Luxe List: 15 Indulgent-Yet-Affordable Trips

From the travel expert
SHERMANSTRAVEL.CO

Sherman's TRAVEL

APR | MAY 2009

Smart Luxury

spring getaways

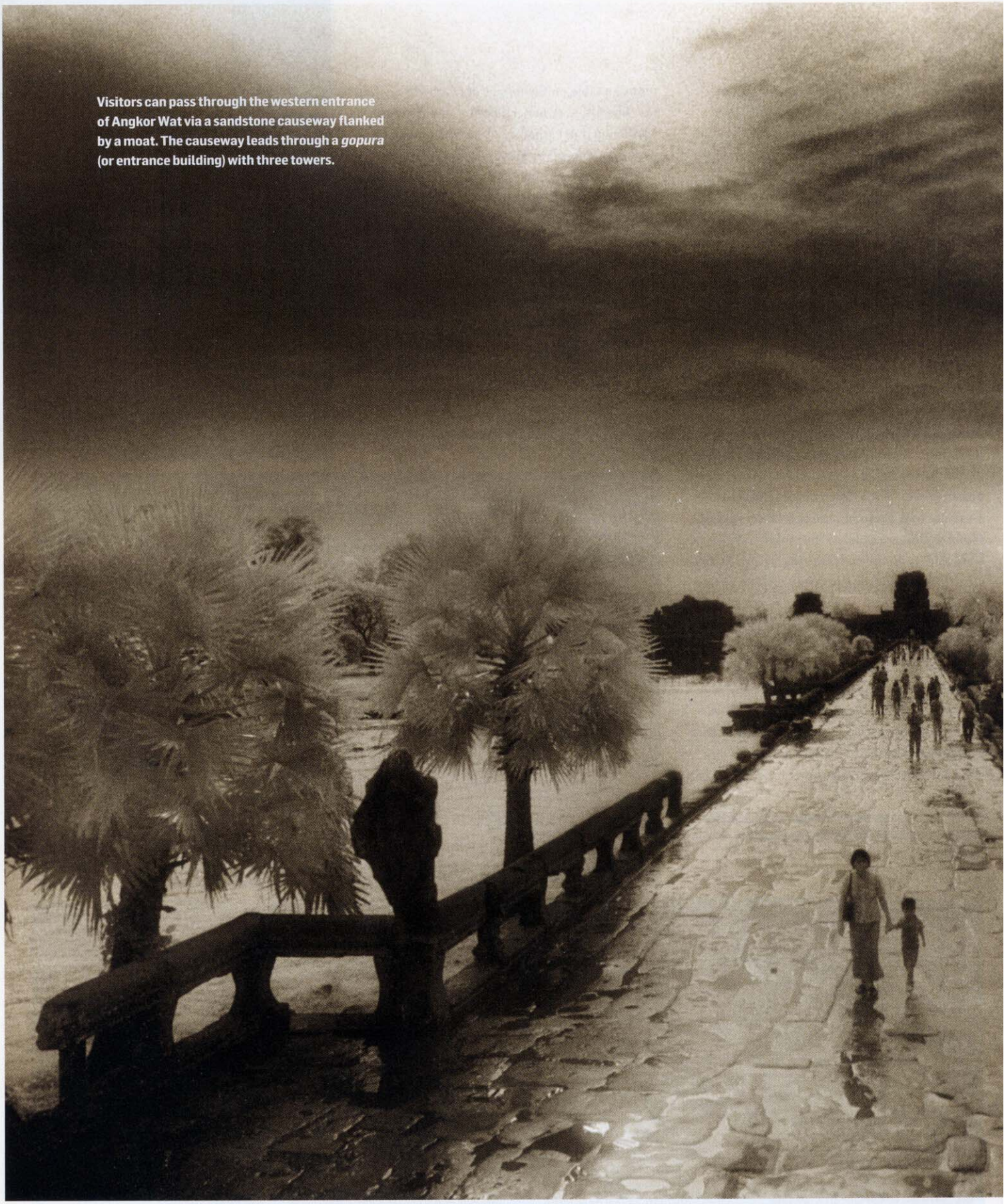
Florida's Other Coast
The Gulf Islands' Discreet Charm

Greek Island Idyll
Up All Night, Out All Day: 3 Perfect Itineraries

Canadian Gems
Posh Resorts Amid Grand Wilderness

U.S. Road Trips: Glaciers, Gorges, Vineyards & More

$4.99US $5.99CAN
04
0 74470 23676 4



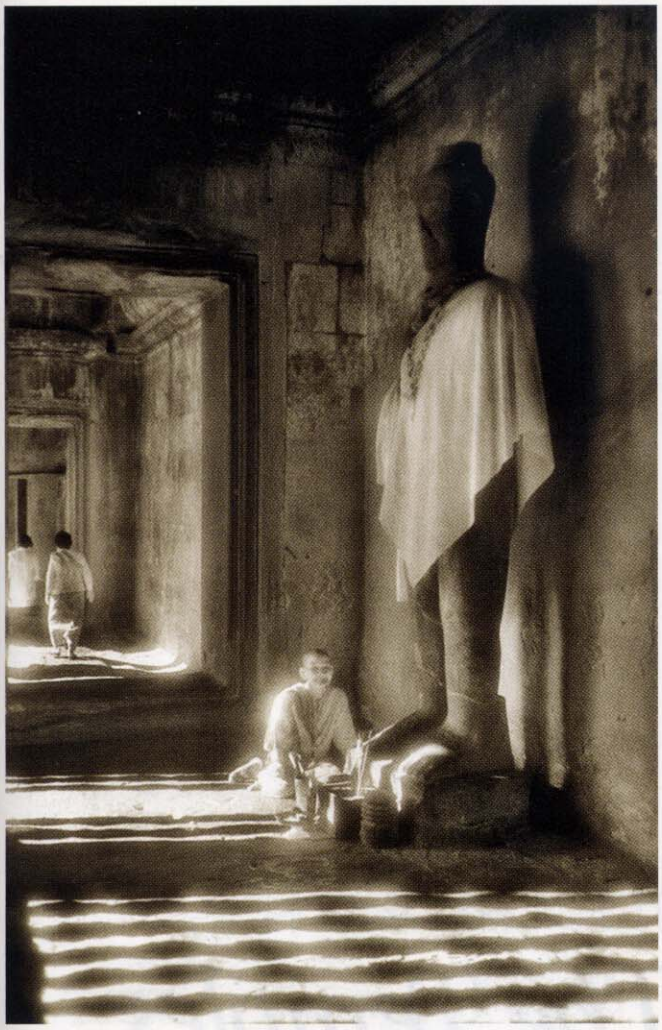
Visitors can pass through the western entrance of Angkor Wat via a sandstone causeway flanked by a moat. The causeway leads through a *gopura* (or entrance building) with three towers.

OFF THE PATH

The Temples of Cambodia & Thailand

BY LAUREL DELP PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN MCDERMOTT

Angkor Wat is on most everyone's must-see list, but venturing beyond the fray to the area's more remote temples can yield the experience of a lifetime. Here, a two-pronged journey to discover some of the world's enduring wonders.



TOP: A nun tends to a shrine in the entry tower of Angkor Wat. BOTTOM: The pink sandstone temple of Banteay Srei is small, relative to others, yet its delicate bas-relief carvings are some of the most intricate.

To the right of the stone bridge leading to Angkor Wat, there is a spot from which all five towers of the legendary Cambodian temple are visible at once. Every part of the sandstone monument is carved, including the curved pediments and tiered eaves, and it looks not unlike the intricately designed headdresses worn by Cambodian dancers. The temple and its long approach are so magnificent that in the 16th century, when Portuguese explorers first set eyes on the site, they believed it could have been built only by the Romans.

In fact, Angkor Wat was the crowning architectural achievement of the Khmer Empire, a series of dynasties that ruled from the 9th to the mid-15th centuries, when it fell to Thai invaders. For six centuries, every Khmer king built a grand state temple, and while Angkor Wat is the masterpiece, it's only one part of the vast capital city of Angkor, which emcompassed more than 386 square miles and was the heart of the empire at its height.

Just 4 miles from the modern city of Siem Reap, Angkor Wat, built in the 12th century, is one of the world's great stone monuments, ranking at the top of any must-see list for passionate travelers, and an essential stop on a visit to Southeast Asia. Because of this, it's almost always swarming with tourists—so overrun, and with so little protection, that UNESCO recently proclaimed it one of the world's most threatened historic sites.

Nonetheless, it's absolutely worth braving the crowds. Angkor Wat is a testament to human creativity and a place that surpasses its legend. But there is so much more to the Khmer legacy than just this one temple. To really explore the Khmer ruins and have a truly one-of-a-kind experience, the trick is to drink in Angkor Wat, then visit Angkor Thom, and continue on into the farther reaches of the ancient empire where many exquisite, smaller temples can be contemplated in peace.

At its height, the Khmer Empire extended north into what is now southern Laos and west across Thailand to Myanmar and the Malay Peninsula. While some of the more lightly visited temples are within driving distance of Siem Reap, a number of the most impressive are in northeast Thailand, in an area rarely frequented by tourists and not yet easily accessible from Cambodia. So the most ambitious tour of the Khmer temples requires two trips. Using Bangkok as a base, fly southeast to Siem Reap and tour the Angkor region, then return to Bangkok and drive northeast to the Khorat plateau in Thailand.

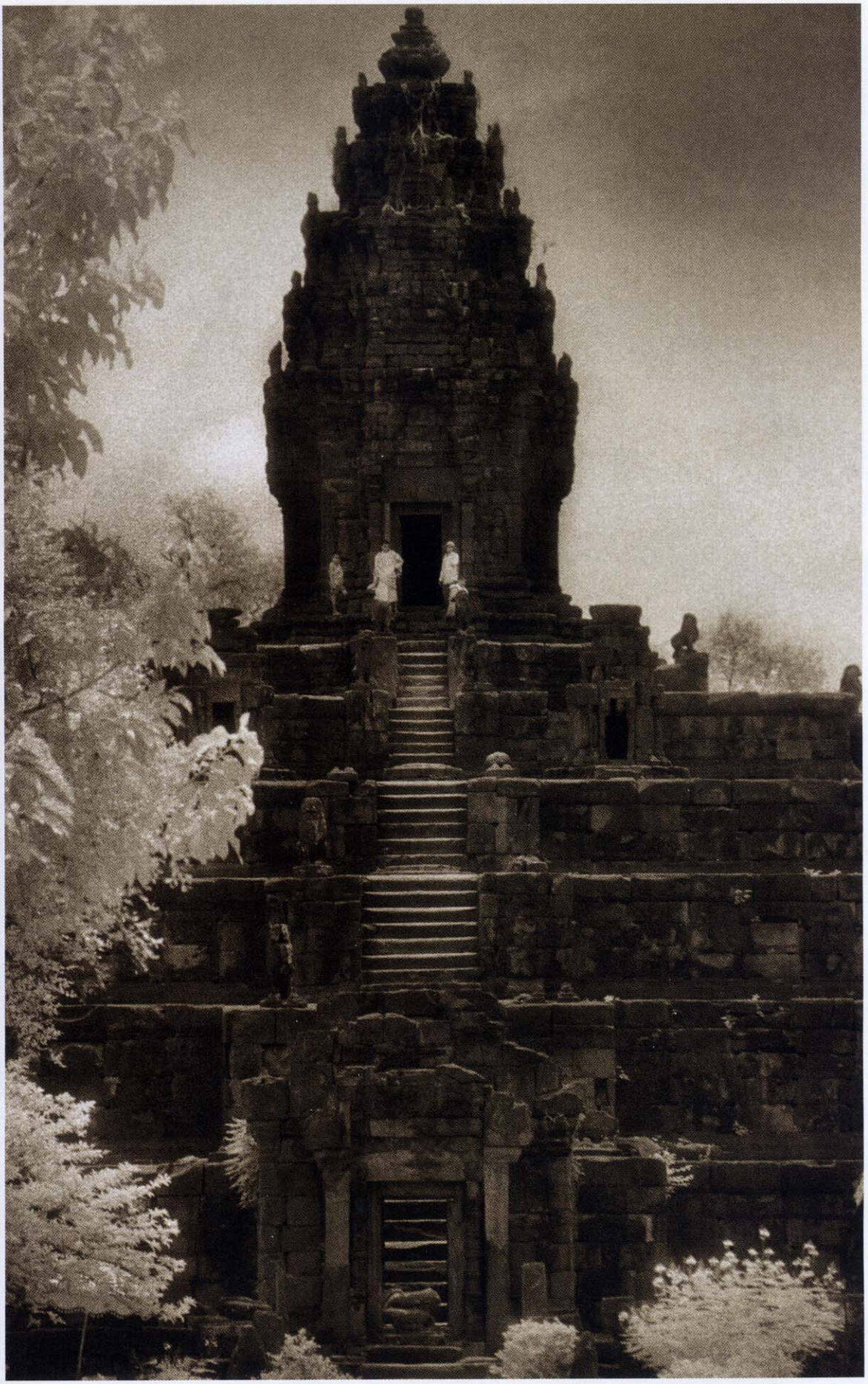
First Stop: Cambodia

As is the case with so many civilizations that built their monuments in stone but their homes of vulnerable wood, we have only a vague idea of people's daily life during the Khmer Empire. What little we do know is thanks to the records of Zhou Daguan, a Chinese emissary who spent from 1296 to 1297 in Angkor and described, among other things, the king emerging from the walled city to visit a nearby temple. The procession, he wrote, was led by soldiers, followed by some 300 to 500 silk-clad, bare-breasted palace girls carrying lighted candles. Ministers and princes were mounted on elephants, and the king rode out on an elephant whose tusks were sheathed in gold.

At the empire's height, the kings constructed temples of sandstone and laterite blocks fit together so expertly that they resembled one stone. Most temples were dedicated to one of the triumvirate of Hindu gods (Brahma, Vishnu, or Shiva) and modeled after Mount Meru, Hinduism's celestial home of the gods, with pyramid-like tiers rising to a central sanctuary surrounded by towers. But along with creating shrines to Hindu deities, the Khmer also incorporated Buddhist themes in their architecture. The two religions coexisted in Southeast Asia, after being brought there by Indian merchants around the time of Christ.

These days it's remarkably easy to reach **Angkor Wat**. An early morning flight goes from Bangkok to Siem Reap, where you can throw your luggage down in any number of hotels, pick up a three-day pass to the Cambodian historic sites, and set off for the ruins,

The massive stone gates of the great city of Angkor Thom were built in the days when nobles traveled by elephant. Today, elephants ferry tourists along its pathways.



CLOCKWISE, FROM RIGHT: The Bakong temple, of Hindu design; a lion at Prasat Phnom Rung in northeast Thailand; an intricately adorned library at Banteay Srei

just a 15-minute drive from downtown. Hiring a licensed guide is an absolute must: A good one will steer you away from the crowds and help you narrow down your visit to a digestible number of sites (see "Making It Happen," p.74). Plan on spending at least two days in Angkor Wat and nearby **Angkor Thom**, and make a concerted effort to visit at dawn or in the late afternoon, when light is at its softest.

First timers should begin at the south gate to Angkor Thom, a moated, walled complex built in the late 12th century and reached via a long causeway. This entrance, one of five, is lined by 108 hulking stone spirit figures (good on one side; evil on the other). Each side's grouping holds a giant *naga* (a semi-divine serpent creature) that forms a balustrade, and in the distance stands the much-photographed gate, an imposing 75-foot-tall construction crowned by four massive, serene stone faces staring in the four cardinal directions.

Inside Angkor Thom, critical sites to see include the Bayon, a mile from the south gate and the Khmer Empire's first solely Buddhist temple (where 200 stone faces gaze out from the towers), and to the northwest, the Terrace of the Elephants, the Terrace of the Leper King (where kings held audiences), and the Baphuon Temple, which once towered over other monuments there. Another essential temple to visit is a 2-minute drive to the east of Angkor Thom: **Ta Prohm** has been left largely unrestored, so that it gives a good idea of what Angkor Wat looked like when it was "found" by Western explorers.

Both Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom can be so packed that visits take on a certain maddening lemming quality. Fortunately, within easy driving range of Siem Reap are comparatively empty temples where it's possible to wander peaceful ruins that beautifully illustrate different aspects of Khmer history and artistic achievement.

The **Roluos Group** is a 20- to 30-minute drive southeast of Siem Reap. Three important ninth-century ruins remain of Hariharalaya, a capital of the Khmer Empire before Angkor: the temples of **Preah Ko**, **Bakong**, and tiny **Lolei**. The most impressive, Bakong—surrounded by a lily-filled moat—is the first great temple-mountain the Khmer built. It has eight towers, and the five-tiered structure is topped by a sanctuary.

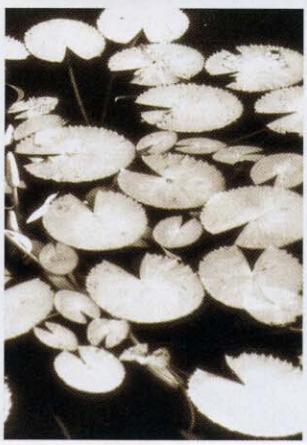
Banteay Srei, a small pink-sandstone Hindu temple reached by a 30- to 45-minute drive north of Siem Reap, is known as the "citadel of the women" for its graceful carvings of female divinities called *apsaras*. It is unfortunately now attracting tour buses, mainly at midday (nearby restaurants are a lunch stop). Built in the 10th century by the Brahmin Yajnavaraha and dedicated to Shiva and Vishnu, this was the spot from which, in the 1920s, a young André Malraux (later France's minister of cultural affairs) was caught trying to loot—the subject of his novel *The Royal Way*.

Beng Melea, dating from the early 12th century, resembles Angkor Wat when it was overgrown and unrestored. It's about a 1.5-hour car ride northeast from Siem Reap, just far enough to be off the scope of tour bus leaders. Strangler figs and ficus trees have spread their roots like fingers to grasp tumbled blocks of stone bearing bas-reliefs. Although there are a few areas where boardwalks and wooden stairs can help you navigate the 267-acre ruins, for the most part you'll be hopping across crumbled walls, encountering sinuous carvings all by yourself.

Second Stop: Thailand

Thailand has more than 2,000 Khmer ruins, including some spectacular hilltop sites along the Dangrek Mountains forming the border with Cambodia. One of these temples is believed to have inspired Angkor Wat, and the Classical Era (11th to 12th century) carvings at others rival those of the Angkor structures. Stepping out among these archaeological sites you'll have an entirely different experience: Instead of tourists, you'll find a few local families having lunch or sometimes no one at all.

Road conditions and tricky border relations make driving to Thailand from the Angkor region pretty much impossible. But it's easy



FROM TOP: Two monks approach a doorway aglow from the setting sun inside Angkor Wat, the only temple in the Angkor region that faces west; the 10th-century temple of Prasat Muang Tam in northeast Thailand, near Khorat; lotus plants and flower buds on a pond at Prasat Muang Tam

MAKING IT HAPPEN

Sherman's Picks:
★ = Smart Splurge
✓ = Great Value

GETTING THERE AND AROUND

Thai Airways flies to Bangkok from New York and Los Angeles (*thaiair.com*). From there, take Bangkok Airways (*bangkokair.com*) to Siem Reap. You won't need a visa for stays in Thailand lasting less than 30 days, but you will for Cambodia. Obtain one at the airport in Siem Reap (bring a spare passport photo). You'll need a pass to visit the Cambodian sites. Stop at the ticket booth on the drive from Siem Reap to Angkor Wat; you'll be photographed and issued a laminated pass (a 3-day pass costs $40). No such pass is needed in Thailand, where all sites are free.

WHERE TO STAY

★ In Siem Reap, **Hotel de la Paix** (*from $185/night; hoteldelapaixangkor.com*) is a chic 107-room design hotel with a spa, a striking pool area, and a lounge that displays the work of local artists.

★ On a tile-paved passage near the Old Market, **The One Hotel** (*from $225/night; theonehotelangkor.com*) offers just a single sumptuously furnished suite, with a rooftop Jacuzzi and lounge area.

✓ Affiliated **Hotel Be Angkor** (*from $95/night; hotelbeangkor.com*) has three rooms, each showcasing the work of a different Siem Reap artist, and two with rooftop lounges.

La Residence d'Angkor (*from $175/night; residenceangkor.com*), reflects Khmer style with hand-carved wood accents and a shady pool surrounded by flowers. Many Siem Reap hotels, including Hotel de la Paix and La Residence d'Angkor, encourage guests to donate to and visit local organizations such as orphanages or sewing schools. We recommend doing so.

★ Set on the edge of Khao Yai National Park in Thailand, 125 miles northeast of Bangkok, **Kirimaya** (*from $200/night; kirimaya.com*) is a beautiful design resort and a popular golf retreat with a spa. All rooms come with terraces or balconies.

✓ Also in Thailand near Nakhon Ratchasima, the **Dusit Princess Korat** (*from $40/night; dusit.com*) is a great value three-star hotel.

HIRING A GUIDE

Tourists typically locate guides through their hotels. Prices vary, but at The One Hotel and Hotel Be Angkor, the typical charge is $40/day for a car and a driver-guide; extra fees apply for sunrise trips or travel to more distant temples. (Tip about 10 percent.) Buses are available to some sites, but they tend to be uncomfortable and their schedules erratic.

WHERE TO SHOP

At **Artisans d'Angkor** (*www.artisansdangkor.com*) in Siem Reap, tour the workshops and then shop for all things silk (from scarves and handbags to pillows) as well as wood carvings, sculpture, and wall art. Another shop with high-end style at reasonable prices is **Khmer Attitude** (*raffles.com*) in the Raffles Grand Hotel d'Angkor, which sells gift items and the work of top Cambodian designers, as well as Carol Cassidy's silk shawls woven by survivors of land mines in remote Preah Vihear province.

WHEN TO GO

November to April is the dry season and peak tourist time, with elevated rates and temperatures in the 80s. May to August, the rainy season brings periodic downpours and 100-degree spells. In late spring and early fall you'll find bearable weather and (virtually) tourist-free temples.

PROPER TEMPLE BEHAVIOR

Visit responsibly—resist the all-too-human impulse to touch the carvings (admiring hands are wearing away reliefs in Angkor Wat and elsewhere). Never buy looted goods: Any artifact for sale has been looted, and for every lintel in a Singapore antique shop, there's a crude gash on a temple. For more information, consult UNESCO (www.unesco.org) or the World Monuments Fund (wmf.org).

A woman stands in a doorway of one of the great galleries of Angkor Wat. OPPOSITE: Two people sit in front of a shrine in Prasat Phimai in northeast Thailand.

go online Visit our **Angkor Travel Guide** and see a **Slide Show** of John McDermott's photos at **ShermansTravel.com**

to arrange a car and driver from Bangkok (and the ambitious can pack in a side trip to Ayutthaya, the Thai capital during the Khmer Empire's decline). Highway conditions are excellent along the 136-mile route to Nakhon Ratchasima, also called Khorat, northeast Thailand's largest city and a gateway to the region.

Scholars believe the dynasty of King Jayavarman VI originated in this area (Suryavarman II, the builder of Angkor Wat, was a descendent), which may account for the many temples, including the lovely early 11th-century **Prasat Phimai** at the end of the Royal Road from Angkor Thom. Today, it's about an hour's drive northeast of Khorat, near the Mun River. Some say Prasat Phimai was the model for Angkor Wat, but it's unique in its use of contrasting layers of white and red sandstone, and the sanctuary is surrounded by galleries of bas-reliefs depicting scenes from the Ramayana, a Hindu epic.

The magnificent temple **Prasat Phnom Rung** is 70 miles southeast of Khorat. Once serving as the halfway mark on the Royal Road, it occupies a peak (*phnom* is Khmer for hill), with sweeping views of the Khorat plateau and the Cambodian plain to the south. Here you'll find carvings from the height of the Khmer Empire's Classical Era. The approach to the temple is awe-inspiring: Long causeways lead to five sets of stairways lined by *nagas*. Like Angkor Wat, the main sanctuary is tiered with multi-headed guardian *nagas* and antefixes.

A few miles away, at **Prasat Muang Tam**, see full moats and ponds—features that have silted over or disappeared from most other temples. Four lotus-filled ponds lie inside the walled temple, each with a surround carved like the body of a rearing *naga*. Much of Prasat Muang Tam leans crazily, and the temple has none of the majesty or intricate decoration of Prasat Phnom Rung, but it's still very beautiful.

One of the most alluring temples, **Preah Vihear**, was closed to visitors until recently while the Thai and Cambodian governments argued over ownership (a situation exacerbated by UNESCO's naming it a World Heritage Site). Limited visits are now allowed. Another haunting treasure, **Ta Muen Thom**, on the lowland border, remains under dispute. Both temples have been wantonly looted and are pocked with bullets from 20th-century wars.

As daunting as this two-pronged journey may sound, taking a detour from our tumultuous world and being able to stand before these elegant stone temples, silent amid tropical forests, is a gift. ■

SEEING SOUTHEAST ASIA

BANGKOK Since you'll be using Bangkok as a base, spend some time exploring the Thai capital. Though it can be gritty, Bangkok is home to amazing sights, food, shopping, and nightlife. Start with a tour of the Grand Palace, an 18th-century royal residence and home to the sacred Emerald Buddha, and the adjacent Wat Pho, an ancient temple complex featuring a massive reclining Buddha. Take a taxi 45 minutes east of the city to embark on a boat ride through canals to the Tha Kha floating market. Serious shoppers should head to the legendary Chatuchak market for silk, baskets, bronzeware, and more. Try some of Bangkok's amazing street food in the popular night markets. For a smart splurge hotel, head to the riverside **Peninsula** (*from $360/night; peninsula.com*), with its modern Thai decor and impeccable service. For great value, try the riverfront **Shangri-La Bangkok** (*from $134/night; shangri-la.com*) or all-suite **lebua at State Tower** (*from $180/night; www.lebua.com*).

ANDAMAN COAST Phang Nga Bay, 530 miles south of Bangkok, is bordered on the west by Phuket island and on the north and east by mainland Thailand's peninsular tail. The region, with its limestone karst towers and islets (formed by erosion) and white sand beaches, is Southeast Asia's premier beach destination. Fly from Bangkok to Phuket, or to Krabi for mainland resorts. Pamper yourself at **Six Senses Hideaway Yao Noi** (*from $450/night; sixsenses.com*). On Phuket, indulge at **Trisara** (*from $570/night; www.trisara.com*), a hillside beach resort and spa. On the same stretch of Phuket's northwest coast is a great value design hotel, **Indigo Pearl** (*from $170/night; indigo-pearl.com*).

HANOI Though it's rapidly modernizing, Hanoi is a magical place to visit, with colonial villas, wide shady streets, lakes, pagodas, and an Old Quarter consisting of 36 narrow lanes named for the guilds (silk, paper, silver) that once traded on them. A wealth of museums, art galleries, and boutiques add to the appeal. Meanwhile, traditional Vietnamese dishes like *pho* or *cha ca* reflect the influence of French cuisine (try *bánh mì*, baguette sandwiches made with pâté). Air France and Vietnam Airlines offer nonstop service and the best rates from Bangkok. The city's grande dame, the **Sofitel Metropole Hanoi** (*from $235/night; sofitel.com*) grants a luxurious step back into the French colonial era. Or try the new **Intercontinental Hanoi Westlake** (*from $205/night; ichotelsgroup.com*), a 10-minute taxi ride from downtown.

Find a 14-day Perfect Trip from Saigon to Angkor Wat at **ShermansTravel.com**.