

# PRESTIGE

HONG KONG  
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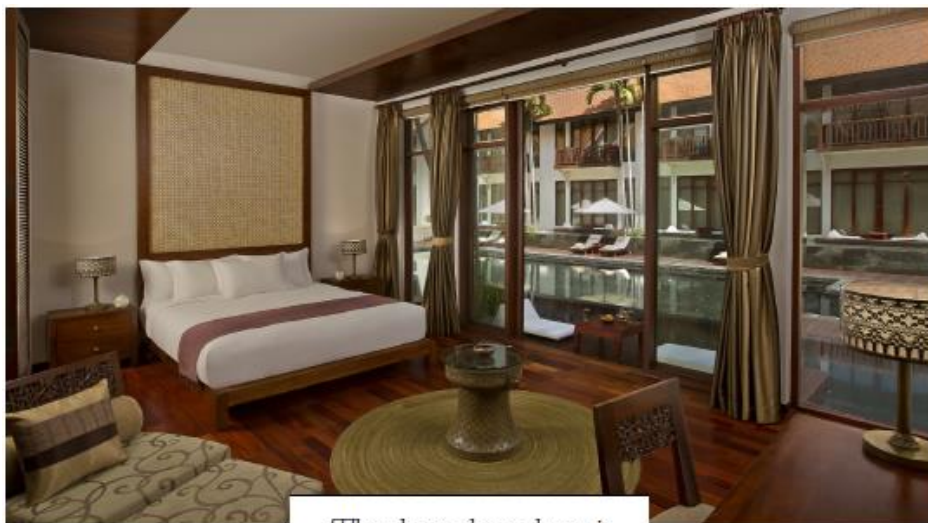
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# Adventures of a Recluse

OLIVER GLAS falls prey to the charms of the Anantara Angkor Resort,  
a retreat so seductive you may never want to leave it





*The hotel makes it remarkably easy to do nothing at all*

FOUR THIRTY AM IS a truly unholy time to wake up. It's pitch black, completely silent and my whole body is aching to get back to sleep. I know I shouldn't be complaining – I'm up this early to go and see the sunrise over the temples of Angkor Wat, a reportedly transformative experience that sits at the top of many a globetrotter's must-see list. But still, this really does seem extreme.

That, in a nutshell, is the main problem with the Anantara Angkor Resort and Spa: all the sights, sounds and smells of Siem Reap are just a short tuk tuk or car ride away, but the hotel makes it remarkably easy to do nothing at all. The pool is too inviting, the staff are too attentive and, right at this moment, the beds are far, far too comfortable.

I do make it to Angkor Wat and, of course, it's more than worth the early wake-up call. But even here, a 20-something-minute drive from the hotel, the Anantara has made life that little bit easier. The concierge has booked us a knowledgeable and somewhat sassy guide called Mr

Hunn, who tells plenty of tales about the temples and relics found in them. "People recently found a crown in the ruins and the government thinks it must have belonged to a princess," he tells us conspiratorially. "But the government is wrong," he barks, and proceeds to reel off a list of reasons why, even going into detail over the archaeologists' misunderstandings of ancient Khmer hairstyles.

The crumbling complex of Angkor Wat is why millions of tourists flock to Siem Reap every year. It's also the reason most visitors only stay in the city for a night or two, spend all their time trekking through the temples and use their hotel only as a crash pad. The Anantara – with its spa, seawater swimming pool and dangerously plush beds – is looking to change that attitude.

The Anantara's mission to get its guests to relax and enjoy the resort begins with the service. A whole team of people quietly go into action from the moment my car from the airport pulls up – one of them whisks my bags off to my room, another hands me a refreshing welcome drink and someone else prepares a foot bath. After

that, there's no waiting around at a desk to check in – the paperwork is done once I arrive in my room and takes all of 30 seconds.

The rooms themselves are the next ploy in the Anantara's seduction strategy. All of them are decorated in contemporary Khmer style and are filled with traditional teak furniture and works by local artists. They're all spacious and even the smallest rooms have a living area with day-bed style sofas, as well as freestanding tubs and separate rain showers in the bathroom. On top of all that, there are only 39 rooms on the property, meaning that the resort feels more like a personal villa than anything else.

Once I've settled in, the prospect of room service is incredibly tempting, but seeing as the resort's restaurant, The Sothea, is just a few steps from my door, I leave the comfort of my room behind. It's worth it. The chefs buy as much produce as they can from the local markets every morning and the quality shows in the variety of

Khmer and international dishes that they cook up at breakfast, lunch and dinner.

Local culture also inspires treatments at the spa, which I try the next day. The hotel's 90-minute-long Traditional Khmer Massage is a contemporary take on an ancient ritual that monks devised to ease their aching muscles after they'd been meditating for long periods of time. It involves no oil and plenty of strenuous stretching, yet leaves me feeling relaxed and refreshed.

But having sung the praises of the hotel, if you're staying in Siem

Reap it really is worth exploring the city beyond the resort's gates. As the staff did for our trip to Angkor Wat, they can help plan short trips into town, or longer expeditions further afield. The temples are obviously the number one attraction, but there are plenty of other, lesser-known sights.

At the concierge's suggestion, we head out one morning to Phnom Kulen National Park, which is about an hour and a half's drive north from Siem Reap. Most of the journey is on a winding, slippery mud track that snakes slowly up into the hills through dense forest populated by leopard cats, muntjac deer and plenty of snakes. We keep our eyes peeled but, as the sun is steadily creeping into the sky and the temperature is

soaring, all of the animals are safely concealed in the undergrowth.

Our first stop on the mountain is the River of a Thousand Lingas. A "linga" is an ancient phallic symbol of fertility that inspired much of Khmer architecture (the towers of Angkor Wat are linga-esque). But here, halfway up the trail into Phnom Kulen National Park, lingas were carved directly into the sandstone riverbed, so you can catch glimpses of them as the river drifts by. These carvings date back to the 9th century and are one of several features that make this mountain range a sacred site for both Hindus and Buddhists. A bit further up the road is another religious attraction, this time in the form of an eight-metre-long statue of a reclining Buddha.

But even the most devout and serious pilgrims drop their poker faces when they set eyes upon the series of waterfalls just a few steps from the base of the Buddha. Here there are two main waterfalls; a relatively short one that thunders quickly past and a huge, 20-metre-high one that drops into a deep, cool pool where you can swim.

Archaeologists have recently discovered that hidden in the jungle all around these waterfalls is a huge, forgotten temple complex that some experts claim may rival Angkor Wat. Most of it is inaccessible due to a lack of roads and, unfortunately, the lingering danger of landmines that have lain buried in the ground since the Vietnam War era. But if that doesn't put you off, then a few guides will take you to some of the easier-to-reach ruins.

As the heat of the afternoon starts to set in, we decide against venturing into the jungle. The thing is, now that we've had a successful morning sightseeing, I find myself dreaming of The Anantara. The pool. The spa. The rain shower. The noodles at The Sothea. It seems the hotel's mission to woo its guests off the sightseeing trail is complete. **Q**

