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PARAGUAY, AU NATUREL

ST. JOHN BARNED-SMITH

Though it may not be on many Americans' mental maps, the country has its own untrammeled attractions and is next door to the mighty Iguazu Falls.

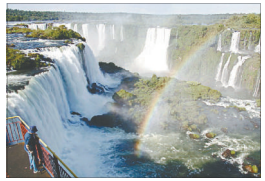
By St. John Barned-Smith
FOR THE INQUIRER

ASUNCION, Paraguay — On a map of South America, Paraguay looks a little like the tucked-away footnote, no mountains or ocean coastline. But over my last two years as a Peace Corps volunteer, I've discovered a wealth of delights along the country's southeastern border. So when my parents came to visit me on a break from the hustle and bustle of the Northeast, I decided to show them some of the startling vistas of nature, signs of man's grand engineering, and spots of soothing tranquility that Paraguay has to offer.

Our trip started on a sweltering day in January's midsummer heat. In Asuncion, we boarded a two-story bus with overstuffed seats and a wheezy air-conditioner and watched the scenery flow by through cracked windows as we headed to our first stop: Paraguay's Jesuit missions, six hours south of Asuncion near the border city of Encarnacion.

From Encarnacion, we packed ourselves into a local bus and rattled along until we reached Santisima Trinidad de Paraná, the most famous and largest Jesuit mission in Para-

See PARAGUAY on N4



Ruins of Santisima Trinidad de Paraná, top, a Jesuit mission. Iguazu Falls, just across Paraguay's border, are shared by Brazil and Argentina. ANDRE PENNER / AP

The little-visited temple of Preah Rup at Angkor, Cambodia, allows visitors to experience the splendor without the crowds. LARISSA MILNE

At Angkor Wat, finding quiet corners amid temples, tumult

By Larissa and Michael Milne
FOR THE INQUIRER

ANGKOR, Cambodia — We bounced along the road in a tuk-tuk — picture a rickshaw attached to a moped — anxious for our first glimpse through the trees of the temple of Angkor Wat. Our imaginations flared with visions of hacking our way through the overgrown jungle, then quietly discovering the nearly 900-year-old stone towers with only a solitary monkey looking on. Perhaps we've watched too many Indiana Jones movies.

Angkor is the largest, and perhaps most exotic, religious complex in the world. Accordingly it's a perennial favorite on travelers' lists. The most prominent structure is Angkor Wat — it's pictured on the Cambodian flag — but it is just one temple among dozens in the vast complex. Over two million tourists descend on the small town of Siem Reap each year to visit the temples. As we neared the magnificent site, it seemed most of those visitors had chosen today to make their pilgrimage.

See CAMBODIA on N5

A Year and A World
One in an occasional series

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Top 10 List

AskMen.com, which says it has 20 million readers worldwide, seeks to help readers "become a better man." To that end (?), it developed this list: Top 10 Cities that Need New People — "cities that would be amazing if only different people lived in them." Really?

10. Miami
9. St. Louis
8. Munich
7. Corpus Christi, Texas
6. Brussels, Belgium
5. Portland, Ore.
4. Geneva, Switzerland
3. Chicago
2. Vancouver, B.C.
1. Boston

— *www.askmen.com*

Geo Quiz

Question: Which U.S. state is nicknamed the Natural State?

— *Chicago Tribune*

(Answer below)

Gadget Guru
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The Sidekick Bliss is a baby bag that can carry one additional thing — the baby. The big, multi-pocketed diaper bag has an integrated baby carrier/sling built into the top.

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A baby bag with something extra.

Sidekick Bliss is $120 at www.gogobabyz.com; 888-686-2552.

—*Judi Dash*

Web Buzz
Aid for the allergic

Allergic to peanuts? Need a gluten-free restaurant? What about eggs, shellfish, or dairy? No problem. Even at Walt Disney World.

Name: www.allergyeats.com
What it does: Provides a peer-reviewed directory of more than 600,000 restaurants across the nation. Includes menus (including gluten-free), allergen lists, certifications, nutritional info, and more.
What's hot: This website is built by a dad with two kids, three of whom have food allergies. Start by beginning a search in the left navigation bar, type in your allergies and the name of a restaurant, address, or city. The five-star rating system is based on a restaurant's allergy friendliness (not how good the food is). Read user reviews, get a map, directions, and more. Even diners without food allergies will find this site handy for the menus alone. It is also available as an iPhone and Android app.
What's not: It would be nice if the results could be sorted by cuisine, in case you need to make a mad dash for gluten-free Mexican food. But I'm being picky. I'd also like to see more reviews, so don't just scroll the menus, rate the restaurants if you're using this guide.

—*Jen Leo, Los Angeles Times*

Answer: Arkansas. It adopted the nickname in 1995 to promote the state's natural beauty.

The child vendors of Angkor Wat

A little boy wants to sell us postcards. Do we help or hurt him by buying?

As we were leaving the temple of Angkor Wat a boy who looked to be about 10 years old sidled up alongside us. It's hard to guess someone's age in Cambodia, where the people are slight, even by Asian standards. His little legs matched our stride as he walked with us and offered to sell 10 postcards for a dollar.

After touring Asia for two months, we've grown accustomed to aggressive hawkers, so we usually put on our game face and stoically work our way through the throngs selling everything from T-shirts to ginseng to who knows what. But we hadn't been approached by a child vendor before.

We had heard stories of child beggars and seen a few in Bali, where they congregate at major intersections pressing their imploring faces up to the windows of taxis at red lights. Our driver there shook his head sadly and said to ignore them, that it's organized begging controlled by local criminal groups, that some parents even hire their children out for the day.

In the streets of Siem Reap, the local town for Angkor Wat, a meal at a sidewalk cafe is often interrupted a few times by children, some looking as young as 6 or 7, selling postcards and souvenirs.

Young vendors wait at the entrance. Everything we read advised us not to give handouts, to donate through approved groups instead. LARISSA MILNE

Both restaurant owners and diners treat them as another nuisance to swat away, like the mosquitoes buzzing in the humid air. Everything we had read advised us not to give handouts on the street but to make donations through approved groups instead, pretty much the same advice we get back home.

Back at the temple though, something about the pint-size postcard vendor made us hesitate. He wasn't begging, he was offering something in return. Caught off guard, we somehow didn't associate what he was doing with large corporations employing child laborers in sweatshops.

We thought we were pretty street-savvy but this kid was even more so and could sense our ambivalence. He tried to engage Michael in conversation and asked if he was from England.

"England?" Michael responded, "No way."

The child replied, "If I can guess where you from buy some postcards."

He ran through an impressive list of countries before finally settling on the United States. As Michael nodded his head the child eagerly continued, "U.S., capital Washington." The kid certainly knew his geography.

Michael bought the postcards and we went on our way. After we slid into our taxi Michael asked our guide if it was OK to buy the cards. He said it was. But as we drove away we couldn't help thinking, "Shouldn't that kid be in school right now?"

Travel creates moral dilemmas that are amplified by vast cultural and economic differences. We still don't know if we did the right thing or not.

— *Larissa and Michael Milne*

Larissa and Michael Milne are traveling around the world for a year and are reporting in regularly about their journey. You can follow them at www.ChangesInLongitude.com.

To comment, e-mail TravelTalk@phillynews.com.

In Angkor Wat, finding quiet corners

CAMBODIA from N1

We usually try to avoid crowds. But what's a privacy seeker to do at one of the world's most visited sites? It turns out there are ways to find a quiet corner, even among thousands of visitors.

One quality that makes Angkor so popular is its sheer size. Angkor Wat itself covers almost 600 acres, and it's not even the largest temple. The national park that houses the ninth- to 13th-century temples of the Angkor complex covers over 150 square miles.

We used that massive scale to our advantage. All those people couldn't be everywhere at once. With a little planning, and the help of a knowledgeable guide, we sought out tranquil spaces and dark, winding hallways within the stone temples; there were times we felt like we had the whole place to ourselves.

Official guides to the park and temples are available for about $25 per day. Our guide, Pheara, had studied the temples for several years. He had also learned English so he could work in the burgeoning tourism industry. Pheara quickly picked up on our desire to avoid the crowds.

Most visitors spend only two nights in the nearby town of Siem Reap, giving themselves just one full day for a grueling marathon of a guided tour that could be called "the greatest hits of Angkor Wat." They usually start at sunrise and many don't finish until after sunset. Marathons, or anything grueling for that matter, aren't our speed, so we spent a week in Siem Reap, a wonderful town in its own right.

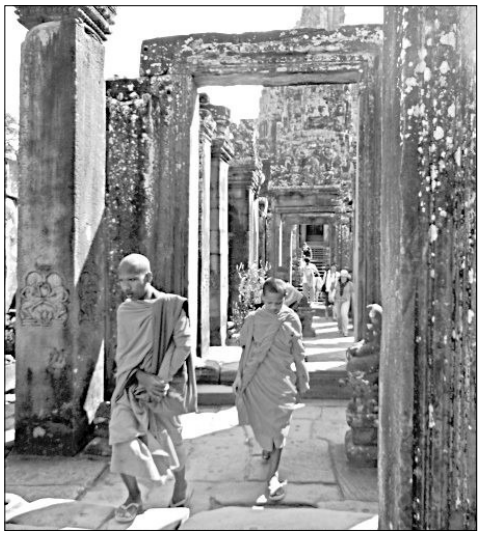
We purchased a three-day pass to the temples so we could explore at our leisure. As usual, the tour books say to get there early to avoid the crowds and, as usual, that's when it gets most crowded. Instead we arrived at midday, just as many people were leaving.

We started out at the western entrance to the temple of Angkor Wat. The buildings are surrounded by a moat with a stone causeway for crossing. On the other side, Pheara turned left, avoiding the narrow main entrance where tourists were lined up like a gaggle of geese. He led us about 50 yards to a smaller doorway where there was — nobody. We felt like we were entering a secret garden as we stepped through the narrow opening into a vast hallway decorated with weatherworn bas-relief friezes depicting epic Hindu tales.

Seeking out solitude became a pattern as we continued our explorations. Angkor Wat is built as a series of ever-rising concentric squares surrounding inner courtyards. Most tourists were clustered along the same section of each courtyard. As we reached each new level, Pheara led us to the opposite side, which had similar ornamentation without similar crowds.

A visit to the temple of Ta Prohm using the same strategy worked well. Known best as the temple used by "Tomb Raider" Lara Croft, Ta Prohm has been left in its native state. Near [illegible] of the temple [illegible] seemingly swallowed up whole by nature. We found ourselves off the worn path to seek out intriguing nooks and crannies. Pheara showed us a rare stone Buddha's face peeking out from an opening in a tree trunk; it escaped destruction by vandals due to its embracing protection by the tree.

Armed with a detailed map, we opted to explore some of the remaining temples on our own a few days later. Preah Ruo, built [illegible] more [illegible] stick [illegible] out would be a major act[illegible] anywhere else in the world. The five-towered laterite and brick structure is well preserved. But because it's not on most tour groups' one-day itineraries, we practically had the place to ourselves. We climbed over the stone parapets at will and scaled the large stone steps of the central tower to find a tiny Buddhist temple nestled inside. In the spirit of the moment [illegible] journey and prayers for loved ones back home. From our solitary vantage point atop the tower we spent a few quiet moments admiring the unimpeded view of the jungle canopy below.



Buddhist monks are a familiar sight at the huge temple complex at Angkor. Below, the temples are still popular place to leave offerings — even after 1,000 years. LARISSA MILNE

By now it was late afternoon, the perfect time to take in Bayon, the 12th-century temple of many faces. Over 200 carved stone faces, each over 6 feet tall, stand watch over the site. With their enigmatic smiles they are sometimes called "the Mona Lisa of Southeast Asia." Although Bayon is one of Angkor's "greatest hits," by this hour the bus tours had left and there were only a few stalwart souls enjoying the grandeur. The few who remained took advantage of glorious photo opportunities as the lengthening shadows caressed the inscrutable stone faces.

Our newfound knowledge of crowd avoidance led us to revisit the main temple of Angkor Wat — this time via the little-used east, or back, entrance. Unlike at the front, this portion of the temple has been left in its natural state; the surrounding jungle has been allowed to creep back toward the temple's rear walls. We hiked into the shady relief of the jungle virtually alone. As we watched the towers gradually emerge through the trees we finally had our Indiana Jones moment and, no kidding, a few monkeys even [illegible]

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