



Jim Drummond Reports from Southeast Asia

Jim Drummond is a regular attender at Crossroads Friends Worship Group, and lives in Flint, Michigan. He is traveling in Southeast Asia during Second Month 2006, and is sending back reports by thee-mail as way opens. (He is a retired college dean, and the necktie has pictures of the actor James Dean. James Dean. . . James the Dean. . .?)

Cambodia, Part One

I have been in Cambodia for three days, and I have far more to report than I could do in a single email. Thus, as best as I can, I will divide my comments among three or four emails. The goal of the whole trip, in many ways, was to fulfill a life-long dream of seeing and visiting Angkor Wat. I did so yesterday.

The visit was certainly not a disappointment, something that frequently happens when someone looks forward to going somewhere for so long. The main temple, Angkor Wat, is but one of 273 temples in the whole complex. This is the largest religious site, by far, in the world. At its peak, the Khmer Empire covered almost all of southeast Asia. The whole history of the country is divided into three epochs, pre-Angkor, Angkor, and post-Angkor. The empire lasted for nearly 500 years, from about 800 AD until around 1300 AD. Angkor Wat was built over a period of 300 years.

The temple is Hindu in origin and remained so throughout the empire period until nearly the end, when Buddhism came into the area. Only Angkor Thom is Buddhist, and even it has lots of Hindu iconography. Angkor Thom is pretty much ruins, although still impressive. The Bayone Temple, located at Angkor Thom, is where I watched the sunset last night. At one point, Angkor Thom was populated by over a million people -- and it has no temple anywhere near as big as Angkor Wat.

It would be possible, if one had a very large hot air balloon or helicopter, to lift Notre Dame of Paris and move it here. The entire cathedral would take up only a corner of Angkor Wat temple. The four towers of Angkor Wat are over 200 feet tall, and the main center temple, where the kings' ashes are buried, is much higher. The entire temple was built of rock blocks with no mortar.

One it was fully constructed, the carving began, and the actual shape of the temple was fashioned and covered entirely with bas relief and other full sculpture. The temple eventually housed more than 2000 Buddhas. It now houses about five. All the others, along with great deal more, was stolen. I can also make out what I think are bullet pock marks on the wall.

I am no doubt boring you to distraction with facts, but I feel obligated to give you one more to indicate the size of the temple. There is a large moat, meaning wide, that surrounds the temple wall. The moat and the wall are approximately four miles, or about a square mile, and this is only Angkor Wat and doesn't include any of the other 272 temples in the immediate area. The temple is in ruin, but it still is remarkably intact. An effort made by India to clean up the temple and remove the last vestiges of jungle from it proved disastrous. They used acid to get the lichens off the roofs, and it did far more than kill the weeds, unfortunately.

This fantastic building was constructed without technology beyond the use of pulleys. It was carved without the use of iron. It remains after it was abandoned, ransacked, looted, fought over, and in modern times, shot up. Yet it has stood for almost 1,200 years. The parking ramps seem to be decaying at the college after 30 years. What a magnificent achievement modern technology is. On the other hand, it didn't take 300 years or hundreds of thousands of people to build it, either.

I will finish by saying the timing, by chance, was terrific for the visit and tour. For about an hour, we could all hear the Buddhist monks chanting. What a background for visiting this astonishing place.

I hope I can send further emails about the power, the poverty, the horrors of Cambodia.