



Cambodia by River

From the Mekong Delta to the city of Angkor

12–26 March 2027 (MN 292)

15 days

Speaker: Freddie Matthews

Journey by river from the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam to Siem Reap, the heart of the city of Angkor.

Six nights in a 5-star hotel in Siem Reap, to see all the major sites of the Khmer empire.

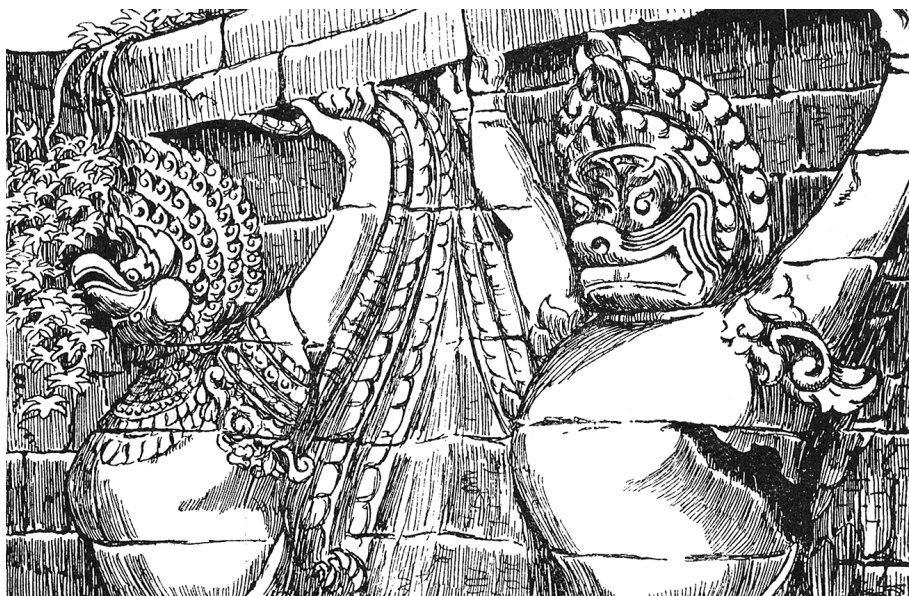
Two visits to Angkor Wat, morning and evening, to see how the colours of the stone change with the light.

Outstanding collection of statuary in the National Museum in Phnom Penh.

Our journey is conducted for much of the way on water – a precious commodity in the life of Cambodians, though there is plenty of it. The Khmer empire built complex systems of channels and reservoirs to manage the seasonal flow; modern-day Cambodians manage it still. From May onwards Himalayan meltwaters pour down the Mekong River, reversing the flow of its tributary, the Tonle Sap, and tripling the size of Tonle Sap Lake, adjacent to Siem Reap, where people live in stilt houses above the floodwaters. Water saturates the rice fields that provide Cambodia's staple crop in an economy that remains essentially rural.

At its apogee in the 12th century, the Khmer empire that gave birth to Cambodia stretched from modern-day Vietnam in the east to Myanmar in the northwest. In the region of Angkor alone (around the modern city of Siem Reap) digital analysis has recently revealed to us the shadow of a vast ancient city of up to a million inhabitants. Here and elsewhere, the empire's kings and craftsmen built temple complexes that count among the most sophisticated and impressive in world history. The best known, Angkor Wat, attracts millions of visitors each year. Yet off the beaten track are a great number of temples that arguably rival it in atmosphere and significance.

The Khmer civilisation broke up in later centuries, and power in Indochina shifted to Thailand and Vietnam. Cambodia was a French protectorate from the mid-19th century until independence in 1953. Its late-20th-century history is one of tragedy and horror, from the covert bombing by the US during the Vietnam War to the emergence of the Khmer Rouge which was responsible for the deaths of at least two million people. Phnom Penh, capital of



Elephant's Terrace at Angkor Wat, from Ruins in Cambodia by P Jeanneret de Beerski, publ. 1923.

Cambodia since 1865, was forcibly evacuated and left to ruin. It has since undergone a miraculous recovery. Today the city is booming and, despite rapid growth, much historic architecture remains. Siem Reap, meanwhile, has completely resisted the blight of high-rise development and preserved its charm.

Itinerary

Day 1: Ho Chi Minh City, My Tho, Cai Be.

Rooms are available in Ho Chi Minh City from 3.00pm on 11th March (flights from London are not included – see Practicalities). The tour begins with lunch on 12th March in the hotel and a guided walk to see the Opera House, Notre Dame Cathedral – a red brick edifice constructed from materials imported from France – and the Central Post Office, completed 1891. Overnight Ho Chi Minh City.

Day 2: Ho Chi Minh City, My Tho, Cai Be.

Drive to My Tho to join the ship in time for lunch (c. 70km). Journey by sampans through mangroves and bamboo forests to the fruit orchards of Ben Tre, an area rich in birdlife. First of seven nights on the ship.

Day 3: Mekong Delta, Con Phuoc. The tranquil waterways fed by the Mekong Delta are known for a slower pace of life, revolving around tropical fruit gardens, rice cultivation and coconuts. Despite the seemingly unhurried existence of the local people, the area is a hive

of activity: these swamplands produce more than a third of Vietnam's annual food crop. Continue sailing to Chau Doc, near the border with Cambodia.

Day 4: Chau Doc, Phnom Penh. Visit Chau Doc and pass floating houses. Take minivans up to Sam Mountain, location of Phuoc Dien Tu or the Hang Pagoda. Return to the ship and continue across the border with Cambodia. Sail up to Phnom Penh: located at the confluence of the Mekong, Tonle Sap and Bassac rivers.

Day 5: Phnom Penh. Explore the Royal Palace complex, including the Silver Pagoda. The Khmer Rouge left a shadow over the city for many years; visit Tuol Sleng, a high school turned interrogation prison known as S-21 and now a genocide museum; and Choeung Ek, the harrowing memorial at the Killing Fields to the 17,000 people who died there under Pol Pot.

Day 6: Phnom Penh, Kampong Tralach.

The National Museum of Cambodia houses artefacts dating from prehistoric times to the present. It was looted when the city was emptied by the Khmer Rouge but subsequently restored – four galleries surround a peaceful courtyard. Join the ship at Kampong Tralach.

Day 7: Oudong silk island. Travel to the ancient capital of Cambodia, Oudong. Re-join the ship at Prek Kdam before returning to the Mekong. After lunch sail to Koh Nghe Tei (Silk

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continued

Island) known for the manufacture of exquisite silk products. The village is a centre of the ancient martial art of L'bokator which roughly translates as 'pounding a lion'.

Day 8: Angkor Ban village and Wat Hanchey. Sunrise cruise to Angkor Ban village. In the afternoon sail north to Wat Hanchey, an important centre of worship during the Chenla period located on top of a hill with some of the best Mekong views in Cambodia. Visit 8th-century structures, some destroyed by American bombings during the Vietnam War. Moor mid-lake near Siem Reap.

Day 9: Tonle Sap Lake, Siem Reap, Roluos. Disembark in the morning and transfer to Siem Reap, where in the 16th century the Khmer empire returned to its former capital having defeated ('reap') the Thais ('Siam'). A busy hub, it retains its small-town charm. The Roluos group consists of some of the earliest temples of the Angkor period. Visit three: Bakong, Lolei and Preah Ko. First of six nights in Siem Reap.

As water patterns are unpredictable there is a chance the ship may not be able to reach Siem Reap. If this is the case, you are transferred by coach (c. 3 hours).

Day 10: Angkor Wat, Angkor Thom. Dominated by its quincunx of corn-cob-shaped towers, Angkor Wat is exceptional for both its scale and astounding detail. Visit after the sunrise backpackers have left but before most other tourists arrive. In the afternoon enter the 12th-century walled city of Angkor Thom. The Bayon state temple features the supreme tantric Buddha's face on 59 towers, another massive pyramidal temple was erected to the glory of Shiva over several decades (Baphuon). The Terrace of the Elephants, with a staggering bas-relief frieze, supported the royal reception hall.

Day 11: Beng Mealea, Banteay Srei. Travel northeast of Angkor to the atmospheric jungle temple of Beng Mealea, made accessible by wooden walkways raised above the crumbling ruins, of grand and elegant architectural design. Loop west to Banteay Srei ('citadel of women'), a small and exquisite pink sandstone temple covered in pristine carved reliefs. Return to Siem Reap late afternoon.

Day 12: Ta Prohm, Angkor Wat. Visits this morning include Ta Prohm, once an administrative hub for a chain of hospitals (famous for the strangler figs that straddle the walls); Pre Rup, the archetypal ancient Khmer temple mountain; and Neak Pean, unlike

anything else at Angkor, a single tower rising from a reservoir. Return to Angkor Wat to study in detail the sandstone carvings enclosing the central sanctuaries. See areas usually not open to the public (subject to confirmation).

Day 13: Banteay Chhmar. Drive north to Banteay Chhmar Temple (c. 3 hours), the last great ancient temple to be rescued from the obscurity of a tropical forest. The scale of its construction, the hydraulic engineering required to sustain it and its long gallery of superb relief carvings suggest that it was the twin hub of the empire.

Day 14: Siem Reap, Chandara. Free morning in Siem Reap; the Angkor National Museum is worth a visit. In the afternoon travel by boat across the West Baray, a man-made reservoir which was once integral to the complex Angkorian rice irrigation system (constructed 11th cent.). Continue to a private dinner at a villa surrounded by rice paddies and landscaped spice gardens.

Day 15: Siem Reap. The tour ends after breakfast.

Participants are divided into two groups for some visits, each accompanied by a guide.

Lecturer

Freddie Matthews. Currently a Cultural Heritage Curator at the National Trust, he was formerly Head of Adult Programmes at the British Museum and Director of Programmes at The Conduit Club in Covent Garden. He has worked at the V&A, Sotheby's Institute of Art, Bagri Foundation, as well as several established art galleries. He is an independent scholar specialising in Buddhist art across Asia, and regularly gives lectures on the subject in the UK and abroad.

Practicalities

Included: transport by private air-conditioned coach; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 11 lunches (one is a packed lunch) and 11 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and local guides.

Flights: international flights from London to Ho Chi Minh City and from Siem Reap to London are not offered with this tour.

Additional nights and airport transfers. It is possible to arrange additional nights at the hotels before or after the tour. The night of 11th March 2027 in Ho Chi Minh City is included in the price of the tour. Airport transfers are included in the price of the tour – we will ask for your flight details at a later date.

Visas. Visas for Vietnam are not required for UK citizens for stays of 45 days or less. Most other foreign nationals require a visa, which is not included in the tour price. We will advise on the process. Visas for Cambodia are required for most foreign nationals and are not included in the tour price. E-visas are not accepted for a border crossing on the river; the cruise company arranges these and we will advise on the process.

Accommodation. Hotel des Arts, Ho Chi Minh City: 5-star boutique hotel in the city centre, modern but authentically Vietnamese. **RV Mekong Pandaw:** spacious and comfortable river cruiser, with excellent service. **Anantara Angkor Resort:** 5-star hotel resort hotel a short drive from Angkor Wat. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? The tour involves a lot of walking on archaeological sites. Uneven ground, irregular paving, steps and hills are standard. A good level of fitness is essential. Unless you enjoy entirely unimpaired mobility, cope with everyday walking and stair-climbing without difficulty and are very sure-footed, this tour is not for you. Average distance by coach per day: 22 miles.

Group size: between 14 and 29 participants.