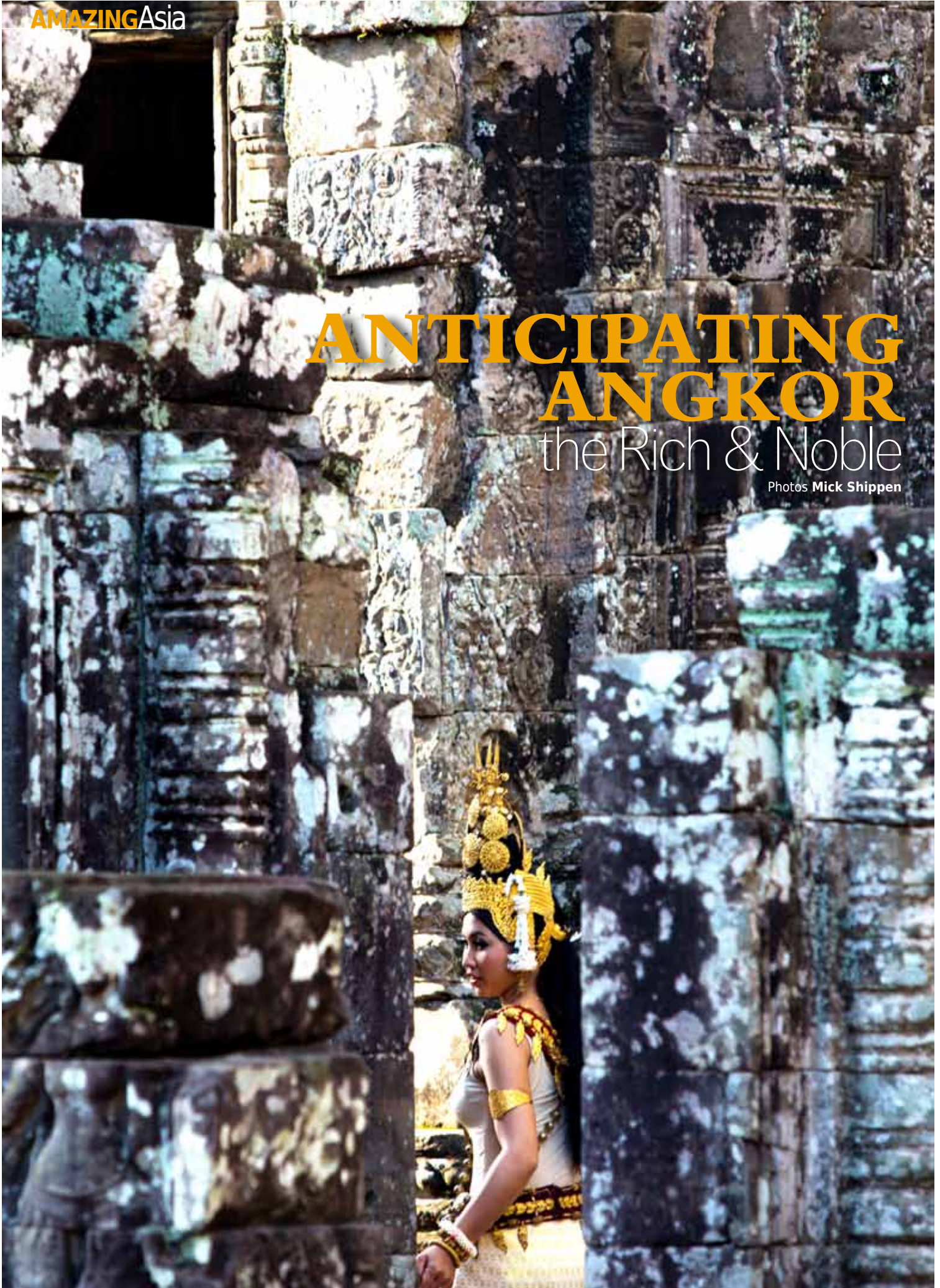


# ANTICIPATING ANGKOR

the Rich & Noble

Photos Mick Shippen



These days Angkor may be an anthill of tourists, but a visit to Cambodia's stone-hewn treasure is still an essential travel experience, writes photographer **Mick Shippen**.

**A**s the gateway to Angkor, Siem Reap is Cambodia's most visited town. Located just eight kilometres from the ancient temples sites, the town has benefited from the massive influx of tourists and many new luxury hotels and resorts.

### Magnificent Museum

A good way to start your Angkor adventure is at the recently completed Angkor National Museum. It's a worthwhile experience that clearly and concisely explains the history of Angkor and is a great precursor to visiting the sites. The museum includes a stunning collection of over 1,000 Buddha images, all removed from the temples to prevent theft.

Angkor is so inspiring that it is possible to spend five or six enjoyable days exploring the area. However, if your time is limited, focus on a few highlights. The Angkor Archeological Park is open from 5:00am until 6:30pm daily. Entry is US\$20 a day or \$40 for a three day pass. A seven day pass valid for one month is \$60.

### Temple Time

In 1296, Zhou Daguan, a Chinese emissary who spent a year in Cambodia documenting the life and customs of the Khmer, gazed upon Angkor Tom and described it thus:

At the centre of the Kingdom rises a Golden Tower (Bayon) flanked by more than twenty lesser towers and several hundred stone chambers. On the eastern side is a golden bridge guarded by two lions of gold, one on each side, with eight golden Buddhas spaced along the stone chambers. North of the Golden Tower rises the Tower of Bronze (Baphuon), higher even than the Golden Tower: a truly astonishing spectacle with more than ten chambers at its base. A quarter of a mile further north is the residence of the King. Rising above his private apartments is another tower of gold. These are the monuments which have caused merchants from overseas to speak so often of "Cambodia the rich and noble."

Seven centuries later, the splendours of Angkor Thom and another 90 temple sites within the Angkor Archaeological Park are still looked upon with astonishment by over one million visitors a year.



### The Myth of Creation

In December 1992, long before hordes of tourists began to arrive, Angkor's importance to mankind was officially recognised when it was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The global organisation stated that Angkor was a masterpiece of creative genius representing a unique artistic achievement, and was an exceptional testimony to a lost civilisation. Angkor Wat itself covers an area

of one square kilometre, and comprises of three levels, and a central tower. A highlight of Angkor Wat is the bas-relief of the 'Churning of the Sea of Milk', a stunning depiction of the Hindu myth of creation. The intricate 70m panel runs the entire length of the temple's east gallery and is regarded as the one of the world's most exquisite stone carvings.

Divided into three sections, the centre of the scene depicts the serpent Vasuki being pulled to and fro by 92 demons at the head while 88 gods, with the assistance of Hanuman the monkey god, pull on the tail in an effort to produce the elixir of immortality, a task they endured for one thousand years. The lower section of the remarkable scene shows real and mythical aquatic creatures in the sea; above graceful flying Apsaras look down on the giant tug-of-war. Eventually the Sea of Milk gives forth *amrita*, the essence of life and immortality and other wonders including Airavata the three-headed elephant, and the nymph-like Apsaras.

### A River of Phallic Symbols

Ta Phrom is a sprawling temple complex and the site of Angkor's most recognisable imagery. The main temple was lost to jungle for centuries and when it was reclaimed the massive trees that straddled the walls were left in place. They were also straddled by Angelina Jolie in the film *Tomb Raider*, hence its present day appeal to visitors. It's a fascinating temple, but get there early to beat the tour buses.

There are several fine temples beyond Angkor, one of the best being Banteay Srei. It is worth taking the 38 kilometre ride out here, if only to enjoy a drive through the beautiful countryside. The temple is constructed of sandstone that has a pinkish tinge and its delicate bas-reliefs are in excellent condition. Due to looting, the sculptures at the site are replicas. The remaining originals can be seen at the National Museum in Phnom Penh.

Another 12 kilometres beyond Banteay Srei is Kbal Spean. The site of a riverbed carved with over 1,000 lingams that date from the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The site is reached by a 1.5 kilometre walk along a beautiful trail through the woods, some of which is uphill, but it is not too taxing. On the way back stop at the Landmine



Museum for a sobering reminder of Cambodia's deadly legacy.

### Craft Revival

After a morning spent temple-hopping exploring the Old Market in the centre of Siem Reap for local handicrafts makes for a pleasant distraction. One of the best craft shops in town is the Artists d'Angkor. It was established in 1997 and promotes the rich heritage, identity, authenticity and evolution of Cambodian artisans.

It's hard to comprehend, but the genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge wiped out so many artists and craftsmen that the traditional arts were almost lost. Today, following a concerted effort, with the help of EU funding, Cambodian crafts are in top form. The crafts business is now totally self-financing and trains dozens of artisans each year, many of whom set up on their own.

In Siem Reap, Artisans d' Angkor have a shop in the town centre and a workshop where visitors can see the crafts being made. Out of town there is a silk weaving centre and another shop close to Angkor Wat. The shops sell lacquerware, stone carving, high quality hand woven silk, silverware and much more.



### Cooking-up Khmer Flavours

With the growing interest in Cambodia as a destination, the country's cuisine is currently undergoing a renaissance. Delicious traditional dishes are being revived and refined for the tables of an ever-increasing number of restaurants.

At La Résidence d'Angkor chefs offer an exquisite menu called 'Khmer Discovery'. An excellent way to become acquainted with Cambodian flavours, the aptly named Bayon, Banteay Srey and Angkor Wat Tower's set menus feature exotic temptations such as Mekong lobster with ginger and Kampot green peppercorn, sun-dried fish salad with green mango and Khmer basil, and fishcakes with kaffir lime leaves and tamarind sauce, each beautiful seasoned and presented with artistic flair.

Cambodian cooks draw on a number of influences to create their distinctive cuisine,





namely the food of neighbouring Laos, Thailand and Vietnam. Flavourful, yet without the searing chilli heat of Thai food, many Western visitors find Cambodian food a pleasant surprise. The classic Khmer dish is *amok*, a mix of fish, coconut milk, lemongrass, herbs and spices baked in banana leaf. Fragrant and delicious, *amok* can be considered the country's national dish.

At La Résidence d'Angkor guests can also join an excellent cooking class, which includes a trip to the market to get familiar with local ingredients, and instruction from a top chef who divulges the secrets and techniques of Cambodia cooking, including how to make an exceptional *amok*.

### Celestial Nymphs

Visitors to Cambodia soon add a new word to their vocabulary – Apsara. Often appropriated as a name for resorts, travel companies and restaurants, Apsaras are actually mythical female celestial dancers that graced the walls of Angkor-era temples as early

as the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD.

Scholars of Khmer art and archaeology often differentiate between the sensual flying nymphs or Apsaras and enigmatic standing figures known as Devatas which are thought to be guardians of the temple. Exquisite bas-reliefs of the highly stylised figures can be seen in abundance at Angkor Wat where over 1,700 have been recorded, and at other ancient monuments at the UNSECO World Heritage Site.

Today, the spirit of the Apsaras has been revived by Cambodia's burgeoning tourist industry and they appear in performances of beautifully choreographed Khmer dance drama at resorts and hotels. [A](#)

### GETTING AROUND

You will need transport to get from temple to temple, either a *romuak*, a motorbike with a trailer for two, or a driver with car. The *romuak* are an excellent way to get around, and preferable to the confines of a car. You can hire a *romuak* and driver for \$15 a day for running around town and Angkor. For longer trips out to places such as Banteay Srei, expect the fee to rise to \$25. Drivers usually wait near hotels and the concierge should be able to assist with negotiations.

### WHERE TO STAY

The perfect complement to a memorable stay in Siem Reap is **La Résidence d'Angkor**, an intimate 62-room Khmer-style resort managed by Orient-Express Hotels. The peaceful oasis is located next to the banks of tree-lined river, a short walk from the centre of town and close to the renowned Foreign Correspondents Club. In addition to its cooking classes the resort also hosts regular evening performances of traditional Apsara dance.

[www.residencedangkor.com](http://www.residencedangkor.com)

Also with a prime riverside location in the historical old French Quarter of Siem Reap is **Angkor Sayana Hotel & Spa**. This well-managed hotel offers outstanding value and charming Khmer service. An excellent choice for independent travelers, the hotel features a relaxing spa, swimming pool, and restaurant and bar. [www.angkorsayana.com](http://www.angkorsayana.com)