


The CAMBODIA DAILY

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# WEEKEND

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The Grandeur of Banteay Chhmar  
Monastery



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# Angkorian in Its Splendor



Photos by Nicolas Axelrod

Wall-carving detail at the Banteay Chhmar former Buddhist monastery, above, depicting the multiple arms of a bodhisattva, or "enlightenment being."

## Banteay Chhmar Monastery Restoration Challenges Conservationists

BY KUCH NAREN AND MICHELLE VACHON • THE CAMBODIA DAILY

**T**HMA PUOK DISTRICT, Banteay Meanchey province - Flat but rather bumpy, and so dusty that dirt clouds raised by speeding vehicles reduce visibility almost nil, National Route 56 from Serei Saophoan leads straight to a moat with sections of Angkorian wall still visible. The village of Banteay Chhmar Khang Choeung is spread along the moat across from the 800-year-old Angkorian-era monastery of Banteay Chhmar. Standing as it does today in a peaceful country setting, Banteay Chhmar's four enclosures, imposing towers, sculpted arches and galleries are invaded by tall trees and greenery, with only the occasional barking dog or bird song breaking the silence inside the compound. For the most part, this is the way local authorities and villagers would like to keep it, though they are also looking forward to a lot more visitors being attracted by the site's restoration, which was launched last year.

“It is 10 times harder here than previous projects I have been on.”

—KOUSUM SARUN, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF THE BANTEAY CHHMAR PROJECT

“As a sanctuary, it must have rivaled Angkor Wat for first place in size and magnificence,” American researcher Lawrence Palmer Briggs wrote of Banteay Chhmar in 1949. The 12th-century complex is neighbored by a baray, or artificial lake, about 800-by-1,600 meters in size, and the monastery is surrounded by an 800-by-750-meter moat.

The Banteay Chhmar monastery complex, which contains Buddhist as well as Hindu elements, is spread over 12 square km but little is known as to why it was built at the foot of the Dangrek Mountains, approximately 100 km from the Angkorian capital.

And unlike major structures at Angkor that the French started to restore, or at least consolidate, in the early 1900s, no restoration work had been done at Banteay Chhmar until last year.

Under the direct jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture and located about 20 km from the Thai border, Banteay Chhmar was put on the World Heritage Tentative List in 1992 at the Cambodian government's request.

The ministry and the Global Heritage Fund officially launched the restoration project in March 2008.

The few expatriate advisers and Cambodian experts working on Banteay Chhmar have previously worked with project leader John Sanday, who is in charge of the California-based Global Heritage Fund's projects in the Asia and Pacific region.

Sanday's involvement at Angkor goes back to 1992, and his conservation work in Asia earned him Britain's Order of the British Empire in 2006.

But although the Cambodian team leaders have tackled the restoration of several temples, they all agree that this former Buddhist monastery is their biggest challenge yet.

“It is 10 times harder here than previous projects I have been on,” said Kousum Sarun, the project's assistant director who has been in the field for about 16 years.

The huge structure is heavily damaged and, they say, time and nature cannot be blamed for all the destruction at Banteay Chhmar.

“The occasional use of low quality materials by the Khmer builders eight centuries ago and looting by Cambodians over the last few decades are also responsible for a great deal of harm, they say.

The most spectacular case of looting consisted of the hacking of two large sections of Banteay Chhmar's western gallery and its wall carvings—117 sandstone pieces that were intercepted in Thailand. They were returned to Cambodia about nine years ago and are now displayed at Phnom Penh's National Museum. But traces of small-scale looting are also apparent, such as the missing head of a statue at the temple's main entrance.

Moreover, since the Khmer Rouge fought with government forces in the region in the 1990s, Banteay Chhmar required demining, which prompted Sanday to ask last year that the government demining agency CMAC do a last sweep in the complex for restoration workers' safety, he said.

Between fighting and smuggling, numerous stones were moved from the spot where they may have fallen naturally, which is adding to the difficulties of reconstruction, said Chan Thoeurn, who is in charge of stone repair at the monastery.

When sections of the monument fall due to tree invasion or the elements, he said, “the stones are piled at one location within a meter from the foundations and are often only slightly damaged or broken.”

“But when people dragged and dug out a pile of stones for artifacts, the slightly broken stones were dumped or moved to second spots about 5 to 10 meters from their first location. They end up seriously damaged...which has made it hard for us to find the stones that go together,” Chan Thoeurn said.

The restoration teams are now trying to match stones to reassemble a portion of the third enclosure.



Restoration workers, left, take to a sorting area a stone that has been sketched and numbered prior to being moved from its original location. The historical carvings on the walls of Banteay Chhmar's third enclosure, right, have yet to be fully studied.

**A**mong Banteay Chhmar's more noteworthy features are its bas-reliefs: religious and historical scenes such as a naval battle carved on the wall of the third enclosure. The monument is one of only three, along with Angkor's Bayon and Angkor Wat, to have such wall carvings, Sanday said.

"And it's in a very perilous state: only 20 to 25 percent of it is still standing" out of more than 400 meters of wall carvings.

As at the Bayon, the historical scenes depicted, he said, "tells a very important story: the history of this area of the Khmer kingdom. And it's only for that reason that we're going to the length of assessing the possibility of restoring them."

This is being done with two techniques. The first, more traditional method consists of sorting out stones in order to reassemble them as they originally were.

This starts with Nhak Lo, who is in charge of stone-mapping, creating a grid of every pile of stones, and assigning each stone a number prior to moving them.

"The stones are in such a fragile condition that they can easily be further broken. So all of us must be very careful moving them," he said.

The second method will involve creating a 3D computer model and designing a restoration database for all the monument's elements and materials in cooperation with the University of Heidelberg in Germany, Sanday said.

The restoration project also involves the restoration of one of the monument's towers, which features giant faces on each of its four sides.

At Banteay Chhmar, Sanday said, "There are sets of towers that are very similar to those in the Bayon," he said. "They are unique towers and...many of them are literally on the point of collapse."

Restoration requires studying the state of the tower in order to consolidate it, a process which may involve partial dismantling and reconstruction of the structure, said Predrag Gavrilovic, a structural and earthquake engineer from Macedonia who is also working on the project.

"My idea is to have minimum dismantling," he said, so as to disturb the original structure as little as possible.

The project involves about 45 to 50 workers from the surrounding area who are being trained by the foreign and Cambodian experts so that locals can continue the work and handle the monument's conservation in

The historical scenes depicted "[tell] a very important story: the history of this area of the Khmer kingdom."

—JOHN SANDAY, OF THE GLOBAL HERITAGE FUND



Emergency measures were used to prevent the collapse of the door to the Hall of Dancers at the Banteay Chhmar monument.

the future.

After all, Kousum Sarun said, "It will take about 150 years to fully restore Banteay Chhmar."

Which, in archeologists' terms, is nothing unusual. Sanday says that GHF is advising the ministry on a masterplan for Banteay Chhmar's restoration and development. The masterplan will be added to documents the ministry is preparing to have Banteay Chhmar placed on the World Heritage List,

Culture Ministry Secretary of State Chuch Phoeurn said. If listed, it would join Cambodia's two other World Heritage Sites, Angkor and Preah Vihear temple.

Since the government has established zoning around Banteay Chhmar—a requirement for inclusion on the heritage list—the amount of time needed to secure World Heritage status might be less than the seven years needed to get the Preah Vihear temple listed, he added.

## Banteay Chhmar Officials Cite Land Decree Abuse

A 1993 royal decree set the "Banteay Chhmar Protected Landscape" as an area covering 46,000 hectares divided into three protection zones. But recent events in the Banteay Chhmar monastery area have shown that activities permitted within each zone must be thoroughly spelled out without delay.

"Zone 1 or Red Zone extends 30 meters from the moat around the temple," said Han Ritha, director of the Angkor Conservation Office at the Culture Ministry and a member of the Banteay Chhmar restoration team. "Every type of construction is completely banned in that red zone."

However, bricks and other evidence of planned construction were seen right at the moat's edge earlier this week. Commune authorities said no permits had been sought or issued for any of this construction.

In Zone 2, which stretches 1,500 meters from Zone 1, limited construction in Cambodian traditional styles of architecture is permitted, Han Ritha said. Few restrictions apply in Zone 3, although no building higher than 10 meters is permitted.

"According to the royal decree...villagers living for a long time near the temple can continue to live there" just as long-time residents in Angkor park were allowed to remain after the protected zones were enforced, said Culture Ministry Secretary of State Chuch Phoeurn.

The royal decree clearly indicates that some parcels of land can be used for farming in Zone 3, Chuch Phoeurn said.

Villagers and local authorities say that despite being allowed to live and farm in the protected landscape, Environment Ministry officials have been working to disrupt locals' farming and are extorting money.

In a Feb 25 letter to Prime Minister Hun Sen, the three CPP commune chiefs of Banteay Chhmar, Kouk Romiet and Komrou communes alleged that since 2002 local farmers "have been prevented by Environment [Ministry] officials from farming or been extorted, and agriculture materials [have been] confiscated from people who go to farm on their lands."

In their letter the commune chiefs requested legal rights to 12,313 hectares of agricultural land in the Banteay Chhmar protected area so that they can feed their families, with the ability to use the land and transfer their rights to it.

Mam Chhay Chhorn, environment deputy director for Banteay Meanchey province and director of the monument's protected area, said Environment officials occasionally have to "educate" locals, but denied any wrongdoing on officials' part. "My officials have never been involved in extortion of farmers," he said, before declining to comment any further.

Farmers interviewed earlier this month reiterated their extortion allegations.

A total of 3,324 families are affected, each of them farming a few of the 12,313 hectares they share, said Komrou commune councilor Hub Hul. The three commune chiefs had first sent a letter to King Norodom Sihamoni in December requesting his help. The King wrote to Hun Sen in January, asking him to give their case consideration. In answer to the prime minister's request, Environment Minister Mok Mareth wrote on Jan 22 that the farmers had no right to the land, as it was in a protected area. Mok Mareth could not be reached for comment this week.

However, part of the land that the villagers claim may already have been dealt out as a land concession to a development company. According to a copy of a December letter to Mok Mareth, Council of Ministers Secretary of State Bun Uy wrote that the government had granted a 75-year lease on 1,783 hectares in the protected area to the private firm Leang Bou Construction Co.



The moat around the Banteay Chhmar monument serves as an important source of water for villagers.

## Villagers Open Their Doors As More Tourists Pass By

With restoration comes hopes of tourism, but to date visitor facilities in the area have taken the form of ecotourism, with a local association, "Banteay Chhmar Community Based Tourism," coordinating stays in villagers' homes.

Started in 2007 with the support of the French NGO Agir pour le Cambodge, the association has set up a network of homes in the area that offer rooms to visitors. Beds are draped with mosquito nets, set with freshly washed pillows and sheets, and the tiled Cambodian bathrooms nearby are impeccably clean. The number of participating homes ranges from 25 to 38 depending on the farming season, the association's President Bieng Sruon said.

Svat Sarin was the first villager to open his house to foreign visitors. At first, the 57-year-old primary school teacher said, "I was nervous and had no clue how to start preparing the rooms."

Today, depending on the number of tourists in the area, he may make \$10 to \$50 per month, he said.

Siev Sem joined in the program only this month and with the help of CBT, who lent him money, he bought three mattresses and fabric for bed sheets. The loan will be paid off "step by step," said the 60-year-old.

Meals are served at the association's wooden office across the road from the Banteay Chhmar monastery's moat—having dinner as the sun goes down over the monument's Angkorian features is quite special. The food is Khmer and on the gourmet side as the association's cooks attended a workshop given by the chefs of the luxury Hotel de la Paix in Siem Reap town. Out of the \$7 visitors pay for one room, the home owner receives \$4, cooks \$1.50, and \$1.50 goes to the local development fund to be used for special projects such as moat cleaning and toilet construction, said Mao Sy, the association's secretary. Visitors pay \$3 and \$4 respectively for a two-dish lunch and dinner.

The number of visitors to Banteay Chhmar is progressively increasing. In 2007, 512 tourists, half of them Cambodians, used the home-stay program, Mao Sy said. Between January 2008 and the end of February this year, 744 visitors—more than half of them foreign—tried home stays, he said.

But one major hurdle to expanding tourism in the area is a lack of water. "The interesting thing about the water is that there is hardly any," said irrigation engineer James Goodman, who is on the Global Heritage Fund team. "Tourists...[want] to go to the bathroom, wash their hands, have a cup of tea or whatever. There is just not enough water for that."

The soil is arid, a mixture of sand and clay that hardly absorbs water when it rains, Goodman said. Unlike at Angkor and other parts of Cambodia, there is no underground water table in the area, and any well would have to be dug extremely deep to reach any water resource, he said.

As part of Banteay Chhmar's restoration project, Goodman is now studying the water system that the Angkorians had put in place. The Khmer built a two-level moat to capture water, a feature that Goodman said he has not seen elsewhere in Cambodia.

Global Heritage Fund is assisting the association in expanding its program and also studying long-term tourism and water needs.