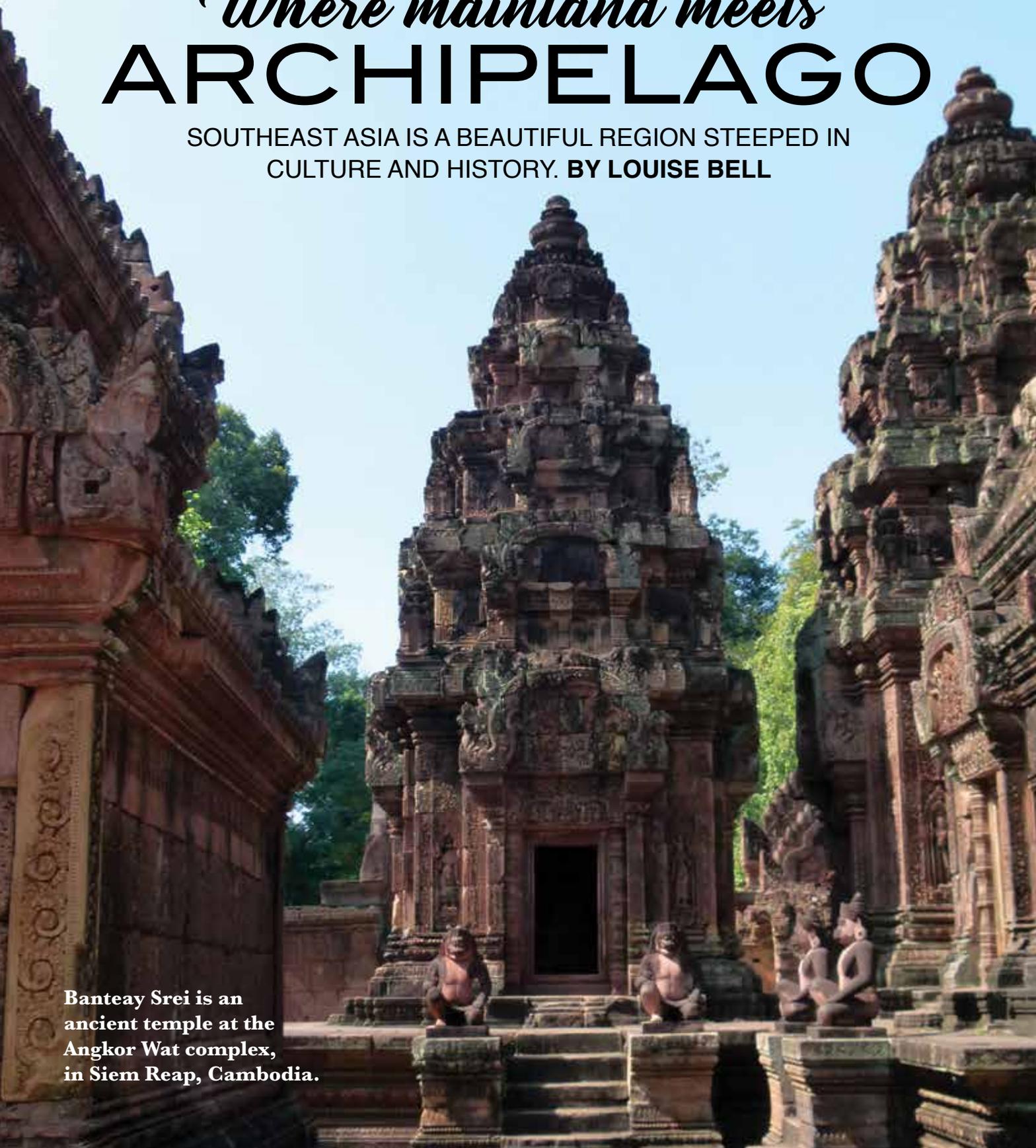


TRAVEL

*Where mainland meets*  
**ARCHIPELAGO**

SOUTHEAST ASIA IS A BEAUTIFUL REGION STEEPED IN  
CULTURE AND HISTORY. BY LOUISE BELL

Banteay Srei is an ancient temple at the Angkor Wat complex, in Siem Reap, Cambodia.



Skyscrapers and bamboo houses. Chaotic traffic and quiet countryside. Temples and markets. Friendly people. These are all images that come to mind when I reflect on our vacation in Southeast Asia. The flights are long, but don't let that deter you from visiting this part of the world. The experiences are well worth it.

Hanoi, the capital of Vietnam, is a bustling city to say the least. The preferred mode of transportation is a motorcycle, and in our experience there appeared to be no rules to the road. Motorcycles laden with up to five people (a mom, a dad and three kids) weave in and out in a dance we didn't understand. When crossing the street, you must look for a small gap in traffic, take a deep breath, step out and keep walking. Drivers seem to be able to predict movements and we saw no accidents.

The Old Quarter of Hanoi covers about 36 blocks, with each street dedicated to a different business category. There was a street for flower shops, one for toys, one for housewares, another for fabrics and even one for Christmas decorations. Viewing these streets from an open-air, six passenger electric car allowed for great views of the shops, as well as the people selling their wares from bicycles or carts.

We happened to be in Hanoi on Dec. 22 — People's Army Day, a national holiday. Thousands of people were lined up to pay their respects to Ho Chi Minh, former president of North Vietnam and founder of the Indochina Communist Party. Our guide was able to get tickets that allowed us to cut into the line about a 10-minute wait from the entrance. Rules of no photos, no speaking, and no hands in pockets were strictly enforced



as we viewed 'Uncle Ho,' whose embalmed body is kept in a glass coffin in a Soviet-designed mausoleum.

From Hanoi, our group of 12 took a three-hour drive north and east to the archipelago Ha Long Bay where we boarded a boat for a private cruise. Ha Long Bay, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is famous for the roughly 1,600 islands and islets that dot the bay, with a spectacular display of limestone pillars. The weather was somewhat hazy, and as we sailed out into the bay, the unusually-shaped landforms appeared before us.

Upon our return to Hanoi, we boarded a plane for Siem Reap, Cambodia, the gateway to the magnificent Angkor ruins. This 400-square-kilometre UNESCO World Heritage Site was the centre of the ancient Khmer



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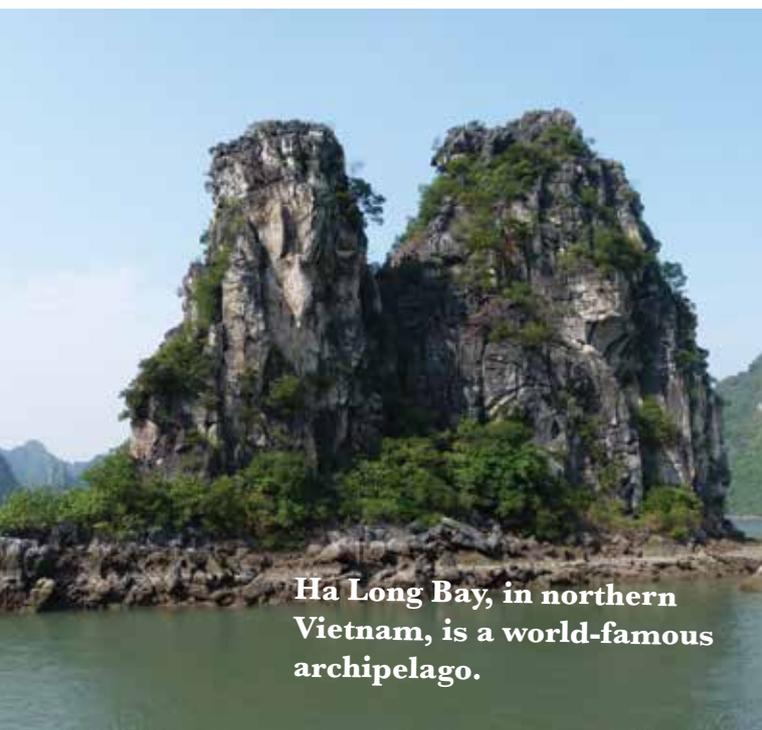
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Trees have spent centuries overtaking the Ta Prohm temple.



Ha Long Bay, in northern Vietnam, is a world-famous archipelago.

Empire, from the 9th to 15th Centuries. The best-known and best-preserved of the ruins is at Angkor Wat, a huge Buddhist temple complex spread across more than 400 acres that is said to be the largest religious monument in the world. From the entrance, it seems the temple is all on one level. In fact, it is on several different elevations, with the tower above the main shrine rising 70 feet into the air.

We had time over two days to visit four temples. Bayon in Angkor Thom has over 200 stone towers carved with smiling faces. Ta Prohm has been neglected for centuries and is being taken over by the jungle as the roots of 500-year-old trees envelope the buildings. The pink-hued stone and intricate carvings set the temple at Banteay Srei apart from the others.

Siem Reap is at the north end of the Tonle Sap, a freshwater lake that flows into the Mekong River. The water level is variable according to the season, so we flew to Phnom Penh, the present-day capital of Cambodia, to board our river cruise. Our 36-passenger ship, one of the smallest river cruise ships on the river, was perfect for visiting small towns and villages. We were surprised on our first morning to find that we were anchored and tied to a tree on the riverbank. We scampered up the bank and onto ox carts to visit a local farmer and his family in the rural Kampong Tralach District.

Whenever possible, we employed unique methods of transportation that allowed us to interact with the locals and have a more leisurely ride to our destination, with time to take in the scenery. In Phnom Penh, we took cyclos (single-passenger rickshaws powered by high-seat bicycles) to visit the Royal Palace complex and the National Museum of Cambodia. The Royal Palace is a gilded building that houses the three royal thrones — the coronation throne, the king's throne and the Queen Mother's throne. The Silver Pagoda, also located in the complex, is aptly named for the five tons of silver that cover the floor. It houses several elaborate statues, including the Emerald Buddha.

One of the reasons we visited Vietnam and Cambodia was to develop an understanding of their troubled history. While we were in Phnom Penh, we learned about the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge, a radical Communist movement during the 1970s responsible for the death of

as many as two million people, including children. Tuol Sleng, codenamed S-21, was a school-turned-prison where at least 12,000 people were tortured and killed. The prisoners often made up stories and falsely accused others just to stop the torture. Only 15 of the prisoners held at Tuol Sleng are said to have survived. Most of the prisoners were eventually sent to Choeung Ek, one of several sites known as the Killing Fields.

While we were in Vietnam, we ventured from Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) to the Cu Chi Tunnels, a network of 250 kilometres of tunnels soldiers used during wars against the French and Americans. Some of the tunnels have been adapted for visits by tourists with steps leading down into the them. The earth is a very heavy clay. There is no shoring in the tunnels, so some have collapsed during heavy rainfall.

The tunnels have been enlarged so that tourists can fit in (but were originally 120 centimetres by 80 centimetres).



Without a guide it would be impossible to find one's way. There were a few lights in some sections of the tunnels, but others were inky black and bat-infested. Hospitals, storage rooms and living quarters were incorporated into them. The cooking and dining areas were camouflaged

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**The Cu Chi Tunnels, near Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), were used in wars against the French and Americans.**

above ground. Our guide showed us how they disappeared into the ground and we had the opportunity to go in an original entrance.

Our tour provided us with many opportunities for cultural experiences and for interacting with the people. In Hanoi, we attended a water puppet show. Our Christmas dinner was a Cambodian dinner at a theatre where we enjoyed a private aspara dance performance. At Wat Hanchey, we visited a Buddhist monastery and received a water blessing. In Ho Chi Minh City, we attended a cooking school and made our own lunch of traditional Vietnamese food.

We spent some one-on-one time with children in an English classroom, listening to them read and asking them about their lives and answering questions about ours. A Viet Cong veteran, who was a medic during the war, welcomed us to his home, where he operates the local pharmacy. A Franciscan monk, who is also a doctor, told us about his work treating leprosy.

We visited homes where silversmiths create pieces that are exported internationally, where they weave traditional conical hats, where they make incense sticks from bamboo, where they dye yarn and weave scarves, and where they craft small boats called sampans.

The last stop on our trip was in Thailand. The opulence of the buildings in Bangkok is stunning. At the Wat Pho Buddhist temple complex we saw the Reclining Buddha, which is 15 metres tall and 46 metres long and covered in gold leaf.

Our final adventure was a visit to a floating market outside of Bangkok. We travelled by van part way and then got on a long tail boat to travel along the canals to Damnoen Saduak Floating Market. Stalls lined the river's edge while boats selling all manner of goods and food jockeyed with the tourist boats for a position along the embankment. We were able to purchase some interesting last-minute gifts and souvenirs before our flight back to Canada. ■

*Louise Bell is a travel consultant at Stonetown Travel in St. Marys and the author of 'Where to Next?' When she is not planning vacations for others, she is taking groups on adventures around the world. Learn more at [www.stonetowntravel.com](http://www.stonetowntravel.com).*