

# The Temples of Angkor



# Introduction

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Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination's essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food or wine.

Angkor — the capital of the Khmer empire that thrived for 500 years from 802-1327 — is one of the most magnificent sites in southeast Asia. The ancient city's temples inspire with their innovative architectural designs, world-class narrative reliefs and Hindu-Buddhist iconography. Still infused with their historical magic, they are yours to discover.

## What's in this guidebook

- **Context.** We begin by laying out basic features of the Khmer civilization that are particularly relevant for understanding Angkor: the global factors that took the Khmer empire from a fragmented, trade-based society to a centralized, agriculture-based powerhouse; its early cultural exchange with India; the rationale underlying the establishment of the capital in Angkor; and the nature of interactions with southeast Asian neighbors.
- **Comprehensive look at Angkor's art and architecture.** We examine the distinctive Khmer style of art and architecture, isolating key features that you will see again and again on your temple visits; we tell you what makes them unique and what they symbolize. To make things come alive, we have packed our review with high-resolution images.
- **Detailed temple profiles.** This guidebook provides detailed profiles for twenty-five of the premier religious monuments in Angkor. For each, we provide information on its history, a detailed plan that highlights its most important architectural and artistic features and a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** This guidebook supplies logistical advice, maps and links to online resources. Further, to help plan and prioritize your temple touring itinerary, we rank temples based on the quality of their art and architecture and offer brief summaries of each temple's highlights, so you can focus in on what most interests you. Finally, we give our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are marked up with text that explains important features.

This guidebook includes profiles of Angkor Thom, Angkor Wat, Bakong, Baksei Chamkrong, Banteay Kdei, Banteay Samre, Banteay Srei, Baphuon, Bayon, Beng Mealea, Chau Say Tevoda, East Mebon, Lolei, Neak Pean, Phnom Bakheng, Prasat Kravan, Preah Khan, Preah Ko, Pre Rup, Ta Keo, Ta Prohm, Ta Som and Thommanon.

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We hope that this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Angkor's art and architecture and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

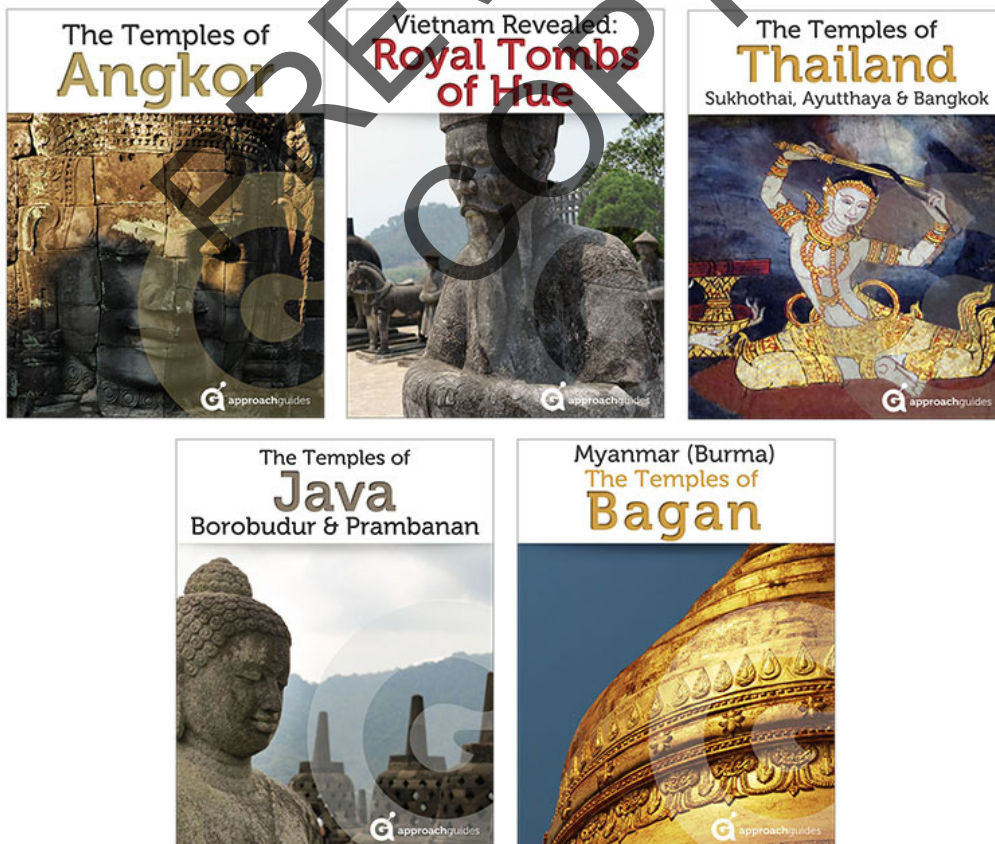
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# Cambodia: The Temples of Angkor

**Version 2.0**

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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Approach Guides  
New York, NY

[www.approachguides.com](http://www.approachguides.com)

ISBN: 978-1-936614-04-2

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—

We, whose good fortune it is to live in the nineteenth century,  
are accustomed to boast of the perfection and pre-eminence  
of our modern civilisation, of the grandeur of our attainments  
in Science, Art, Literature, and what not,  
as compared with those whom we call ancients;  
but still we are compelled to admit that they have far excelled  
our recent endeavours in many things,  
and notably in the Fine Arts of painting, architecture, and sculpture.  
We were but just looking upon a most wonderful example  
of the two latter, for in style and beauty of architecture,  
solidity of construction, and magnificent and  
elaborate carving and sculpture, the great *Nagkon Wat* [Angkor Wat]  
has no superior, certainly no rival, standing at the present day.  
The first view of the ruin is almost overwhelming.

—

Frank Vincent Jr.,  
an American adventurer  
who visited the only-recently-re-discovered Angkor in 1871-2,  
as recounted in his book

[The Land of the White Elephant  
Sights and Scenes in South-Eastern Asia  
\(published 1874\), Chapter XVII.](#)

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## Watch Before You Go

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THE FACES OF  
▶  
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Fig. 1. China-India maritime trade routes: 1st-6th centuries (red dots), post-6th century (yellow dots).

## Indianization Begins

Óc Eo was the site of **the earliest and most meaningful contacts with early traders**, particularly Indians, who would contribute meaningfully to the cultural and religious heritage of southeast Asia as a whole.

With the opening up of trade routes in the 1st century CE, a process of “Indianization” began in which the region was exposed to India’s influential indigenous religions: Hinduism and Buddhism. Prior to this exposure, the people of Cambodia practiced **animism**, which included worship of ancestor spirits and natural forces, such as the earth, rain, water and the sun. As trade intensified, the region’s animistic program was subsumed (although not erased) by these dynamic foreign faiths.

The Indian religions, however, brought more than a belief system; they naturally carried advanced linguistic, social and political traditions that supported them. India’s advanced **cultural fabric was absorbed during this seminal period** and leveraged to rapidly build a sophisticated civilization centuries later in Angkor. Viewed from this perspective, the Indianization process was a necessary precondition for Angkor’s future development.

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# Cosmology Shapes Temple Designs

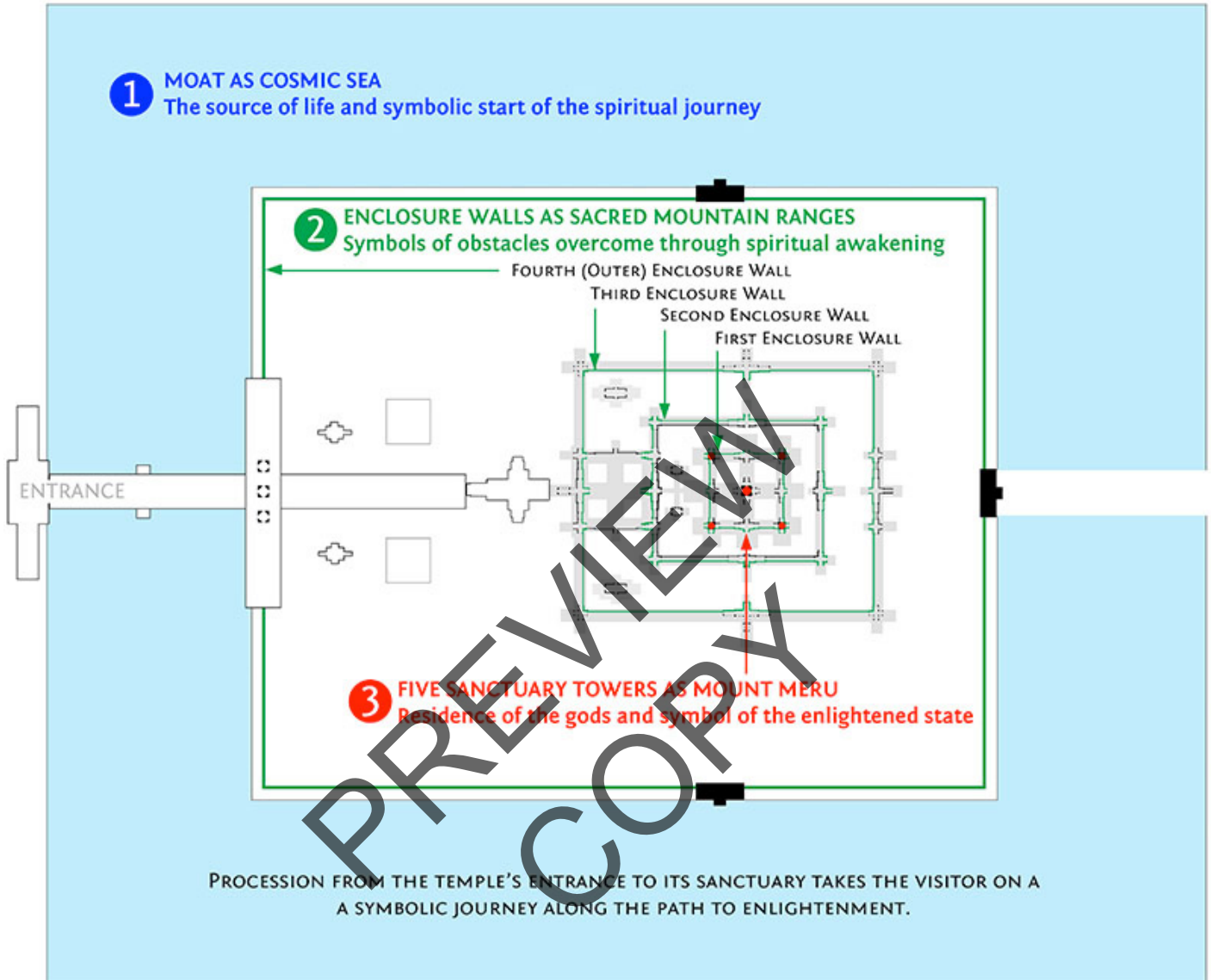


Fig. 4. Temple design recreates three-staged cosmological journey (Angkor Wat layout).

The Khmer temple was designed as a microcosm of the Hindu cosmological universe. In making their way from the temple's entrance to the sanctuary at its center, visitors undergo a **symbolic three-staged journey** to salvation through enlightenment.

## Stage 1: Moat as Cosmic Sea

The outermost boundary of a Khmer temple was often surrounded by a moat, a body of water symbolic of the Cosmic Sea (blue highlights in Fig. 4). For Hindus, the Cosmic Sea is the source of creative energy and life, the starting point for the journey toward salvation.

Temple visitors begin their journey by crossing the sea on causeways lined with serpents, beasts similarly intimately associated with both Hindu and Khmer myths of creation (we explore the serpent in greater detail in a subsequent section).

## Stage 2: Enclosure Walls as Sacred Mountain Ranges

Continuing on their way to the center of the temple, visitors pass through a series of massive enclosure walls; these walls recreate sacred mountain ranges, symbolic of obstacles that must be overcome on the path to enlightenment (green highlights in Fig. 4). Monumental **tower gateways, called gopurams**, grant visitors passage through the walls, each successive one revealing a more sacred area, further removed from the outside world.

The combination of concentric enclosure walls with large gateways was **derived directly from south Indian Hindu architectural precedent**. Enclosure walls make their first appearance very early in the Khmer building tradition — at the late 9th century pre-Angkor site of Roluos in the temples of Preah Ko, Bakong and Lolei — and are a constant feature in all subsequent temples.



Fig. 5. Five sanctuary towers, Angkor Wat.



### Stage 3: Five Sanctuary Towers and the Sacred Intersection

At the center of the temple stand **five sanctuaries with tower superstructures** (red highlights in Fig. 4; and Fig. 5).

- **The mountain residence of the gods.** The temple's overall form — dominated by its large central tower (*vimana*) — symbolizes the mountain at the center of the universe, Mount Meru. The gods reside on the summit (Fig. 6).
- **God's cave.** The sanctuary proper, located directly under the tower, is where an image of the deity resides (Fig. 6). Its dark interior represents the cave into which the god descends from his mountaintop home and becomes accessible to human beings in physical form.
- **The sacred intersection.** Inside the Hindu temple's sanctuary, the worlds of the divine and human connect: the god's vertical axis (mountaintop to cave) intersects with the visitor's horizontal axis (temple entrance to cave). The entire universe emanates from this intersection (Fig. 6), as unity with god is the goal of earthly existence. In Hinduism, since the god — typically one of the trinity: Shiva, Vishnu, or (rarely) Brahma — is believed to temporarily physically inhabit his representation in the sanctuary, the Hindu temple is arranged to enable the direct devotee-to-deity interaction that necessarily follows. Unlike other faiths, there is no religious intermediary and no abstraction; god is manifest before the devotee's eyes, a profound encounter.

It is here, in a cave at the foot of Mount Meru, that the visitor's symbolic journey ends in nirvana: the pairs of opposites characteristic of worldly existence (eg, good versus bad, right versus wrong) fuse into a single infinite everythingness beyond space and time.

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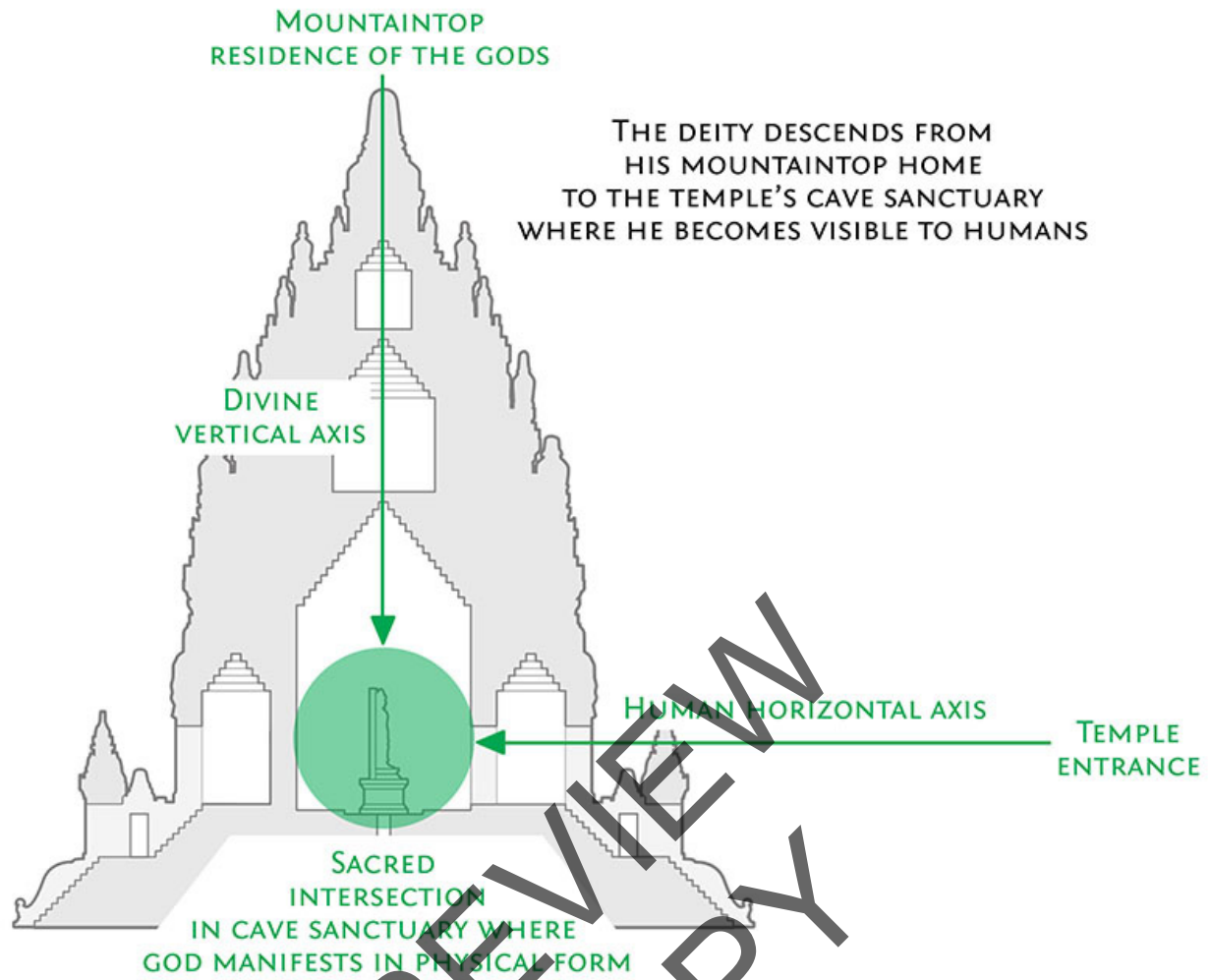


Fig.6. Sacred intersection, Hindu temple.

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# Defining Features

Beyond the most fundamental, cosmologically-driven building blocks — moats, enclosure walls and sanctuary towers — Angkor's temples reveal a distinctive set of trademark characteristics.

## Temple Orientation & Position

For the most part, the primary entrances to Angkor's temples are on their **east sides**, facing the rising sun, consistent with Indian temple prototypes. A particularly noteworthy exception to this rule is Angkor Wat, which is oriented toward the west; the reason for this exception is reviewed in the sections devoted to the temple.

***Author tip:** To make reading the temple layouts in this Approach Guide as easy as possible, the direction of north is always positioned at the top; accordingly, temple entrances are typically on the right side of the plan.*

Further, while sanctuaries typically sit at the absolute center of early-period temples, those of mature period quintessentially Angkorean temples are shifted back (typically to the west), away from the entrance.

## Ascending Platforms

Consistent with the concept of the temple as mountaintop residence of the gods, many Khmer sanctuaries sit on a pyramidal base consisting of an ascending series of rectangular platforms. The use of multiple platforms to form soaring temple-mountains marks **a break from Indian Hindu temple precedent**, where sanctuaries typically sit on a single modest platform. The first Khmer temple to employ ascending pyramid-like platforms was Bakong, built in 881.

Platforms are accessed via **particularly steep stairways**, set at angles of 45-70 degrees, perhaps in imitation of the wooden steps and ladders that provide access to Khmer timber houses. The difficulty associated with ascending these stairways — progressively sharper as one gets closer to the central sanctuary — confirms that many were likely designed not for use by the general public, but rather for a select group of religious and political officials.

## Covered Galleries Lining Enclosure Walls

In Khmer temples, the enclosure walls are often lined with continuous covered galleries.

The transition from the earlier Angkor practice — a series of individual long halls encircling temples — to single continuous covered galleries **began at the start of the 11th century** in the temples of Phimeanakas, Ta Keo and Baphuon. Their emergence **facilitated a new type of relief decoration at Angkor** that employed an advancing continuous narrative; this is discussed in more detail in the section entitled “Khmer Art - Relief Style.”

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# Sanctuary Plan

**Author tip:** If a temple sanctuary's plan is square, it conforms to the early-Angkor style and dates from the 9th or 10th centuries; the trademark Khmer cruciform plan indicates 11th century or later.

The sanctuary is the most sacred part of the temple, functioning as the residence of the presiding deity. The plans of sanctuaries at Angkor demonstrate a clear progression, increasing in complexity from square, to cruciform, to modified cruciform.

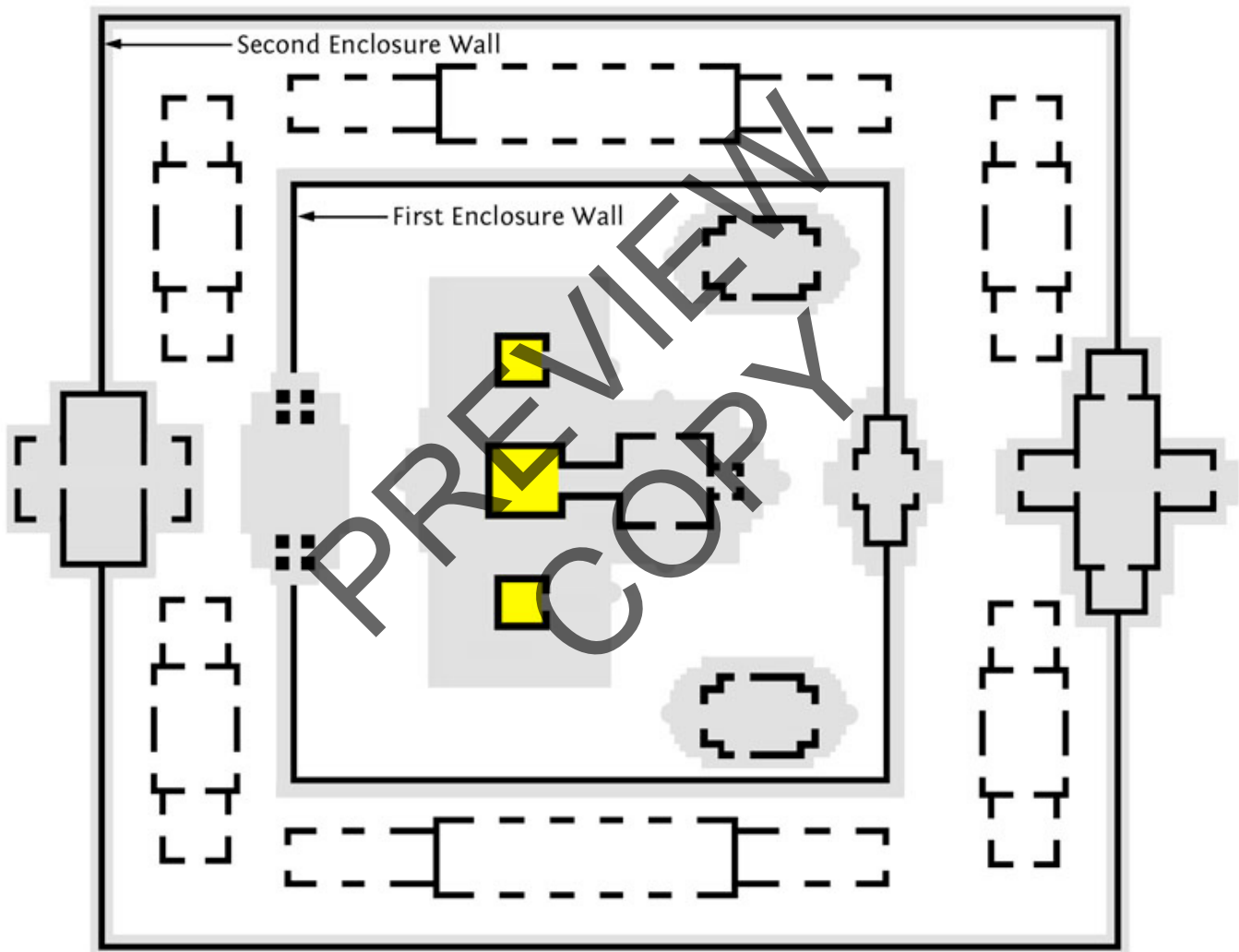


Fig. 12. Square-sanctuary layout, Banteay Srei (built 967 CE).

## Square Sanctuaries

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## Angkor's Hybrid Lotus-Bud Style

Later towers at Angkor, especially those built under Suryavarman II (ruled 1113-1150), take on elements of this north Indian characteristic. Their new vertical orientation is particularly clear at Angkor Wat: while the horizontal levels of the southern style are still in evidence, Angkor Wat's towers show a slight inward bend and increased vertical momentum. In Fig. 19, the hybrid is clear: the south Indian style's horizontal levels combine with the north Indian style's vertical push and inward bend.

This hybrid is the trademark Khmer tower, the gently curving lines of which resemble a **closed lotus bud** at the moment just before opening to reveal the flower inside.

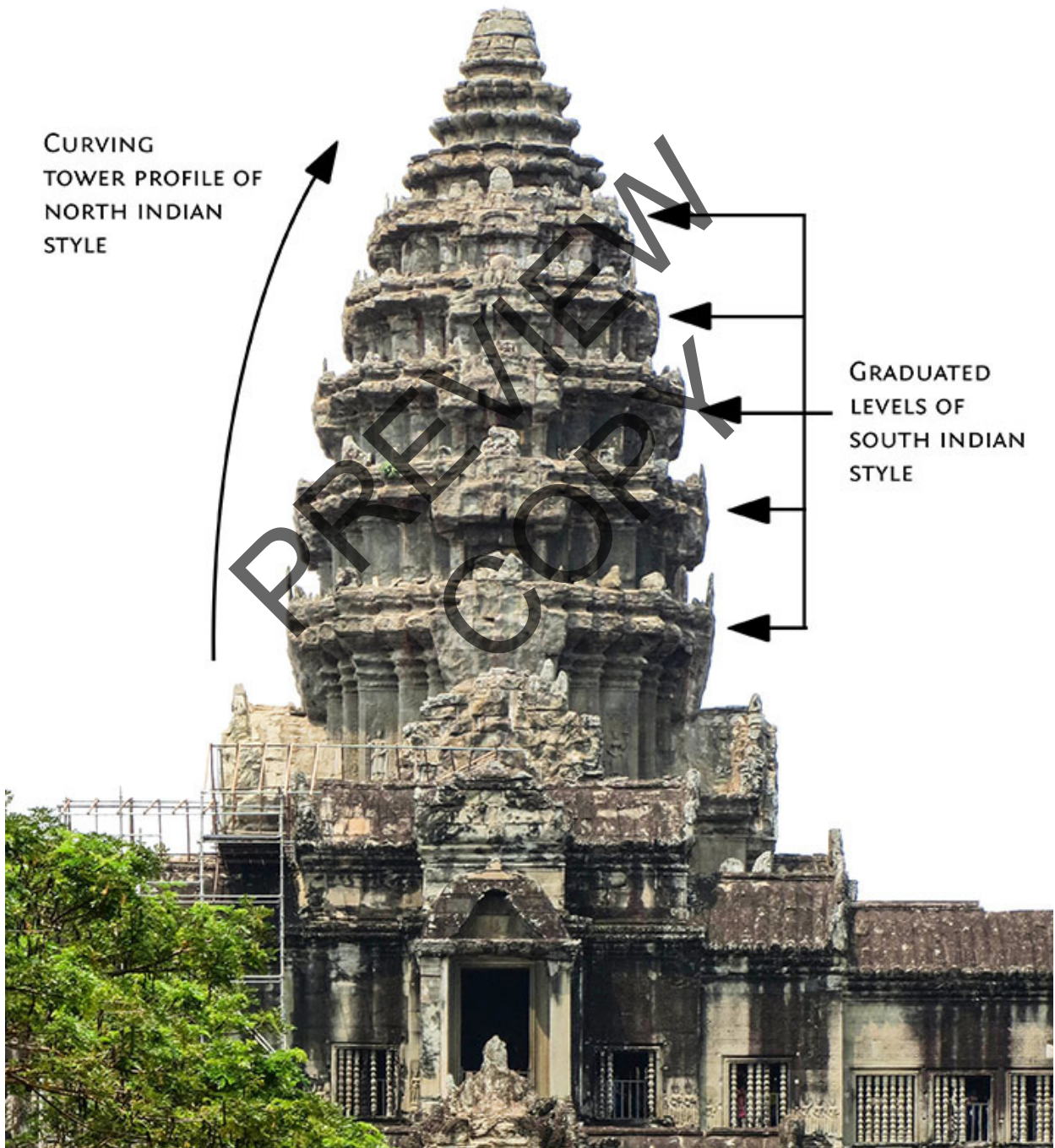
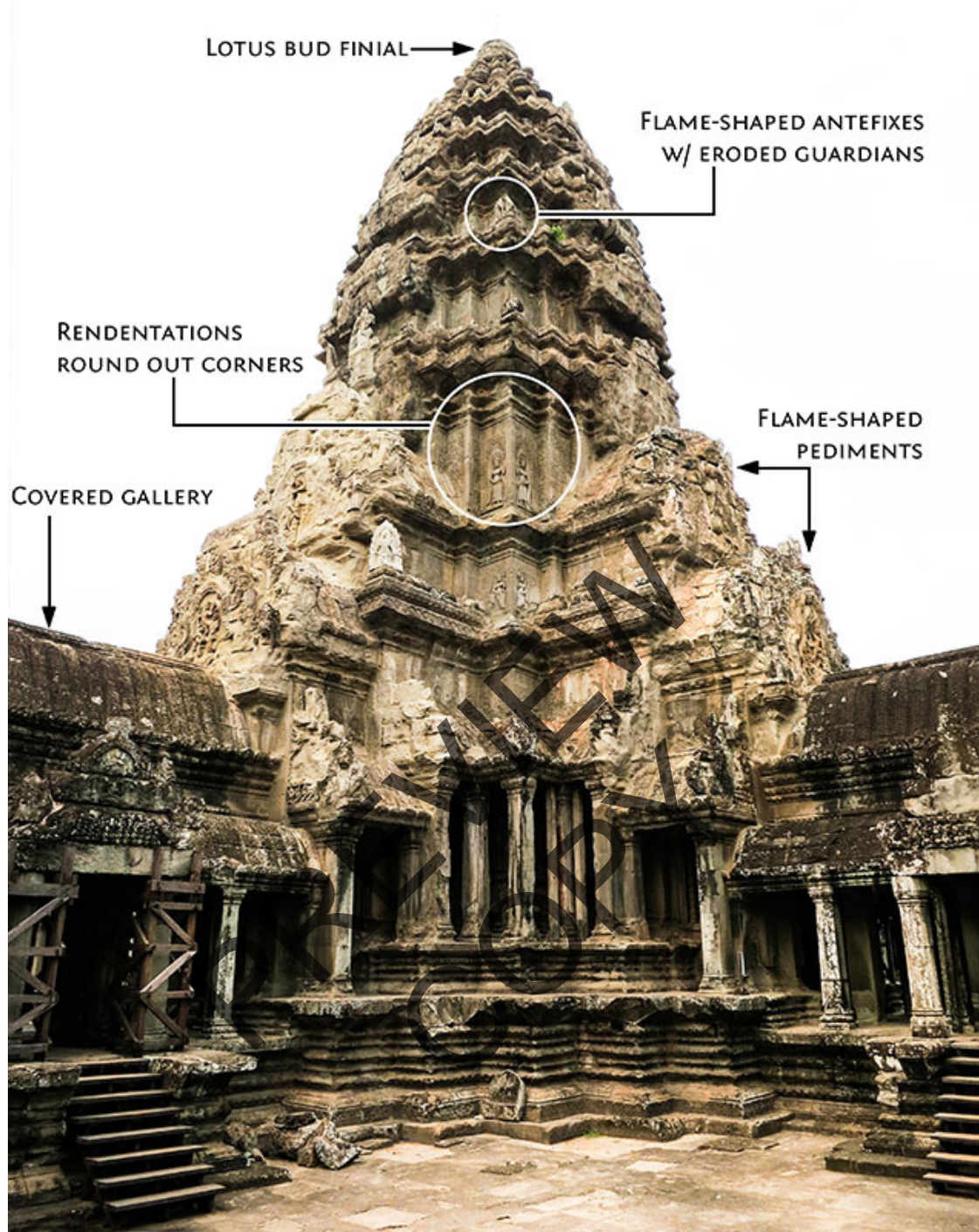


Fig. 19. North- and-south Indian-influenced towers of Angkor Wat.



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**Fig. 21.** Principal tower, third level, Angkor Wat.

## Quincunx Arrangement

The **quincunx tower layout** is a trademark of the Khmer architectural style. It employs five towers — a tall tower in the center surrounded by four smaller ones — to symbolize the sacred peaks of Mount Meru. While the quincunx is also used in India, it is far more popular in Angkor.

The arrangement was pioneered in Angkor at the Phnom Bakheng temple, built in 907 under Yasovarman I (ruled 889-915), and was a regular fixture of temples constructed subsequently. Prior to

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**Fig. 28.** The Mahabharata's Arjuna and Krishna (west gallery), Angkor Wat.

### Narrative highlights

- The story centers on the **Battle of Kurukshetra**, a mythical battle over dynastic succession that occurred between two groups of cousins descended from the great king Bharata: the **Kauravas** (the sons of darkness, who usurped the throne) and the **Pandavas** (the sons of light, who were exiled).
- The heroes of the story, the Pandavas, are led by the archer **Arjuna**, who is counseled by his charioteer, Krishna; **Krishna is an incarnation of Vishnu**, one of the three primary Hindu gods (**Fig. 28**).
- Krishna convinces Arjuna that it is his duty to destroy his evil cousins (most importantly, Bhishma, the Kaurava leader). Krishna's philosophical counseling is recorded in the famous portion of verses from the Mahabharata known as the **Bhagavad Gita** (the sixth book). In arguing for cosmic harmony, Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita stresses the importance of action consistent with divine-ordained **duty** (*dharma*); in order to act in such a way, the individual must necessarily break from his worldly attachments, in this case Arjuna's desire to do no harm to his cousins on the opposing side.

- After triumphing in this great battle, the Pandavas renounce the throne and retire to the Himalayas.
- Despite their victory, the Pandavas must atone for their sins in the underworld prior to ascending to the heavens. Only **Yudhishthira**, the brother that was absolutely true to duty over family obligations, pride and material pursuits, was allowed to go directly to heaven.

Scenes from this epic abound in the decorative reliefs of Angkor's temples.

## Ramayana Epic

### History

The Ramayana — the modern Cambodian version of which is known as the *Ramakien* — is the other primary Hindu epic. Also written in Sanskrit and divided into seven books, it was likely composed around 300 BCE, perhaps in large part by a single poet, Valmiki; it underwent modification in subsequent centuries, probably reaching its current form in the 2nd-3rd centuries CE.



**Fig. 29.** The Ramayana's evil demon Ravana (northwest corner gallery), Angkor Wat.

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# Map of Temples



**Fig. 39.** Map of Angkor temples.  
See detailed satellite with all temple positions marked in [Google Maps](#).

**Author tip:** We suggest using our detailed [Google Map](#) to help with your itinerary planning. Further, the map's satellite view offers valuable perspective on temple layouts.

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# ANGKOR WAT \*\*\*

## Quick Profile

- **History:** Built from approximately 1120-1150 under ruler Suryavarman II (ruled 1113-1150). Angkor Wat, meaning “the city [Angkor] that became a pagoda [Wat],” appropriately functioned as both the capital of the Khmer empire and the state temple.
- **Religious orientation:** Hindu, dedicated to the god Vishnu. It is interesting that Suryavarman II chose Vishnu, rather than the prevailing deity in Angkor, Shiva. Although the reason for this change of allegiance is unknown for sure, one possibility seems particularly apt: Vishnu is the Hindu god who intervenes on earth (in the form of an avatar) to restore universal order; perhaps Suryavarman II (for reasons discussed later in the review of the temple’s first-floor relief galleries) wished to portray himself as presiding over a similar restoration that would bring prosperity to his people, perhaps even as an avatar of the great god.

## Tips for Touring the Site

- **Location:** 5.5 kilometers (3.5 miles) north of Siem Reap, Angkor Wat is the southernmost of the great collection of temples that comprised the ancient Khmer city of Angkor.
- **Visiting hours.** Open from 5am - 5:30pm, Angkor Wat has extended hours to accommodate sunrise visits.
- **Suggested starting point:** west entrance; **ending point:** west entrance. Although there is a secondary entrance on the east side, we advocate beginning at the primary west entrance (for your first visit).
- **Length of visit:** Minimum 2-3 hours. We recommend trying to visit more than once, ideally at both sunrise and sunset.
- **A strict dress code.** Visitors who wish to climb to the third-floor summit must wear clothing that covers their shoulders and legs down to the knees. Since this rule is strictly enforced and cannot be remedied by draping a scarf over your shoulders, we advise carrying a t-shirt that can be put on to gain entry. Also, hats cannot be worn.
- **Crowd-level rating:** High. As you’d expect, Angkor Wat is a busy temple, packed with visitors. That said, it is large enough that you still can find some isolated spots. Expect to run into the greatest congestion while touring the first-level relief galleries. To beat the crowds, the best times to visit are very early in the morning (near sunrise), early afternoon (the hottest time of day) and the very end of the day (near closing).
- **Visit nearby:** For visitors on a very limited time schedule, we recommend combining Angkor Wat with visits to the Bayon (\*\*\*) and Preah Khan (\*\*\*)

**Author tip:** *If you plan on visiting Angkor Wat twice, we recommend entering from the little-used (by tourists) east entrance, rather than the primary west entrance. This route avoids the crowds and the gopuram offers a glimpse of pre-restoration Angkor Wat.*

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## 2. First Level: Relief Galleries

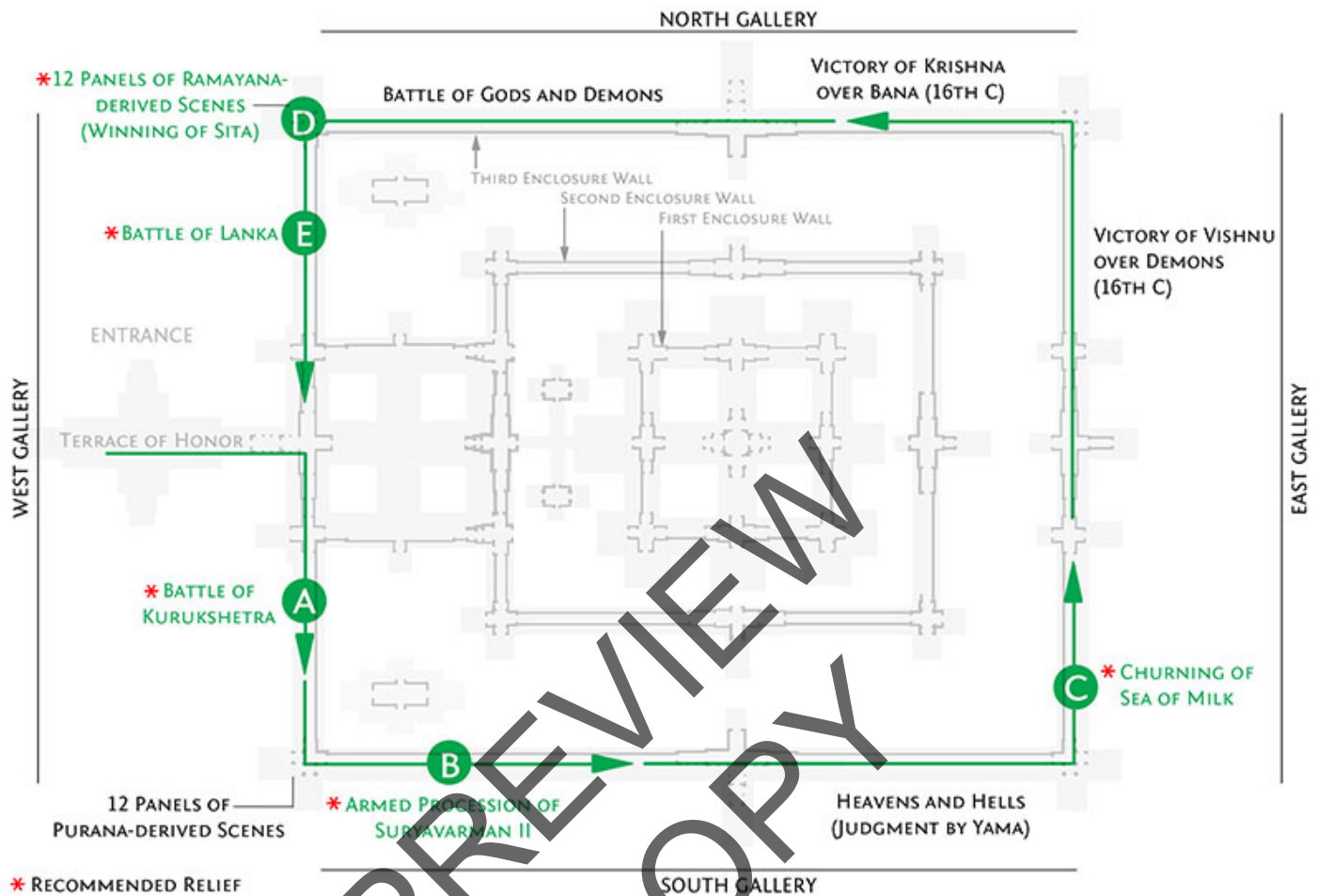


Fig. 63. Locations of first-level gallery reliefs.

To get to the first level's relief galleries, continue along the main promenade from the gopuram to the temple proper. Once you enter the temple, turn right to begin the tour.

### Overview

Angkor Wat's premier reliefs are concentrated in the galleries that run along the exterior of the third enclosure wall on the temple's first level.

- Known as the Large Panels, they are uniformly 2.4 meters (8 feet) tall, extending nearly from floor to ceiling (Fig. 64).
- The reliefs cover a massive area, approximately 600 square meters (6500 square feet).
- They are divided into eight sections, with panels flanking the entrances on each of the four sides; there are also reliefs in two corner pavilions (northwest and southwest).



RELIEFS

CORBELLED ROOF ORIGINALLY COVERED BY WOODEN CEILING

COLONNADE WITH RISHIS

Fig. 64. Gallery.

## Touring the Highlights

Given the massive size of the first-level galleries, it helps to have a little direction with regard to where to focus attention. To make things easier, we have marked the best reliefs with asterisks (\*) and assigned each a letter (a through e) to organize our tour of the highlights in subsequent sections (Fig. 63).

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# Symbolism

## Cosmological Foundation

Neak Pean is designed to represent the lake Anavatapta referenced in Mahayana Buddhist cosmology. The lake resides at the center of the world and issues forth four great rivers, represented by the smaller spill pools.

- **India's Ganges river:** east spill pool, with a human-head waterspout.
- **Pakistan's Indus river:** south spill pool, with a lion-head waterspout.
- **Uzbekistan's Amu Darya river:** west spill pool, with a horse-head waterspout.
- **China's Yellow river:** north spill pool, with an elephant-head waterspout.

The base of the round island at the center of the central pool consists of two coiled serpents, symbolically linked to the lake's sacred waters, their heads rising at the east entrance (Fig. 151). The serpents recall the serpent king Mucalinda who protected the meditating post-enlightenment Buddha by raising him above the floodwaters of a great storm.



SIMHALA

BALAHA HORSE  
(AVALOKITESVARA)

COILED SERPENTS  
AROUND SHRINE

SOUTH SPOUT  
SHRINE

SYMBOLIC LAKE  
ANAVATAPTA

**Fig. 151.** Core sanctuary, view from north.

## **Avalokitesvara as Balaha**

Making its way to the east entrance of the sanctuary, an in-the-round sculpted horse traverses the water (**Fig. 151**). The horse, named **Balaha**, is an incarnation of Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion responsible for shuttling humanity to salvation. At Neak Pean, he is depicted rescuing the shipwrecked merchant **Simhala**, bringing him closer to enlightenment in the Buddha's teachings (**Fig. 151**).

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## Decorative Highlights

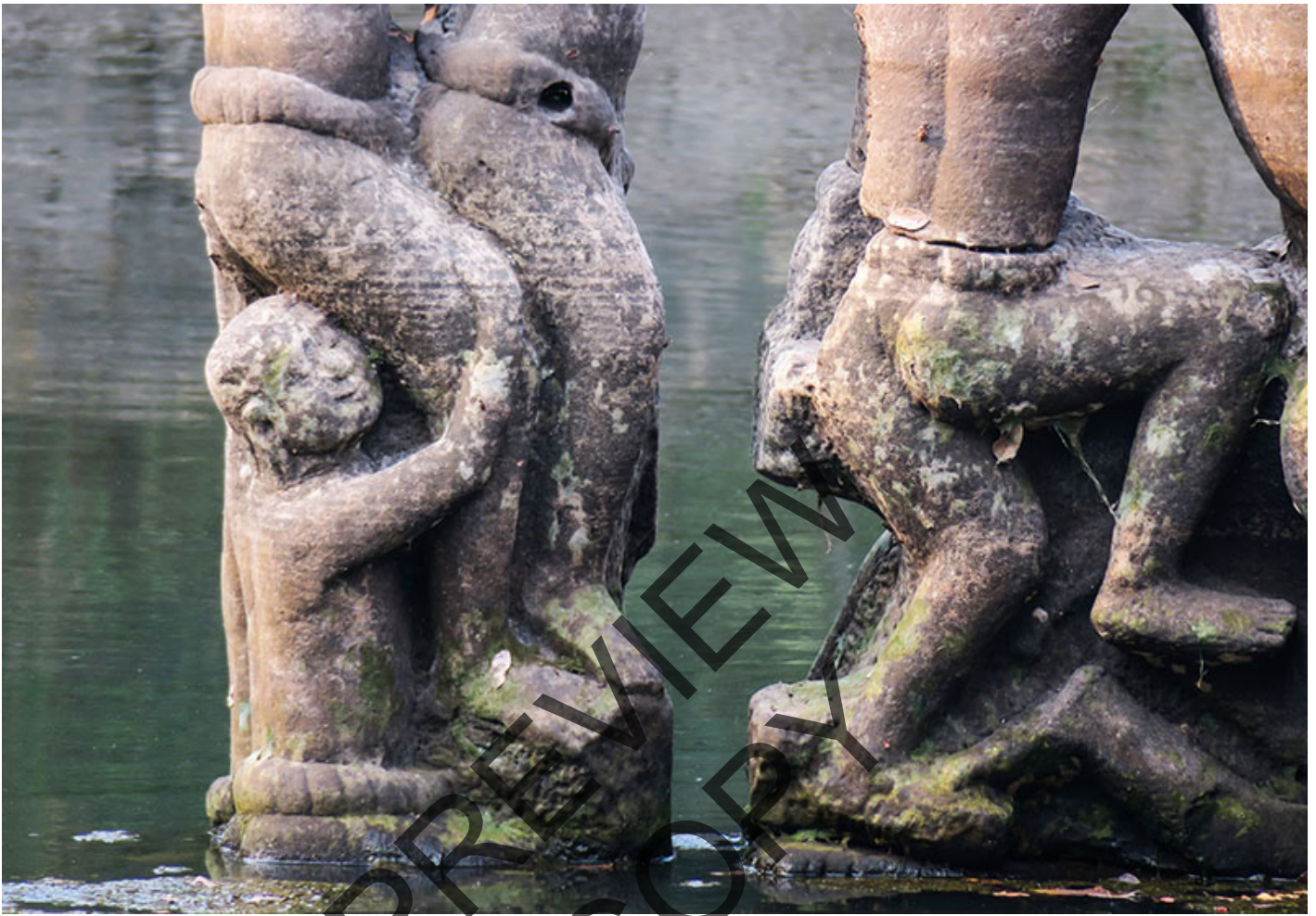


Fig. 152. A rescued Simhala.

### Simhala

A delicate image of the shipwrecked merchant Simhala — shown clinging to the bottom half of another shipwrecked person's body, who in turn holds onto the tail of Avalokitesvara-as-Balaha (Fig. 152) — conveys a powerful emotion of contentment and peace, symbolically realized through compassion for others.





**Fig. 153.** Elephant-head (Yellow river) waterspout, north spill pool.

## Spout Shrines

The waterspout shrines have corbelled roofs and deep-cut sandstone-relief heads, through which water from the central pool flows into the smaller spill pools below (Fig. 153).

## Sanctuary

Although they are difficult to make out from the viewing area, the sanctuary's blind doors carry reliefs of standing Avalokitesvara figures, while its pediments hold scenes from the life of the historical Buddha.

- **East pediment:** The Buddha, renouncing his royal life in favor of asceticism, cutting his hair.
- **North pediment:** The Great Departure, when the Buddha abandons his kingdom in pursuit of the truth.
- **West pediment:** A post-enlightenment Buddha is protected by the multi-headed serpent Mucalinda.
- **South pediment:** The narrative is damaged and undecipherable.

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## A SPECIAL THANK YOU

A special thank you to the team at the Ministry of Tourism of Cambodia and the Tourism Department of Siem Reap Province, whose assistance proved invaluable in facilitating the update to this guidebook.

Mr. Hul Seila

Mr. Ngov Sengkak

Mr. Am Phandouen

Finally, to our tuk-tuk driver, Mr. Chorm Vichea, without whose early wake-ups and supreme patience we would not have stood a chance of completing our temple touring, we owe you even more. Arkun!

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# TRAVEL TIPS

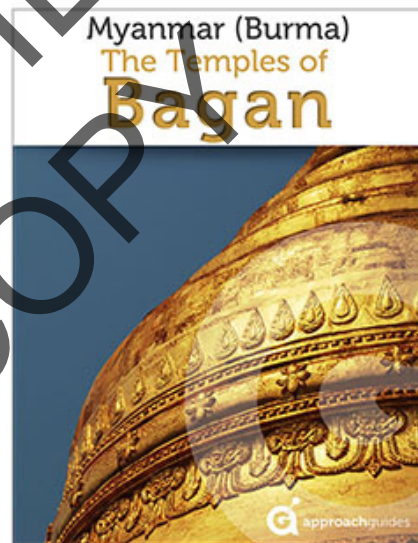
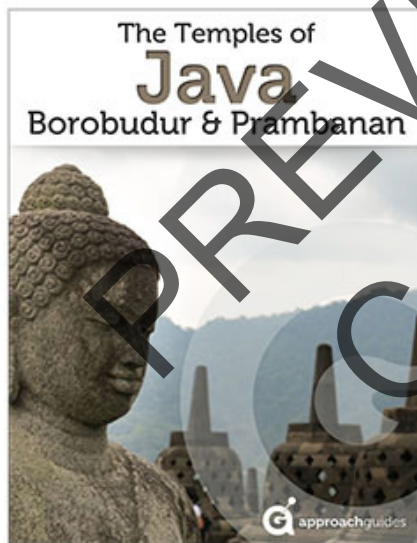
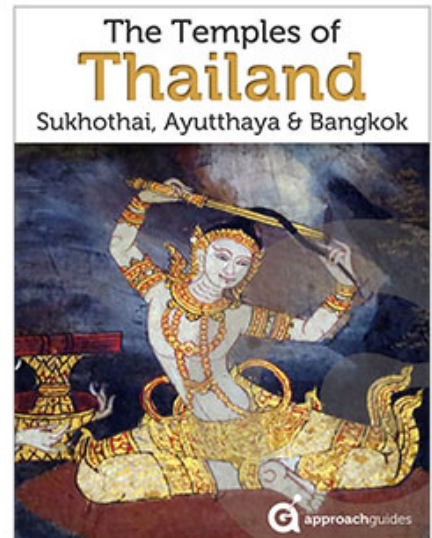
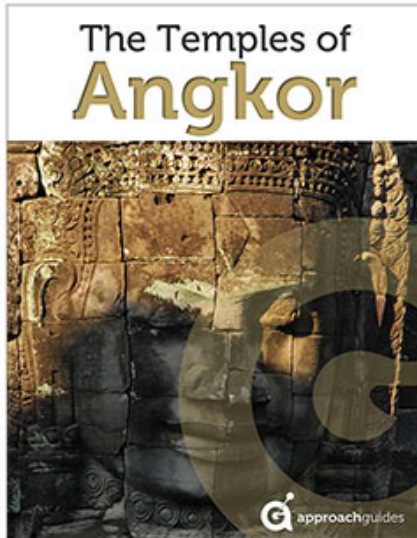
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Here are just a few of our Cambodia recommendations ([see the complete list](#)):

- **In the Shadow of the Banyan** The novel tells the story of a seven-year-old girl who survives the Khmer Rouge's killing fields. *By Vaddey Ratner.*
- **The Sounds of Cambodia** Listen to a playlist containing a personal collection of Cambodia tracks compiled by our founder Jennifer Raezer. The perfect pre-trip soundtrack.
- **Buddha in your Backpack: Everyday Buddhism for Teens** For teens looking to learn more about Buddhism, this book introduces Buddha's teachings with advice for navigating everyday situations. *By Franz Metcalf.*

We encourage you visit [tripreads.com](http://tripreads.com) to get our Trip Reads for [Cambodia](#) and other destinations throughout the world. Enjoy your travels!





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# PACKING LIST

*for global voyagers*

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David & Jennifer Raezer  
Founders, Approach Guides

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**Los Angeles Times**

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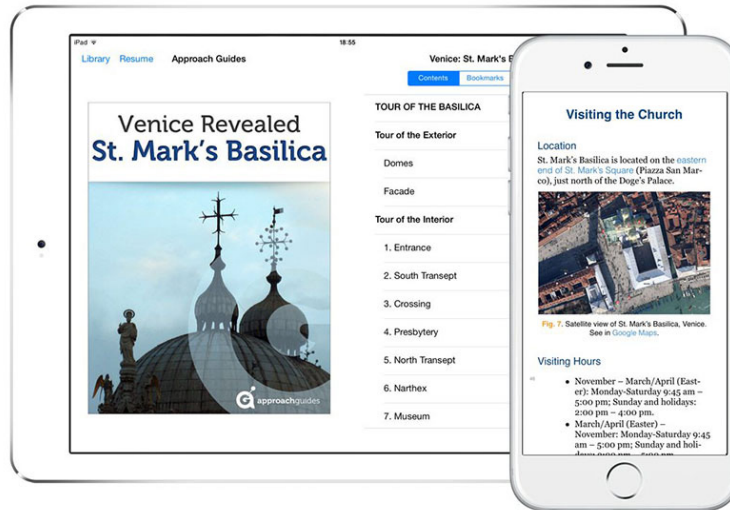
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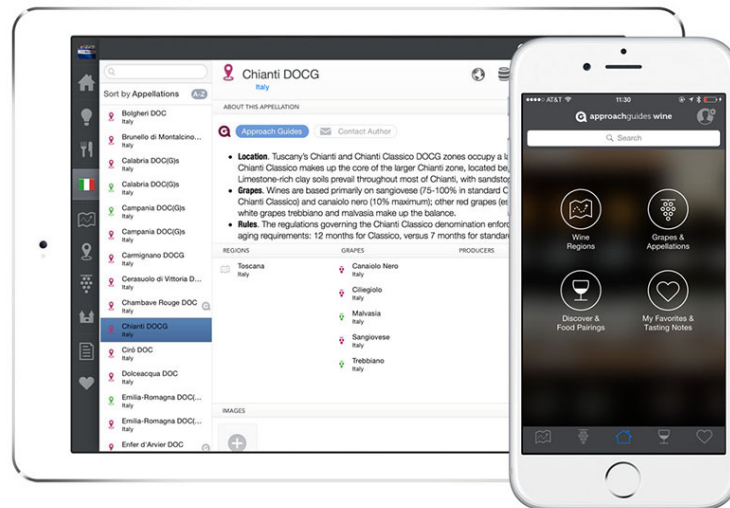
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