

# Beyond Angkor

Once isolated and dangerous to travel to, a number of grand temple sites in the Cambodian countryside are now open to visitors. The journey may be long and sometimes arduous, but for the traveller in search of the solitude and mystery that the main sites of Angkor now no longer provide, the rewards are great.

Photography and story by Paul Levrier

Opposite : The pyramid tower Prang at Koh Ker as seen from a helicopter. This page : A misty morning in the Cambodian forest.



**This page :** A thirty six armed Bodhisattva and disciples carved into the western gallery walls of Banteay Chmmar temple.  
**Opposite :** A balustered window entangled by the roots of a ficus tree at Preah Khan temple in Kompong Svay province.





Who would have thought that five years ago

the Cambodian temples of Banteay Chmaar, Koh Ker, Preah Khan Kompong Svay and Beang Melea would be accessible and safe to visit after decades of isolation, war, looting and neglect?

These were names that most travellers have never heard of, let alone had any interest in visiting. But as the main sites of Angkor become increasingly crowded and the sense of peace, mystery and admiration of wandering these magnificent monuments to a lost, ancient culture rapidly fade, the natural human desire of exploration is guided elsewhere.

With the civil war of previous decades firmly entrenched in the past, the Cambodian government has been actively looking at ways of expanding its tourism product away from the temples of Angkor. One should never assume that Angkor can be seen in a day (far from it - after sixteen years of exploring the area I find something wondrous each and every time I visit), however, it remains hard to entice visitors to stay that extra day or to explore other sites further afield. With a massively improved security situation and the opening of new roads, once inaccessible sites are now open to the curious visitor and provide a reward and travel experience that is well worth forgoing any discomfort or time to get there.

Strategically placed along the ancient highway from Angkor to Preah Khan city in Kompong Svay province and at the crossroads from Angkor to Koh Ker, Beang Melea was the first of the 'new' temple sites to open to tourism five years ago. Located a 90 minute drive from Siem Reap, the temple is enshrouded in mystery. Unlike many of the Angkorean temples in the main complex, Beang Melea has no inscription or written record of how it came to be in what is obviously a massive 12th Century temple surrounded by substantial human settlement. As with all other remote temple sites in Cambodia, Beang Melea was 'off limits' to travellers and historians for decades due to the civil war and its after effects with the mass laying of land mines keeping visitors at bay until the area was completely cleared in 2005.

Despite Beang Melea's ruined state, the temple was surveyed in the late nineteenth century and a ground plan was established that bears a striking similarity to Angkor Wat. The major difference between the two is that Beang Melea was built at ground level throughout whereas Angkor Wat rises to become the grandest of all the Khmer temple-mountains.

The temple itself is completely enshrouded in jungle and a carefully constructed wooden walkway guides visitors through the complex. The authorities seem to have learnt from past experiences and station guards throughout the complex to discourage visitors from clamouring over the rocks and rubble and prefer that visitors maintain a fixed path. The extensive balustered windows of the inner galleries are a highlight as is the sheer exhilaration felt from exploring a site of such beauty and solitude.



From Beang Melea the road continues to Koh Ker for another 55 kilometres. The site of Koh Ker is unusual to the degree that it does not follow the layout of what one might expect of a Khmer city but it remains extensive, covering an area of 35 square kilometres. Although again enshrouded in mystery, Koh Ker is still widely recognised among historians as the empire of reigning king Jayavarman IV in the 9th Century. The fact that king Jayarman IV chose such a remote site to establish his kingdom is not revealed on any document so far discovered. In terms of Angkorean history Koh Ker's status as the capital of the empire was relatively short lived, lasting only 20 years, until it moved back to Angkor in the year 944

Despite a wide scattering of monuments the main site of interest is the Prasat Thom enclosure and the Prang temple, rising from the ground in the shape of a pyramid for 35 metres. The topmost level is reachable by climbing a single, east-facing stairway and was originally crowned by a 'linga' more than a metre in diameter that has long since vanished. Today the climb to the top is closed to visitors due the danger of its deterioration. As with all these grand temple sites wandering them at dawn or dusk is to truly embrace them. There remains no accommodation at Koh Ker and whilst it is just a bit too far as a day trip, it is possible to arrange a camping expedition here for both groups or individuals. For those with a bit of cash in their pockets Helicopters Cambodia have a 4 seater helicopter available for charter trips to any of the outer temples and this remains a popular and convenient way of exploring these magnificent sites.

Returning to the Beang Melea crossroads, the ancient Angkor road forks off almost due east towards Kompong Svay province and Cambodia's least accessible temple site - the city of Preah Khan. Not to be confused with the more well known Preah Khan temple in the Angkor complex, Preah Khan Kompong Svay is an arduous drive of eight hours along a unpaved road.

Once there there is nowhere to stay except perhaps in a tented camp or in a local homestay in the nearest village. Needless to say, for this reason alone, a visit to Preah Khan, Kompong Svay is certainly more for the temple affiaciendo rather than the casual visitor. That is not, however, to diminish its importance or attraction as the site is remarkable for what it stands for.

Here, literally, miles and miles away from anywhere lies a temple site of such massive proportions - an impressive thirty square kilometres - and of obvious importance to the civilisation of the Khmer people, and yet much of its history remains guesswork by scholars. The only substantial text found in the whole Preah Khan site lies in the Inscription Temple as part of the main enclosure. A tablet here, with stories of the goddess Shiva and Buddha, dates the temple after the conquest of Angkor around the year 1010. This appears to be the site's one of only several pre-twelfth century buildings, the remaining monuments dated as being built sometime during a later period at the time of Jayavarman V.



Surrounding the enclosure is a moat, still housing water, although much overgrown and left to dry. The very existence of this moat is significant since it proves that the architect's original plan was to create an enclosed sacred space no more extensive that the one observable today.

As the site of Preah Khan has been neglected for centuries more modern times have seen the temple open to pillage and vandalism. This is true of all the remote temple sites in Cambodia and walking around the rubble of Preah Khan it is sad to see such a magnificent site a shadow of its former self. Whilst the majority of temples inside the Angkor complex have massive funding for ongoing renovation hardly a cent has been spent on Preah Khan.

Many of the carvings have been shattered by vandals, chiselling away at the heads in order to sell them on to unscrupulous buyers and the once imposing towers now lie collapsed or in a state of collapse. It is hard going scrambling over these destroyed monuments and the heat will soon take its toll, but for a temple experience unlike any other the sheer remoteness and atmosphere of Preah Khan, Kompong Svay makes a visit here quite remarkable.

To date, this writer, has only ever found one series of photographs and written research on this temple available to the public, highlighting its isolation from tourism. For now, the long and difficult journey alone, will ensure Preah Khan remains out of reach for many years, if not decades, to come.

**Preceding page:** The remains of a lone apsara carving amidst the rubble of Beang Melea temple. **Above:** Monks admiring the motifs on one of the stone doorways of the Hall of Dancers at Banteay Chmmar temple. **Above left:** A three faced Buddha carving on a gallery wall at Banteay Chmmar



Left: A local caretaker in front of the Prasat Thom, Koh Ker.  
Right: Local transportation en-route to Beang Melea.



In the other direction from Siem Reap, lying some one hundred kilometres north-east of Angkor is the town and temple of Banteay Chmmar. Unlike Preah Khan, Banteay Chmmar is readily accessible from Siem Reap and a soon to be completed paved road will see travel time reduce to a very comfortable 90 minutes. Another site that was isolated for decades, Banteay Chmmar is seeing increased interest from both visitors and overseas funding to help in its restoration.

Ever since its discovery, writers have have struggled to explain why such a barren place, almost as desolate as Koh Ker, was chosen by the twelfth century Khmers for a major urban-religious centre.

There is no poetic inscription that may cast light on Banteay Chmmar as was the case with Ta Phrom or Preah Khan at Angkor. Only a few short texts engraved on the door-piers give a limited amount of information such as the name of a deity or occasionally those of one or more founders of a particular shrine.

Probably commissioned by the father of Jayavaraman VII, but possibly of an earlier date, the core of Banteay Chmmar and its inner enclosure walls are of modest overall proportions (c. 50 x 45 metres). There is the central shrine and the two customary 'libraries' within the compound and the distinct 'face towers' more commonly recognised at the Bayon and on the gates of Angkor Thom. The inner Hall of Dancers has doorways carved with mythological scenes and motifs depicting music and dance.

However, the grandest spectacle of Banteay Chmmar can be found on its gallery walls. Although partially destroyed in 1992 by looters (much of the gallery was chiseled off and carted across the border to Thailand), much still remains. A spectacularly carved thirty-two armed Bodhisattva with its multiple heads and seated disciples is the crowning glory of the piece, although sadly this is only one of eight that has survived modern day destruction (one other has since returned to Cambodia and is now housed in the National Museum in Phnom Penh).

The continuing bas-reliefs along the gallery walls depict Khmer soldiers heading off to battle and various 'war scenes' against the Cham invaders and mythical creatures, carvings as detailed and as fine as those found on the walls of the Bayon at Angkor.

As with all these remote temples in Cambodia, Banteay Chmmar remains in a state of complete collapse. The recently established Global Heritage Fund by John Sanday (former director of the World Monument Fund project in Preah Khan), hopes to alleviate this threat and is currently working with the Cambodian government in preparation for listing the site on the World Heritage protection list.

With Cambodia's improving infrastructure, temples such as these will soon start to see an influx of tourists. It is hard to keep such magical places a secret for too long. But, as far as 2010 is concerned, it remains remarkable that today one can, with a little effort, explore such magnificent sites such as these and have them almost to one's entire self. This used to be the way at Angkor. It is still the way here ... at least for the time being.



## BEYOND ANGKOR

### MAP OF ENLARGED AREA



For specific information on any of these sites please contact our offices at Destination Asia Cambodia

### BEANG MELEA

A comfortable road journey heading south of Siem Reap and past the Rolous temple complex. Beang Melea is best visited at first light, requiring a very early start from Siem Reap, or in the late afternoon. If you visit at 5pm you will have the site entirely to yourself, although it would mean a return journey in the dark.

Out of all the more remote temple sites Beang Melea remains the easiest to visit and, therefore, we can expect tourism numbers to increase here.

### KOH KER

It is possible to visit Koh Ker as a day trip from Siem Reap but this would require a very early start and a late return, hence touring the site during the heat of the day - something we would not really recommend. While there is no homestay in the area it has become quite popular to stay overnight in a tented camp. This can be arranged through Destination Asia Cambodia for either FIT's or small groups. For those with additional time it is possible to arrange cycling outings to Koh Ker or to incorporate a bicycle ride as a part of the overall excursion.

### PREAH KHAN, KOMOPONG SVAY

If your client has the budget for a helicopter charter this is the one temple site we would recommend to visit. The road journey of eight hours each way to/from Siem Reap makes it out of bounds to most visitors. There is absolutely no infrastructure at this site and fellow humans are rare, apart from the one or two temple site guards to greet you on arrival. With permission it is possible to camp at the site although all provisions must be brought in.

### BANTEAY CHMMAR

Once remote and now easily accessible. At the time of writing a newly paved road was being completed all the way from Sisophon (the nearest main road junction). This will ensure the road journey will take a comfortable 90 minutes from Siem Reap, making a day trip quite feasible.

Accommodation is currently available in the form of a local homestay located directly outside the temple complex. Visiting the temple in the early morning will almost guarantee complete solitude.