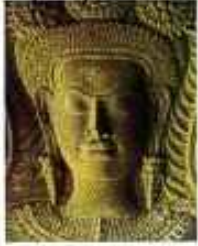


CAMBODIA

by J. Palkiewicz



Beautiful and wild, dangerous and primitive is the tropical forest of Cambodia. The hot, humid and oppressive air smells hypnotically of

rotting vegetation. Only a few rays of light penetrate the dense wall of branches, roots, vines and ferns. In the middle of this wild exuberant growth lies my goal: Angkor, the mythical centre of the Khmer empire, over 1000 years old, only discovered in 1861 by the French botanist Henri Mouhot.

And there it is: "gopuram", the monumental, shining gate of Angkor Thom, the ancient citadel of the Khmer. In the distance, the colossal, pyramid-shaped mountain temple of Bayon rises above the horizon - the strangest construction in all civilisation. 216 gigantic Buddha faces adorn its 54 towers. And Buddha is not the only one who protects the mighty temple city. The entire area has been mined by guerrilla fighters, preventing access to the eastern "gate of death".

I first saw Angkor in 1972 when I visited the area at my own risk with a special UNESCO passport. Only a few weeks later, the infamous "Red Khmer" took control of the region once and for all. At the time, I rode from temple to temple on the back of an elephant, feeling like an intruder, afraid I might be violating the sacred stones. Never before and nowhere else in the world had I seen such a perfect symbiosis of nature and culture. And, even after all these years, this view still takes my breath away.

In an area measuring 200 square kilometres, the largest religious building in the world rises above the ruins: Angkor Wat, the "temple of the capital city".

Nature versus culture: the jungle seems to be on the verge of engulfing the ruined temple of Ta Phrom. Yet, that's what it has been trying to do for centuries - without success



The magic stones of Angkor

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Constructed by King Suryavarman II (1113 - 1150), this immense complex is 52 metres high and surrounded by a wall with a perimeter of four kilometers. It is the crowning work of classic Khmer architecture and is covered by fantastic sculptures. Statues and sophisticated reliefs depict not only the numerous Khmer gods but also scenes from the every-day life of this era.

Enormous rectangular artificial lakes and irrigation systems all around Angkor allowed rice to be harvested three times a year. This formed the basis of the city's wealth, making Angkor the centre of

the largest East-Asian empire. While still at its zenith, Angkor was destroyed by the Siamese in 1432, gradually losing out entirely to the jungle. Before long, the tigers, snakes and apes were in charge here again.

When I first visited the city, the statues of the deities and demons pulling on the body of the mythical serpent "naga" were still standing along the stone bridge which leads to the main entry to Angkor Thom. Today, all that is left of this bridge is a pile of rubble. Man has successfully destroyed within 20 years things which managed to survive almost

six centuries of exposure to natural jungle forces. The busts of the sacred gods have been decapitated or mutilated, while the reliefs, ornaments and even the statues of the light-blue "apsara" dancers have been smashed. And after the vandals came the robbers, selling antique treasures of incalculable value to tourists as souvenirs. Although Cambodia's cultural pride is now being guarded to some extent, antique stores in Bangkok are still well stocked with artifacts stolen from Angkor.

The barbaric Red Khmer were followed by the Vietnamese. Admittedly, in the twelve years in which they occupied the country they did at least leave Angkor in peace. Yet, they exploited the surrounding jungle without mercy, rigorously clearing it away. There is barely a tree to be found on the four-kilometre long road linking the French colonial town of Siem Reap built in the Thirties with Angkor Wat.

Now that Cambodia has opened up its borders ever so slightly to tourists, visitors are able to admire the antique beauty of the imperial city. But for how much longer?

Unfortunately, there is a risk that this complex may lose its unique magical appearance forever. Some of the temples have lost their legendary green coat of protection. Hundreds of workers are currently restoring the weathered monuments, burning off the surrounding vegetation and leaving behind them bare earth in the process. Considered to be the most precious Khmer temple and surrounded today by a scattering of deadly mines, Banteay Srei, the small "Citadel of Women" constructed in 967 from pink stone, has been "violated" in a similar way.

"We've been lucky again - the Khmer



rebels did not show their faces”, said a soldier in the team accompanying me, a foreign legionnaire serving with the UNO. This region, located only 35 kilometres from Siem Reap, is still controlled by the Khmer.

On one particularly nice day, I see a number of dainty dancers in shining sarongs on the steps leading to the At Phrom temple. They are moving gracefully, sensuously and with extraordinary precision to the slow rhythm of the “khleng” - reminiscent of the famous “apsara” dancers. At the height of Angkor’s development, more than 600 young girls danced to the kings’ delight. Here in At Phrom, nature’s supremacy is particularly in evidence - enormous trees and bushes dwarf the precious buildings.

A number of different international initiatives want to assist in the tremendously expensive task of restoring Angkor. But I have my doubts: how worthwhile is it really to go to gargantuan efforts to renew a ruined city, given the fact that it can never be restored to its original state in the first place? In fact, Claude Jacques of the French School of the Far East goes as far as to criticise the removal of the sumptuous vegetation. He argues that the trees and bushes play an important role by protecting the temples from rain and sun. All that needs to be done, he claims, is to keep their growth under control.

I also believe that the harmony between stone and flora should be preserved. Yet, by turning Angkor into an open-air museum, its fascinating magic is destined to be destroyed.