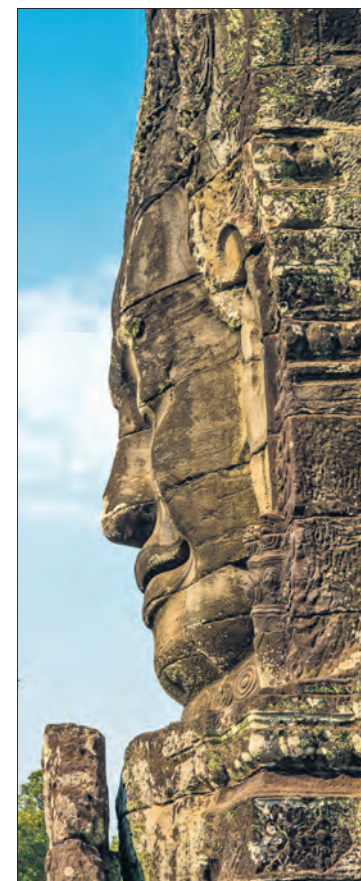




Sunrise can be a beautiful time at Angkor Wat. | ARLENE AND ROBIN KARPAN PHOTOS



A giant face is carved onto the Bayon temple.



Guardian monkey statues sit in front of the Banteay Srei Temple.

Angkor Wat lives up

TALES FROM THE ROAD



ARLENE & ROBIN KARPAN

For the last two years, Angkor Wat was chosen as the World's Top Landmark in Trip Advisor's Travellers' Choice Awards.

This ancient city in northwestern Cambodia has risen from near obscurity during the bad old days of wars and political turmoil in the late 20th century to become one of the most popular tourist destinations anywhere. And for good reason. We have visited ancient ruins in various parts of

the world, but Angkor Wat is in a class by itself.

Founded in the 12th century, Angkor was capital of the vast Khmer Empire that ruled much of southeast Asia.

The temple (or Wat) complex is considered the largest religious site in the world. Originally Hindu, it later became Buddhist, the primary religion of Cambodia today.

While Angkor Wat is just one of many temples, it is the largest and most ornate and has come to symbolize the entire complex.

The size is simply overwhelming, covering 1,000 sq. kilometres with scores of temples and buildings, complete with moats, bridges, and reservoirs and canals for a sophisticated water diversion scheme.

Thought to have housed around a million people, it was the largest city in the world before the Industrial Revolution, and an early example of urban sprawl.

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Buddhist monks visit the ruins at Angkor.

to its reputation

It isn't just size that is impressive but also the highly intricate work — decorative building blocks, countless carvings of celestial dancers, gigantic heads, and portrayals of Hindu gods and myths. Most astonishing is the series of delicate carvings stretching for 800 metres along the central temple wall.

Nature too has added another dimension with massive strangler fig trees that are slowly taking over much of the ruins. While these invasive trees are a concern to conservation, they are a part of Angkor's timeless nature.

Guided tours to the UNESCO World Heritage Site abound, though it is fairly easy to visit on your own. The adjoining city of Siem Reap has an international airport and has become a major tourist centre with accommodation from swanky international hotels to simple guest houses, seemingly endless places to eat, and plenty of ways to spend your money. Be prepared for lots of company. Angkor Wat gets more than two million visitors per year, with peak season being the dry and mild December to February winter.

The key to an independent visit is hiring a tuk-tuk driver. Used by locals and tourists alike, the ubiquitous tuk-tuks are motorbikes with an attached carriage-type contraption accommodating two passengers.

Our hotel recommended Mr. Song, who for about US\$20 to \$25 per day was our personal driver, not only taking us to and from the ancient city, but also between the widely spread-out sites. We decided how long we wanted to spend at each spot and could sometimes plan visits to avoid the tour bus invasions. This also allowed us to explore some of the more remote temples where only a handful of other tourists venture.

We spent three days wandering around the ruins and still didn't get to everything.

Current ticket options, covering

all the temple complexes, are US\$37 for a one-day pass, \$62 for three days, or \$72 for 10 days. Although admission fees are hefty, most other costs in Siem Reap, such as accommodation, transport, meals, and local tours are fairly low by international standards. We were especially surprised at how well we could eat for remarkably little money.

While Angkor Wat is the main reason to visit Siem Reap, it is worth spending a few extra days to take in other sights. The pleasant city has a lively night market, and it's easy to book excursions to the countryside, nearby Tonle Sap Lake, waterfalls, and Buddhist monuments if you're not "templed-out."

Arlene and Robin Karpan are well-travelled writers based in Saskatoon. Contact: travel@producer.com.



A Buddhist ceremony is held at Angkor Wat.



Crowds of visitors fill the main entrance to Angkor Wat.

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