

Part 2

We booked our tickets to Siem Reap through the Town View Hotel's reception, including the early morning Tuk-Tuk to take us to the bus terminal. Taking these motorcycles with a cabin attached to the rear is a real fancy-fair ride; this one without trailer suspension better be prepared for the bumps so holding my luggage tight was an instinctive precaution. The morning air in my hair felt fresher than the splash of water I had in my face to wipe the nights sweat away and five minutes later we settled the bill at the price agreed on.

I had hoped to board one of those road cruising coaches we had seen dominantly riding the Royal Roads to Angkor, but arriving at the bus departure terminal nothing of the kind showed up. A 40 seat bus bound for Ho Chi Min left on schedule all right, despite its dust weathered appearance, but ours had yet to come 10 min. before scheduled departure time. Then the bus traffic controller hailed us to a surprise; a 20 seat new Toyota mini bus or micro bus as they call it in Japan. I brushed my concern about storing my luggage in the baggage compartment underneath off, what the heck out of sight out of hand?

We got front seats as if we were VIPs, allowing to take a couple of good video clips of the scenery along the road. The air-conditioning was hardly noticeable, could have done without it I felt, yet the 5 hours ride ahead and all things considered, comfortable traveling is worth a lot, and at the price of \$12 this was good bang for your buck. This was the third time out of Phnom Penh city and the excitement lay much more in reaching Angkor Watt than seeing the sugar palm tree dotted ochre fields incessantly passing by rural hamlets at the horizon. Crossroads with the usual few shops and stalls. At one stop Robert was lured in buying fried bananas that tasted like used car tires, so horrible he threw them away after spitting out the first bite. I was more fortunate with my spiral cut up pineapple and we shared it with a chat over the night bus we rode on New Years Eve in Myanmar. Comparatively that was more adventurous, and much more uncomfortable; sitting on a broken fold out seat in the aisle of the bus, stop over in places that did not have electricity, partly unpaved roads, but the friendliness of the people made up for it -we were part of the cattle transport. On this de luxe Toyota bus the polite smoothness of communications matched the wheels rolling over the tarmac -no hiccups, few bumps. Just the radio station with American country music was a bit out of place. When the driver changed the radio station to local pop, that was worse. Sounding almost as bad as Japanese Pop, the volume was low enough to allow me to doze off.

Half through the journey I had calculated the Boeung Tonle Sab or Great Lake would come in sight if we were lucky. But just as with my previous experience of the Boeung Kak Lake side in Phnom Penh, no sight of it for 10s of km on end.

I checked with my map. Perhaps after Kampong Thum, another 30 km another chance, and then when we finally had the full 180 degrees panorama view it was a rather boring one. Too wide to see the other side of the big inland sea we drove along uncharacteristic bush overgrown marshlands for most of the remaining hours, watching the shimmering surface of the Great Lake turn steely stale.

We were approaching sleepy Siem Reap in the early afternoon. People started to signal the driver to drop them off one after the other, the bony sun weathered young farmer with his twiggy wife and teen daughter -they certainly looked well dressed in their Sunday clothes, had they been to a relative in the big city? Then the gold toothed business man with whom I briefly had chatted got off. He had been on a business trip to Vietnam and I wished he'd talked with Robert instead; I had never been there and Robert had widely travelled in Vietnam, knowing the lay of the land much better than I. Finally our turn came: at the intersection of the National Road N 6 into Siem Reap and the road leading to Mom's Guesthouse. Japan based Branden had recommended it after his fourth trip to Angkor. He is not the only one traveling to World Heritage sites several times, but if that's what it takes to be awarded the Honorable mention in the International Photography Awards Competition then all the more admirable his winning entry "People of Asia" becomes. I could also understand Swedish Journalist Johan Engblom now when he wrote me there is so much choice of accommodation in Siem Reap that even in peak season you wouldn't have to resort to the park bench which he like so many other veteran travelers still considered too dangerous at night. Johan had been confronted with gun toting guys just the month before...

The Watt Bo road had consecutively small hotels, restaurants and Internet cafes lined up on both sides of the road and this was not even the Old Market Area where foreigners hang out. On the outside the guesthouse looked like a miniature Greek temple in the Roman Empire with its two pillars at the side of an oversized entrance door, on the inside rustic like an Oxford campus library; grotesque from every perspective. Warm in wood colors and cold in its yellow red tiled floor; empty with a ceiling far too high up for a first floor width this narrow. The spacious room at \$20 was definitely price worthy, all amenities available except that note on the wall read 'no lady visitors'.

Paradise for gay pedophiles then? The welcome leaflet to Siem Reap had a most starch warning on the back, printed in bold red letter face: 'Sex with children is a crime'. The deterrent added read: Offenders face up to 20 years in prison in Cambodia as well as criminal prosecution in their own countries. More than 2000 offenders arrested for sex crimes during the last five years...

After checking in we rented mountains bikes for the following three days and rode into town for dinner. Though I had never ridden a mountain bike with both front and back wheel suspension, not much practice was needed before I

enjoyed riding on and off the kerbstones of sidewalks, bumping potholes and unnervingly navigating uneven pavement slaps. The government withdrew licenses for renting motorbikes after too many foreigners had been killed in traffic accidents. Too bad for us easy riders!

That the saddle of the bicycle had the size for obese American buttocks I could live with but I got pretty annoyed by the sound of a rusty chain and tight gearshifts on the handle bar. I had already told the hotel manager in no doubtful words that for \$10 a day a drop of oil should grease the chain drives and bracket bearings to benefit all parties involved - the bicycle's not in the least- but he just said he rented out; maintenance was up to the hotel owner, meaning neither of them wanted dirty fingernails and be lowered status to labor workers. I suppose the Do-it-Yourself is a luxury only for Westerners' with a cycling hobby like me. In Japan too, people frown when I tell them my wife and I painted the walls of our whole apartment 8 years after settling in. Arguably specialist craftsmen would have done a better job. In Japan for me the question remains: why let all the middlemen take the bigger piece of the pie for planning and arranging the tasks others toil at? Or do we seek further assertive cultural explanations in Asian class differences where only those skilled apprentices and masters craftsmen can be entrusted with fixing a flat tire? I had hoped that in the Euro Zone equanimity of classes and status would have evolved; but I hear otherwise. My sister really got p*ssed off with the year long hassles building their new house, she and her husband rolled up their sleeves and labored on about everything from brick laying to sanitary and electrical installations because the East European guest workers on contract did not have the skills anticipated from them. To round off, there is of course the brighter side of life on Continental Europe: Wouldn't we all like job positions in a reclining armchair, preferably attended to by a butler named James? Where are the good colonial days of old? What the heck, what am I complaining about? A bicycle chain lacking a drop of oil? What Cambodian could afford such a flashy MTB/TPT bike with 18 gears and front and back suspension? For going to dinner? Getting there was like a walk in the park, literally; the ride along the Stung Siem Reap riverbanks simply superb in Cambodia made Adidas shorts and Swiss sandals. Without bicycle lights, faint street-lighting left Indiana Jones shadows on the sandy track and the moonlight in between the trees shed a silver veil cooling the breeze from over the still river surface, the tropical heat of the gone by day still hung between the sugar palm trees.

In contrast to Phnom Penh where the FCC, Quartier Latin, nightlife and the area for backpackers are seas apart, the 'foreign quarter' near the Old Market in Siem Reap had all in one; colonial buildings for budget travelers, Souvenir Shops for Baby Boomers, even Jet-Set bars for the trickle of Yuppies. And, just outside the cordoned off area: food street stalls with kerosene lights as you still find on quays of harbors in Japan, the so called Yatai. We were apparently

the only ones to come on mountain bikes, and pushing them past the road block we passed two guys on heavily packed transcontinental motorbikes; the kind with sponsor labels all over. Perhaps they were knocked off track from Paris-Dakar by a slip in time; they certainly looked spaced out in their StarTrek helmets, unshaven and dust covered black leather outfit, they were in for a cool beer I'm sure!

A number of restaurants had little appeal, the Mexican Tacos, the Italian spaghetti place, the real McCoy -a McDonalds had there been one- lacked ... We settled for an ill-defined one. Without asking we chained the bikes to a pot palm of the terrace restaurant and took a seat, right up front the tarmac. Beer and an easy choice of some surrogate western style dish would do. No sooner we had labeled Angkor Watt Beer as heavenly fluid, golden nectar, we got company! A young night raven quacking questions away, not waiting for me to formulate an answer that would short-circuit playful tarts without being rude, she ordered more beer for us that Robert promptly cancelled. Drunk, doped or both she tried to convince us it was her day off. Robert waived her nonchalantly away with a go-go.... We preferred watching foreign holiday makers parading in text bannered T shirts and shorts, some women with the latest see-through Indian cotton skirts that luckily covered their ugly legs, and should their giant boobies not turn you on you could always try to spot a stopple bearded yuppie wearing weesy sunglasses as a night time hair diadem.

The chicken legs with baked potatoes were served. The tastier distraction wetted the palate enough to forget feeling alien among aliens. We hadn't come to socialize or join cross table talk but as observers of scenes and scenery. The one unfolding right there was most entertaining: two western women up against one guy at the table next to us. One would doubt the women knew the guy at their table since his every move to court them was vehemently turned down. "He doesn't seem to get the point the women are making, so unresponsive to his advances, annoyed with him - animosity in their eyes" I said to Robert who remarked: "He's a jerk!" "But they seem to know each other after all, look! She's taking a helping of fried noodles from his plate!" They continued arguing over something. The blond woman was especially mouthy in English. I expected him to stand up and like in the movies throw in the towel or his napkin in this case; quit in rage with the f* word but no! He grabbed her hand last in a ditch reconciliation attempt or so, she let him hold hers! Now it was pretty clear they just had a quarrel or were about to split up or so. Robert half disdainful repeated "he's a jerk". To me they did not have the faintest likeness of a good match. A short uncharismatic poor artist type with his dark nondescript hairstyle, his dirty unsymmetrical face against hers, egg shaped, sharp lines with a nose curling of pride, sporty body figure just like her brunette girl friend. Was the chemistry in bed their fatal attraction then?

Before I could figure it out they all stood up and left, still arguing. What a holiday!

Going Dutch had been our unproblematic way of settling bills since Myanmar, Robert the fastest at calculating simply said \$7.5 each. Converting US Dollars, the de facto currency, had become really easy with 4000 Riel to the Dollar. \$7 and 2000 Riel couldn't be simpler. I hardly ever checked the math he did myself. Just as in Japan you're so used to people's honesty, you'd hardly question or check the change you get; cashiers do have a notice saying 'We cannot exchange money' though which I've always thought weird. Who wants to change Dollars or pay in any foreign currency at my local supermarket? Then I realized that I'm living not far from an American Air Force Base in Fussa. But when that notice is found just about anywhere in Japan, the reason must lie elsewhere: misconstruing English? Having a fashionable English sign that no commoner understands anyway? What is actually meant? They won't give you small change for a big yen note, that's it! As a non native speaker of English you develop a nasty habit of putting question marks behind everything; an occupational hazard. Here in Cambodia nothing is taken for granted, tales of rip offs and bribes go their rounds, and should you be interested -we were not-they're all over chat rooms on the Internet. All we were here for was digitalizing our piece of legendary Angkor Watt, rub shoulders with the locals and feel the dust of centuries still unsettled.

Traditional Cambodian gamelan music from the adjacent rock-disco house surfed the air-waves just audible between two drum ruffles. "Let's check it out" Robert was always quick to say when something ahead caught his attention. Seeing the open front disco floor empty and few stools at high tables around square pillars taken, everybody must be on second floor of this rusty red establishment then. Up a steep ladder sort of wooden staircase, there indeed, a wide open space filled with a colorful blend of talking holiday heads in front of the stage. Live music, live performance of a trendy troupe, no admission was charged. Traditional Balinese and classic Thai dancers gladly give tourist performances for a decent pay, here the alms hat went around. OK, the costumes may not have had that much glitter and the dances were more reminding of peasant folklore in poor rural China or Ainu festivals in Hokkaido, but the gamelan band made all the difference. Unfortunately more than a couple of IXY Canon shots turned out blurred, I had to learn more about special effect settings on this digital camera! There was a second chance; a leaflet advertised at \$100 a seat a dance and light show staged open air in front of the Angkor Watt ruins, which we'd probably want to watch on TV or buy for \$10 on pirated DVD anyway. We rode back uneventfully after tackling disorientation leaving the tourist zone.

I woke up long after sunrise when Robert knocked on the rustic wooden door to my room. "Gerrit? Ready to break the fast?" "Hai!" I exclaimed single worded; convenient this bilingual yes word, should become universal standard really, whether single or Hi,Hi or even triple for expressing a 'don't push me' yes in Japanese.

Freshness of the night still hung in the air outside Mom's Guest House. Proprietors or domestic servants difficult to say, sparingly sprinkling the sidewalk and part of the dusty road with the water from a classic 10 l galvanized aluminum bucket; the type I hadn't seen since messing around in the cellar of my parents some year ago. Interesting, they sprinkle water with the hand in Japan too. A tropical garden restaurant with overhead canapé drew us in. Robert made sure there was fresh milk to the coffee before ordering, and I realized again how much bigger an eater Robert was when he ordered banana chocolate pancake in addition to the sausages, omelet and toast. Later he argued with the waiter for a refill, and somehow he managed to get the extra cup of coffee free of charge. "Got to get them used to the concept of "refill" he remarked playfully to which I had no objection at all, caffeine addict that I am myself.

We picked up our bicycles at the guest house. The argument of getting an oiled chain lock rather than breaking the key in the dust blocked keyhole seemed to have worked, I got a new one. The oil that could have greased the chain and smoothen opening the lock, I did not. We rode off for a day trip. The ruins of Angkor Watt lay some 7.4 km from Siem Reap town. The night before we had gotten to the city centre without any trouble; the whole wide area was decently mapped on the tourist brochure so no worries of getting lost in the jungle. Once at the outskirts of the township there was only one road leading straight to the square moat enclosed Watt; three lane wide but without division lines and at each side of the asphalted road extra cleared bush; a time trip tunnel thru the jungle straight as an arrow and as far as the eye could see, a majestic road for all conveyances indeed.

Some horse drawn chariots with holiday makers passed, did they pity us sweaty cyclists in this 30 degrees plus heat before noon or just thought us a bit crazy to spare a dime on a royal ride? 15 min into the marvel of cycling in the tropics a road block. No, nothing of the military kind, a diversion to the sort of toll road gate where you had to present ID and a passport picture for a visitor's pass \$10 a day, if you weren't set for the 5 days discount pass at \$30. By now I had understood that \$10 is pretty much a preconceived price for everything. No queuing, the ticket gates seemed to have been built for mass transition, but none of them were having visitors in numbers to speak of. The broad faced Khmer in neat uniform processed our papers in no time, wished us a good day and we rode on. A few mini busses passed, the mechanical sound coming from the jungle stopped for a moment, but soon resumed. Noisy and unmelodious I

couldn't accept it came from a chainsaw and dispelled the notion it were malfunctioning loudspeakers. Pedaling up next to Robert I asked: "Do you hear that ... hmm ... noise, Robert?" "yeah, I know, it's not like the Japanese cicadas, but they are cicadas!" "Holy Jemoly, and that in midwinter?" "Well, you're in the tropics here remember!" "Right, in Japan we hear them all day long only during mid summer, in autumn another kind, locusts, an equally ear deafening concert but in the evenings then, still, I like the change really, this is so monotonously flat", I continued, hoping the conversation would distract from the nasty noise. "Worse in Sri Lanka, even the call of frogs there don't break the monotony. I had a Gecko lizard around where I used to live. That was something of a break. In Bangkok it's the howling stray dogs that are deafening the night but they are fun". Keeping up the pace and frolic I added "Not so in Nepal, those lice infested bastards' bite can give you a real health scare!" "I used to mark their territory with throwing small stones the first couple of nights, then in the days after it was enough to pretend throwing to keep them at bay" Robert laughed and I rejoiced his down to earth wisdom in knowing the lay of the land there as well as other countries in Asia, in particular Thailand.

"Hard to imagine coming from Japan to a world class city like BKK full of stray dogs, but I do remember the one bitch with her puppies that recognized you after you had moved a year earlier, that was a touching sight!" I gasped for breath, talking and riding at such a tempo in the tropics. "Save for the story of her male partner you found bitten to death, that was a reality check and then you didn't even throw a stone at the black bully culprit! Haven't seen much of dogs here in Cambodia, have they eaten them all?" "Wouldn't know, in Korea or China that wouldn't be a surprise, they eat everything, live monkey brains, deep fried grasshoppers, just name it". "Then Hong Kong is more civilized they have members-only-clubs for feasting on endangered species!" We fell silent and pedaled on, down to earth in the here and now as if there were nothing new under the sun, me sweating like a horse, Robert not a drop.

Sunscreen here is as life sustaining as water and I had gladly accepted a daily ration from Robert's since Phnom Penh. Whereas I had stood behind the idea of an undershirt and head cover in the summer heat of Japan, Robert always traveled around without either. I must admit that I did not miss my hat left at his place in BKK, but soaked undershirts were part of cycling in SE Asia. We hit the grand square moat somewhere on the south side. Now that was open space! The Thorn Rose image of Ankor Watt overgrown by jungle and covered in moss is about as widespread as the desert that surrounds the Valley of Kings in Egypt, or Dunhuang along the northern Silk Road through the Kumtag Desert for that sake. All but, I need to reevaluate what image jungle calls to mind again. The Amazon rainforest? Sumatra or Borneo's impenetrable rugged mountains or African tropical forests? Nothing of the kind. The Swiss Alps do not call the Himalayas to mind and vice versa. This dense jungle through which

the access road is cut continued at the other side of the moat. More of the same, leafy green rainforest trees in a lacustrine environment all pretty much to the same height, no bamboo but thick dry undergrowth. Certainly not inviting.

Not much to deliberate on when a sign board at the T junction points right to a tourist bus parking lot and the other direction to the main entrance a kilometer or two more. We took the left turn, hopefully avoiding crowds of guide flag swinging, camera toting, yellow cap groups of Japanese. All along the moat I searched for a first glimpse of the classic poster view; in vain. It remained hidden behind a green mass of tropical forest, just as the outer wall 3.6 km in circumference did; even from the paying parking lot in front of the bridge over the water reservoir still no sight. The gate yes, flanked on both sides by a massive wall, the first of three concentric galleries, now that looked promising indeed. School boys and girls on a full time working holiday selling postcards, shawls, and copyright broken books did not insist all that bad when Robert told them we'd buy after returning to our bicycles. He certainly had a teacher's way of convincing them. With his bright smile, half joking but firm, they must have believed he wouldn't buy anything if they continued running after us. He set the example with pointing at the one girl most insisting: "YOU, Nothing BUY!" They backed off. Another girl got a 'may be promise' for two or three shawls out of him. Leaving us to cross the bridge undisturbed and in full control of our cameras they'd known from experience we'd be back.

Timing was right, three saffron orange clad monks in the camera's sight. A wedding with bride girls against the backdrop of the Naga snakes and the canal. Just warming up, I said to myself and made it for the west gate. Coming out the other side, standing on the concourse to the Royal Terrace, at quite a distance still, there it was then: the unmistakably great work of world architecture. I recognized the wonder, the frontal view of the five Angkor Watt towers crowning the elevated sanctuary at 65 m high; five prominently pointed icons at the end of a long stone paved Via, surely over 300 m long: the causeway connects the western Gopura to the temple proper, with Naga snake balustrades and six sets of steps. No jungle here, obviously cleared completely since its re-discovery in 1861 by the French Henri Mouhot who first introduced it to the West. Much earlier records of Chinese and Japanese explorers have been perused since. Now the square mandala shaped compound has a short cut grass plain with a lotus pond, and with some pairs of the iconic Khmer sugar palm trees this completes the picture postcard delight for holidaymakers. Refreshments at the stalls lined up against the Outer Wall with relatively few people around question: are holidays all about sun, sand and sea? Perhaps it was a bit early for tour groups. We wasted no time, there was so much more to take in straight from the centre of that wonder from the bygone. Sandstone fossil culture as it were, from times immemorial, reminders of greatness that

now is Internet connected, graphic grid scanned, catalogued in digital format. The reality of actually being here, mounting the eroded steep staircases where thousands of feet had stepped before was surreal. I'm sure more than one Westerner had bumped head on the low arches by lack of caution signs.

Would have spoiled the mystique anyway. The inscriptions on square pillars had of course all been noted down, taken rubbings of and deciphered. Suffice to imagine the sheer years it'd taken to carve them in addition to knowing that this mountain terrace temple emerged at the height of the Angkor Kingdom in the early 12th century and had been built along with adjacent temple complexes: Angkor Thom with Bayon at its center, the Phreah Khan and Ta Prohm temples spanning an Angkor dynasty of Kings over a 100 years.

My childhood fascination with deciphering secret scripts had been saturated throughout my sturm und drang years. What's the use of studies in Buddhist scriptures in Sanskrit and Tibetan here? Add Chinese characters to it and you will appreciate that Pali script and derived languages or the Cham script of the ancient Champa Kingdom with Chams today followers of Islam is no longer my cup of tea. All I've got is an informed guess that the inscriptions, chiseled on these square pillars, on stone stelae and the surrounding carved figures of Devatas in relief appearing throughout this temple are related to Veda or post-Vedic texts like the Mahabharata, so Hindu mythology again. Further evidence of this religion's influence on the emergence and development of the Angkor civilization we found on the many walls depicting the Ramayana epic in bas-relief friezes: the monkey god Hanuman, the demon king Rawana's attempt to carry off Princess Sita. I noticed the Kilaya, a tri-bladed magical peg also called P(h)urba in Tibetan .

Arguably Hinduism considers Buddhism as a branch development, just as Jainism views themselves as antecedent and may be Christianity should view Islam similarly, unless they accept to both being a branch development of Judaism, of all monotheistic religions. God forbid, how much good have they all done us? Khmer rulers adopted Hindu beliefs initially, worshipped Vishnu and Shiva and adapted it to native customs and beliefs. Where in the world have they not? Japanese Buddhism adapted ancestor worship, Tibetan Buddhism adapted all elements of Tantric Hinduism and Bon shamanism, Christianity no exception with their Christmas tree imports from China. Not difficult to accept Mahayana Buddhism when it was transmitted to Cambodia then, and from there Theravada Buddhism the religion of most Cambodians today. Humbling to recall receiving blessings from Buddhist Saints indeed, wonder workers without frontiers, without flavor for favors.

Here one can feel part of the bigger picture, in the shadow of a monumental high rising stone complex. The ogival redented towers, shaped like lotus buds; half-galleries to broaden passageways; axial galleries connecting enclosures;

interconnected with three concentric galleries, all in a unified diversity of grey, pock-faced grey that is. Most of the visible areas are of sandstone blocks, while laterite or brick was used for the outer wall and for hidden structural parts. The cement or binding agent used to join the blocks is yet to be identified, although natural resins or slaked lime have been suggested. Skilled and confident in the use of sandstone as the main building material these Khmer of the Middle Ages must have been...

We climbed up the flight of steps and entered the west gate to the temple proper. I kept hikers' good advice in mind: watch your step and stop to look around. Here also the typical decorative elements are devatas (or apsaras), bas-reliefs, and on pediments extensive garlands and narrative scenes.

And there under the cruciform cloister right in the centre through a hole in the damaged roof a beam of sunlight shone on the green palanquin above a standing statue of six armed Brahma. A bright yellow brocade cloth over the left shoulder, ceremonial scarves and pearl necklaces hanging over two of the six arms, few incense sticks burning all indications of little live worship and so much more museum mystique to support: the donation box. Behind I could see more daylight, the exit out of the second gallery. With a one hand Gasho (合掌) gesture and a single nod (相問訊) I allowed myself to take a flash-off snap shot and then took the left corridor, going unintentionally clockwise around the second gallery. Damn, you had to really watch your step in this darkness; the stone-paved floor was uneven and slippery of moist. Should I have brought my walking stick and let it double as Kong Fu security like in Myanmar? a flashlight too? Had other tourists used ropes I'd joined them as cave explorers. I worked my way towards the light, where was Robert? I reached the corner of the second gallery, looked out through the row of short pillars onto an inner court, bright blinding sunlight demanded my eyes to adjust before I could figure out what there was to see in this court between second and third gallery. Looked like public bathing pools in Kathmandu, without water though. Hey, there was Robert. Amazing, amazing was all I could say. "Let's move on" he said after a moment of pensive silence, "there is more". I nodded "Which way in this maze?" "To the centre of the third gallery" he was on his way already. A stone-paved causeway between the two bathing pools led to another flight of steps. The American longhaired UCLA professor with his much younger wife or girl friend or student may be stood half way up and glad to see me again he continued practicing his French. "C'est au desus tous expectations, n'est-pas?" "Certainement!" I replied appreciatively. He had certainly come as close as native English speakers could to the pronunciation of the French u. We had ineluctably bumped into each other at the West Gate, crossed eyes when he had asked "Français?" to which I had replied: "Belge d'origine, Danois de nationalité et resident du Japon". That's when I got to know he was an anthropologist. In Japan I would probably have dashed out a visiting card in

the hope of making new friends or business acquaintances; but here it remained with shaking hands, a firm handshake I must say. I worked my way up the treacherous steep steps. Who would have expected it a luxury to walk through these narrow dark passages? But it was a cool haven from the unsparing sun. That was probably the luxury for the monks and laymen on a spiritual path. Here spiritual wishes for 'sunshine on your path' would definitely be misplaced.

We had reached the last of the cruciform cloisters and navigated the perfidious paved third gallery around the central sanctuary. Architecturally speaking this unique feature in which galleries surround the main square sanctuary with 4 towers at the corners forming a quincunx with the central one crowning it would be incomplete had there not been visionaries in a distant past whom had drawn up human's inner space reflecting the cosmos in Mandala shape long before MySpace.com came into existence in a world wide web architecture. Standing at 65 m tall I recall reading, it is obviously a majestic reminder of historical grandeur, the defeat of Siam as it is lavishly illustrated in bas-reliefs, the epitome of the high classical style of Khmer architecture. Angkor Watt has become the symbol of Cambodia, appearing on its national flag, and is the country's pride and prime attraction for \$ visitors.

Whereas bloody battles have been fought with the proverbial iron will that moves mountains, the representation of Mount Meru still stands. Mt. Meru in Hindu cosmology is the antecedent to Mount Sumeru that Buddhism calls its centre of the world. Tibetans believe it is in reality Mt Kailas in the Himalayas; truth or tantrum of a sacred place in four religions, whatever, Buddhism adopted this cosmology in its Mandala structures and can be widely found throughout various schools and traditions, all the way through China to the Mikkyo schools like the Shingon-shu in Japan.

We moved around the core of the temple proper to the east gate. More of the same, though clearly we had reached back stage! Standing on a 30 m long apron of open ground between the third and second gallery we could look up and admire the ceiling between the pillars decorated with lotus rosettes; the west face of the wall with dancing figures and the east face of the wall with window balustrades, dancing male figures on prancing animals all so richly entertaining you'd end up with your SD memory card full before you'd know. I had to get out of this trench and look out the east gate, not that I felt claustrophobic but I had filled up greedily on grey and needed green, burb and fart and all that could help to prevent indigestion. Climbing another flight of steps to top of the outer gallery? Yes, a definite go!

What a relief to be able to let your eyes gaze over the grassy plain with tropical forest trees at the far end. Robert pointed at a stage with rows of chairs some 100m away. "Fancy a \$100 front seat for tonight's light show?" he mischievously asked. As always I find it difficult to build up a lively chat when a ball humorously hit my side of the court. "Wouldn't mind being stinking rich here" was about all I could utter. "My brother is a millionaire", Robert paused, "I told him once money doesn't make happy, but then he got angry and we had a good fight about it; was never on good speaking terms with him anyway" Robert concluded. "Well, having money certainly helps widening the choices you can make" I reasoned. Robert didn't follow up. Let's go for lunch he suggested and headed for the corner ogival tower. We walked the third gallery open to the outside with our eyes more to the green side of the columned gangway. Half way through the 200 m long half-gallery, we passed the north gate.

"This is a good place for a meditation" Robert prompted.

I totally disagreed but didn't say so. In fact, I had noticed Robert's spontaneity a number of times and respected he at times carried out his impulses without second thought. Robert put himself in a semi formal meditation position and probably expected me to follow suit.

I sat staring out at the green jungle in front, a bit annoyed with the Angkor ruins in the corners of my eyes and in my awareness of them behind.

"Picture the Buddha up in the sky there", Robert firmly continued talking to himself while taking a deep breath. This time I couldn't help but angrily responding: "NO"! It may have perplexed him, my anger contaminating, "They're ruins!" I added and withheld not a place you would feel like going to for meditation. The Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet that felt quite the same, drained dead completely, empty of live energy came to mind but since he also had been there I did not feel like discussing it there and then.

"That's impermanence", Robert remarked "you breath in and out, send out light and absorb it, recite the heart sutra's mantra form is emptiness and emptiness is form", which he repeated in Sanskrit.

"All phantasmagorias Robert, I haven't understood a jota about impermanence after all these years" I argued categorically, "and I don't do mantra-yana or japa-mala"! "Not even Chenrezigs Mani?" Robert questioned unbelievably. "No, I refuse; I told Lama Tashi that it only stirs up things that I feel needn't stirring up. Loving compassion is beyond my comprehension, the alpha and omega of ignorance for me if you will". A head on collision path that if not Robert had circumvented saying: "OK, if it doesn't work for you..." would have ended in a brawl over variations of meditation techniques and who is right and who is wrong; and in what tradition which would do no one good.

I am not against a civil debate on religious issues, but then I am no match for theologians or scholastic approaches. After a minute of silly silence we stood

up and continued our way to lunch. The next corner of the gallery offered a grand view over the courtyard worthy of another shot. I noticed a man, flat faced Asian, of around my age just taking aim. His Nikon camera with a canon of a zoom, his baseball cap, vest, just about everything indicated Japanese. Judging by facial features only is difficult, but the question "Nihon jin desu ka?" is an easy solution to check it out. He answered in English "Yes, I'm Japanese" and was quick to add that he was actually living and working in Hong Kong. A short standard conversation followed. "Where are you from, where do you live?" he asked in English and I choose to use my well-exercised answers in Japanese. Robert was quick to join in. Surprising how much he had retained of Japanese after only four years in Japan. The difference between Robert and me there is that he finds it harder to understand Japanese and easier to express himself whereas I have it the other way around. Before saying goodbye I pulled out my name card, funny enough opposite the Japanese Aisatsu way that starts with exchanging business cards. Mr. Inose was not prepared for this, searched his pockets, mumbled 'sumimasen' and fished a reserve business card from his wallet. Executive Director, right. We shook hands. It felt a Hong Kong much-exercised handshake, not the kind of cottage cheese shake I'd expected. Mr. Inose wished us well and we responded likewise as gentlemen befitting.

Refreshed we made it back through the West gate where hordes of school kids were awaiting us with cheap souvenirs. Robert was not spared for being held to his 'may be' promise. Even I took advantage of the situation, pointing at him as the man to deal with. He actually did manage to persuade them to wait till after we had had lunch.

We settled for a table outside a classy pavilion restaurant after the white shirt and black vest waiter had showed us all the signs 'reserved' on the tables inside. The Angkor Cafe offered a limited variety of lunch menus, which made it easier to decide. Why not spaghetti? Can't be all that demanding for a local chef to cook something together that suggests Italian; at a bit pricy taste to my budget, but then the set menu with coffee and desert made up for it when it came. And if that was not filling enough there were always a number of makeshift stalls with plenty of more choice in fresh fruit.

I've always been a bit crazy about coconut milk in SE Asia and had one chopped the tip off while Robert was in full barter mode with his faithful followers of souvenir sales kids. He got what he had bargained for: three shawls for the price of two. For a moment I thought 'me too', buying my 'omiyage' but all of the kids geared up once they saw money circulating and that put me off a bit. I hesitated buying a picture book with two Japanese author names on it. The pictures inside had a quality print too good to be true for the price of \$10. Was everything in price classes of 5-10-15 \$20? In Japan this art publication would probably fetch the double if not more. Robert

thought it a pirated version and not worth more than \$5. I had a second look. I couldn't tell whether it was indeed fake and violating copyrights. Offset printed on good quality of paper, a marvelous collection of very picturesque pictures; clearly the photographer Mr. Hitoshi Tamura had chosen to shoot Angkor Watt 360° - in a highly professional manner. To pick out just one: Sunrise above the main tower of the classic Angkor view lending theories of Eleanor Mannikka support. Mannikka claims that the measurements of solar and lunar time cycles were built into the sacred space of Angkor Wat, meant to perpetuate and to placate the deities manifest in the heavens above. Her suggestions have been received with a mixture of interest and skepticism in academic circles however. For me truth lies in the eye of the beholder, when an ugly woman looks into the mirror and sees she is beautiful then she must be beautiful. For Japanese punctilious culture these measurements must come as natural as waiting for the perfect time to take a shot of the famous diamond star sunrise above Mt. Fuji. In the book accompanying academic prose was limited to 30 pages in the back, out of 200 this is minimal but in it the author Mr. Yoshiaki Ishizawa compiled valuable background, religious beliefs and superstitions, historical facts and figures.

I was about to banzai deepening the dilemma, tried with a grin to give the thin small A5 size book a \$5 shot in despise, in vain. The tiny girl argued: "me pay \$8; this book \$10" I had noticed the much larger volume at \$20 earlier, but carrying it in this tropical heat had been the deferring factor. "OK, \$8, no win, no loss" was my reasoning. Her move: "\$9 and 2 shawls all \$10". "OK, \$10 one book and three shawls, like my friend, everybody happy". The deal closed all right but the tiny girl whom I would have given 8 or 9 years old didn't seem all that happy when she answered she was 12 in fact. Had I been stingy? All flocked around Robert again who enjoyed the game of haggling over prices and bought several other things he probably didn't need or want. I must admit that it gained him a couple of priceless pictures when he asked several of them to pose for close-up portraits.

Time to move on, cycle out to Ta Prohm. I had relied on Robert's choice to see Angkor Thom the day after Angkor Watt, never questioning which order of visits to the very many Angkor sites was better. We cycled back along the moat to the T-junction at a slow pace, continued as it were the anti-clockwise circumambulation of past times under shrouding greenery.

The cicadas uninterruptedly produced their monotonous mechanical sound. Along the royal roads we turned east as the map advised, passing a group of men, women and children harvesting hay with sickles in the same field where some cows had free space to roam and fill up on goodies of first choice. Red strands through the ochre soil became bigger and bigger till there was only really red soil. We stopped briefly for taking a snapshot of each other on our

mountain bikes in front of a puddle with small pink purple lotus flowers against the ruins of Prasat Kravan in the background. Its red bricks called vivid memories of cycling the dusty plains of Bagan, Myanmar to mind. There also no escaping the oppressive heat, no shelter from the glare under the canapé foliage.

Not many world heritage sites in Asia were left to cross off on the list now. We filled up on water from the bottle in the holder on the down tube and rode on. Not long after the tunnel through the jungle opened up to the right. I felt more attracted to go for a close look at the lake where fishermen were sailing off than to enter the dark Gopura gate in the wall of Banteay Kdei to the left. Robert also had to plow through the loose sand, so we walked the rest of the distance to the shore. Three fishermen in turquoise blue tunica -was there a woman among them? -throwing their nets at each side of the punt boat, now wasn't that a wonderful sight of skillful survival. More difficult than fish to catch this net throwing scene was in the zoom at the right time. I held my hand steady at the side of a great Banyan tree, while holding the bicycle still between my legs took aim and missed it of course. Try again, what the heck, with a SD memory card and 500 pictures capacity a day you can go on a picture kick without fears for a cold turkey. Perhaps I got it right after the third shot. Robert had walked off to the ruined embankment with ever present Naga snakes leaving his bicycle lying there unattended, sure nobody'd run off with it. Two other cyclists neared, undoubtedly rented show-off bikes, young Asian budget travelers, university student types, clean shaven. I fired Gonnichiwa to the closest by who turned his head right away to his friend behind him. "You speak Japanese?" was this one's answer. I shrugged. "I'm Japanese but my friend is Korean he doesn't speak Japanese", he continued without hesitation "I travel with him to learn English". Now there you are, the whole lot in one go! What can I say? "i-i-i desu ne---". He continued in English "Where do you live?" and I in Japanese: "Fussa ni sun-de imasu... ". "Tokyo?" We had to laugh, "Yes, Tokyo, I'm Gerrit by the way". "Yoshi", and pointing at the shy man in the shadow of the tree he said: "Tomodachi, Chaar san" Robert had joined, a lively conversation with three words in English and two in Japanese followed. I learned he was not a student but working in Singapore for a Japanese trading firm. He suggested we go together for seeing the Banteay Kdei. I eyed Robert who said we were on the way to Ta Phrom. Our ways split up with a "See ya".

A kilometer up the road we chained our bikes and went in on foot. Immediately I recognized more of the classic views of Angkor, ruins overgrown with jungle, huge trees. They're actually roots of the Fig Strangler tree that drops roots from above. Now we are talking ruins! The devastation was painful. Fallen blocks everywhere, moss and mold covered. Below the canapé foliage of tropical rainforest an eerie green atmosphere hung, with creepy creatures and

spooky spider webs. The zebra tarantula spider, a regional delicacy: fried spiders an everyday snack with a bland taste if you want to know before it churns your stomach. Difficult to spot as they build and live in burrows up to several feet deep, emerging only to capture food. But I spotted the same wood spider species as I had seen in Okinawa, the most southern island archipelago of Japan, though there they don't sell fried spiders on the markets.

This here is a photogenic paradise for people with a passion for Indiana Jones, but the group of monks in my sight may have felt otherwise; trees growing out of the monastery ruins and Thorn Rose jungle surrounding the temple.

I suppose Ta Prohm has been left in much the same condition in which it was found because of the tantalizing job priorities at Angkor Watt and Bayon. Built in the Bayon style of a Mahayana Buddhist university and monastery, you could compare it to the Nālandā one in the Indian state of Bihar. Though I recall its natural environment so very different, one does observe that it flourished until the 12th century and accommodated a population of over 10,000 students and 2,000 teachers, housing in yet another architectural masterpiece of stone residences. Knowing that Ta Prohm was home to more than 12,500 people (including 18 high priests and 615 Apsaras, dancers or courtesans, nymphs or geisha sporting together with them for some time -I imagine- to recount in all good faith stories of their woodwinked beauty, passion and caprice), with an additional 80,000 souls in the surrounding villages serving to provide supplies, you could argue it was the feudal equivalent to the Ganden, Sera and Drepung monasteries in Tibet of a little later era, namely 15th century, with that difference then that much more scarce wood was used there to construct mega dwellings for earthlings and god-alikes all the same.

Unlike most Angkorian temples, this temple is not a mountain temple, temple-mountain or temple-pyramid if you like, but flat. No steep treacherous stairs to climb to the inner sanctuary. Instead the three inner enclosures of the temple proper are just galleried, albeit ruined. For the visitors much work has been done to stabilize them. Above ground, what could become a muddy pool in torrential rains, wooden boards on stilts as gangways permit access to the corner towers that have basically been left collapsed to maintain its condition of apparent neglect.

We made our way around in the first enclosure, a quincunx form with the tower of the central sanctuary. Our Japanese and Korean guy bumped into us again there. This time we had little to say; "whew, quite something, ain't it?" They waited in line for the must have classic picture: the corner of the central gallery where a huge Strangler Fig tree boils aloft dropping down its giant roots. We moved on, perhaps on our way back we also had to queue, but I'd take the chance. First to the back of the yard, to the third enclosure. The ground was dry and allowed to walk beside the wooden gangway. More heaps of rocks, and no access to the inside of galleries, too dangerous obviously. To me the

collapsed face tower at the end of the gallery some 30 meters away and the surrounding the outer enclosure was dubiously worthy of another stone heap picture, but I took it anyway. One flight of wooden steps led down out of the sanctuary to the south. Refreshing wide green view without stone heaps everywhere. Almost a Garden of Eden, with a well-trodden path between bushes, all to keep it from being overtaken by the whole largely forested area. Robert dickered the price of a bamboo rattle. Surprising that only this man was allowed to sit and sell a few cheap handmade souvenirs inside the compound. His blue tunic was perhaps a free pass of sorts; an official gardener with a side business. All the other souvenir vendors kept outside the main entrance gopura on the east side. I didn't ask, but looked undecidedly to a few overpriced miniature Buddha statues. Didn't seem to be locally made; the material looked authentic brass all right but was too light to be any copper alloy. The idea of mixing copper dust with plastic and glue, pour the hot solution into a mold was an easy and cheap way for mass production that I first learned of in Denmark. It had apparently caught on. Now I even wondered whether it was Lama Tashi's invention and innovative marketing that had found its way here. I didn't buy the souvenir, the one I had from Denmark was loaded with good memories and filled with a 'Dzung' Tibetan for precious wishful filling gems, and I had long stopped trading in Buddha statues; supplying Buddhist centres and aspiring acolytes in Europe was never a lucrative business.

This Ta Phrom temple was originally called Rajavihara, vihara meaning monastery in Sanskrit and Raja every one knows is the king of animals; the lion. Why the main image on the stele of this ruin is representing Prajñāpāramitā, the personification of wisdom is a question that needs further reading up on. All I know is that historically Hinayana scriptures do not mention Prajñāpāramitā as the disciple of Buddha Gautama and that in Tibetan Buddhism Jampelyang is the only one in the pantheon sitting on a lion. The Japanese less popularly depicted Monju is in Sanskrit Manjushree with his consort Saraswati, the Buddhas of learning and wisdom. For Chinese Buddhists Wutai Shan is considered to be the earthly abode of Manjushree, Wénshū, and one of the Four Sacred Mountains of Buddhism in China a popular place of pilgrimage and associated with the Northern lineages of Zen. Not only in Japanese Buddhism, the Buddha Shakyā is commonly associated with an elephant not a lion. In Thailand the Buddha entering par-nirvana can be seen everywhere, but other Buddhist countries consider it a less happy image to express. Whatever, as the title of this travelogue alone suggests it is not appealing scholars and the reader may have long understood I'm more a Jack of all trades but a master of none. For those with an appetite for finding out what more the temple's stele records, there is plenty of literature on when and how the temple amassed considerable riches, including gold, pearls and silks.

Is there anything more to say but all religious history under the sun can be sheared with a common denominator? Shave it bald, bald is beautiful, leave the explanation of the rise and fall of empires to historians or just to the elements that perpetuate impermanence without explanation and with a good bit of advice carry on to apply the knowledge gained too late? If I had only known ...

For everything there is a first time...

Robert suggested we try Khmer massage that evening. I have never had much interest in massages. Probably because I associate it with parlors that have more going behind the front 'massage menu board' or also associate it with a luxury, an extravaganza I can do without. Robert reasoned the latter is incorrect, in Asia - and I must agree- a lot of these small services, a shave, a shoe shine, home delivery of noodle soup not to forget cleaning the ear canal and cutting nostril hair fall within range of the common man's purse. Whereas Robert uses an electric haircutter to trim his receding hairline I feel going to my barber is the ultimate treat. Robert obviously enjoys massages in various places and price classes. The first ever massage I had was in the Philippines. My wife Nongkie suggested I had one at a beach on Cebu Island. I accepted it reluctantly and only the upper body part. In Japan, seeking relief from stress related pains in my shoulder and neck - Katakori as Japanese call this common ailment when you're over 40 I went to a Chinese healer. I denied him to use chiropractor methods but accepted the glass bulb thing. Chinese suction cup treatment is done with small glass cups patched on certain meridian points of your back and then fired up to made a vacuum which leaves a red spot on the skin where the circle has sucked out all the bad energy. Did it work? Yes, undeniably -for a couple of hours after which it gradually wore off. I concluded to stick to ZaZen as a cheaper way to treat myself on psycho somatic disorders.

After a decent dinner we went back to the massage parlor we had passed just outside the foreign quarters. Now only three women were sitting in front of the shop under two white spotlights. The plastic terrace chairs looked more belonging to a seaside resort. Two young Cambodians just came out. My immediate thought was if they can afford it I could too. After all it had been a full day going places and cycling around, my soar leg muscles would probably be brought in shape for another day of heavy duty by the next morning.

Robert was in his element and quickly got into talk with the lady manager and her two friends who had passed by for a late night chat I assumed.

The usual introductory greetings with names and places we're from, breaking the ice and the price was right. \$15 for 60 min. head to toes. We entered.

The room in red had the bare basics, a counter with flowers and a simili leather bench for waiting, a steep staircase with iron bar balustrade up to the first

floor and dimmed lights. We were served Chinese Jasmine tea while the room was been prepared and the masseuses could have a go on us. Robert continued the conversation asking for opening and closing hours that was not advertised and more inquisitive how many customers a day they had on average. He would later ask the girls the same questions: working hours, customers a day and pay. It didn't add up... Whatever, he had the skill to communicate with people in Thai and Khmer who may not like Thai in a historical perspective, for those who do have a grasp of the language he's at least of the neighborhood. Telling his own age and getting to know theirs -no matter the language or culture- is part of conversations in the East, but unlike in Japanese culture it had little in common with placing people in their social compartment. Were westerners less afraid of communicating with an unknown social status? Or were the criteria just different?

Up the iron staircase several rooms, the spacious one with 6 mattresses laying ready for us. We chose the two middle ones of the 4 aligned parallel and took off all clothes except underpants. Two young women greeted us the traditional way, 'sompeah' with hands folded in a prayer-like fashion while slightly bowing saying "Chum Reap Suor", handed us 2 towels, one to cover the pillow and one that should cover up our buttocks after which came a third small wet one.

I wiped my face and arm pits with it. In Japan this would be bad manners, the small wet steaming hot towel is only for the hands. I had no objection to lie on my stomach, but would have preferred the curtains between us left the way they were -not drawn.

The young woman assigned to me, Chhean was her name and as I later found out meaning meditation, contemplation, started with the feet as I had expected. No, it wasn't painful even after I gave the go ahead for pushing harder. It tickled other regions of my body, unexpectedly the intestines. So it wasn't all crap that foot massages claim on Shiatsu or acupressure maps. Chhean moved up, giving my right ankle a twist that would definitely have left me crippled had she performed this on my left ankle. Lucky for me she noticed the hardened fibrous growth over the tendons after two surgical procedures to repair a complex fracture I had sustained in the 80s.

Sonisay, Robert's girl whose name meant one you like at first impression giggled behind the curtain. I wondered how he was faring with the action taken on his muscular body.

Chhean continued kneading my right calf muscle followed by pushing her thumbs in deep slides up the muscle; I thought the skin would come off. Was the herbal oil menu then worth the extra charge? It seemed to take hours to finish the thigh, rolling it and twisting it, always followed by upward strokes of deep massage. Banging it would have been a welcome distraction, but the talk behind the curtain was ultimately the catch, I had not much to say, not much to ask. While my left leg got its work-over thoughts gained free rein, drifting off into shades of gray. Borders of comparison blurred, laboring on experiences

without labels while evaluations overlapped time zones. I'd known this all along. Surrender in trust or was it the other way around? Several eternities must have passed since I got restless. When is she finally going to start with the upper body? No sooner thought than executed, she changed position. I on my turn moved my arms and hands above my head. I felt her knees taking place at my hips' sides, but nothing more. The very moment two small hard thumbs or were they knuckles pressed hard on my lower back muscle and a current of weak electric ripples set off up my spine. Ticklish as with my feet, but not as unpleasant a sensation as in my lower belly, I could hardly wait to feel her working her way up to my shoulders. At least I knew what to expect here, a monthly visit to my Japanese barber had accustomed me. I wondered if the girls were coordinating their timing since they started talking to each other and whether my arms would get the same procedure as my legs. Boy, I had to have a look at their hands afterwards; they did not diminish in strength this late hour. I also would change from working the rice fields with a hoe to a more sophisticated job in the city. As if Robert had been contemplating the same he asked where and whom they had learned the trade from in English. His masseuse didn't get his question right from the first time. Robert repeated in simplified English: massage where school? They seemed to discuss it and then came up with Nuat phaen boran or something sounding alike, the name of their village or hometown but it was definitely distinguishable from Khmer in sound so I deducted it was from a Thai they had learned the massage technique. Robert confirmed it meant Thai massage which made perfectly well sense since the procedure very much resembled the massage I had in BKK before coming to Cambodia. She had now arrived at my arms starting with pinching the ligaments, tendons and joints of my hands, then squeezing and kneading the muscles of my left and then right forearm, rolling movement over biceps and triceps muscles. Finally, work on my shoulder and neck muscles that I wished would have gone on and on but suddenly time was up. Abruptly but politely they excused for leaving the room to let us get dressed and when we came out from behind the curtains, they escorted us to the counter to pay in a most loving way. Too bad for Robert Sonisay didn't oblige for a date the next day.



To be continued
Part 3 Bayon