

## Running in Angkor Wat



Back in November, I increased my runs in Kampong Thom for a couple weeks to “train” for the December 5, 2004, 9<sup>th</sup> annual Angkor Wat International Half Marathon in Siem Reap. The races are held in the Angkor Archaeological Park. This 9- to 12-century temple complex is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The races were preceded by the usual dignitary speeches, but this race has a lot of significance in Cambodia because it is sponsored by a group that raises money to support landmine victims. The NW corner of Cambodia was probably the most heavily mined during the war, so living here you see victims on a daily basis. Many of the victims from Siem Reap have formed groups to support themselves playing traditional Khmer music in the park.

There were several groups along the half-marathon route providing entertainment. Naturally, there was a wheelchair event that left a few minutes before the rest of us at 7:30 AM.

Half marathon running and wheelchair; 10K run, walk, and artificial leg; 5K run and walk; 4K family; and 3K walking races start and finish at Angkor Wat. Immediately after the start, the half marathon did a short out-and-back on the road to Siem Reap to bring the total course distance up to 13.1 miles. The race then returned to *Le Petit Cirque* and goes past the beautiful moat surrounding Anchor Wat and many interesting temples, including Prasat Kravan, Banteay Kdei, Ta Prohm, Thommanon, Chau Say. You then enter Angkor Thom, a 12-13<sup>th</sup> century walled and moated royal city, through Victory Gate (eastside), past the Terrace of the Elephants, around Bayon, with its slightly sinister smiling faces, out of Angkor Thom through the South Gate, and back to the finish line at Angkor Wat.

Although the French say they discovered Angkor Wat in 1860, there have always been small villages through out the temple complex area. Therefore, there were many race spectators; thousands of cute kids trying to slap the hands of passing runners. I also saw a troop of monkeys along the road. Almost the entire course is shaded, cool, and scenic. Running through the Angkor Thom gates is an awesome experience. I will never forget running through the South Gate, which is basically one-lane wide. There was an ambulance coming from behind and an elephant (tourist ride) coming towards me. I am not sure



who yielded. I was only about a mile from the finish and didn't want to lose any more time at that point, so I squeaked through first and didn't look back.

Organization of the race was excellent, considering all the events and languages spoken. Asians put their family name first, then their given name, so I don't know how the organizers kept the records straight. There seemed to be only slight chaos at the registration table. I registered over the internet and had no problem.

Although my half-marathon time was not worth writing about, the weather was great, not too warm. It was a memorable run and I added to my t-shirt collection. Afterwards, we relaxed in Siem Reap. The town has a touristy feel with many fine restaurants and bars. It was great going out for brunch and having a cold beer after the race with my friends. We spent the rest of the day at a fancy hotel pool.

This was actually my second chance to run in Angkor Wat. Back in late October, I attended the Indochina-Mekong Hash, which was organized by the Phnom Penh Hash House Harriers (P2H3). This was three days of running, eating, beer drinking, and absurd joking with hash runners from all over Asia, Pacific region, and all the way from Europe. This was a major event. They were already selling tickets for the 2006 event to be held in Vientiane, Laos. It was a bit too much partying for my taste, but the long trail run we did was great. The P2H3 stated that none of its runners have ever stepped on a landmine, but warned runners to stay on the trails just in case. It was about 20K on trails within the temple complex, including along the top of the Angkor Thom wall and past Angkor Wat and many tourists waiting to get sunset pictures at the temple.

Angkor Wat is a must-see if you visit SE Asia, but there are many other attractions in Siem Reap area, including Koolen National Park, Tonle Sap Great Lake, with its floating villages and bird sanctuaries, and arts and crafts. The Angkor Wat temple complex deserves a real visit before or after the race. I recommend renting bicycles to get around, and at a minimum, get a 3 day pass to leisurely explore the temples and Khmer culture.