

Standing world at that  
time. because most  
houses



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Standing in the middle of the jungle in northern Cambodia is the impressive temple of Angkor Wat. It is the most famous temple at the Angkor temple complex in Siem Reap, Cambodia. The entire complex covers over 248 square miles, and was once the capital city of the Khmer empire, featuring dozens of temples in many sizes.

The name Angkor Wat translates directly to “city temple”, but the temple was not actually called this during its building or use. Archeologists and historians have not been able to find any reference to its original name on the site or in manuscripts. The complex was once the capital of the Khmer empire, and historians believe that the population at its height during the twelfth century was over one million people, making it the biggest city in the world at that time. Because most houses and other buildings were made of wood, the entire city has decayed away except for the large stone temples. The Khmer empire was founded in the ninth century by Jayavarman II when he united two kingdoms in modern-day south-east Asia. Over the next 500 years, it expanded its borders into parts of modern day Laos, Thailand, and southern Vietnam. The king who ordered the construction of Angkor Wat, Suryavarman II, was king during the prosperous time of the early 1100's. He rose to power as a teenager in 1113 by killing his great-uncle, Dharanindravarman I, who was riding an elephant, and restored the peace and unity to the empire that had not been seen since his father's reign in the eleventh century.

He immediately ordered the construction of Angkor Wat, and historians believe the construction lasted about thirty years. The temple itself is made up of a series of walled-off raised platforms, each at the center of the last

one, with one central tower and four towers surrounding it, all surrounded by a moat with two bridges over it. The majority of the temple is made of a stone called laterite, which is then covered by softer sandstone for the carvings and intricate designs.

The 5 million tons of sandstone had to be carried from a quarry twenty-five miles away. The temple is dedicated to the Hindu god Vishnu, and historians hypothesize that the design is inspired by the image of Mount Meru, the Hindu equivalent of Mount Olympus, where their pantheon of gods and goddesses live on a series of five mountains surrounded by an ocean. The bridges approach from the east and west sides across the 650 foot wide and 13 foot deep moat.

It has a circumference of more than 3 miles. The moat has helped to stabilize the foundation of the temple by preventing groundwater from rising too high or too low, but it is unknown whether this was intentional or not. The entrance to the temple is guarded by two lion statues and faces to the west, an anomaly in Hindu practice, as most Hindu temples face to the east. Because Vishnu is sometimes associated with the sun and the sunset is sometimes associated with death, historians have debated whether the temple is turned towards the sunset as a homage towards Vishnu or that it perhaps served as a burial spot for the ashes of Suryavarman II. Angkor Wat is covered in so much artwork and carving, that it is widely regarded as the pinnacle of the Khmer style of art and architecture. Images of Vishnu and famous scenes from the Hindu epics Mahabharata and Ramayana are carved as reliefs into the sandstone walls. Archeologists have found traces of paint

on some walls and believe that the walls were originally painted, even though they have been all eroded away by now.

The most famous relief, titled “ The Churning of the Sea of Milk” pictures a scene from the Hindu creation story. Carvings of Vishnu are placed everywhere; one is even placed at the top of the center tower. After the death of Suryavarman II in 1150, war and violence again fell upon the empire. The Chams took over the city of Angkor in 1177 and held it for four years until Jayavarman VII, a Buddhist king, retook the city.

Because he and his supporters were all Buddhist, images and carvings of the Buddha were added to Angkor Wat. During a short resurgence of Hinduism, these Buddhist images were taken down, but afterwards, the Theravada form of Buddhism was the official religion of the Khmer empire and Angkor Wat was used as a Buddhist temple. The Thai conquered the city of Angkor in 1431, and the Khmer rulers were forced to abandon their temples and move south.

Angkor Wat was abandoned and forgotten for a couple centuries, only occasionally observed by wandering Buddhist monks who spread stories of the temples in the jungle. The jungle began to overcome the temple and it experienced pillaging, water seepage, and misuse. The Frenchman Henri Mouhot rediscovered the temple in 1860 and his description of it in his book about his travels was printed and sold around the world, sprouting lots of interest in Angkor Wat all around the world. The French began a massive restoration project for the temple in 1908, and brought the temple back to the state it is in today.

However, during the 70's and 80's guerrilla warfare kept people from living near the temple for research or restoration projects. The genocide of the Khmer Rouge regime killed the Buddhist monks who were taking care of Angkor Wat along with about 2.5 million other Cambodians. The temple and the entire Angkor complex was named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1992 and immediately placed on the World Heritage in Danger list. The restoration projects done by charities and companies since placed on that list allowed for the removal of Angkor Wat from the endangered Heritage list in 2004.

Despite its history of war, violence, and neglect, the Angkor Wat remains as a prideful symbol of Cambodia, even keeping a prominent place on its flag and currency. The temple is the reason why at least 50% of tourists visiting Cambodia come to the country, and provides a great boost to the Cambodian economy. Enduring a long and diverse history, the Temple of Angkor Wat is a lasting testament to the strength of the Khmer empire and the beauty that can be found even among violence and disrepair.