

5 Southeast Asian Historical Sites You Must See While Living in Singapore

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By Michael Smith Finder Blogger: The Travel Photog, and founder of www.asiaphotostock.com

While Southeast Asia has some amazing historical constructions, some of them take a bit of effort to get to. But don't let that stop you from having an experience of a lifetime in the region.

1) Borobudur, Indonesia

Central Java has a mystical landscape of active volcanoes, rice fields and sugarcane plantations as well as the enchanting, largest Buddhist stupa in the world at Borobudur 40 km northwest of Yogyakarta. Built from stone in the 9th Century it was damaged by earthquakes and buried by volcanic eruptions from Mount Merapi. It was rediscovered during the rule of Sir Stamford Raffles and fully restored 40 years ago.



The monument consists of 9 terrace levels including 3 circular levels containing small stupas surrounding a larger one at the top. The statistics are mind boggling! It contains over 500 Buddha statues and more than 2500 carved reliefs on 3000 meters of wall telling the story of Buddha and his life.



The second you arrive in the car park you will be bombarded with hawkers selling everything you might possibly need including hats, tee shirts, fans, drinks, postcards and kites. It's impossible to avoid them. Smile and keep walking or bargain hard.

2) Angkor Wat Complex, Cambodia

Siem Reap is the most visited city in Cambodia and is primarily responsible for the dramatic rise in tourism and development. It is only a few kilometres away from the massive Angkor Wat archaeological wonderland which stretches over 400 sq km. The most famous and instantly recognisable temple is Angkor Wat but there are many others spanning the Khmer Empire of the 9th to 15th century that are just as dramatic.



Built by King Suryavarman 11 in the 12th century Angkor Wat is the largest Hindu temple in the world. Crossing the bridge to enter the temple is fabulous. The five large stupas tower 65 meters from the ground. Intricate carvings on the bas relief friezes and quiet shady corners add to the aura.

Leave plenty of time for Ta Prohm, the jungle temple immortalised by Angelina Jolie in the Tomb Raider movie and the compact Bayon Temple, my personal favourite, with 216 giant faces on the stupas.

3) Sukhothai, Thailand

The Sukhothai Kingdom flourished in the 13th and 14th Centuries and during that period many extravagant palaces and temples were built. What remains today are spectacular ruins in Sukhothai Historical Park and nearby Satchanalai Historical Park.

The central part of Sukhothai Historical Park is flat and ideal for touring by bicycle. Start at Wat Mahathat, the largest and most impressive temple.



Numerous large stupas, attractive Buddha statues and tall columns, many reflected in lily ponds, will keep you lingering for well over an hour.

A 5 minute bike ride leads to Wat Si Sawai with its three imposing brick and stone pagodas and nearby is Wat Sa Si, a small temple which stands on its own island. The elegant, bronze walking Buddha is outstanding and the view of the main seated Buddha, framed by pillars is equally stunning.

Spend two or three days in Sukhothai which means "dawn of happiness" in the Thai language but only during the dry season as there is little in the way of entertainment if it rains.

4) Bagan, Myanmar

Bagan is a hot, dry, rural area in Myanmar with 2,000 pagodas and temples to choose from. It is very spread out and is best explored by car but the primitive roads are flat and empty so biking is an option for those with time and the energy. Bagan has too much to see on a short trip so we be very selective. Shwezigon Paya is Bagan's answer to Shwedagon in Yangon. It's a wonderful large golden monument built around 1100 AD to enshrine a replica of the Buddha's tooth in Kandy, Sri Lanka. Hawkers tout souvenirs from the stalls leading to the pagoda but the low pressure selling and smiling painted faces make spending a pleasure.



Ananda, one of the largest and best preserved temples in Bagan, built around 1100 AD in the shape of a cross and Htilominlo Temple is special and accommodates novice monks.



Shwe San Daw Pagoda is the place to see a sunset in Bagan. A short, steep and energy sapping climb up the side of the pagoda offers views over the plains. Spend some time by the river and rural villages in Bagan too, you will find it very rewarding.

5) The Plain of Jars in Phonsavan, Laos

The mysterious, huge stone vats at the Plain of Jars in remote North East Laos will surely see a surge in visitors as infrastructure improves. These jars remind me of stone circles in the UK, and they continue to baffle historians who are uncertain of their age, purpose or what ancient people made them and transported them there. Various hypotheses include storage for wine, celebratory "medals" for victory in battle or perhaps 2000 year old Neolithic coffins. Whatever, we headed to Site 1 of the 3 main sites of the Plain of Jars. It is the site closest to Phonsavan. A few small tour groups were our only company as we explored the site that of 250 jars. The jars were huge and great to wander around.

Jars Site 2 has two separate areas with 100 jars. One section is small and overgrown, but of particular interest is a tree from the jungle that had merged with a jar. The second, up a hill, had good views and a jar lid with what looked like a human form chiselled into it, reminding me that once upon a time all the jars had lids.



We walked through rice fields and water buffalo pastures up the hill to the 150 jars at Site 3. Cobwebs, the shade of the trees, a light mist, isolation and wondering if the jars were indeed former coffins gave this site an eerie feel.

About Mike Smith



Michael left the UK in 1986, on a contract for a chemical company, and never made it back. Instead, he's been using his camera to capture gorgeous natural scenes, fascinating festivals and intriguing people around Asia – and selling his photos and others' on his [site](#).