Condé Nast Traveler

The Temples That Time Forgot

Cambodia's Undiscovered Temples

Far from the madding crowd of Angkor Wat, in a remote southern province in the Mekong floodplain, LAWRENCE OSBORNE wades deep into Cambodia's misty past—and the source of some of the country's most magnificent and mysterious art

VIEW SLIDESHOW

Founded as a Buddhist monastery and university in the late twelfth century, the temple complex of Ta Prohm was once home to more than 12,500 people. More recently, its beauty earned it a starring role in the 2001 movie *Tomb Raider*, with Angelina Jolie.

By LAWRENCE OSBORNE KENRO IZU AUGUST 2012 ISSUE

THE MEKONG is a river I have always feared a little—it is sea-like, sinister, inscrutable. It breeds some of the world's largest freshwater beasts: Irrawaddy dolphins, giant catfish, and stingrays. It begins in Tibet and is the earth's most productive freshwater fishery. In November, it turns into a floodplain, and as I crossed it then its waves were thick with rotting flowers and roots and knotted floating grass. Birds swooped around the boat, following it, and their nests could be seen in the tops of drowned trees. After forty minutes, a silhouette came into view as if rising out of this temporary and demented unnatural sea: the forbidding "sacred mountain" of Phnom Da, its tower black against the storm and stark in its enforced solitude.

Steps rose up steeply through still-wet jungle. At the top, the Mekong waters appeared on all sides and an imposing brick-and-stone *prasat* (the Khmer word for a tower or pagoda) stood alone in a froth of wildflowers, its walls dark rust-red and black. Beautiful carvings soared above the doorways, and the chiseled plinths were still firm and elegant. But the *prasat* itself was clearly empty: looted, or gutted by archaeologists—one never knows in Cambodia.

A cowherd stood with his cattle before the main doorway. As I appeared, he simply held out a casual hand and said, "One dollar"—that Khmer refrain which every traveler guiltily repels. With him was a man suffering from some kind of illness, his hands twisted and his eyes lopsided. He seemed to be in informal charge of the shrine within. They watched me silently. Inside, there was a lingam stand (an emblem of the god Shiva) with two bowls of incense sticks, now exposed to the sky: Concentric brick rectangles rose vertiginously upward to an opening through which the rain fell. The tower was engulfed in forest, intimate amid its surroundings, and inaccessible to historical knowledge. The guardian came rolling toward me on his misaligned hips, his hand outstretched.

He croaked out a greeting, which sounded like, "B'muray."

"B'muray," I said.

"No," he repeated. "You Bill Murray. You give me five dollar."

(It is true that there is a resemblance.)

FOR YEARS, and especially when I lived in Phnom Penh, I had been coming to the National Museum and admiring a strange group of statues. They are kept in a gallery to one side, a little ignored,

and are unlike any other in Cambodia. Dark green in color, far older than the masterpieces from Angkor Wat which otherwise crowd the museum, these huge pieces possess a style and sexual grace that seem to come from an entirely different civilization. They were discovered in the ruins of Phnom Da in 1935, by Henri Mauger, and were dated to about the sixth century A.D. In the middle was a gigantic figure of Vishnu with eight arms, his hands clutching a flame, an antelope skin, and a flask, and on either side of him two smaller figures of Rama and Balarama. To me, they were the most beautiful and imposing things in the museum, and the most emotionally appealing. And so I had always wanted to get to know the place where they had come from—the remote southern Cambodian province of Takéo. How could a site so unknown have produced art so great?

The "Phnom Da style" is the most ancient sculptural genre in what is now Cambodia. The ten-foot figure of Vishnu is carved from a single block of sandstone, and only five of his eight hands are still attached to surviving arms. But all of them are carved with finesse, the individual nails carefully delineated. Like a young pharaoh, the god wears a tall cylindrical hat and a folded loincloth. His physique, too—slender and lifelike, with wide shoulders and a little bulging belly fat below the navel—reminds one of Egyptian figures. This is the oldest known Cambodian sculpture. Even the dark-green polished, shiny surface of Vishnu seems different from the texture of later styles.

Where do these oval faces, aquiline noses, and almond-shaped eyes come from? Even the tear ducts, the pupils, and canthi of the eyes are perfectly carved. The figure of Balarama, the elder brother of Krishna, whcih stands to the right of Vishnu, is particularly moving. His left eye has been obliterated, but his gentle smile is still intact, as is the symbolic plow he carries. His figure is boyish, tilted at the hips. Rama, meanwhile, holds a tall bow and gazes down at us with a haughty gentility. As an avatar of Vishnu, he is associated with chivalry and virtue.

Prasat Neang Khmau, built in the early tenth century, is also known as the Temple of the Black Lady—its name perhaps alludes to Kali, the dark goddess of destruction.

I knew where Phnom Da was on the map—it lies a few miles from the Vietnam border, in the Mekong floodplain. This means that in winter it turns into an island and one has to get there by boat. This was forbiddingly appealing. Since none of the Khmer temples outside the tourist circuit of Angkor Wat are well known, I was well aware that it would be more arduous than simply taking a plane to Siem Reap and staying in yet another Royal Angkor Village boutique lodge with an Anantara spa. But there are only so many times you can walk around Angkor Wat at dawn with fifty thousand Korean tourists, searching for mystical solitude. People said that the temples of Takéo were like Angkor fifty years ago, even if they were nowhere near as grand. It was, I thought, unlikely to be true, but it would be enough for me if they were merely different.

When I arrived in the port town of Takéo, the waters were so high that the longtails for hire at the jetties were almost level with the street behind them. Takéo is always a lethargic proposition: a market caked with fruit skins, a few lok-lak restaurants with nightly song and dance, a handful of wretched guesthouses with those balconies of oddly plasticated columns that Cambodians love. They were now milky-brown under storm clouds. The tops of submerged mango trees swarmed with swallows, grasses floating between them. It's about a fifty-dollar longtail ride to cross this strange landscape that does not promise hospitality. On the far side of it can be found both Phnom Da and a very different place called Angkor Borei, a village in a lagoon with some unusual remains. They lie within an area known as "the cradle of Khmer civilization."

Sixteen hundred years ago, Angkor Borei was a huge city named Vyadhapurya, the capital of a state that Chinese chroniclers of the third century A.D. called Funan. In A.D. 240, two Chinese ambassadors named Kang Tai and Zhu Ying visited the kingdom and provided a few fragmented descriptions of it. The Chinese gave the title "Fan" to the Funan kings, so their names have come down to us in Chinese forms—the founder king was known as Fan Shi Man. Funan was the first great state of Southeast Asia—and is also the least known, with much of its architecture having all but disappeared.

AS I STOOD THERE on top of Phnom Da, I recalled that Rudravarman, the last significant king of Funan, is believed to have built the temple in the sixth century. The *prasat*, though, is thought to date from the eleventh. It is therefore likely to be a reconstruction of an earlier original. Lower down the hill are five man-made caves filled with Shiva lingams that were used as cremation sites during Pol Pot genocide. Farther down still stands an even more haunting building, a small seventh-century temple known as Ashram Maha Rosei, or the Sanctuary of the Great Ascetic. It is considered architecturally unique in Cambodia because of its use of stone at a time when stone was not readily accessible in the region (most Khmer temples of this antiquity are brick). From Maha Rosei came a magnificent statue of Harihara, a fusion of Shiva and Vishnu, that is now a star exhibit at the Musée Guimet in Paris. But today the shrine is empty; its beauty lies in the massive size of its single inner vault and its exterior. The effect is that of a cave holding a single image of a god—such as might be used by an ascetic—and is

very like the austere seventh-century temples of Sambor Prei Kuk, a hundred miles to the north. Like Prei Kuk, it is one of the few Khmer temples where you can be alone, undisturbed by a chattering tourist machinery.

One thinks of the thousands of people who gaze at the Harihara of Maha Rosei every year in Paris, and of the quiet desolation of the place where it once belonged. A less war-torn land might have been able to keep its treasures. But Cambodia is a looter's paradise, and its more obscure temples have proved easy prey because they are not guarded.

An hour later, I was in Angkor Borei. It is a very different place, soporific and outwardly plain but charmingly approached through narrow, curving waterways overgrown with jungle, where knee-high shrines and upturned boats sit inside the mangroves. These are the ancient, clearly man-made canals of Funan, as far as anyone can tell. Aerial photographs taken by the French geographer and photographer Pierre Paris in the 1930s show that there was once a vast system of these canals connecting Angkor Borei to the Mekong Delta city of Óc Eo, sixty miles away in Vietnam.

Funan, after all, was a maritime state controlling the seaborne trade between India and China that hugged the coastlines all the way between the Ganges and the Champa kingdom of Vietnam. Water was its lifeblood. The state declined in the mid sixth century—most probably because improvements in naval technology finally enabled ships to cross open ocean and so avoid Funan's tax collectors—and was absorbed into the more northerly kingdom of Zhenla. But one of its paradoxes is that its greatest art seems to have come from the very period of its terminal decline. No one knows why.

Angkor Borei retains a lost-world atmosphere from its past. The boat dropped me off at a museum on the water, next to a decomposing French mansion of moss-thickened vaults and balconies not dissimilar to some antebellum plantation house. I wandered through the rooms while the curator turned on the fans one by one. "A visitor!" his eyes seemed to cry.

"You look familiar," he said slyly. "I have seen you before."

I prepared my one dollar in my pocket, but it was never asked for. Instead, we went together through the museum.

"Have you ever heard of Funan?" he politely inquired.

"Never heard of it before."

"Cambodians never heard of it either."

He told me about the Funanese—a mysterious people, a lost people—and showed me exhibits of piled human bones from funerary sites, beautiful pottery and stone friezes depicting Vishnu. Out in the garden stood massive replicas of Funan-era Vishnu and Shiva statues (some of the originals are in Phnom Penh), but they were less interesting to me than the remains of the city walls, which are practically the only thing of brick left of ancient Vyadhapurya.

A short ride on a *motodop*, a hired motorbike, took me to where pieces of the massive brick and masonry walls (parts of it were damaged by the American bombing of Cambodia) stand festering in weeds, wildflowers, and damp, and are happily incorporated into the texture of village life. I thought of the Roman walls in Istanbul, which are similarly neglected and casually worked into the daily life of the city.

The University of Hawaii and the Cambodian Royal University of Fine Arts have come together in the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project to unearth more of this culture's remains, convinced that they hold the key to later Khmer culture. All over town, orchards and empty lots and backyards are quietly being dug up. The archaeologists are enticed, no doubt, by Louis Malleret's famous excavations at Óc Eo in the 1940s, during which he discovered Roman coins. Funan was where the Romans came to trade with the Chinese. It was as far east as they ever got, and maybe they also left their coins and fibulae in Angkor Borei. It's a strange thought: a Roman of the Augustan empire standing by these same canals, eating a mango.

A bas-relief carving at the late-twelfth-century Ta Prohm temple, whose architecture is considered one of the best expressions of Cambodian baroque (as opposed to Angkor Wat's classical) style.

A cultural crossroads, then. But no one knows what the people of this ancient state called themselves. Historians are not sure if they were entirely Khmer. Their writing was Sanskrit, but their enigmatic inscriptions do not refer to a vernacular tongue. What we do know is that although Funan is murkily revealed to us through the Chinese, it was Brahmin Indian emissaries who shaped its Hindu culture.

According to one legend, Funan was founded by a Brahmin prince called Kaundinya, who married a local princess named Soma, the daughter of a serpent king, or *naga*. To Kaundinya, it is said, the kingdom owed its Indian laws, itsSanskrit writing, and its Hindu pantheon. The Indianization of Southeast Asia— which reached its culmination in Angkor Wat—began here, in the watery landscape of the Mekong Delta.

I TOOK MY BOAT back to Takéo at dusk. There are few places to stay in town—ten-dollar-a-night guesthouses offering windowless cells to Khmer traveling salesmen—but I found the Meas Family Home Stay, just outside town, run by two Khmer schoolteachers, Siphen Meas and Im

Mach. They gladly host Peace Corps volunteers who come here to build toilets for local farmers and the odd wandering archaeologist. Bill Murray, I discovered, had not yet sampled its charms.

It was a farm of sorts, with paddies spread around it. I spent much of the early hours awake, listening to night birds, to funereal music rolling out of the darkness, and to the demented Cambodian cockerels that begin their chorus at 1 A.M. A cacophony of pure life, of life before electricity. ("We are being hooked up to the electricity grid next week," Siphen said. "What an unprecedented event!")

Yet no one forgets here that this is a wounded land and that the wounds have not yet healed. Earlier, by candlelight, Siphen told me how the Khmer Rouge had murdered her brother back in the 1970s and that the family had discovered this fact only the week before. And so a murder in 1977 had now resurfaced to cast its shadow upon the living. It was a past that was not at all passed.

"Forty years after the event, we begin our morning. It's a strange relation to the past, don't you think?"

"Perhaps it's a denial."

"Yes, it is. This country is only just beginning to get back to its past." As with the personal past, so with the archaeological.

We sat by a large fish pool that had been carved out by a huge American bomb. The Khmer are masters of improvisation. They had also looted most of the temples that lay scattered around the province, and it was a blessing, Siphen had to admit, that so many of the sacred artworks had ended up in the Musée Guimet, thousands of miles away. Most had been spirited off to the illicit antiques stores of Bangkok and Cambodia and would never come back. Even the lintels and pieces of lathed columns had been carried away—it was like an army of nocturnal mice nibbling at an unguarded granary. Takéo, she suggested, was too poor not to loot its own heritage.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, I took a car down to the border of Vietnam to visit one of Cambodia's most remote temples: Phnom Bayong. Route 2, which connects Takéo to Phnom Penh, takes you all the way there. The turnoff for the temple lies off a small side road near the village of Kiri Vong.

On this road, schoolgirls in navy skirts were riding their bikes, glancing down at the foreigner sweating in the heat with his can of soursop juice. Their expressions were hard to gauge. There was amusement in their distant and hesitant curiosity, as well as a subtle surprise. The grinning farmers in their pickups looked as if they were armed, and they probably were.

It's a lonely three-hour walk up to the summit of the holy hill Bayong, where the temple stands with its views of the flooded Mekong and the mountains of Vietnam. On the way, the footpath winds through towering banyan trees. Music was coming from little radios in the huts of the farmers; in a clearing, dark stones lay underfoot like the threshold of a massive gate that had been torn apart. Black-silk butterflies swarmed across the path.

A few Buddhist pilgrims still make their way up the monumental steps that lead to Phnom Bayong, but the site, like so many in Cambodia, is open and wild, unstructured by either tourism or archaeology. It feels religious in a way that a tourist temple never could, but this is also because of its setting. Unled, unguided, you are left to piece it together by yourself.

The site itself is heavily damaged, though it is thought to have been built to celebrate a victory of the kingdom of Zhenla over Funan. Halfway up to it, as I slithered along small gullies of rock and mud, tailed by black butterflies, a boy appeared out of nowhere, a kind of Khmer Huck Finn chewing a piece of grass, and suggested that I give him a dollar to avoid getting lost. Because the path was looking less and less like a path, I paid.

"Good job, you," he said grimly. "Otherwise, lost ever so long time."

The walk to the summit proved the accuracy of this pessimism. It's little wonder no one comes here. Surrounded by cliffs and ruined walls, Phnom Bayong is reached by a near-vertical staircase and is infested with murmuring bats. The boy told me that the mountain was sacred and that Buddhist nuns were looking after the ruins. They browsed the jungle surrounding it in search of ingredients used in traditional folk medicines. If I wanted, they would paint spells on my body to protect me from illness. It would be one dollar more. I readily agreed to this and paid up, but instead of visiting the spell-writing nuns, for some reason we ended up trudging down to another little temple nearby, from where the great delta waters could also be seen, a pale-brown brightness reaching to a somberly green horizon.

Like Phnom Bayong, it was enigmatic, fragmented in some way, and on the point of disappearing into forest. The Hindu images had long ago been removed. My dollar-sucking guide explained that there were four other temples on the sacred mountain and that there was a Buddhist hermit whom I could meet. The hermit would also paint spells on my body, and they would be even more powerful than the spells painted by the nuns. It would be one dollar more. What about the nuns? I asked. The nuns had run away, he said. They were afraid of foreigners. "Can't we pay them to come back?"

"Pay? They nuns. Come to hermit."

I paid up again, but as with the nuns the Buddhist hermit could not be found, and we ended up wandering all over the mountain as the afternoon waned. No one ever painted any spells on my

body, but the boy did tell me the most famous legend of Phnom Bayong, which goes something like this:

Once upon a time a king called Preah Bat Bayong Kaur lived on this mountain with his wife, Neang Sak Kra'op (meaning roughly "the lady with perfumed hair"). The nefarious King of Siam—the Thais are always the bad guys in Khmer stories—heard of her beauty and sailed to the mountain in a ship. He threw a party for the queen, and while the Khmer guests were distracted, he made off with her and never returned. Years later, her son, Dey Khley, went in search of her and happened to come across her without knowing who she was. He fell in love with his mother and married her. But when they returned to Bayong, the king recognized his former wife and sentenced his son to build twelve huge ponds. The prince, said the king, could be reincarnated only when the twelve ponds ran dry. But even today they are full of water, and so the luckless son is still waiting in the afterlife for a drought. Thus are punished even the unwitting perpetrators of royal incest.

The Cambodian countryside is filled with such myths, which are like the rumors that come out of a past that recent history has all but obliterated. This is a land of submerged memories—a secretive and wary land which is mindful that bad things can always happen again. On the way back to Phnom Penh the next day, I stopped at the magnificent Angkorian-era temple of Phnom Chisor, built in the eleventh century by King Suryavarman I of Angkor. It's the closest and most forbidding large-scale temple complex to Phnom Penh, apart from the lovely ruins of Ta Prohm on the Tonlé Bati lake. There is a kind of imperial swagger to it, a sense of overarching power. Both Ta Prohm and Phnom Chisor are more spectacular than the older Takéo temples—especially Chisor, with its superb terraces and richly carved reliefs. But now Chisor seemed to me less poignant than mysterious Phnom Da or Phnom Bayong.

Two other temples are connected to Chisor by a monumental staircase that winds its way down the side of the mountain, and the whole complex possesses a coherent splendor that Bayong cannot match. Yet Chisor feels more like what one experiences on a larger scale at Angkor. Coming down the enormous staircase, I enjoyed watching the boys playing soccer in a field of motionless cows that seemed not to notice the football flying between their legs. I was glad there weren't five thousand tour guides ready to explain what this meant.

I TOOK MY CAR back to Route 2 and on the way stumbled upon two neglected brick towers that stood at the edge of a modern shrine. They are the remains of a place called Prasat Neang Khmau, or "Black Lady" in Khmer, a tenth-century temple whose name perhaps alludes to Kali, the dark destructive goddess. I knew that from here had come two enigmatic statues that are now also in the National Museum in Phnom Penh. Like the sculptures of Phnom Da, they have fascinated me for years, and when I returned to Phnom Penh I went in to look at them. One is an equine avatar of Vishnu known as Vajimukha, a male body with a horse's head, and the other is a female divinity of some kind dressed in a fluted robe that is tied above a lustrous, smooth navel. Her head is missing, and her surface is now a dark-jade color.

They stand in the same room as the great pieces from Phnom Da, and although they are from a later century, they have the same archaic otherness about them. They are more beautiful, more human somehow than the masterpieces of Angkor that occupy the foreground of our perceptions of Cambodia. And like the place from which they were torn long ago by French experts, they are something of a quiet secret—a civilization within a civilization, waiting to be rediscovered when Cambodia can finally afford the splendid luxury of memory.