

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Angkor, Cambodia

Elisa Leonelli · Sunday, March 27th, 2022

While driving back from my visit to the [Jane Goodall exhibit](#) at the Natural History Museum, I noticed the banners for the [Angkor exhibit at the California Science Museum](#), and I got very excited, because I remembered exploring this amazing ancient city in 2003, after a trip to Vietnam. So I rushed over to see it, starting from an outstanding documentary in 3D at their IMAX theater.



Angkor. The Lost Empire of Cambodia. Photo by Elisa Leonelli

I learnt many things I did not know, and the progress made with new archeological methods to uncover the mystery of why the mega city of [Angkor](#), capital of the [Khmer Empire](#) for six centuries from 802 to 1431, was abandoned. I won't spoil for you the possible explanation, that serves as a warning about the climate crisis of today's world.



Hindu Goddess Durga and Buddha. Photo by Elisa Leonelli

On display are precious objects and sandstone statues of Buddha and Buddhist divinities like Lokeshvara and Prajnaparamita, of Hindu deities, such as Durga/Devi, the Mother Goddess, Narasimha/Vishnu and his wife Lakshmi, positioned against photographs of the imposing stone temples, with written explanations and videos. Educational displays allow you to build your own temple with construction blocks.



Gate to Angkor Thom from *Angkor-3D*

The main temple, [Angkor Wat](#), is still in use today as a holy place of worship for Hindu and Buddhist religion. The gates to the city, [Angkor Thom](#), are carved with giants faces, as is the [Bayon temple](#).

What I was most impressed with, when I was walking among the ruins, were the gigantic roots of extremely tall Silk-Cotton Wood trees growing on top on the temples.



Angkor. Bayan temple. Photo by Elisa Leonelli 2003

The carvings and the architecture reminded me of the 10th century Chandella temples that I had photographed in [Kahjuraho](#) during my seven-week [trip to India](#) in 1984.



Angkor. Ta Prohm. Photo by Elisa Leonelli 2003

The restoration of this archeological wonder has been slowed by millions of landmines that have killed 64,000 people since 1979. I learnt the troubled history of Cambodia from the 1984 movie *The Killing Fields* directed by Roland Joffé. Angelina Jolie found out about it when she was shooting *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) around Angkor, which eventually lead her to direct the movie *First They Killed My Father* (2017) from the memoir by Loung Ung about her life as child during the brutal Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979).



Elisa Leonelli at Angkor Wat. 2003

“Angkor, the Lost Empire of Cambodia” opened on February 16, 2022, and runs through September 5.

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