



By Nisha Jha and
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YOU say Cambodia and they ask “Angkor Wat”? This epic temple is not just a temple but has become so synonymous with Cambodia that nothing else seems to exist in that country. So much so that scores of tourists go there just to see the sunrise before returning to their countries. Your trip to Cambodia is considered incomplete if you do not boast about visiting this temple complex of impressive architecture, a combination of history, and Hindu mythology.

This brings us a question. Is that all that Cambodia offers us? The answer is an emphatic No.

Siem Reap has a plethora of temples besides Angkor Wat. The other temples which we highly recommend are Bayon temple, Banteay Srei and Ta Prohm where trees and stones vie with each other to tell their centuries-old secrets and where Angelina Jolie’s movie *Tomb Raider* was shot.

Don’t miss the traditional dance-drama of Cambodia, called the Apsara dance. It has been a tradition since the earliest days of tourism to treat visitors to an Apsara dance performance which is a taste of classical Khmer culture. The slow-flowing dance patterns is poetry in motion. Many of the hand movements are quite



Don't miss the traditional Cambodian Apsara dance

GOING BEYOND ANGKOR WAT

Soak in Cambodia’s ancient history & culture

similar to the *mudras* of Indian classical dance forms. The word *apsara* means exactly the same as in Hindu mythology.

Visit the Landmine Museum in Siem Reap. There are millions of active landmines in the countryside and Aki Ra, who lost parents to the genocide, is actively involved in landmine defusing and clearing. He also runs a museum and a school for the disabled children, victims of landmine blast while playing or going about their work in the fields.

THE lake Ton le Sap is not just a lake but an experience, a medium to earn livelihood for hundreds of locals and Vietnamese refugees. They live, study, pray, eat and sleep in their boats on the lake. Floating village consists of schools, churches, grocery shops, hospital and even graves. A typical scene you could come across is of children floating in aluminum tubs with big water snakes around their necks, posing for photos and asking for money. If you have more time and are interested in nature then off you go on a bird watching expedition on banks of Ton Le Sap.

Befriend a local and then you can see many of their cultural events. If you are fortunate you may also attend a Cambodian wedding, which is an elaborate affair. There are various rituals and events such as asking bride’s hand from her elders, engagement ceremony, procession, reception, song & dance and the actual wedding.

In Siem Reap catch Dr Beat Richner, a Swiss pediatrician, playing Cello & talking on health issues in Cambodia. Every Saturday people wait for his mesmerising performance where he collects money for his hospital for children in

Cambodia which he founded in 1991. He has been working in Cambodia for 4 decades now and can’t have enough of it.

Move out of touristy Siem Reap and you’ll see a very different Cambodia. The entire country is still recovering from its disturbing past, and Toul Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh will tell you how barbaric the period was. If you want to know more about Khmer Rouge, include this museum in your itinerary. Natives, with the help of NGOs, are picking up pieces to make a respectful living from what they are left with.

While in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia, hire a tuk-tuk to go to a small island called Koh Dach or Silk Island. The whole contraption including passengers goes aboard on a barge to cross the Mekong River.

Everyone on the island Koh Dach has a weaver in the family and even kids know how to work on a loom. Golden silk threads are intricately woven to create beautiful Cambodian motifs on raw silk fabrics which are made

into wall hangings, shawls, stoles, scarves, table linen. Young children of Koh Dach come to the mainland on weekends in search of prospective customers and take them to their houses.

Once you have soaked in the history and the culture, now is the time to soak in the sun!

Cambodia does not boast of long coastline, but what they have is perfect for a beach holiday. Sihanoukville is at around 230 km from Phnom Penh and there are several coaches plying between the two towns. Sihanoukville is also not as crowded as neighbouring Thailand. You can snorkel or scuba dive to your hearts content or just lie down and take it easy on its clean beaches before heading home.

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