

A Day at Angkor Wat

By ReadWorks

Maly took a big swig from her water bottle and vigorously fanned her face with her newly acquired pamphlet. She had only just skimmed the information within, since she always got sick when she attempted to read on buses. She peered out the window to try to take her mind off of her stomachache. Far in the distance, she could just make out the tops of trees—a speckle of green in a vast sea of brown. During the hot spring months of April and May, it can often be difficult to find vegetation in the city of Siem Reap in Cambodia. The bus carrying Maly and her class constantly churned up dust as it wobbled through the streets of the city, steadily making its way toward Angkor Wat, the destination for the class field trip.

The pamphlet Maly was using to fan herself detailed the history of the United Nations World Heritage site, one of the most significant archaeological sites in southeast Asia. During the thirty-minute bus ride from their school to Angkor Wat, Maly and her classmates were supposed to read a little bit about the site in order to familiarize themselves with what they were about to see. But Maly already knew plenty about the monument, as her father was an archaeologist who had previously worked there. He had told her numerous stories about its history—how the actual site is comprised of several ancient temples and monuments, even reservoirs and canals, and how Angkor Wat is just one of many temples within the ancient Khmer civilization of Angkor.

“A lot of people get it wrong,” he had said. “Angkor isn’t just Angkor Wat—it’s a site spanning 400 square kilometers that used to be an entire city!”

Maly thought of her father as the bus pulled into the parking lot of the archaeological site. As the students stepped off the bus, their teacher, Mr. Reynolds, rattled off a few facts in his booming voice. “This wonderful place you’re about to see was the start of the Khmer Empire!” he said excitedly. “Construction of Angkor began in the twelfth century under the rule of King Indravarman and continued under the rule of his son, Yasovarman.”

Maly and her friend Chet passed Mr. Reynolds and looked out at Angkor Wat. The massive temple stood stately in the distance at the end of a long stone path. One large stone pillar marked the center of the temple, and the rest of the structure spread out in a square formation so that four shorter pillars surrounded the central one. From their vantage point, the building looked small, but as they approached it, they were overwhelmed by its size.

“The construction of this temple was commanded by King Suryavarman II, who dedicated the building to the Hindu god Vishnu,” yelled Mr. Reynolds, in hopes of reaching his students, who had already scattered in excitement. The class trekked down the path, sweating more and more as the sun reached its peak. When they reached the entrance, Mr. Reynolds gathered everyone around. “Now, since this temple is so old, there’s a lot we still don’t know about it,” he said. “First of all, Angkor Wat isn’t its original name, and we don’t know what it was despite the numerous historians who have tried to find it in ancient inscriptions. Then there’s the actual structure itself—we don’t know why it was built the way it was. Some scholars think it has something to do with astronomy, since the ground plan of the building aligns itself with the Draco constellation, which is named after its dragon-like shape.”

Chet, Maly, and their classmates walked up the stairs into the building. “Wow,” Chet said, his jaw dropping. Maly smiled. She had been to the temple before, but was always amazed by the sophistication of the building despite its age. Even though some of the stones were nearly black now, they still showed signs of their former glory in intricate carvings. Maly wondered how the stonemasons had carved such hard material back when they were first constructing the temple.

Mr. Reynolds approached the two students, whom were seemingly entranced by one of the carved entrances. The stones depicted a scene from an ancient Hindu myth. “You know, this is one of the most well-preserved temples in Asia,” Mr. Reynolds told Chet and Maly. “The government is working on restoring the parts that have been ruined by weather or purposeful destruction. It’s called ‘anastylosis restoration’—to use the original materials of the building to reconstruct damaged sections,” he explained.

Maly had noticed some old stones on the ground outside of the courtyard when she had first walked in. “So they’ll use some of those big stones laying outside?” she asked her teacher.

“Absolutely! That way the structure will continue to look as it originally did,” replied Mr. Reynolds.

Chet and Maly wandered around the grounds, increasingly amazed by the size, carvings, and statues of the temple. The two of them tried to imagine it as it was back in the twelfth century, with people coming in and out to pray to Vishnu. Now, tourists and tour guides roamed in their place.