention!



A view of Angkor Wat (top) with its reflection in water.

The author with Apsara dance troupe (above) at Angkor, (seven-headed Naga is in the background.) The mysterious faces of Vishnu at Bayon.



More than the artistic beauty of the sculptures and the wilderness around the temples, Angkor is a miracle in stone. As one climbs the steep step pyramids to get a bird's eye view of the dense forests or when one watches the sunset after climbing to the Bantay Samrey temple on top of the hill, one gets a feeling that these temples were constructed so that every visitor to these temples could experience the sights and sounds of nature.

The Tonle Sap lake is located near Angkor Wat and is a sanctuary to innumerable large water birds which

migrate from northern China in the months of December and January. Many of these birds can be seen perched on the treetops that surround the temples. A few can be seen flying above the Siem Reap river which snakes its way through the forests that surround Angkor. So there is a good chance of sighting several threatened and endangered species of large water birds throughout your trip through Angkor.

The author is an intrepid Indian traveler, who lives in Ahmedabad and is author of books on ZeNLP.