

TRAVEL
ASIA



Into the CAMBODIAN HEARTLAND



Despite the legacy of the Khmer Rouge, the north-western provinces of Cambodia are among the most beautiful and rugged, and home to some of the most dramatic and spectacular temples of the Angkorian era. By **SREEREMA BANOO**





A group of children, half-dressed and with runny noses, rush out towards us as we make our way to what looks like a solitary gravesite. We are steps away from the Cambodia-Thai border, some 12km from the town of Anlong Veng in the province of Oddar Meanchey. The site, surrounded by weeds and undergrowth, is in the middle of nowhere. It is a nondescript mound boasting few funerary pieces, chiefly a tin roof, empty bottles, remnants of incense sticks in a sand-filled tin and a wooden sign in Khmer that roughly translates to “Please Keep the Area Clean”. There is no marker or tombstone.

But then again this is no ordinary gravesite; it is in actual fact the cremation site – and for the lack of an actual grave, the last resting place – of Pol Pot aka Brother No 1. Born Saloth Sar, Pol Pot is synonymous with his army, the Khmer Rouge, that from 1975 to 1979 was responsible for the deaths of between one and three million Cambodians. Pol Pot died at the age of 73, on April 16, 1998 – 23 years to the day after the Khmer Rouge had marched into the nation’s capital Phnom Penh. Historian David Chandler in his book *Brother Number One: A Political Biography of Pol Pot*, remarks that his body was cremated beneath a pile of rubbish and personal belongings in a jungle clearing with no senior figures nor his wife or daughter in attendance.

I take a look at the surrounding environs. Pol Pot’s house, or what is left of it, is just metres away from his cremation site. Here in this house, Pol Pot lived a free man, even after government forces drove out the Khmer Rouge from its stronghold in Anlong Veng in 1998. That he died unpunished is something that disturbs many Cambodians. Although five former leaders are in custody awaiting trial under United Nations-backed genocide tribunal, I do wonder if these trials will close or heal old wounds.

For Paul Hay of Hidden Cambodia Adventure Tours, a Siem Reap-based company specialising in dirt bike and adventure tours, the three decades since 1975 have not numbed the pain of having lost his loved ones. Paul, who is in his mid-thirties,

and was just a child when the Khmer Rouge came to power, lost his father, eldest brother and sister to the brutal regime. “We were all separated. My brother and sister were sent to work camps. Later, we tried looking for them and were told that they had died,” he says, wiping away tears. He does not recall much of those terrible four years, but remembers enough not to wish it ever to happen again.

These painful memories bubble to the surface as we drive further into the heart of what was once Khmer Rouge country, the north-western provinces of Oddar Meanchey and Preah Vihear, that was liberated and considered safe for travel only after 1998.

These areas are some of the most heavily mined in the country, and grim reminders of this are at every turn: signs with red backgrounds on which appear white skulls, crossbones and the words “Danger. Mines”. Stark warning not to stray off marked paths. Here and there remnants of the fighting are visible, from bullet holes in temple walls to rusted machinery and abandoned bunkers, the latter with some of the most amazing views I have ever seen.

But more than the legacy of the Khmer Rouge, these north-western provinces are some of the most rugged and beautiful in the country. They are also some of the most remote and see few visitors. Beyond the rugged beauty of the Dangrek Mountains (Cambodia’s natural northern border with Thailand), the vast Preah Vihear province is also home to some of the most magnificent and significant temples of the Angkorian period: the mountain temple of Prasat Preah Vihear, those at the 10th century capital of Koh Ker, and the great Preah Khan.

Due to time constraints, I had to give the mighty Preah Khan a miss (not to be confused with a similarly-named temple at Angkor). This vast laterite and sandstone temple is said to be the largest temple enclosure built during the Angkorian era. Still, Prasat Preah Vihear and Koh Ker do not disappoint.



Prasat Preah Vihear comprises five mini temples, or *gopura*, and towers some 550 metres above the Cambodian plains. The temple was built by a succession of seven Khmer kings beginning with Yasovarman I (reigned 889-910) and ending with Suryavarman II (reigned 1112-1152), architect of Angkor Wat. Perched atop the cliff face of the Dangrek Mountains, Prasat Preah Vihear offers some of the most breathtaking and scenic views – the Cambodian countryside, the tiny village at the base of the mountain and dusty laterite roads that crisscross the plains below. The temple's location makes it an ideal spot to take in the sunset. Despite the biting cold winds, the views are mesmerising. This is truly a magical place and having made the 300km journey from Siem Reap over two days, in some small way I feel I too have made a pilgrimage of sorts.

As with most sites of magic and splendour, the temple is not without controversy. For decades, Prasat Preah Vihear has been the subject of tension between Cambodia and Thailand, and for a time the latter occupied the temple and surrounding area. In 1962, Prasat Preah Vihear was rightfully returned to Cambodia. Still, this did not stop the Thais from appropriating Cambodian land along the ill-defined border; there is even a paved road leading to the temple's back door! Thankfully for Cambodia, the imposing Dangrek Mountains are a natural barrier, thwarting the Thais' efforts to completely acquire the temple.



Some 150km south of Prasat Preah Vihear is Koh Ker, the former 10th century capital of the Angkorian king Jayavarman IV (reigned 928-942). Koh Ker is massive and despite the short time it served as the capital – upon his death Jayavarman IV's son and successor Hashavarman I moved the capital back to Angkor – the site boasts many structures and sacred buildings. Charles Higham, in his book *The Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia: From 10,000 BC to the Fall of Angkor*, says Koh Ker's size reveals that Jayavarman IV was able to attract a considerable number of followers. The centrepiece at Koh Ker is the temple-mausoleum known as Prasat Thom, which Higham says ranks only behind Angkor Wat in terms of size. Standing at a height of 35m, Prasat Thom boasts a niche at its central spine, believed to have once held a 23m linga.

Due to its remote location and having been lost to the jungles of northern Cambodia, Koh Ker is said to be one of the least-studied temples of the Angkorian era. Apart from the principal buildings like Prasat Thom, many of the other structures have yet to be fully explored. The area was also heavily mined and de-mining efforts by CMAC and Halo Trust are ongoing.

Just around the temples is the tiny, impoverished village of Koh Ker, whose inhabitants can trace their ancestry back to the days of Jayavarman IV.

Once considered remote and inaccessible, today it is possible to do a day trip from Siem Reap to Koh Ker thanks to a paved road (metalled in some parts and laterite in others). The 140km journey takes about three hours and passes through the villages of Svay Leu and Siyong.

Indeed much of north and north-western Cambodia is slowly seeing development (read: improved roads and road networks), and as a result attracting visitors keen on sights beyond Angkor Wat. No matter the route – whether it veers towards the pain and suffering of the past, resurrecting the ghosts of the Khmer Rouge, or a pilgrimage to a dramatic mountaintop temple – it is the Cambodian people, with their grace and quiet strength, who make the journey into the heartland a memorable one.

SREEREMA BANOO IS AN INTREPID TRAVELLER AND HISTORY BUFF WHO DOESN'T MIND VENTURING OFF THE BEATEN TRACK IF THE SIGHTS AND STORIES ARE WORTH IT.

