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The Temples of Cambodia

Discover Ancient Angkor

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Angkor is a region in Cambodia that served as the seat of the Khmer Empire, the largest empire of Southeast Asia that flourished between the 9th and 15th centuries. This ancient and revered Cambodian province is home to astonishing and enduring architectural evidence of the Khmer Empire's Hindu and Mahayana Buddhist beliefs; the temples of Angkor are awe-inspiring reminders of what was the largest preindustrial urban center in the world,

larger than modern day New York.

Angkor Wat

While there are over 100 stone temples scattered throughout the Angkor region, the 5 listed here are the definite must-sees. Unquestionably topping this list is the temple at Angkor Wat, built by Suryavaram II to honor the Hindu god Vishnu. The enormous temple consists of 5 concentric rectangular walls and moats, symbolizing a cosmic chain of mountains and ocean. Angkor Wat is the best-preserved temple in Angkor; it appears on the country's national flag and is the prime attraction for tourists.

The construction of Angkor Wat lasted at least 37 years. The main tower of the central temple represents the mountain Meru, the center of the Hindu and Buddhist universe. When touring Angkor Wat and the surrounding temples and religious monuments, it's also possible to visit nearby Siem Reap, a small colonial town just north of Southeast Asia's largest lake, Tonle Sap. If you'd like to stay a day or 2 to bask in the Angkor's spiritual sanctity, Siem Reap has **many hotels** offering reasonable prices.

Banteay Srei

Banteay Srei, or the Temple of Women, has been called a jewel of Khmer art. Its great reliefs depict many mythological Hindu events including the duel between the monkey princes, Bali and Sugreeva; Narasimha's slaying of the demon Hiranyakasipu; and the burning of Khandava Forest.

Banteay Srei is unique among Angkor's noble temples because it was built by a wealthy courtier and scholar who served as an advisor to the Cambodian king, and not the monarch himself. Banteay Srei was dedicated to the Hindu god, Siva in 967; the temple is therefore considerably older than the other Angkor sites.

The grounds, buildings and layout at Banteay Srei are small, contrasting with the monumental scale of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom. While the buildings may be compact, they don't feel crowded, and the structural layout enhances the narrative relief carvings covering Banteay Srei's red sandstone walls and passageways.

Preah Khan

Preah Khan is another of King Jayavarman's creations and an inscription on the temple suggests he built it on the site where he defeated invaders from Champa, a region that is now Southern Vietnam. The successive rectangular galleries surrounding the Buddhist sanctuary have largely been left untouched.

This large complex not only functioned as a monastic house of worship, it was also a university including elements of Buddhist, Vaishnava and Shaiva worship. When visiting this hallowed ground, make sure to explore the Prasat Preah Stung, a central tower with 4 ornate Bayon-like carvings. Once inside, meander through the galleries and 2 libraries.

This is another Angkor site you can explore while staying in Siem Reap. The Preah Khan hotel takes its name from the site and offers guests modern luxuries near this enduring cultural landmark.

Ta Prohm

The Khmer monarch completed the construction of this royal monastery in the 12th century and dedicated the grounds both to his mother and the goddess of wisdom, Prajnaparamita. The central stone pillar, called a foundational stele, chronicles the dedication and urges successors to protect the revered site.

The location of the temple, set amidst the lush Cambodian jungle, makes it extremely popular for tourists. Ta Prohm was home to more than 12,500 people, and the temple served as a place of worship for thousands of souls in surrounding villages. Now this peaceful town stands as a reminder of Cambodia's early spirituality and religious beliefs.

Bayon

Another of Angkor's sacred temple sites is Bayon is a walled capital city known especially for its jungle of face towers. These towers bear massive stone carvings depicting the face of the king and a message of spiritual worship. This is a place where the teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism exist in a unique spiritual balance, most visibly evident in the massive stone faces carved into Bayon's many towers.

To explore these sacred Cambodian sites, it's possible to book a **temple tour**. History and spirituality combine in this ancient land where mythology and religion share the same stone face, and cultural customs wait to be discovered at every turn.

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