

## **A Little Trust Leads to Sunset at Angkor Wat**

My first glimpse of Angkor Wat came from the back seat of a Cambodian police officer's motorbike.

It all started with an early evening arrival in Siem Reap. After checking in to my hotel, I referred to my guidebook which suggested that sunset at Angkor Wat was a visual experience not to be missed. Curiosity piqued, I checked the clock, noted the dying sun and decided to quickly walk the 5 km from my hotel to the temples.

It soon became clear that walking the distance was not the safest idea for a woman traveling alone. Beyond Siem Reap's city limits, the road turns gritty. Overgrown vegetation, dense banyan trees, and the flickering light of squatters' campfires replace the shiny veneer of the tourist capital. I picked up my pace and made the mental note to find a tuk-tuk for the return trip back to town.

Suddenly, a Cambodian police officer stepped out of the woods, blocking the path in front of me, and hollered in a thick accent, "Stop! Stop! Stop right away!" I froze in my tracks, heart pounding in my chest. I knew Cambodia had corrupt officials and I was wary of him in my vulnerable state, but after a quick study of his starched uniform, closely buzzed hair, and militant demeanor, I thought to myself, "Yeah, he's for real." My mind began racing to think what I could possibly have done wrong. Was it my clothes? The fact I was alone? I didn't litter, did I? Baffled, I wondered if I was about to set a tourist record for the shortest duration in a country before getting arrested. And for what, I had no idea.

"Do you have a day pass?" He barked at me.

"Uh, no," I replied slowly, "I'm not planning to tour the temples tonight. I'm just heading over to Angkor Wat to see the sunset."

"You need a day pass," he commanded.

"I will buy one tomorrow. I'm not going inside the compound," I tried again while trying to hide my frustration at seeing the sun quickly setting behind the trees.

Time was running short. "I really just want to get to the temple before the sun goes down to take some pictures."

"No. You need a day pass. You buy it now and use it tomorrow." He adamantly pointed behind me to a spur in the road where the ticket booth was located. "You have to go back there and buy a day pass."

Clearly I wasn't going to win this argument. I sighed and hurried back to the ticket booth. Once I had the requisite day pass in hand, I continued my trek to Angkor Wat, resigned that I was likely to miss the sunset. All of a sudden, the roar of an engine came up behind me. I turned around to see the same Cambodian police officer on his motorbike. "What now?" I thought. "Get on," he said, pointing to the back of the bike. "I will drive you to the temple." He must have seen my hesitation because he smiled at me and said reassuringly, "I know you are late now. I am sorry. Please let me help you get to the temple quickly." Something in his eyes told me that I could trust him. I got on the back of his bike and we sped away down the bumpy road.

When we arrived, I slowly got off the motorbike, transfixed by the landscape in front of me. The setting sun glanced off the thousands of dust particles hanging in the humid air to illuminate the sky a vivid crimson that reflected in the still waters of Angkor's moat. The famous spires of the vast temple wound proudly up to into the heavens. Hundreds of locals and tourists mixed with monks in burnt orange robes, all harmoniously situated along the entry's ancient stones. A sense of peace and calm resonated throughout. No one spoke above a whisper as we witnessed the vibrant sunset dim into the soft purple tones of early evening, serving as dramatic backdrop to Angkor's majestic silhouette.

I felt the cop watching me. I turned to him and murmured, "It's all so beautiful." He nodded proudly, as if he had coordinated this celestial spectacle himself. He went on to explain that Angkor is a representation of heaven and earth with the spires symbolizing mountains and the vast moat, the ocean. "That tallest tower?" he pointed. "That is where the gods live."

I stood for awhile in front of the complex after that considering the poetry of the architect's vision. As I looked out on the scene before me, I was left convinced that

Angkor Wat has to be one of the world's most beautiful man-made places. I was so glad that I was able to enjoy it at this magical hour.

"Come on," he said. "I will give you a ride to town." Grateful that I wouldn't have to find another way home, I accepted his offer. We drove the red-dirt thoroughfare in a dusty storm of tuk-tuks, cars, and motorbikes when suddenly he veered off on an unfamiliar side road. Warning bells went off in my head. I leaned over his shoulder and in a calm voice that belied the sense of alarm I felt inside, asked nonchalantly, "Where are we going?" He replied, "It is ok. I know of a better way. I think you will like to see the Cambodian countryside."

"He is a police officer, you can trust him," I told myself all the while calculating the least painful way of jumping off the bike if I had to.

True to his word, our path opened to beautiful country with cropland and tiny wooden houses scattered throughout. He stopped a few times, pointing out where he thought I might like to take pictures. He was as proud of this place as I was curious to see it. I soon relaxed and enjoyed the rest of the scenic ride that my impromptu tour guide gave me back into town. When he dropped me off, I generously tipped him. "Thank you for a great experience tonight," I said. "I never would have made it in time to see the sunset, and you kept me safe from harm." His face broke out into a huge smile, "Of course. I am happy to show you. You would do the same for anyone else." I reflected on his words. "I sure hope so," I thought to myself.

He did a double take at the sum of money in his palm and exclaimed, "You want another tour tomorrow night?"

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