



Sacred

Places

in Southeast Asia

BY ANDREA BALDECK

A SINGLE, CONTINUOUS NOTE thrums through the sultry air of a tropical afternoon. Concealed in palms, strangler figs, and kapok trees, all the cicadas are singing in unison. This taut sound shimmers over the vast plain, an invisible presence among the very earthbound ruins of Angkor, capital of the ancient Khmer civilization, in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia. In the rich drainage basin of the Mekong River, a city of temples thrived for over seven centuries and witnessed the sweep of wars, migrations, and religious beliefs over its flat and fertile surface. While the stones slowly yield their secrets to archaeologists, worshippers continue to seek the spirits evoked by a site sacred to Hindu and Buddhist alike.

From the monumental to the miniature, Southeast Asia contains sacred places that enliven the senses and inspire awe, delight, and a curiosity to know and see more. They await all those who believe in the transformative powers of travel, the exhilaration of being immersed in other cultures, and the rewards of greater understanding. Such pursuits have a spiritual dimension all their own. What better point of departure for a visual exploration of sacred places in Southeast Asia? Accompany the photographer for a selective look through the lens at a richly layered world.

Preah Khan Temple, Angkor, Cambodia

The stark contrast of massive stone blocks and the delicate tracery of bas-reliefs, found throughout Angkor, arrests the eye at Preah Khan, the “Sacred Sword” temple constructed for Buddhist king Jayavarman VII, the master builder, in AD 1191. The frieze of *apsaras*, or heavenly dancers, recalls the era when the temple was served by one thousand dancers who performed in the evening by the light of torches and tapers. Empty niches above, once containing Buddha images, attest to the zealous iconoclasm of his successor, a Hindu who converted the temple for the worship of Shiva. Deep within, a shrine still persists that is honored by the visitors of both faiths. There, silken banners move languidly in the minimal breezes, the smell of incense tinges the air, and offerings are quietly left at the altar.



HEAD OF JAYAVARMAN VII AS A BODHISATTVA, BAYON TEMPLE, ANGKOR

Enigmatically smiling since the late 12th century, Jayavarman VII, idealized as Avalokiteshvara (the “living Buddha” of compassion), looks down from the heights of the city that today bears his architect’s imprint. Creator of Angkor Thom, the “Big Capital,” Jayavarman VII’s four-sided likeness guards the monumental gates of the walled city, built to accommodate royalty on elephants. Within, the Bayon Temple projects his outside image in profusion from its forest of towers. Once gilded, these sandstone images now bear the scars and mottled surface that lend *gravitas* to its complex.

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STATUE OF VISHNU, ANGKOR WAT

Down a long, shadowed corridor echoing distant footsteps, one turns a corner into a slash of afternoon sun streaming between the corbeled arches of roughened stone. Facing the western light stands a latter-day effigy of the Hindu deity Vishnu, the preserver, whose presence and protection was invoked when the temple was dedicated in AD 1150. With later monarchies came Buddhist worshippers, who gave their name for the temple, *wat*, to this masterpiece of Khmer architecture, which now admits devotees of both faiths under its roofs.





Places

PAK OU CAVES, LAOS (ABOVE); AND
INTERIOR, PAK OU CAVES (TO THE RIGHT)

Flowing south from the Golden Triangle, the Mekong muscles its way between jungle hills and limestone crags. From the rail of the boat, the flood-tide marks on the discolored stone hint at the surge of the river during monsoon season. Wind and water have sculpted caves in these walls, which have local importance as the abodes of spirits. North of Luang Prabang, the old royal capital of Laos, the Pak Ou caves appear high above the river, a fantastical collaboration between nature and humanity. Since the 15th century, it has been a shrine for Laotian royalty who made pilgrimages to it in gilded barges. The Pak Ou caves harbor a trove of Buddha figures left by centuries of devotees. Rank upon rank of them come into view as one climbs the long staircase from the water's edge. Within the embrace of the rock, the fissures recede into darkness, punctuated by glimmers from myriad gilded figures.





YOUNG BUDDHIST MONKS, NYAUNG SHWE MONASTERY, MYANMAR (BURMA)

On a chilly December morning in the highlands of Myanmar, mist curls from the surface of Inle Lake, and heavy dew shimmers on the tufts of grass outside the weathered wooden monastery, raised on stilts above the ground and crowned with gingerbread towers above the large, oval-windowed assembly hall. From the deep black of these openings drifts a low, even, rhythmic flux of voices chanting in prayer. This otherworldly, meditative moment, suspended in time, snaps back to the present with a grin and a giggle, as two curious young monks slip the bonds of concentration and their teacher's gaze.

AT NYAUNG SHWE MONASTERY

The measured rhythms of a monastery's day are marked with a bell or gong, or as here, with the inventive recycling of a brake disc to a more elevated task.





**BUDDHA FIGURE, SULAMUNITEMPLE,
BAGAN, MYANMAR**

On the river plain of the meandering Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) River repose the remains of the 400 year empire of Bagan. Whitewashed and gilded domes, their spires needling the sky, declare the presence of myriad temples and stupas. Each sits atop a stepped brick terrace, adorned with stucco and tiles like an elaborate wedding cake. Out of the tropical midday sun one enters the cool, lofty space of the Sulamuni Temple. Light pours into the corridors through vaulted arches, revealing the remnants of 12th century frescoes, rising from floor level to the shadowed upper recesses where roosting bats murmur in the gloom. In a niche facing east sits a massive Buddha figure, his face an image of burnished tranquility. The abstract mosaic of gilded squares on his “sideburn” reflects the renewed application of gold leaf by worshippers in the endlessly repeated act of venerating and preserving this effigy.



**THIEN HAU PAGODA, HO CHI MINH CITY
(SAIGON), VIETNAM**

Cholon, the old Chinese neighborhood of this frenetic city, fizzes with life: motorscooters and trishaws swoop and weave in the traffic; pedestrians shop at outdoor stalls and buy noodles from the curbside cooks; and street vendors hawk their wares, from tennis shoes to live birds, in a dissonant counterpoint of voices. Step off the street into an oasis of calm: the jewel-box pagoda of Thien Hau, dedicated to the Taoist sea goddess. Within its walls resonate elements of Confucianism, Taoism, and Mahayana Buddhism, brought by successive waves of immigration from China, and adapted by the Viet people to their spiritual needs. Away from the roar of the street, one can find a moment for meditation beneath the coils of incense, suspended like strange bedsprings from the eaves of the tiled courtyard. Prayers on slips of papers are attached to these spirals, so that they may waft to the heavens on the perfumed smoke.

ACOLYTES OF BUDDHA, WETHALI (VESALI), MYANMAR

In the far west of Myanmar, the Kaladan River runs to the Bay of Bengal through rich, rice-growing lowlands that were home to ancient dynasties for more than a millennium. The roots of Buddhism go deep here; legend has it that one of the few actual likenesses of Gautama Buddha was cast in this region by a heavenly sculptor. In a field on a hill, under brilliant sunshine, a double defile of life-size stone acolytes follows a latter-day gilded Buddha who strides toward a nearby monastery and pagoda. Worshippers have added their own tribute to the carved rice bowls of these supplicants.

NOVICE BUDDHIST NUN, YANGON (RANGOON), MYANMAR

Down an alley beside the sprawling, cacophonous Scott Market in central Yangon comes a small, quiet, hesitant figure. The shaven head makes it harder to divine her age, but her robes and begging bowl mark her as a novice nun. Theravada Buddhism, as practiced in Cambodia, Laos, Burma, and Thailand, supports mendicant orders of monks and nuns; the stately morning walk of alms-seekers in saffron and pink robes is repeated daily on the streets. Monasteries and nunneries provide an education, sometimes the only free instruction available in a community. While many children spend only a short time here before returning to civilian life, they have accrued merit for themselves and their families.

PAHTODAWGYI PAGODA, MANDALAY, MYANMAR

From the teak timbers of the U Bein bridge that straddles Taung Thamen Lake, near Mandalay, one can see a distant structure, rising from and reflected in the water, dazzlingly white in the midday sun. Reachable only by boat, the Pahtodawgyi Pagoda seems even more inaccessible for its closed, turreted shape, built like a fortress by a 19th century Burmese monarch. The play of light, shadow, and liquid around it enhance the sensation of is ungainly otherworldliness—part temple, part mirage, part mystery.





SHRINE TO THE NATS, YANGON (RANGOON), MYANMAR

Rising beside the pavement along Yangon's teeming waterfront is a massive banyan tree, its aerial roots a mass of grey tentacles. In the recesses between them perch miniature pagodas and altars, some bearing small figures. Bright garlands hang from branches, while stubs of candles and incense sticks mark recent offerings. This three-dimensional collage is evidence of Burma's ancient animism where scores of spirits, the Nats, enliven and influence daily life. Complementing, rather than competing with, Theravada Buddhism, the Nats were folded into its pantheon nearly a thousand years ago. Each household has its own small shrine, and in the countryside, natural features—trees, rocks, waterfalls—represent the abodes of spirits who must be recognized, revered, and appeased. Paying homage to the local Nats is completely compatible with worshipping Buddha in the temple, and home altars can accommodate both in egalitarian harmony. 🏠



Born in a rural village in western New York, ANDREA BALDECK began photographing with a simple box camera at age eight, imagining herself a *Life* photographer canoeing through the jungle to meet Albert Schweitzer. This interest and dream pervaded years of musical study at Vassar College, medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, and practice as an internist and anesthesiologist.

In the early 1990s Baldeck left the operating room for the darkroom, to work as a fine-art photographer in black and white. Her portfolio grew to accommodate portraiture, still lifes, and landscapes, as featured in her books *The Heart of Haiti* (1996), *Talismanic* (1998), *Venice: A Personal View* (1999), and *Touching the Mekong* (2003), which won a design award in 2004 from the Association of American Museums. Since 1996 she has exhibited widely in the U.S. and abroad, and her photographs are found in museums and private collections.

Baldeck's work in progress includes further exploration of the natural and man-made worlds. A collection of botanical images, titled "Closely Observed," was mounted recently at the Morris (Philadelphia) and Holden (Cleveland) Arboretums and at the U.S. Botanical Garden in Washington, DC.

For Further Reading

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