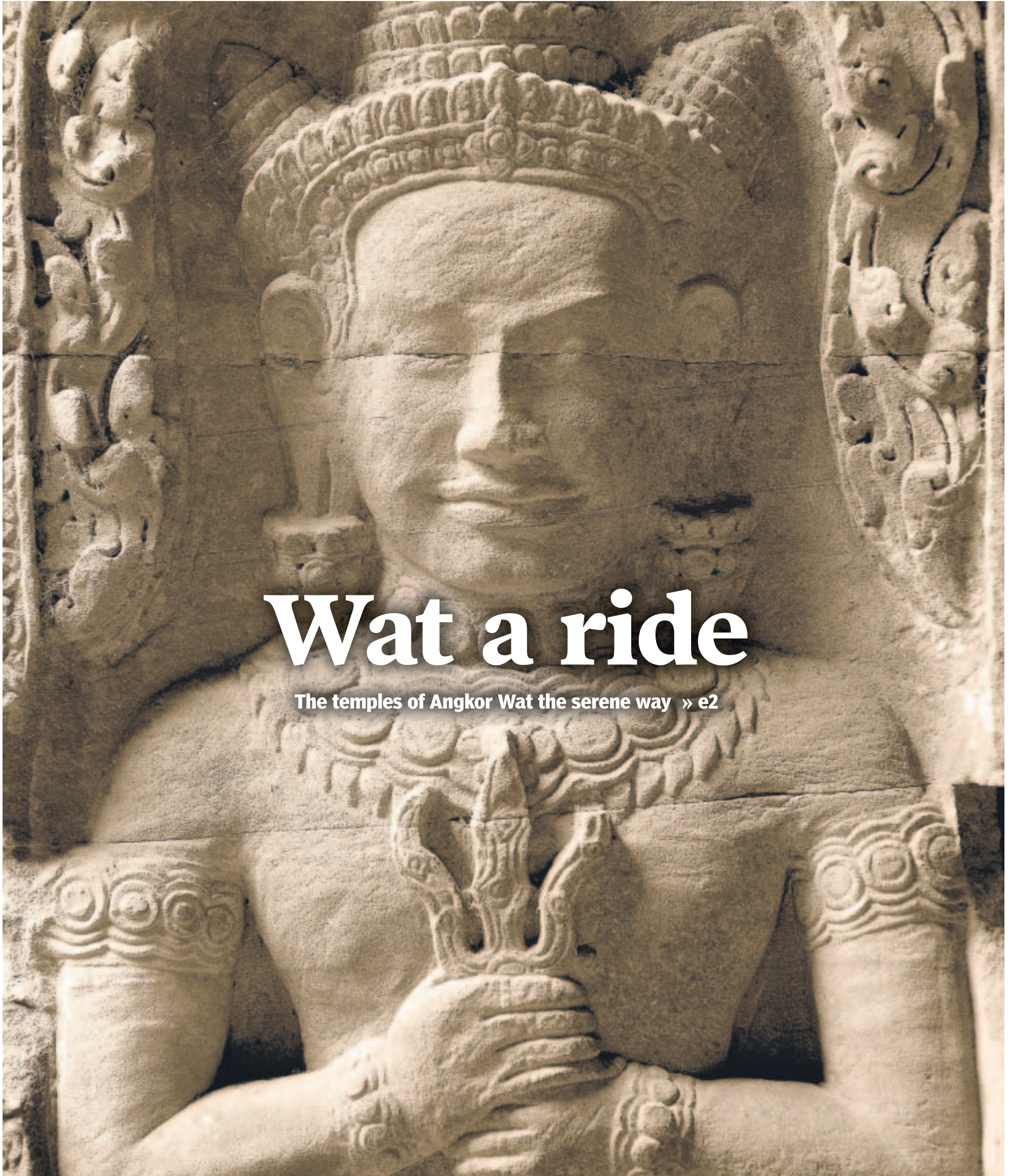




Herald Sun

extrago

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2008



Wat a ride

The temples of Angkor Wat the serene way » e2

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extrago

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**Spartan:** butler at the no-star hotel.

» travel bite

Hunker in a bunker

Who needs stars when bunking down for a night? Clearly not the guests at the new Null Stern Hotel in Switzerland. The world's first zero star hotel is set in a subterranean fallout shelter in the town of Sevelen. There is no television and forget the en suite, but there is artificial lighting as the hotel is housed underground.

Null Stern literally means one star and will open next year, costing from six euros a night. Brothers Frank and Patrik Ricklin have come up with the antithesis of luxury, though the hotel is certainly clean and spartan stylish with single, double and bunk beds.

Slippers and earplugs are given to each guest as they arrive because rooms are communal. Many house four beds and the ventilation system is noisy.

Despite the basic interiors and communal showers the hotel does have a butler who will no doubt serve you tea in the event of a nuclear war.

The brothers are said to be planning a franchise of fallout shelter hotels within Switzerland where every town was required to have a shelter in case of emergency during the Cold War.

more > www.null-stern-hotel.ch**Winner**

Waldemar Cybulski, from Endeavour Hills, has won a two-night stay at Quest Phillip Island.

Tackling the temples



» cover story

Heat, humidity and other travellers are all part of the ancient ruins of Angkor. But it's not hard to experience a quiet slice of Cambodian life, writes **Ewen Bell**

HIDDEN in the jungles of northern Cambodia are the ancient ruins of Angkor.

Temples carved from stone are the lasting testament of Khmer kingdoms dating back as far as the ninth century. With each new kingdom came new monuments, each grander and more ornate than the last.

The singularly spectacular Angkor Wat is detailed with mythological scenes of Hindu origin, and was followed in the 13th century by the Buddhist-inspired Angkor Thom.

The further into the jungles around Angkor you venture the more temples you will find.

Siem Reap, 8km from Angkor Wat, is the modern Cambodian city that services the region. In the wet season the streets flood

with rain, and in the dry season they flood with tourists.

Angkor continues to grow in popularity, but there are plenty of remarkable ruins to discover — and you don't have to share them all with crowds.

Getting a quiet slice of ancient Khmer culture is as easy as riding a bicycle.

Sunrise over Angkor

At 5am every day a trail of lights winds its way from Siem Reap to the entrance of Angkor Wat, like an ancient Naga serpent twinkling in the pre-dawn darkness.

Tuk tuks and taxis rumble into Angkor to deliver eager shutterbugs hoping for a colourful daybreak.

Inside the temples are two pools that reflect the silhouetted shape of the inner

sanctuary as the sun nears the horizon. However, sunrise over Angkor is no secret. At 5am a dozen people are waiting to claim their spot. By 5.30am, at least a hundred are bumping into each other to get a shot. Enterprising local women bring plastic chairs to let you enjoy the view in comfort, and they'll let you have them for free if you buy a coffee for \$1.

Be early or your scenic seat will be behind a row of Chinese tourists; cover your legs and arms to avoid the perils of sunrise mosquitoes and pray to the sunrise gods for a clear horizon and drifting clouds.

Pedal to the temple

There is no better way to see the countryside than on a bike. You see more, experience more and get to appreciate the achievement of building such grand temples in remote settings.

Every mile of road goes through a rural landscape where water-buffalo plough the rice fields, fishermen cast nets into the flooded plains and excited children run alongside yelling hello with a wave.

The flat landscape means you can pedal all day without hitting a hill, and there are lots of small villages where you can stop and refill your water bottle. No two day rides are the same.

Melbourne tour operator RAW Travel has just started cycling tours around Angkor which explore the ancient culture and rural lifestyles. Expect to get off the main roads and follow the trail through tiny villages and past flooded lotus ponds.

Some of the longer routes combine the journey with buses or boats to head back into town in comfort. Their aim is to show travellers there is more to Cambodian life than just the temples.

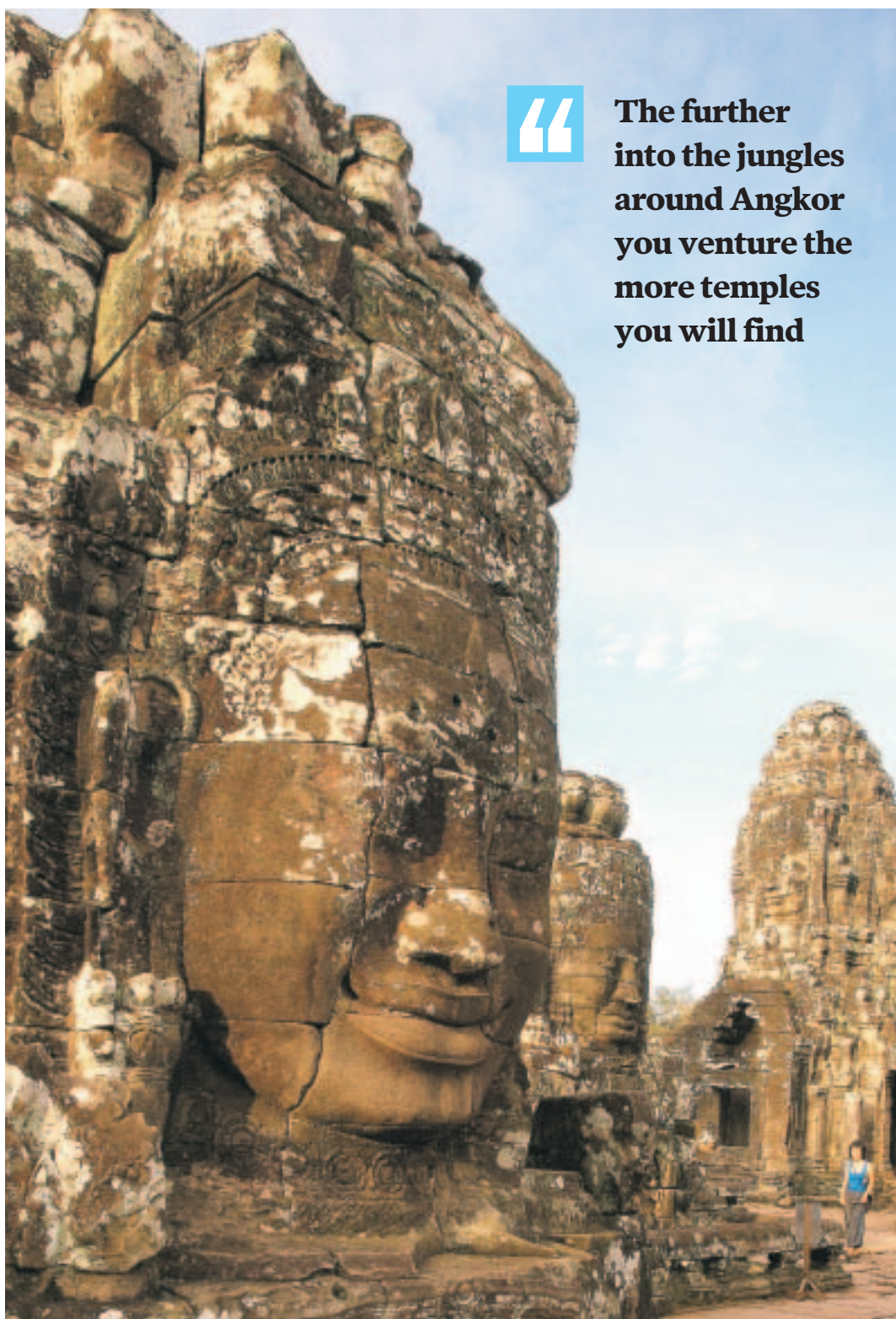
Start early

Getting on the road at the break of day not helps you enjoy the temples in the cool morning air and to get away from the crowds.

Majestic towers at Rolous are less than 15 minutes' drive from downtown Siem Reap, and for the first few hours they are bathed in peaceful solitude.

In the dry season the days can be stiflingly hot, and in the wet seasons they are prone to afternoon thunderstorms. At any time of the year the mornings usually bring a little sunshine before the heat of the sun fills the air with humidity. An early start is good for the camera and good for your body.

To escape the crowds and weather in the afternoon, explore Angkor National Museum, a stunning collection of artefacts and treasures including 1000 Buddhas. (www.angkornationalmuseum.com)



The further into the jungles around Angkor you venture the more temples you will find



Take it slow

There are more temples in the complex than you can see in a week, yet most people stay for three days or less. The key to enjoying Angkor is to give yourself plenty of time to rest and recover after a full morning tackling the temples. Trying to cram in sights all day every day just leaves your body and spirit in ruins.

Definitely see Angkor Wat and the Bayon, but then consider spending a few extra days heading out to remote locations such as Banteay Srey and Kbal Spean.

Beng Melea is another untouched treasure you don't often read about. This temple has never been restored, but a timber walkway leads through the scattered pillars and stone that remain. Under the shade of massive trees, remnants of the architecture remain in place, covered in bright green moss.

It's like a giant jigsaw puzzle hidden in the forest, edged by a lotus pond and a few cows grazing in the shade.

King for a day

Dining out in Siem Reap is one of Asia's great delights. You can eat cheap and cheerful if travelling on a budget, but why not kick up your heels and head to the top of town for an evening of fine dining?

Luxury options near the centre of Siem Reap include the Hotel De La Paix and the FCC (Foreign Correspondents Club).

A couple of glasses of white sangria and a three-part local feast costs under \$20, and they're just some of the five-star treats on the FCC menu.

If you have something truly special to celebrate during your holiday then Hotel De La Paix is the pick of the five-star options with a sensational location in the heart of town.

The best of Siem Reap and Angkor are at your doorstep, while some genuine pampering awaits you back in the hotel room.



>> THE DEAL

Getting there: Singapore Airlines has daily flights from Melbourne to Siem Reap starting from \$1250, including taxes. Visit www.zuji.com.au for the latest fares.

Where to stay: Art deco influences abound at Hotel De La Paix and \$460 a night gets you a room for two with breakfast and free wifi. www.slh.com or ph: 1800 251 958

Bike package: RAW Travel's four-day Angkor Explorer package costs \$890 and includes well-maintained bikes, permits to visit temples and the services of guides. Every day's ride is accompanied by an airconditioned vehicle. www.rawtravel.com or ph: 1300 208 245.



Clockwise from far left

Smiling: a tower from the Bayon period at Angkor.

Two wheels: locals use bikes to get around Angkor Wat.

Tuk tuk: tourists near Angkor Thom's northern gate.

Worship: Monks walk to the Bakong monastery near Siem Reap.

Vishnu: an eight-armed Hindu deity at Angkor Wat.



Perfect getaways

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INCLUDES Return airfare flying Thai Airways and 7 nights accommodation with breakfast daily. **VALUE 3 FREE** nights.

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