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Where Gods and Soldiers Tend the Border in Cambodia



Visitors, including Buddhist monks, make their way along a stone-paved pathway at Preah Vihear Temple on a mountaintop in northern Cambodia.

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IN the wet season, the roads through the northwestern region of [Cambodia](#) turn into an undulating sea of muck, with potholes the size of cars and ruts as deep as truck axles. To figure out which routes were least likely to leave me wet, muddy and stranded, I buttonholed a dozen long-distance taxi drivers before settling on the toll road from Dam Dek, which had the added attraction of passing by two out-of-the-way Angkorian temples, [Beng Mealea](#) and Koh Ker.



Cambodian soldiers guarding the Thai border are based near Preah Vihear Temple.

My destination was an even more remote Angkor-era complex: Preah Vihear Temple, awesomely perched 1,700 feet above Cambodia's northern plains, near the country's border with [Thailand](#). Designated as a [Unesco World Heritage Site](#) in 2008 — not without some international controversy — it makes an adventurous alternative to far-better-known [Angkor Wat](#). While several thousand foreign tourists visit the temples of Angkor on a typical day, Preah Vihear Temple gets, on average, just five.

I was traveling with my friend and driver, Hang Vuthy, in a 1991 Toyota Camry with a surprising New York past: according to a window sticker, it had once belonged to a member of the Yonkers Police Captains, Lieutenants and Sergeants Association. Imagining the car in a mid-Atlantic blizzard, it occurred to me that wet-season driving in outback Cambodia is not entirely unlike navigating unplowed snowy side streets. Indeed, for much of our journey we avoided the most treacherous stretches of mire and snaked around potholes of indeterminate depth by religiously following a single serpentine track rendered navigable by earlier cars and trucks.

Preah Vihear Temple — the name means Mountain of the Sacred Temple — is the most spectacularly situated of all Angkorian monuments. Built from the ninth to the 12th centuries atop a peak of the Dangrek Mountains, it occupies a triangular plateau rising from the Thailand border to a prow-shaped promontory.

An ever-changing architectural, mythological and geological panorama unfolds as visitors progress along the temple's 2,600-foot-long processional axis, up a series of gently sloping causeways and steep staircases through five gopura, or pavilions, each more sacred than the last.

I began my visit at the bottom of the Monumental Staircase, which, according to the Angkor scholar Vittorio Roveda, “symbolizes the laborious path of faith needed to approach the sacred world of the gods.” The 163 gray sandstone steps, partly carved into the living rock, are flanked by statues of lions and, near the top, two magnificent nagas (seven-headed serpents) facing north toward Thailand. Also intently watching Thai territory were several AK-47-toting Cambodian soldiers in camouflage.

The first structure I came to, called Gopura V by generations of [archaeologists](#), was an airy cruciform construction once topped by wood beams and a terra-cotta tile roof. Many of the stones have tumbled over, but the delicately balanced eastern pediment has

survived to become Preah Vihear's most recognizable icon, appearing on publicity posters, patriotic T-shirts and the new 2,000-riel banknote.

In centuries past, this pavilion was where pilgrims from the plains of Cambodia, having just climbed the steep, mile-long Eastern Staircase (mined and inaccessible for decades but soon to reopen), met their counterparts from what is now Thailand, who had completed a rather less-taxing ascent from the Khorat Plateau.

Alongside a group of saffron-robed monks, I continued north on a majestic, sandstone avenue, 800 feet long, to Gopura IV. There, I came upon a particularly vivid bas-relief depicting the Churning of the Ocean of Milk, a Hindu creation myth in which gods and demons churn the primeval waters to extract the ambrosia of immortality.

Although most of the splendid decorative carvings at Preah Vihear, including this one, depict Vishnu, the temple was originally dedicated to the Hindu god Shiva. In later centuries, it was converted to use as a Buddhist sanctuary, and today many of the visitors are Buddhist pilgrims.

As I continued my ascent, I walked under exquisite lintels and tympanums depicting more scenes from Hindu epics like the Mahabharata, and beneath richly carved double pediments adorned with finials and upturned gable ends — calling cards of Cambodian and Thai architecture to this day. Ancient inscriptions in Khmer and Sanskrit, bearing cryptic details about the history of the temple and the Angkorian kings who built it, were hidden here and there under a patina of lichen.

The temple's culminating point, geographically and symbolically, is Gopura I, whose mandapa (antechamber) and Central Sanctuary, now a jumbled pile of carved sandstone blocks, are surrounded by galleries that call to mind a French Gothic cloister, except that here the windows are rectilinear and the galleries covered by corbelled vaults. (The Khmers, for all their architectural genius, never mastered the keystone arch.)

The entire structure is inward-looking, its outer walls almost devoid of openings despite the sweeping views just outside. Scholars speculate that while the site was considered holy in part because of its spectacular situation, the ancient architects may have believed that picture windows would distract both priests and pilgrims from their sacred tasks.



Children play in the ruins.

As I approached the rocky tip of the promontory, just beyond Gopura I, a breathtaking panorama came into view. Cambodia's verdant northern plains extended majestically toward the horizon, and in the distance I could just make out Phnom Kulen, about 65 miles to the southwest, where the Khmer Empire was founded in A.D. 802. (Angkor itself lay hidden in the haze, 88 miles away.)

To the east, toward [Laos](#), and the west, the Dangrek Mountains stretched into the distance in a series of serrated bluffs. Looking north, almost everything I could see was in Thailand, rendered remote and mysterious by its inaccessibility.

Thailand ruled much of northwestern Cambodia, including Preah Vihear Temple, from the late 18th century until 1907, when the French colonial administration forced the Thais to withdraw to the current international frontier; Cambodian sovereignty over Preah Vihear was confirmed by the [International Court of Justice](#) in 1962.

Thailand, despite unresolved land claims, initially supported Cambodia's [Unesco](#) bid for [World Heritage](#) status, but the temple soon became a pawn in Thai and Cambodian domestic politics, unleashing nationalist passions in both countries.

In July 2008, according to Cambodian authorities, Thai soldiers intruded into Cambodian territory near the temple. The Thai government denied that any border violations had taken place. Since then, a total of at least seven soldiers from both sides have been killed in intermittent exchanges of fire, according to local news reports. At the time of my visit, though, the frontier had been quiet for several months.

Curious about what the standoff actually looked like, I asked my guide, conveniently a moonlighting army officer, if I could get a glimpse of the Thais. He took me to the bottom of the Monumental Staircase, where I could hear the distant sounds of war — air-raid sirens and shooting — but the combat was taking place on a tiny television, which off-duty soldiers were watching with rapt attention.

We walked along a forest trail past a volleyball court and trenches, passing soldiers in hammocks with their wives stealing a moment of intimacy in an encampment with little privacy, to a forest clearing with a bamboo table at the center.

About 20 yards in front of us stood a line of neatly built bunkers; uniformed men could be seen among the dark green sandbags. “So those are Cambodian soldiers?” I asked, trying to get my bearings. “No,” my guide answered, “those are Thais. Over there” — he turned 180 degrees and pointed to a line of bunkers 20 yards in the other direction — “are Cambodians.” The table, I realized, marked the midpoint of no-man’s land.

The Cambodians’ front-line bunkers, made of disintegrating sandbags sprouting grass, were shaded by blue and green tarpaulins and surrounded by orderly gardens. Their raised observation post, topped by a thatched roof, looked as if it might have been on loan from “Gilligan’s Island.” I was in the middle of a very un-Korean Panmunjom, a laid-back, tropical version of Christmas 1914 on the Western Front.

I soon learned that the Cambodian soldiers stationed there call the site Sambok Kmom, or beehive, because, they say, the area’s many wild bees leave Cambodians unmolested but set upon any Thai who encroaches on Cambodian land. Moved by national feeling, domestic tourists wearing krama (traditional checked scarves that serve as something of a Cambodian national symbol) wandered by, distributing cigarettes and other morale-boosting gifts to the soldiers who were deployed to help the bees protect Cambodian sovereignty.

Around the clearing, soldiers from both sides, unarmed and without body armor or helmets, were relaxing in front of their own front-line bunkers. Cambodian officers seemed to find the bamboo table, shaded by trees tall enough to let breezes through, especially congenial. A few paces away, the Thais had strung a hammock between trees, and one soldier, lounging in a white T-shirt, black combat pants and black military boots, was engrossed in a cellphone call.

Despite the apparent tranquillity, I knew that if the order were given, the men on both sides of the invisible line would not hesitate to shoot. In fact, many of the Cambodian troops stationed around Preah Vihear are battle-hardened former Khmer Rouge fighters. For now, though, relations are casual and, I was told, some wary friendships have developed.

The best staging point for a visit to Preah Vihear Temple is Sra Em (also spelled Sa Em), 19 miles by road from the temple. Two years ago, it was a sleepy crossroads hamlet with

a single grimy restaurant and one rundown guesthouse. These days, in the wake of the area's military buildup, it feels like a Gold Rush boomtown, with haphazardly parked four-wheel-drives instead of tethered horses; karaoke bars sporting pink fluorescent lamps and colored lights, instead of saloons; and the gleanings of Cambodia's recently doubled defense budget, instead of gold nuggets glinting in the stream. Armed men in camouflage uniforms abound.

Sra Em's accommodation options are rudimentary, to put it politely. My room's star amenity was a cold-water spigot for filling the plastic bucket used both to bathe and to flush, and below the cheap plastic mirror and its public access comb, dust bunnies had formed around the hair of guests past. Each time I returned to my room, I found a dead cricket, a new one every day, hinting, perhaps, at the presence of some sinister insecticide.

Preah Vihear Temple is, obviously, not quite ready for mainstream tourism. During the two days I spent at the temple in October, I saw only four other Westerners, including an unhappy German couple whose day trip from Angkor Wat had been rather more trying than expected, and perhaps 50 or so Cambodian tourists. But intrepid travelers who brave the diabolical (though improving) roads, substandard accommodations and alarming government travel advisories are richly rewarded.

For 40 generations, Hindu and Buddhist pilgrims have trekked to this temple, seeking to ascend toward the holy and the transcendent. Today, the awe-inspiring nature of this Angkorian masterpiece, accentuated by the challenges of getting there, confer on every trip the aura of a pilgrimage.

NAIL-BITING TAXI TRIPS AND A VOLCANO AT YOUR TABLE

GETTING THERE

With the visa-free crossing from [Thailand](#) closed for the foreseeable future, getting to Preah Vihear Temple requires battling [Cambodia](#)'s famously potholed roads, which are at their worst during the wet season (about June to October).

Share-taxis, which have no set schedule and depart when full, link Sra Em with [Siem Reap](#) via the former [Khmer Rouge](#) stronghold of Anlong Veng (\$7.50 a person; 130 miles; three hours) and with the provincial capital of Tbeng Meanchey (\$6.50; 65 miles; two hours). The U.S. dollar is widely accepted.

The taxis, usually “jacked-up” Toyota Camrys, carry six or seven passengers in addition to the driver, so if you want the front seat to yourself you’ll have to pay two fares. Ante up six times the single fare and you’ve got yourself a private taxi.

From Sra Em, a ride to Kor Muy on the back of a motorbike will run about \$3.75. Then the three-mile ride up the mountain to Preah Vihear Temple, on a concrete road whose gradients will impress even San Franciscans, is \$5 by motorbike or \$20 to \$25 by four-wheel-drive pickup.

WHERE TO STAY

Glassless windows, sinkless bathrooms, towels with the absorptive capacity of a plastic bag, fans that run only when a generator is sputtering outside your window (usually from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.) and laissez-faire housekeeping are, alas, the norm in Sra Em’s guesthouses. I should have stayed at the 25-room **Tuol Monysophon** (855-99-620-757), which opened this year. A brown, barn-like structure topped with a red tile roof, it has basic rooms downstairs with private baths, mosquito nets and wood-plank floors, for \$10; smaller upstairs rooms with shared facilities are \$7.50. To get there from the triangular crossroads, head west (toward Anlong Veng) for 500 yards.

WHERE TO EAT

The Preah Vihear area’s best restaurant, hands down, is Sra Em’s **Pkay Prek Restaurant** (855-12-636-617), an unpretentious complex of open-air, fluorescent-lit pavilions with plenty of geckos. The specialty is phnom pleoung (hill of fire; \$3.75), a meat and veggie feast you grill yourself at your table on an aluminum “volcano” suspended above glowing coals.

SAFETY

Before setting out to Preah Vihear Temple, check the Phnom Penh Post (phnompenhpost.com), the Cambodia Daily or other reliable sources to make sure that Thai-Cambodian tensions are not rising.

According to the Cambodian Mine Action Center (www.cmac.org.kh), the immediate vicinity of the temple is now safe, having been cleared in recent years of more than 8,800 anti-personnel mines. However, nearby areas are still heavily mined, so do not, under any circumstances, wander off the footpaths.

WHAT TO READ

The most useful guidebook in English (and Thai) to the temple's [architecture](#), symbolism and history is “**Preah Vihear**” by Vittorio Roveda (Bangkok: River Books, 2000), but it may be difficult to find.