



## Worlds Apart: Angkor Wat

BY PAMELA BIERY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD MURAI



For over twenty years, photographer Richard Murai of Penn Valley, CA, has documented sacred places throughout the world. His interest in "the underpinnings of spiritual belief" has taken him to diverse sites in Britain, Europe, Asia, India and Russia. Murai visited Cambodia in 2003 and 2004, capturing a unique, devotional sense of place in his photographs.

Working out of Siem Reap, he spent many days in the 45-square mile Angkor complex photographing the ancient Khmer temples of Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom, which, as some of the most important archaeological sites in South East Asia, were designated as UNESCO World Heritage sites in 1992. "In spite of the recent political upheaval and the carnage of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, the people are incredibly warm and inviting. Though encountering throngs of visitors, the complex is still incredibly vast, unspoiled and deeply moving. Angkor's fascination lies not only as a spectacular archeological site, but also, first and foremost, it serves as a vital and revered spiritual center." Some one million visitors are expected in 2004-5.

"When I returned the second year, I was able to revisit the same monasteries and many of the same monks who are devoted to an ascetic life and the service of the monastery. We are so adapted to, and expect change in our material world, whereas the Khmer culture is very constant

and enduring - though recent history has, unfortunately, proven otherwise."

Murai chose to photograph these images using high-resolution, black and white photography. This format seems to accentuate the depth and detail of each scene. From strangler fig trees, the placid faces of monks or the intricate Apsara carvings, his photographs invite us into the frame to examine the art, feeling and story in each image.

To preserve the feeling of traditional silver gelatin prints, Murai uses conventional black and white film and then scans these images, converting them to digital files. Then, by editing the images using computers and Adobe Photoshop, Murai produces breathtaking large scale prints via large format carbon ink printers. He utilizes a contemporary work flow from film to scan and print in the same manner as traditional darkroom processes.

In addition to his second visit to Kampuchea (Cambodia), this year Murai also visited Myanmar (Burma). Most notable in Burma is the Bagan district, a plateau which features over 1200 *paya* (pagodas) stretching out as far as one can see. Images of devotion, the scenes of monks and simple villages mix with sunrise panoramas and temple silhouettes against the early morning sky.

Murai hopes his work may illustrate the similarities in the sacred among cultures

throughout the world. A full-time college professor in Northern California's Central Valley, most years he plans one or two teaching trips, in addition to his personal travels. Sensitive to the alienation, cynicism and the confusion that arises from diverse cultural and global political situations, Murai hopes:

*"Becoming sensitive to unfamiliar cultures can quell much of this anxiety and may encourage tolerance and compassion. The act of making pictures adds immeasurably to my understanding and the final images, though worlds apart, provide a reaffirmation of the oneness of the human spirit."*

Photographer's Forum will feature Richard Murai's work in February 2005. Last year, Lenswork and Camera Arts published Murai's Angkor images. The latest issue of Manoa Journal/University of Hawaii Press' *In the Shadow of Angkor*, featured an extensive collection of his Khmer imagery. Gallery representation includes the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Artist's Gallery in Fort Mason, SF and the Mowen-Solinsky Gallery in Nevada City, CA.

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