

Coaxing a Khmer Temple From the Jungle's Embrace

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To reach the temple of Banteay Chhmar from the Cambodian town of Sisophon in the dry season involves a two-hour drive through parched forests coated with brown dust. The temple is breathtaking. Bas-reliefs depict naval battles between ancient Khmers and their Cham rivals in remarkable detail. Giant sandstone faces loom over thick vegetation strewn with collapsed lintels and broken naga heads.

Visitors to Angkor Wat will have seen something like this. But the glory of Banteay Chhmar is its raw, unadulterated state. Sitting 100 kilometers, or about 60 miles, northwest of Siem Reap, this is Cambodia's "forgotten" temple. You will probably find yourself alone, able to rekindle the experience of colonial French explorers as they first stumbled upon Khmer antiquity.

But the same isolation was not lost on those who vandalized Banteay Chhmar in the late 1990s. The Cambodian military not only mined the complex but made off with large sections of bas-relief destined for private homes in Bangkok and beyond. Local guides like Seng Samnang remembers the oxcarts loaded with artifacts being wheeled out of the temple. "There was nothing we could do," he said. "If we had challenged these men we would have been killed."

About 115 pieces, a truckload, have been recovered and they are sitting in the National Museum in Phnom Penh. Of the rest — there is allegedly much more — reports of Buddha heads appearing in Thai generals' gardens have done little to ease longstanding tensions over Thai claims to Cambodia's patrimony, an issue that resurfaced last year, and remains unresolved, at the northern temple of Preah Vihear.

Banteay Chhmar is returning to the spotlight, but now the news is good. In 2008 the Culture Ministry handed control of the temple to Global Heritage Fund, an organization in California that tries to safeguard the world's most endangered sites. Established in 2002, the fund has a

budget of \$6 million and 44 employees to rehabilitate the temple, the eventual aim being its inclusion on Unesco's World Heritage List.

John Sanday is leading the project. He is a British architect who first set foot in Cambodia in 1992 to work on the 12th-century Preah Khan, a temple famous for its outer wall of garudas, the mythic birds of Hindu legend. To help attract financing, the savvy Mr. Sanday, a former employee of the World Monument Fund, managed to persuade a number of private individuals to "adopt" a garuda for \$30,000.

Like Preah Khan, Banteay Chhmar was built as a monastic complex by Jayavarman VII, the king who converted Cambodia to Buddhism. But the paucity of surviving inscriptions make it unclear exactly when and why. Writing in 1949, the historian Lawrence Palmer Briggs claimed the temple "rivalled Angkor Wat in size and magnificence." It has four enclosures surrounded by a moat, a vast artificial lake, or baray, and could sustain a population of at least 100,000.

Romantic it may be, but much of Banteay Chhmar today consists of piles of lichen-stained rubble. Of 400 meters (1,300 feet) of bas-relief wall, only 25 percent still stands. Faced with collapsed or collapsing structure, Mr. Sanday and his team must decide what should be rebuilt or merely stabilized. Whether to replace the missing stones with newly quarried or recycled stone is another question.

A simple paradox lies at the heart of the restoration process: The less you notice, the better the job. Mr. Sanday sees overzealous rebuilding as compromising of a monument's natural history, and much of its beauty. On the other hand, donors to projects such as these usually want to see tangible results, if not the revelation of some architectural marvel.

Mr. Sanday's solution is to opt for a "presentation" of key areas of the temple, which in the future can serve as a model. Visitors will enter — as did the ancients — past the eastern gopura, along a causeway largely destroyed by 600 hundreds years of monsoons. Once that is rebuilt, they will advance toward the southeastern gallery of bas-reliefs and access the temple's central areas along suspended wooden boards.