

[Fighting Time, Jungle and Bats to Recreate Angkor Wat](#)

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Towers of lichened stone jutted up through the Cambodian jungle like a misty fairy tale or a movie set out of Star Wars. Thick creepers, muscular roots and a wet umbrella of tree canopies squeezed the Cambodian Hindu temple Angkor Wat in a biomass vice. The largest (one square mile) and perhaps most enchanting spiritual architecture in world history was crumbling into oblivion, 900 years old--haunted and forgotten. A French explorer accidentally found the ruins of the Angkor complexes built by the great Hindu/Buddhist Khmer civilization. Stone pinnacles, walls teeming with sculpture, richly etched galleries, and outdoor terraces sinking into waterways--Angkor Wat was designed by the Khmers as a temple mountain rising out of water.

To the French conservators, Angkor was archeological champagne, the best of the best. Rescuing it became a technical passion. For 40 years the French concentrated on arresting further deterioration and by 1970 a hundred-man team, cranes and heavy cement-mixing equipment were reinforcing the massive jumble of stonework. Four out of Angkor's nine towers are gone, irretrievably lopped off by crunching weather forces.

The French operation shut down in a monsoon of gunfire as first the Khmer Rouge guerrillas occupied the complex, then the Vietnamese Army. In the 1980's the Archeological Survey of India (ASI) studied Angkor, and concluded it would be completely devastated in a hundred years if extraordinary measures weren't taken. ASI shouldered the restoration project in 1986, redoing much of the French work with newer, less visible joinery techniques. Recently, a gallery was fully restored to its original intricacy, a two-year process. Nets were hung to discourage thousands of bats, who for centuries had nested in the temple, their acid-rich droppings eating away the stone.

Illustration at left is of a Khmer brahmin bathing a Sivalingam in the presence of a Khmer monarch. At right is a stairway leading to the central Vishnu sanctum tower. Inset is a stone demigod figure. Above an ASI crane positions a porch pillar.