

"On the road to Siem Reap" written by Michel GÉRARD

For hundreds of years, the lost city of Angkor was a legend and the discovery of its temples by Henri Mouhot in 1860 finally opened it to the world. The temples in Angkor are scattered for about 64 kilometres around the village of Siem Reap that has become accessible again from Thailand by road.



A traveller in need of adventure and sensations will prefer the road, therefore, thanks to the opening of the check-points at the borders in Aranyaprathet and Poipet, that enable one to discover not only a region of Thailand little explored but also, after having crossed the border, to observe the life of the Cambodians in the countryside.

The first necessary step of this journey is to obtain a Visa from the Cambodian embassy in Bangkok. The excursion starts then with a trip on an air-conditioned bus from Moh Chit 2 early in the morning. After crossing the region of Nakhon Nayok and Sa Kaeo, the bus will arrive at the terminus of Aranyaprathet. It is situated eight kilometres from the Thai border check-point. Just in time for lunch, a bowl of noodles soup in the market across the road will undoubtedly be appreciated.

With a stomach full and ready for a short trip on a motorbike, you will have to negotiate the price of the ride with one of the numerous motorcycle-taxis that are used to transfer the locals from the market to Klong Luk, the check-point at the border. Some kilometres farther, with legs stiff and hair in need of combing, you will stop at a few metres from the customs post where, passport in hand, you will proceed.

After having fulfilled the customs formalities, you can start crossing "no man's land" which is a few hundred metres with a passage on a bridge, which stands over a river. On the way it is sad to see that a lot of children work at carrying goods under the indifferent look of the customs officers. Before passing through the Cambodian gate, it will be necessary to complete a few more customs formalities that can be very different on some days. You will then be permitted to enter the country of the Khmers...

Just on the other side of the border you will be able to see four or five brand new casinos where the Thais go to spend their money. Also close by, there are pretty, small, exotic gardens, beautiful and very clean asphalt parking lots, and well dressed guards. It is evidently not what you are going to find farther in Poipet, which is the first Khmer village. But your journey is not over. It would be time to find the local pick-up that would be waiting to fill up before leaving in the direction of Siem Reap. On the way the vehicle runs along a dirty track, then the landscapes become rice fields with no trees in view, showing only dwellings made of wood. When rice begins to show and the fields are full of water, the scenery is beautiful with different tones of green visible from far away.

The small villages on the way offer opportunities to buy some drinks from small stalls and to have direct contact with the population. After more than an hour on the road, depending on the season, the first stop is at Sisophon where it is possible to stay overnight. Those who wish to continue should be aware that the road there divides into two: one way leads to Phnom Penh, and the other to Siem Reap, which is much closer. It will be necessary to get another vehicle to pursue your journey that will last about two hours.

At the destination, a minimum of three days will be essential in order to rest after your one-day journey and also to visit the numerous temples of the 11th and 13th centuries. The sites not to be missed are: Banteay Srei or "the Citadel of the Women" situated twenty five kilometres to the north of Angkor Wat, remarkable for the quality of its construction and decors. Tonle Sap or "the Great Lake" is one of the unique geographical splendours of the world which offers the visitors a vision of the centennial traditions of the waterside life and natural beauty of the country. The site of Kbal Spean, the sacred river called "the Thousand Lingas" with its divine sculptures and its lingas, phallic representations of the god Siva, symbolizing the creative power is truly exotic...

Of this long journey from Bangkok, the most spectacular moment will remain undeniably the sunset on the city of Angkor Wat, seen from the hill Bakheng. This picture will remain engraved forever in your memories!

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