

The temples of Angkor Wat

Murli Menon

I started my journey from Ahmedabad and I flew to Bangkok via New Delhi and Bangkok to Phnom Penh. From Phnom Penh airport, I took a taxi to Phnom Penh Bus Station and boarded the bus to Battambang. From Battambang, I took the bus to Seam Reap. After a three-hour bus ride through the lush green Cambodian countryside dotted with palm-fringed rice fields, the bus stopped at Ramdulatea village for lunch. As soon as we get down from the bus, hawkers selling everything from roasted peanuts to souvenirs descend on us in hordes. I bought steamed sweet vegan coconut rice pancakes and wrote my travel blog with my laptop while waiting for my fellow passengers to finish their three-course lunch.

Along the way, we passed The Tonle Sap Lake near Angkor Wat, which is a sanctuary for innumerable large water birds. They 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 possibility of sighting several threatened and endangered species of large water-birds throughout your trip from Battambang to Angkor Wat.

As I explored the temple complex at Bayon, I was perplexed by the mysterious smile on the face of Vishnu (God in Hinduism). 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 kings of Angkor 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 (the longest and oldest epic poem), Ramayana (epic poem written in Sanskrit) and thousands of birds, plants, animals, deities (gods and goddesses), devatas and apsaras (supernatural women in mythology)? How have these ancient monuments survived to this day with minor damage, though these monuments 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.

I reached Siem Reap and a motorbike taxi took me from the bus station to a family run guest house named Lay Lay guest house located 6 km away from Angkor. I went to bed early to prepare for the early morning two-hour trek to Angkor to see the sunrise at 6:00 a.m. Motor taxi fares are negotiable and my bargaining skills stood me in good stead with these hard-core bargainers. Locals are quoted fares in Riels whereas foreigners are quoted in multiples of U. S. dollars (as there are no cents or riel coins in Cambodia).

Also, the fare quoted is for the return journey with a considerable amount of waiting time at the temples. Also, I got more time to explore the sculptures and



architecture inside the temple complexes. The downside is that one has to walk the first kilometre to get the cheapest price. However, one also can get free rides to Seam Reap from the locals who do not seem to mind giving a short lift to foreigners on their two-wheelers! I woke up in the wee hours of the morning to find the streets full of life. A procession of tourists was on the way to see the sandstone replica of "Mount Meru" bathed in molten gold. I got on the moped of a local villager, going to sell wooden carvings to the early birds, to reach Angkor.

Bayon is just one of the 60 temples that exist in the 50 km. radius around Seam Reap town. Some temples are located 50 km. away from Siem Reap. There are 50 more such treasure troves to discover during my fifteen-day stay at Seam Reap. 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 you an opportunity to enjoy the changing phases of the sun and also study the changing colours of the temples under various shades of light.

Some temples of Angkor have been purposely left exactly as the explorers found them. This is a good thing, as you can see the giant silver cotton trees growing throughout the temple and giving it a wild look. This also ensures you have to trek on foot through thick forests to enjoy the beauty of these

temples, which were abandoned to the elements. Even a cursory visit to all the major temple complexes of Angkor could take you almost three to four days. You can spend a considerable amount of time at the major temples if you stay at Angkor for at least seven days.

The more you spend time at Bayon, the more you wish to stay on because you would not only like to photograph each one of these enigmatic faces but would also like to catch it in different moods during the three twilights of the day. The most spectacular views are at mid-day and dusk.

It is a pleasure to watch the crimson rays of the sun reflected by the black stones as the sun sets. The other important feature of Bayon is that it is in the middle of thick forests and the sounds of the crickets reverberate throughout the day as the crickets get fooled by the semi-darkness that envelops these forests. In many places, the sun's rays cannot penetrate the forest floor because of the thick forest cover! After a tough day exploring the temples on foot, it is soothing to laze on the hammocks between the trunk of two gigantic trees, while listening to the shrill cries of the crickets. I closed my eyes and meditated on the binaural beats of the crickets under the giant trees which surround these giant temples.

Walking around these giant sculptures almost instils a sense of timelessness, since I could easily have been 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, I stopped around these blocks of these 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, idle thieves and civil war but continue to exist as it did when it was built! This itself is proof of divine intervention!

More than the artistic beauty of the sculptures and the wilderness around the temples, Angkor is a miracle in stone. As you climb the steep step pyramids to get a bird's-eye view of the dense forests or when you watch the sunset after climbing to the Banta Samrey temple on top of the hill, you get a feeling that these temples were constructed so that every visitor could experience the sights and sounds of nature. The energy aura of Bayon is incredibly powerful. As you enter the tiny caves bathed by the setting sun, inside the evergreen forests, a cool breeze blows across one's face and immediately puts one at ease. The sounds of the evergreen forest and the peaceful environs of Bayon make it an ideal place for meditation. Meditating at Bayon before sunrise is a powerful experience. You can feel one's body, mind and soul being recharged with fresh energy! Every cell of one's body vibrates with a primordial power, which pervades this ancient site.

Every step inside the ancient complex of Bayon is not 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 centre of the wilderness, stands a black pagoda (cult place) with giant sculpted faces! However, the effect of the first morning light on Bayon is an incredibly touching moment. The most unbelievable part of the visit to Bayon is that the faces look different at different times of the day. 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!

But despite the effect of the elements over a thousand years, only a few cracks show through some faces. A majority of the faces stand together as if assembled the previous day! The sandstone, dolomite and rock needed for the construction of these temples were quarried 30 km away on the banks of the Seam Reap River and transported to Bayon, sculpted and assembled there. However, the immensity of this enormous accomplishment became apparent to me, as I tired of walking through the labyrinth of towers, each adorned with four identical faces. The emotions on the faces are clearly visible. While the face of Shiva (his third eye is clearly seen) is grim, Vishnu is seen smiling, whereas the two faces of Brahma are neutral. The emotions on the faces symbolise creation, maintenance and destruction!

After watching the sunrise over Angkor Wat, it is time to move on to the giant faces of Bayon, which were abandoned centuries ago after the Siamese sacked Angkor.