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## Travel

**Peace at last:** Buddhist monks at the water's edge at Angkor Wat in Cambodia

**O**UR approach to countries emerging from violent pasts requires delicacy. Should we flood them with NGOs or encourage them to stand on their own? Is it constructive or crass to roll up as a tourist?

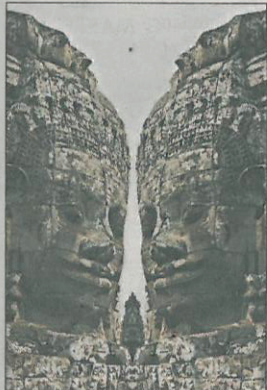
Cambodia went through a genocide by the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979 and before that was a wretched sideshow to the Vietnam War.

An enchanting post-French colonial country of jasmine-scented boulevards was reduced to a giant labour camp, and it has naturally taken decades for the country to heal itself.

I absorbed its numbingly awful story in the early Eighties when my former husband, actor Julian Sands, played Sunday Times journalist Jon Swain in the Killing Fields. Swain's book, *River of Time*, is a haunting account of Cambodia's destruction.

Some visitors still want to see the graves of skulls – respect for humanity or genocide tourism? – but the big crowds now come for Cambodia's cultural treasures and for the beaches on the Gulf of Thailand, near Sihanouk.

Do not underestimate two recent events for Cambodia. The first was Angkor Archeological Park's recogni-



tion in 1992 as a World Heritage Site. The second was Angelina Jolie arriving in time for *Tomb Raider* in 2000.

Ta Prohm temple, built by the Khmers in the 12th to 13th centuries to evoke the divinity of kings, is now known as Lara Croft temple. The power of kings defers to the power of Hollywood.

During my stay the elegant colonial Raffles Grand d'Angkor hotel in Siem Reap is bristling with the American secret service. Finally, out of one of the large pool villas strides a small, confident woman in purple silk. It is the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton.

She is in Cambodia for a regional summit, pledging more investment for Indochina. From a discreet corner of the restaurant I watch the theatre of power. It is 90 per cent logistics, with a choreography of countdowns to arrival and departure, a cavalcade of cars, walkie-talkies and hand gestures.

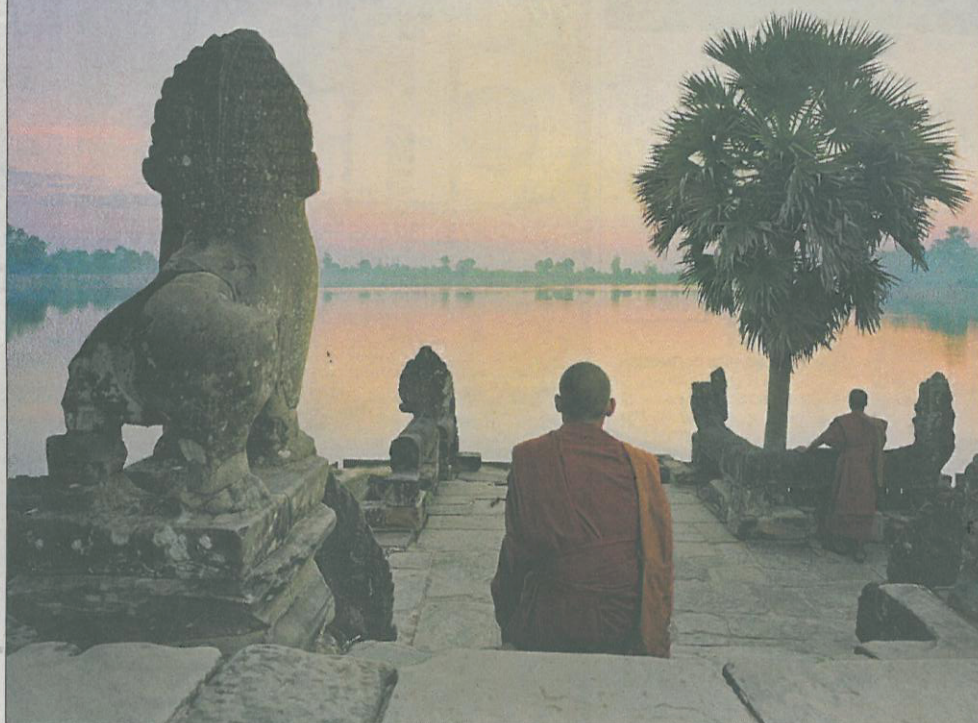
The next VIP due in Siem Reap is said to be President Obama. Michelle Obama has asked to bring their daughters so that they can see the temples.

I have come for the same reason, but am travelling a bit lighter than the US Administration.

The small town seems to have proportionately more hotels than London, populated by both backpackers and the well-heeled from Korea and China, but also Europeans. In this low season there are still more than 2,000 visitors to the temples each day. It may start to

# RISING KINGDOM

As US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visits Cambodia for the ASEAN summit, **Sarah Sands** explores the country's ancient Khmer temples and the country's first luxury private island resort, which offers wonderful tranquillity



### DETAILS: CAMBODIA

WEXAS Travel has nine nights from £3,895pp including return international flights with Malaysia Airlines into Siem Reap via Kuala Lumpur (from Heathrow), domestic flights from Siem Reap to Sihanoukville, private transfers, full day private touring to Angkor Wat, three nights B&B at Raffles Siem Reap and five nights full board at Song Saa, valid from August 15 until October 31, wexas.com

take its toll on the maintenance of the gigantic blocks of sandstone, transported by elephants from the northern mountains. Tourists must buy a daily or weekly pass to the park so there is some control on numbers, and renovation is being undertaken.

I enter by the eastern entrance at dawn. It is a lovely 40 square miles of lowland and forest, including magical fig trees. Through a clearing lie the five towers of Angkor Wat, beyond its glassy moat. It is somehow bigger and more mystical than the pictures.

I wander alone around its borders, until I reach the western, main entrance, where hundreds of tourists are waiting to take the classic sunrise shot of an orange sun behind the central towers. But it is too cloudy for

that, you need to be here between December and March.

There is much more to Angkor Wat than the sunrise. The carvings of ferocious confrontations between good and evil are amazingly detailed and the famous tableaux *Churning of the Ocean of Milk* lives up to its reputation.

The thrill of these temples is that they are also fighting with encroaching nature. In the case of Ta Prohm, the enormous roots of the spung tree are embedded in the stones, as if they may punish mankind's hubris by returning the galleries and arches back to the earth.

What must it have been like for the French natural historian Henri Mouhot to have stumbled upon this in 1860, during an expedition partly funded by

the Zoological Society of London? It is the best way of imagining Angkor.

The natural resources of Cambodia include some of the most beautiful stretches of virgin land in South East Asia. As Thailand's beaches come to resemble an Ibiza of the East, Cambodia's look more alluring.

**T**HE story of Song Saa island is one of romance and bloody-mindedness. Australian couple Rory and Melita Hunter, who restore French colonial properties in Phnom Penh, were sailing around the Koh Rong archipelago on their honeymoon and moored at the largest isle.

A tribal elder offered to sell them the two small uninhabited adjacent islands on a 99-year lease.

Almost seven years later, Song Saa is complete – a complex of 27 luxury villas with wi-fi and a British chef who could show Heston Blumenthal a trick or two with his signature "pebble beach" pudding.

It was not quite Angkor's elephants moving stone from the mountains but building a resort from scratch on an uninhabited island is some feat. Fresh water is piped across from the larger island, huge power generators and heavy stone baths arrived by barge.

Melita Hunter has used nature creatively. Tables and stools are made of driftwood, which also forms decorative sculptures around the island. It is all about views.

Song Saa offers the luxury of design and comfort but it is isolation that is priceless – watching the uninterrupted pink and orange sky.

The smaller second island, linked by a causeway, is set to become a spa sanctuary among the vegetation. Until then, the masters are the fruit bats.

I take my hat off to the Hunters. There is a growing market for a plot of peace on earth and Song Saa private island answers the yearning. It is also a hopeful irony that the archipelago once occupied by the Khmer Rouge is a magnet for growth. Cambodia's future is some compensation for the woes of its past.

Butterville B&B review, Port Elliot  
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Ancient wonders: top left, giant carved faces at Bayon Temple; left, Bayon Temple at Angkor Thom; right, Song Saa resort