



The beauty of Angkor Wat and Bangkok's secret kampong enthralled **Mike Smith** on a recent trip that took him to both locations. Siem Reap has magnificent ancient temples that offer a unique experience, colourful markets and a much improved tourist infrastructure. Bangkok with its culture, great food and night life has something for everyone - including an oasis of calm on an island kampong. Mike took Thai Airways' inaugural Airbus 380 flight from Singapore to Bangkok before travelling overland to Cambodia.

ASIAN CITIES

The Airbus 380 is a very big plane but it still got tossed around in turbulence as we arrived in a late night storm. We would explore Bangkok on our return so we headed straight to Siem Reap the next morning by bus.

Market Rates

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 from the huge Angkor Wat archaeological wonderland which stretches over 400sqkm. The most famous and instantly recognisable temple is Angkor Wat, but there are many others in this UNESCO world heritage site, spanning the Khmer Empire of 9th to the 15th century, that are well worth seeing too.

The 300km ride to the Thailand and Cambodia border took only three hours as we whizzed past fields of corn and rice to arrive at the shanty town of Aranya Pratet with its massive wholesale and retail market.

I love markets for their sights, sounds and smells. This one has plenty to explore with sacks of garlic, onions and fresh vegetables in one section and fake designer shoes, bags, watches and clothing in another. The food court was excellent and provided standard fare of noodles, assorted eggs and baguettes plus more exotic delights such as deep fried grasshoppers, bugs and roaches.

Bordering on the Insane

As we dined, our luggage was removed from the luxury air conditioned bus and piled into an open cart which was pushed across the border where we would be reunited

with it later. Following our guide like sheep we bypassed the queue at immigration, got our passports stamped and entered no man's land along with countless porters, traders and general hangers on.

Neither Thailand nor Cambodia allows gambling, but in the half a kilometre walk through no man's land I noted seven casinos and numerous hotels, so there is clearly a demand. We never did go through Cambodia's immigration but our passports were stamped and re-entry cards back to Thailand filled out on our behalf. It felt good to get VIP treatment for a change!

Pub Street – My kind of Place

The 150km to Siem Reap was somewhat slower but we arrived in time to hit Pub Street which, as its name suggests, is full of bars and restaurants catering to tourists, expats and locals alike. Our party split up with the young and young at heart joining the crowd bopping away to the resident DJ playing disco music at full volume in Temple Bar and the rest of us enjoying a quieter drink at Angkor What? with its psychedelic exterior and irreverent tag line of "Promoting irresponsible drinking since 1998."

Beer was only fifty cents a pint in happy hour! Now that's my kind of place.

Khmer Wonder

It was raining in the morning when we awoke but it stopped as we set off for the Angkor Wat complex. At the entrance we quickly completed formalities. Our photos were taken and in return for \$20 we received our day passes.







The first stop was six kilometres from Siem Reap at Angkor Wat itself and I challenged myself to get both classic and somewhat different images of this large breathtaking monument. Built by King Suryavarman II in the early 12th century it is the world's largest Hindu Temple. Crossing the bridge and walking to the main entrance the reflections in the lake are very photogenic.

We spent three hours and burned many calories exploring the ample grounds and three tiers of Angkor Wat. The five large stupas towering 65m from the ground, intricate carvings on the bas relief friezes and quiet shady corridors all command attention. Hot, sweaty and happy I retired to the drinks stall and quenched my thirst watching monkeys playing on the outer walls.

Location for the Tomb Raider

Ta Prohm Jungle Temple is a maze with tricky paths and plenty of fallen stones so it is best visited with a guide. The jungle has merged with the temple and giant roots of the silk cotton tree growing out of the stone buildings give a unique feel to the place.

Our group, like many others, posed in front of the tree roots for a photo. Keep your eyes open as there are little surprises to be found here such as a Buddha head strangled by roots. We didn't see Angelina Jolie or Lara Croft, but I could easily understand why the *Tomb Raider* movie

featured this temple.

The Faces of Bayon

Bayon Temple was the finale of our day tour. Constructed at the end of the 12th century by King Jayavarman VII, this was the last state temple built at Angkor and is dedicated to Buddha.

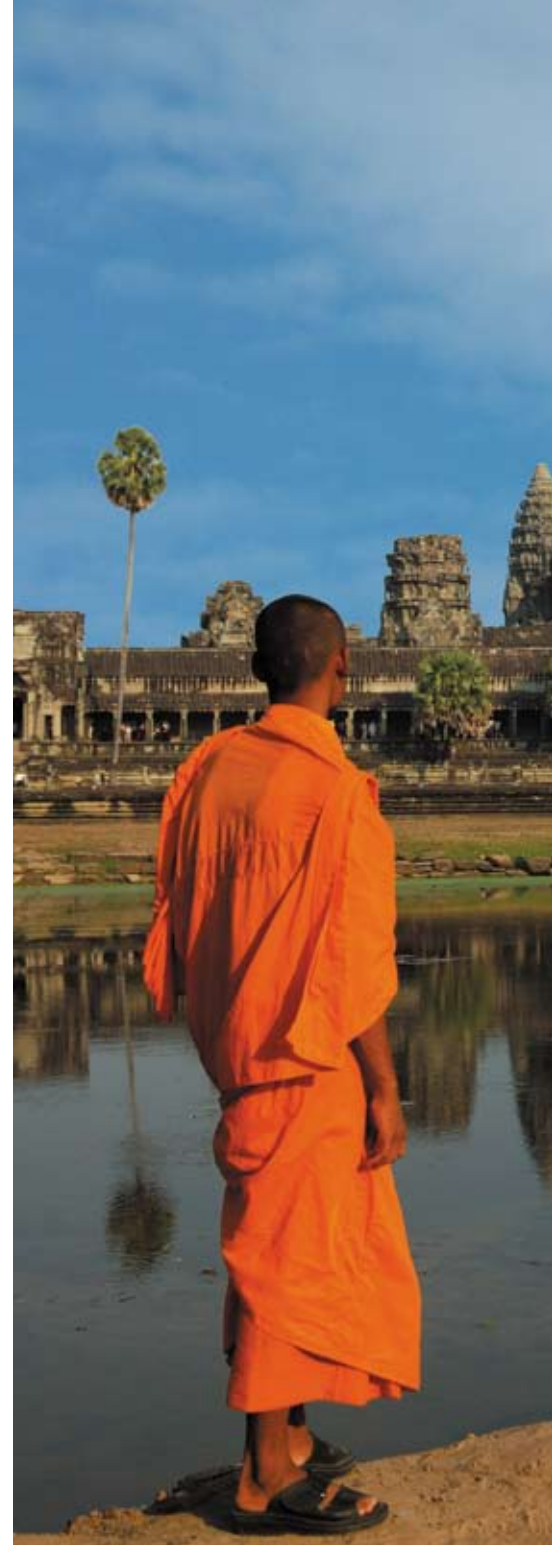
This was my favourite temple despite the steep steps, brutal heat and humidity. It is much more compact than the others and easy to navigate.

The 216 giant faces on the stupas are very spectacular and there are lots of photo opportunities using door frames, passages and ponds for effect.

Night Markets

After a long shower, followed by a buffet dinner accompanied by a graceful khmer dancing display, it was time to explore Siem Reap's night markets. I preferred the old wet market with its beautifully displayed fish and sausages, but the true shoppers headed for the newer, cleaner option across the river with its broader selection of souvenirs.

The journey back to Thailand was uneventful with a similar easy immigration clearance. We stopped en route at an eco-farm where students were being taught how to plant and cultivate rice and how to use a buffalo to till the soil. This looked exhausting work. I don't envy farmers!



An Oasis in Bangkok

I like Bangkok and as usual found somewhere different to visit. Ko Kret is one of the best kept secrets in the city, but you need the best part of the day to do it justice.

Starting at the terminal near Saphan Taksin MRT station I took the express boat to its final stop at Nonthaburi. The trip cost less than \$1.00 and took about one and a half hours. The journey on the Chao Phraya River is an adventure in itself with lovely views of Wat Arun, houses on stilts and the ubiquitous long tailed boats darting past at regular intervals.

From Nonthaburi a short taxi ride took me



to Pak Kret where I took a 10 cents ferry across the river to the kampung island of Ko Kret, also known as pottery island; home to the Mon people.

Pig in a Coffee Shop

Paramaikwat with its clean white stupas and small monastery lies just beyond the simple jetty and it kept me occupied for quite a while but I wanted to complete the six kilometre walking tour of the island so moved on.

It took me over two hours to stroll the quiet lanes, stopping now and then to chat,



enjoy a cold drink and check out the few remaining potteries. I have fond memories of the pig in the coffee shop, simple houses, a tree growing out of an industrial chimney and phallic symbols in this peaceful rural retreat. A lovely pottery incense jar souvenir reminds me of my visit.

Next visit I will make sure that there isn't a rehearsal for the Royal Barges. The Chao Phrya River was closed to boats for several hours delaying my return. However, I used the time to enjoy a very relaxing massage to revive my aching body!



Ancient and Modern

As usual, I made a brief visit to the Grand Palace which never fails to inspire with its regal buildings, fierce guardians, golden stupas and eclectic mix of visitors.

The rest of my final day in the city was spent getting back into the modern world with visits to Madame Tussauds and the Oceanarium, currently the largest in Asia, with a wide selection of brightly coloured fish and an exciting collection of sharks and rays.

In the evening I watched a classical Thai dance performance and the risqué Calypso show with its all male cast, including a complement of buxom ladyboys. Both shows were entertaining in their own ways, but only in Thailand would such contrasting events occur at the same venue.

Siem Reap with its markets, Pub Street and the superb Angkor Wat is a great place to visit while Bangkok has something for everyone and I really enjoyed Ko Kret. For those with plenty of time Thailand is a good gateway to Indo China. For those on a tighter schedule I recommend two separate trips. **AJ**

HOTELS

Bangkok

Novotel Bangkok Airport Hotel
www.novotelairportbkk.com
Sofitel Sukhumvit Bangkok
www.sofitel.com

Siem Reap

Ree Inn
www.reehotel.com

AIRLINE

Thai Airways and other airlines fly daily to Bangkok