




# Snapshots of Siem Reap

By Dr Wong Tien Hua



Monkey with someone else's bananas

## A few things I learnt about Siem Reap, Cambodia

- Angkor Wat is one of the largest religious monuments in the world, yet it is actually only one temple amongst a huge sprawling complex of temples. It is truly a marvel to behold. Whilst temples like Angkor Wat and the Bayon remain well restored and well kept, others such as Ta Prohm have literally been eaten by the forest, its entire structure integrated amongst the roots of the silk cotton trees, like a symbiosis between nature and what is man-made, and where one cannot exist without the other.
- Siem Reap is only two hours away from Singapore by flight. Closer than Bangkok, there's really no excuse not to go there at least once. It is the nearest UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS) we Singaporeans can visit. And no, the towers at Marina Bay Sands are NOT a UNESCO WHS (well, maybe you can wait for another millennia, after the forests have reclaimed it).
- Hotels in Siem Reap span the gamut from shoestring budget to super luxurious. Modern minimalist hotels such as Hotel de la Paix and FCC Angkor stand out. Similarly, there are plenty of restaurants serving anything from local amok fish to fine French dining. The bar scene at Psar Chas (the Old Market) can be quite lively at night – beer is cheap here.



## Some tips

- Airport arrival was no hassle at all other than the customs officer asking for a small bribe which we politely declined. Downtown Siem Reap is a 20 minute ride away.
- Most of the major sites can be covered with a three-day itinerary, but Siem Reap deserves at least five days for a richer experience.
- Book a hotel with a nice pool. Days out in the temples are hot and sweaty, and you would very much look forward to a nice cold dip thereafter.
- There are a lot of touts in Siem Reap, especially desperate small children looking to sell trinkets and tourist items. Try not to give money as this will ensure a second wave of equally desperate youths. Sweets won't do either, because they do not have good oral hygiene. Bring a large bag of individually wrapped nutritious snacks to give out instead.



Ruins and rubble of Ta Prohm



South Gate of Angkor Thom



Rays of light at Angkor Wat



Giant serpentine roots anchor themselves deep into the ancient temple structure at Ta Prohm, supporting the trunk of a silk cotton tree as it reaches up into the heavens above







- Don't try to jump, roll, or shimmy along the rough temple walls a la Lara Croft. There is no treasure to find and it is not easy even for Olympic gymnasts.
- Bringing a bunch of bananas along the temple walks amongst a mission of monkeys is like wearing an expensive Bulgari BB with bling bling in a bad neighbourhood – they will hit you hard, and it will not be pretty. We witnessed a tourist being unceremoniously deprived of her post-lunch snack – all she could do was watch helplessly as the jubilant thief leaped and climbed out of reach.

Rice farming – you won't want to leave rice uneaten after seeing how much hard work goes into its cultivation







Two children peddling for photos and tips whilst paddling in metal pails in choppy waters at the floating village

- The temples are home to an active Buddhist community but it is not as if the compound is crawling with saffron robed monks. Always get your camera ready to snap away.
- The Chong Kneas Floating Village seems to be on every tour itinerary but it was a total scam. It has earned the dubious title of being the lowest ranked on TripAdvisor's (<http://www.tripadvisor.com>) Siem Reap Attractions. The experience was certainly an eye opener on how humans could live in such harsh conditions (on boats out in the middle of a vast lake), but it also showed how corrupt those in power are to exploit them, and how ugly the tourism business can be. **SMA**



*Dr Wong Tien Hua is a family physician in private practice. His travel kit consists of the Canon EOS 40D DSLR camera with the Canon EF 17-40mm f/4.0 L USM, and the Canon EF 70-200mm f/4.0 L USM.*



How many elephants are there in this photo?