Angkor Diary

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The Ta Prohm temple where trees cohabit with the walls and roofs.

It was nine in the morning when the Bangkok Airways flight from Bangkok landed at Siem Reap (SR) airport. The heat could be felt already as we came out of the aircraft and walked down the gangway. However, the air seemed quite fresh and what struck me particularly was the neatness of the surroundings. SR is a province of Cambodia – a country whose per capita income is lower than that of Bangladesh. So, one couldn't expect to see a big airport. But this was a newly constructed one – with very unique Khmer style architecture (resembling Thai temples). Since no jet bridge had been put up, passengers could walk down to the terminal building in an old fashioned manner. But that gave one an opportunity to see (if one cared) how the elegant entrance and general cleanliness of the whole place.

Visa on arrival proved to be remarkably smooth, fast and efficient. But our daughter who seemed to be the only passenger on that flight travelling with a Bangladesh passport had to be handled separately because their "system" was not prepared to take this type of old fashioned hand-written passports! Anyway, the process was completed without major fuss and we soon came out to be greeted by a representative of the hotel where we had booked accommodation.

Siem Reap was on the list of my "to visit" places ever since the peace process took hold in Cambodia and the country opened itself to tourism. It was the famous Angkor Wat that put Siem Reap on the map of global tourism; but Angkor was only one of the many such temples.

Temples can be found all over Cambodia, especially in SR province where Hindu kings reigned during the ninth to the thirteenth centuries. From the number of temples that date back to that period, it seems that the construction of temples was a major activity of the kings. Altogether, there are 1080 temples in the country, of which 294 are in SR province and 65 are in the area surrounding the city of SR which is known as the Angkor Archaeological Park (AAP).We visited only a few of those 65. Our selection was naturally influenced by distance from SR city where we were staying, although we did visit a few that were about an hour's drive from there. The latter were *Bantey Srei, Bantey Samre* and *Pre Rup*. For those who may be interested in a trip in the future, a spectacular view of the sunset can be had from the top of *Pre Rup*.

A few general points regarding the temples may be worth noting. First, the temples were constructed during reigns of Hindu kings, and as such, they started as Hindu temples. However, from about the 13th century, people in Cambodia started to convert to Buddhism. And since then, the same temples started to be used by the Buddhists.

Second, the temples that we saw (and I guess most) are basically in ruins, and have been restored to various degrees. In fact, in many cases, the process of restoration is a continuous one, and is likely to continue for many more years. A number of countries including Germany, India, Japan, Republic of Korea, and Switzerland are helping in the work.

Third, visiting the temples can be physically arduous, involving long walks inside the compounds and climbing steep stairs. Examples are a climb to the top of *Pre Rup* from where we had a lovely view of sunset and the climb to the main part of Angkor for viewing the interiors of the temple. One needs to be in good health and in appropriate attire.

Fourth, given the climate (hot and humid), a good idea is to start temple tours early in the morning and finish by mid-day. The afternoons are very hot and should be devoted to other