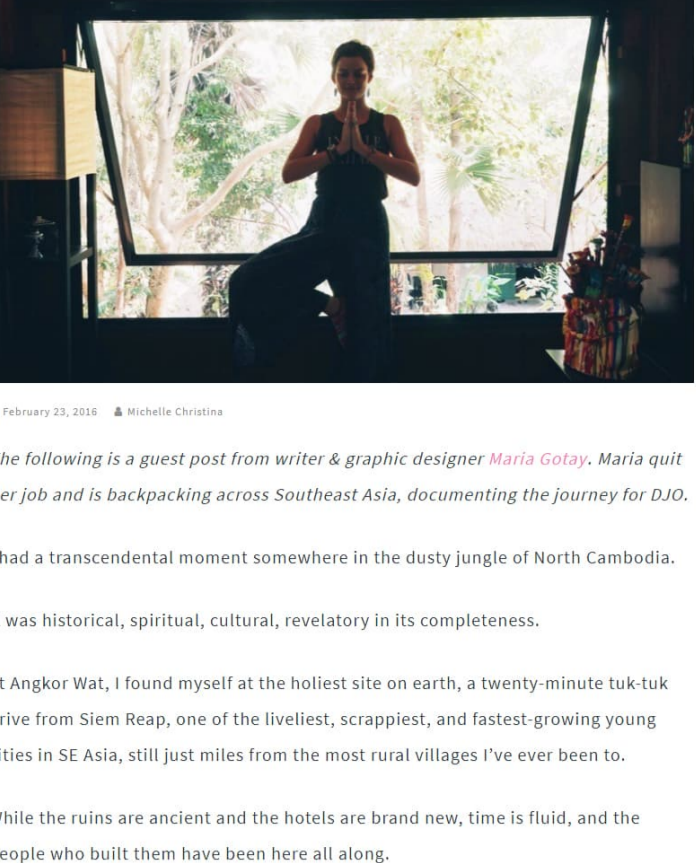


Archived: Digital Nomad Diary: Feeling It All In North Cambodia



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The following is a guest post from writer & graphic designer Maria Galay, Maria quit her job and is backpacking across Southeast Asia, documenting the journey for DJO.

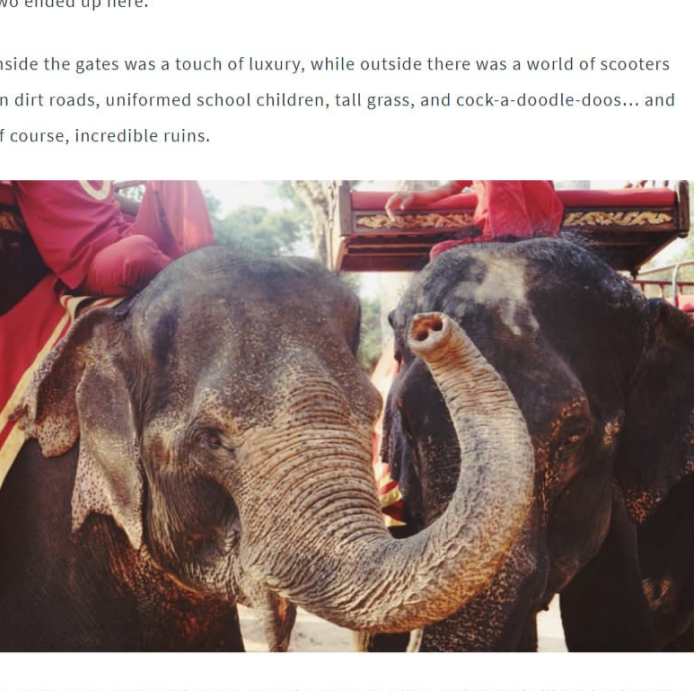
I had a transcendental moment somewhere in the dusty jungle of North Cambodia. It was historical, spiritual, cultural, revelatory in its completeness.

At Angkor Wat, I found myself at the holiest site on earth, a twenty-minute tuk-tuk drive from Siem Reap, one of the liveliest, scrappiest, and fastest-growing young cities in SE Asia, still just miles from the most rural villages I've ever been to.

While the ruins are ancient and the hotels are brand new, time is fluid, and the people who built them have been here all along.

Cambodia's people are hardworking and have worked hard for a long time; conditions in this country have been devastatingly difficult, and with the recent boost in worldwide attention, life is finally getting easier.

We came here to learn about ancient cultures. We left learning about modern ones, too.

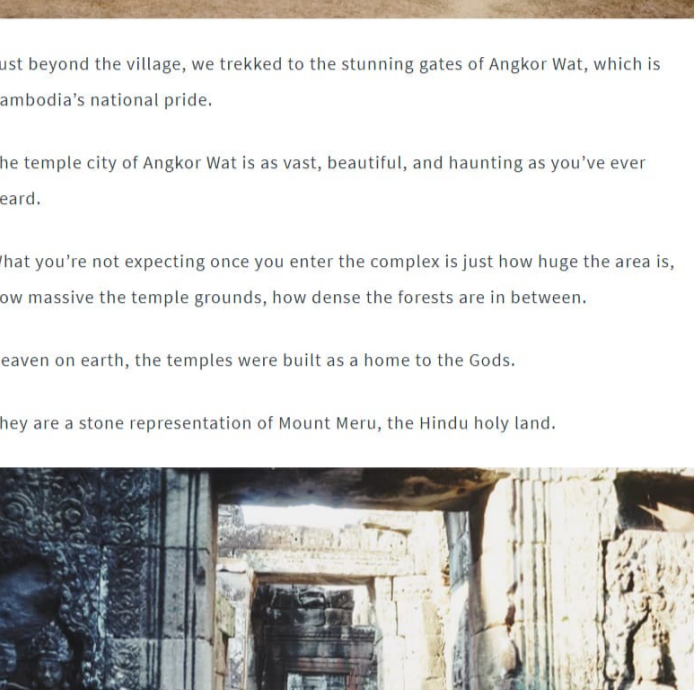


Our experience began at a beautiful complex called Meru, bordering Angkor Wat. It was a beautiful Airbnb run by like-minded couple Bel and Phil, she an Australian ex-pat with Cambodian roots, he a Belgian musician who ended up in Phnom Penh years ago.

They run their property with touches of modern style and a cosmopolitan air. They prepared a guide full of hip recommendations off the tourist track and were an inspiring source of perspective about the country's culture.

We knew from the start that there was something special about Cambodia if these two ended up here.

Inside the gates was a touch of luxury, while outside there was a world of scooters on dirt roads, unformed school children, tall grass, and cock-a-doodle-doo... and of course, incredible ruins.



On our way to the temples, we rented mountain bikes and traced village back roads, greeting a father and son bathing in the (moisty dry) riverbed.

We saw young farmers herding water buffalo. We passed by wedding venues: a white tent over a dirt field, rich ruffles of fuchsia fabrics draped along the mouth of the structure.

Nearby a tribe of women was hard at work preparing for one of the community's weddings, which, we learned, happen almost daily during the dry season.



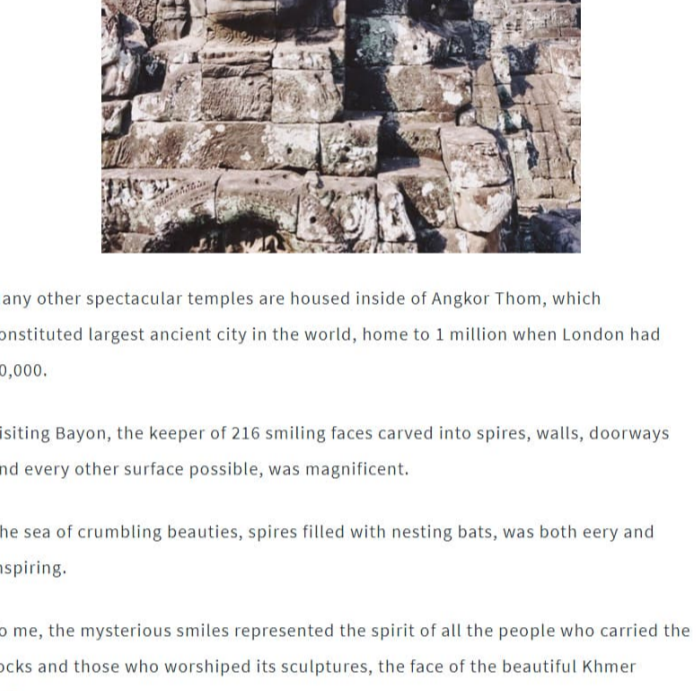
Just beyond the village, we trekked to the stunning gates of Angkor Wat, which is Cambodia's national pride.

The temple city of Angkor Wat is as vast, beautiful, and haunting as you've ever heard.

What you're not expecting once you enter the complex is just how huge the area is, how massive the temple grounds, how dense the forests are in between.

Heaven on earth, the temples were built as a home to the Gods.

They are a stone representation of Mount Meru, the Hindu holy land.



The area was built, rebuilt, expanded and expounded from the early 800s to the 1400s.

The temples are built for different gods and different religions.

There was a thematic see-sawing between Buddhism and Hinduism over the Golden Age of Angkor.

Since then the temples lay untouched for over 400 years.

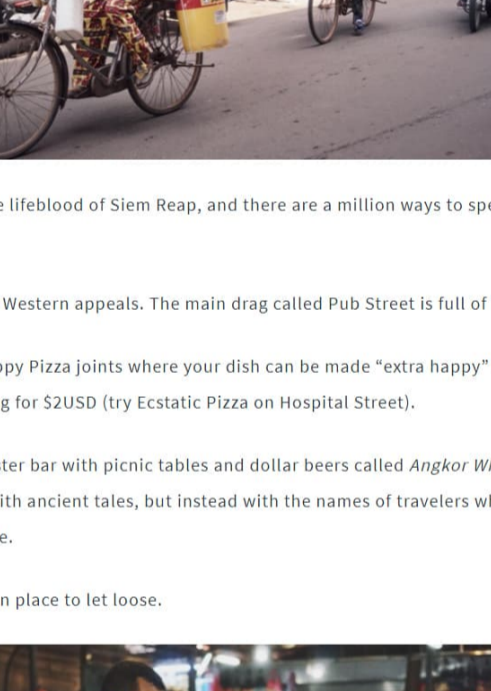
What we see now is a restored UNESCO world heritage site that was rescued from the elements, only returned to Cambodia in 1907.



Angkor Wat's architecture is a mind-blowing mesh of symmetry and spirituality—the literal representation of the ascent to the afterlife.

Its long walkway is dotted with vendors with coolers of palm juice, relentless child workers selling postcards and magnets, docile monkeys marching along the columns, selfie-taking tourists, and an air of divinity.

We wandered the temple, dodging tour groups and seeking solace in the cool shadows, making the climb to the very top, where we could see for miles.



Many other spectacular temples are housed inside of Angkor Thom, which constituted largest ancient city in the world, home to 1 million when London had 50,000.

Visiting Bayon, the keeper of 216 smiling faces carved into spires, walls, doorways and every other surface possible, was magnificent.

The sea of crumbling beauties, spires filled with nesting bats, was both eerie and inspiring.

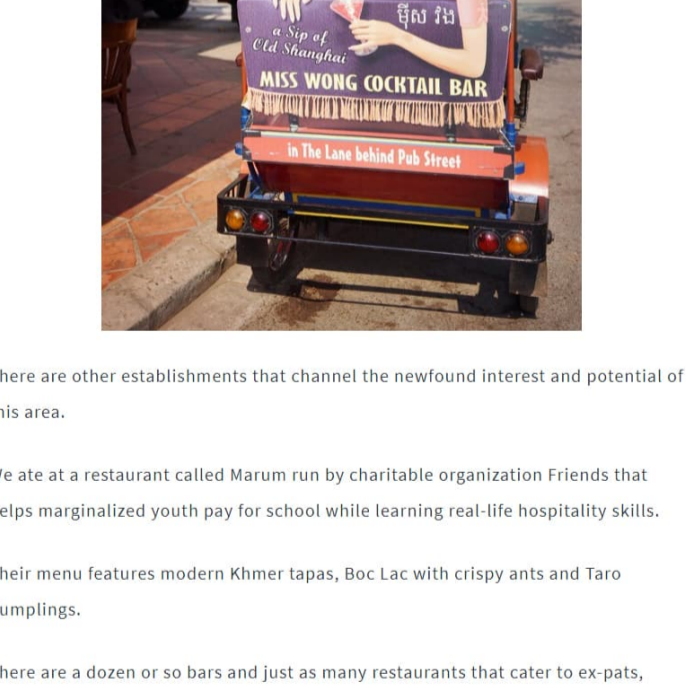
To me, the mysterious smiles represented the spirit of all the people who carried the rocks and those who worshiped its sculptures, the face of the beautiful Khmer culture.



It's within Angkor Wat's gates where religion and history tango so magnificently, one explaining so much about the other, and vice versa.

Words don't describe the high you feel while wandering these ancient ruins. It's a once-in-a-lifetime experience that can either take you on the spiritual high of your life or the grandest cultural journey.

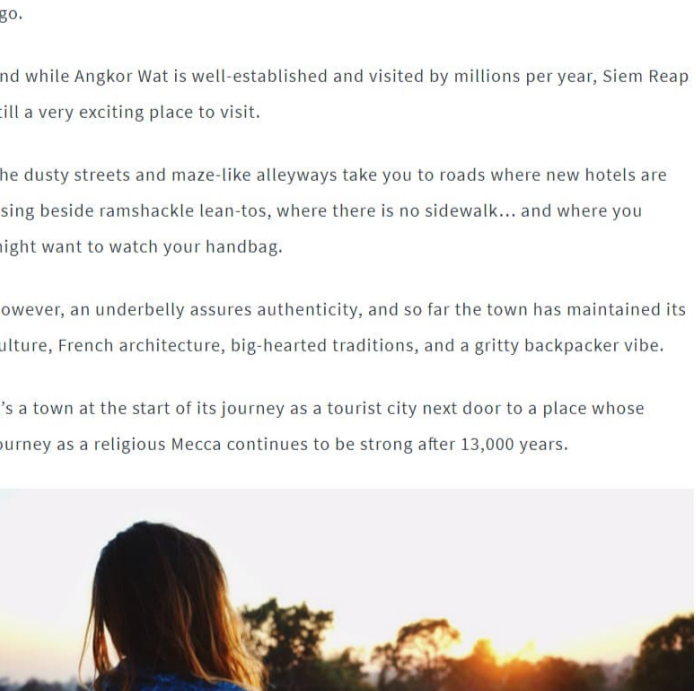
I pedaled away, soaking in the long dusk marking yet another sunset seen by these old temples, mind enchanted with a blend of the both.



After two days of roaming the temples, we made our way to the indescribable city of Siem Reap, called the "epicenter of chic Cambodia" by Lonely Planet.

This town is a mystery, a discovery, a reward all in one.

It's got French architecture and a booming nightlife scene, a small community of expats who are opening businesses, a ton of foreign investment putting up buildings quickly, and locals who are finding work.



Tourism is the lifeblood of Siem Reap, and there are a million ways to spend your money.

There are the Western appeals. The main drag called Pub Street is full of nightclubs.

There are Happy Pizza joints where your dish can be made "extra happy" with an herbal topping for \$2USD (try Ecstatic Pizza on Hospital Street).

There's a hipster bar with picnic tables and dollar beers called Angkor Wharf, walls scribbled not with ancient tales, but instead with the names of travelers who've made the pilgrimage.

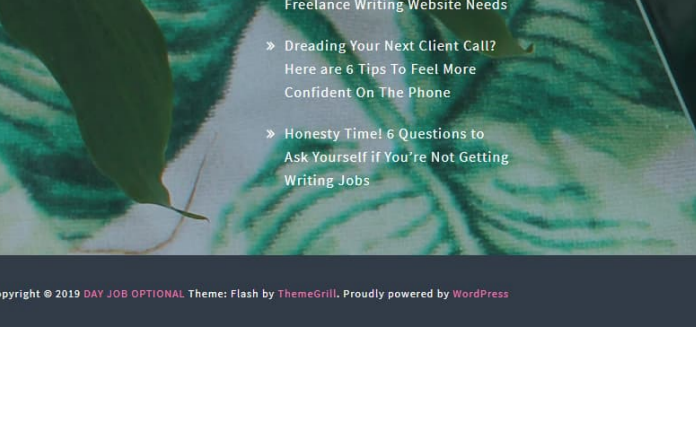
It's a really fun place to let loose.



Beneath that bling, there are the places where people live, work and gather.

It's all very accessible: there's the Psar haa, a massive market full of shaved ices and jelly fruit soups, food carts selling Cambodian sausage and coconut corn cakes.

We traced dirt streets punctuated by fish-filled aquariums featuring nibble massage, traditional Cambodian string bands, landmine amputees looking for handout donations, and tuk-tuk drivers napping on string hammocks in their cabins.



If you're patient enough to wade through the sales tactics, you'll find that people here are genuinely friendly and kind.

Their faces lit up by smiles and wrinkles, eager to practice their English or share a laugh.

For us, we often connected with locals on a topic that transcended the language barrier: an admiration for Logan's thick, dark beard.

Everywhere we went, men would make eye contact and curl their fingers around an imaginary beard running down their tanned, square, hairless jaws, then belt out laughings.



There are other establishments that channel the newfound interest and potential of this area.

We ate at a restaurant called Marum run by charitable organization Friends that helps marginalized youth pay for school while learning real-life hospitality skills.

Their menu features modern Khmer tapas, Boc Lac with crispy ants and Taro dumplings.

There are a dozen or so bars and just as many restaurants that cater to ex-pats, mostly just a little further out of the gridlock.



We keep hearing over and over again that Cambodia is what Thailand was 25 years ago.

And while Angkor Wat is well-established and visited by millions per year, Siem Reap still a very exciting place to visit.

The dusty streets and maze-like alleyways take you to roads where new hotels are rising beside ramshackle lean-tos, where there is no sidewalk... and where you might want to watch your handbag.

However, an underbelly assures authenticity, and so far the town has maintained its culture, French architecture, big-hearted traditions, and a gritty backpacker vibe.

It's a town at the start of its Journey as a tourist city next door to a place whose journey as a religious Mecca continues to be strong after 13,000 years.



My revelation? Epochs rise and fall away, are forgotten and hopefully stand the test of time, things are difficult and then they are forgotten.

In ten thousand years I hope to have contributed in any way to something that continues to give humans tingles.

Three nights in the North left me wanting more, but the road is wide, and Phnom Penh is calling...

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Follow Maria's entire journey [here](#).

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Michelle Christina is the Co-founder of Day Job Optional. Strong coffee, strong wi-fi, and absurd inside jokes are some of her favorite things. While a self-proclaimed side project addict, writing remains the ultimate focus of her life.

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