

# MOONLIGHT TRAVELLER



**Parag Khanna** takes a midnight tour of Cambodia's temple ruins where Buddhism and Hinduism meet Communism.

**Y**ou could see *Tomb Raider* ten times and still not grasp the physical enormity of Angkor Wat in Cambodia. The country's national treasure has recently been declared a World Heritage monument by UNESCO. Increasing hoards of tourists come to visit the sprawling complex of temples which date back from the 9th and 15th centuries, making it difficult to soak in the spiritual serenity which they exude. I had long given up the expectation of discovering the unknown at well-trodden sites on the traveller circuit in Southeast Asia, but a nocturnal epiphany brought me as close to one of mankind's wonders as can be hoped for in the Lonely Planet age.

As I had arrived in Siam Reap late in the day, I decided to rest and fight the monsoon season's hazy heat with an iced-tea at the Foreign Correspondents Club. I strolled into the courtyard and gazed upwards at the cloudless sky and the full moon. Almost immediately, I was possessed to pursue what I had dismissed as a futile wish before my arrival: the chance to have the great Angkor Wat all to myself.

I was unaware that Angkor closes each day at sunset, but I still expected to have my fantasy dashed by numerous flashlight tours or even a Thai-style full-moon rave. I kept my hopes up thanks to the tuk-tuk drivers' unwillingness to commute seven kilometres to the main temple, citing the unwritten rule. One final negotiation and an auto-rickshaw driver agreed to do a round trip for five dollars. Along the way, the moonlight domed the still, ancient forest with its intense penumbra and the silent countryside had an eerie feel.

When I arrived I was relieved to find just a few couples with small children milling around the road, and I convinced my driver to wait for half an hour by the vast western moat. Angkor by night was a captivating surprise, its pillars loomed like huge shadows. As I tiptoed over the bridge to the outer gate, I could see through to the silhouette of the main temple, looming one kilometre in the distance, like a mountain hidden in a landscape painting. I reached the first step and knelt down — *Buddham Saranam Gacchami* — monks ritually chant in Sanskrit at such sites: I take shelter in the Lord Buddha.

I donned my own mischievous Buddha's smile and crept around a solitary, dozing guard, whose radio reverberated the monotonous humdrum of a *Voice of America* broadcast in the Khmer language. Once through the outer wall, I froze. The dazzling moon illuminated the outlines of the colossal symmetric facade, but the details of its grandeur were hidden. Its time-stopping power emanated through the semi-darkness towards me. It may as well have been the 11th century as I felt my way around the massive stone blocks, both the stairs and the walls of Angkor's elevated towers.

Angkor is holy to Buddhists and also to the entire Cambodian nation; it is the only building which appears on any nation's flag in the world. Not even Pol Pot, who outlawed practicing Buddhism during his bloody, nihilistic reign of terror in the '70s, dared to desecrate the enchanting temples which so elegantly fuse Hinduism's epic beliefs and Buddhism's ascetic spirituality.

I recalled another full-moon night at the glowing, rectangular-faced mausoleum of the great Central Asian conqueror Tamerlane in Bukhara. For a bundle of Uzbek som a night watchman led me down a dusty staircase into the crypt where the real sarcophagus of Amir Timur lay.

Visiting great monuments under the moonlight has numerous advantages: fewer people, cooler temperatures and a fresh perspective. Samarqand's magnificent *madrassah*, the Registan, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, the London Eye and Washington's presidential memorials are all more romantic under a full moon. In fact, even at Angkor Wat the opportunity was not lost on the Raffles Group, which one year ago staged a concert of the Spanish tenor Jose Carreras on the temple's grassy Eastern approach. During my one-on-one communion with the mystical Angkor Wat, it held me in its gentle glow like a dormant fortress. A number of the temples in the sprawling thirty square kilometre Angkor complex actively serve as pilgrimage sites for Hindus and Buddhists, but for one starry night I didn't have to share them with a single orange-robed monk. Like Muslims who refer to themselves after the pilgrimage to Mecca as *hajji*, I declared myself an *Angkori*. ◉

