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**HAIL ROBERTA**

The Queensland Orchestra backs soul diva Roberta Flack at the Brisbane Entertainment Centre on Wednesday, February 4, and again on Friday, February 6, for "the voice of the century" Jose Carreras. Tickets for Roberta's concert, from \$85, peaking at \$155, and for Senor Carreras from \$100, peaking at \$660. Ticketing from [www.ticketek.com.au](http://www.ticketek.com.au) or phone 132 849. Accommodation packages on offer at Emporium Hotel, check [www.emporiumhotel.com.au](http://www.emporiumhotel.com.au) - other accommodation options by visiting [www.brisbaneinsummer.com.au](http://www.brisbaneinsummer.com.au)

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Unlike many temples of Angkor, Beng Melea is an untouched wonder waiting to be discovered, writes NEIL BENNION

It's all a bit tame, isn't it? The temples of Angkor might once have been buried in the Cambodian jungle, but these days, the only thing you have to scythe your way through is other tourists.

Granted, Angkor can still offer the elegant decay of Ta Prohm, where nature and civilisation huddle together in a dark embrace. But its restored state and central location mean the only real risk is that of getting in the way of someone's photo.

Fortunately, there is a part of Angkor where you can still test out your explorer credentials.

Beng Melea temple is largely unrestored and its distance from the main temple area - about 60km - deters many from visiting. Until fairly recently, the threat of landmines kept even locals away.

As we head from the tourist epicentre of Siem Reap, motorcycles weave past with so many people crammed on board they resemble acrobatic display teams. But the traffic gradually thins and soon the roadside is adorned with vegetation or houses on stilts with lazy hammocks slung between the posts.

"Guide?" asks an old man in a cowboy hat as I near the temple proper.

Even from here the ruinous state of the complex is apparent. Though the external walls are largely intact, all about them lie piles of scattered stone blocks. It's as though parts of the place have been blasted asunder by a vengeful deity.

If I were this close to one of the main temples, clusters of cute yet persistent children would

be following me round playing flutes, like some strange subversion of the Pied Piper. Yet here they seem far more interested in playing games with each other.

My guide explains that his name is Mr Chuan and he is 72, but even this is stretching his English to its limits. Clearly, we aren't going to be discussing 12th century Khmer politics.

He quickly proves his worth, however. A rather tame wooden gangway leads into the ruins, but he ignores it. Instead, he skips youthfully along a building's stone apron and gestures through a wood-reinforced doorway.

Suddenly, we're adrift in a turbulent sea of lintels, blocks and friezes, cast in a dappled light by the encroaching jungle. Huge pieces of debris fill the chamber to half the height of the doorway.

Mr Chuan leads me over the enormous mass of stone, my hands wrestling with their smooth, dry corners. It's just like Tomb Raider, except without the precious gems. Or unearthly bosom, for that matter.

There amidst the churned-up plinths and columns is a delicately carved frieze of elephant heads. It's just one of many hidden charms

I'm hooked already. This is no looking-and-pointing experience. I have to physically get to grips with the place, clambering about and propelling myself with all four limbs.

"Hello, mind your head!" warns my guide as he slips nimbly through an obstructed doorway. We emerge in an arcaded chamber where incense smoulders in a small shrine.

"Elephant!" Mr Chuan says, as though deliberately playing with my head.

He's pointing through a stone window with vertical bars composed of beautiful lathe-turned balusters. There amid the churned-up plinths and columns is a delicately-carved frieze of elephant heads.

It's just one of many hidden charms he picks out along the way, with monkeys, Buddha images and apsaras (celestial female dancers) also making plenty of appearances.

Beng Melea was built from sandstone in the middle of the 12th century during the reign of Suryayaman II and is similar in architectural style to Angkor Wat. The shape roughly describes a rectangle with inner enclosures. Not that you could tell from the ground.

Emerging from the rubble, we briefly negotiate open ground for a change. The undergrowth thrums with the sound of birds and grasshoppers and the air is rich with jungle scent.

Despite having been assured that the temple has been cleared of landmines, part of me can't help but feel wary - this is Cambodia, after all - and I tread gingerly. Like it would make a difference.

Mr Chuan knows the place like the back of his well-worn hand and the lines on his face echo the weathered distemper of the ruins.



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# wild one



**Fragile paradise:** The charm of Beng Melea, Angkor, Cambodia, is that unlike other temples it has not been restored.

"See the library," he notes, making effortless sense of the mess.

"Library" is just the traditional name for this kind of isolated annexe. It is unlikely to have stored books. Which is just as well as the place is enough of a mess as it is.

Eventually, we pop out of the chaos and emerge on to a later part of the wooden gangway and the rare sight of a couple of other tourists.

The gangway takes a far less ambitious path through the temple, like an archeologist with a Zimmer frame. The concept of tamedness, however, is still a relative one: I watch a snake shuttling along a stone crease, fire ants scurrying about on an apsara and a huge, bony spider wrestling a leaf from its web.

Soon I'm back at the point where I started and this navigation thing suddenly all seems rather easy.

A worldly-wise explorer like me doesn't need a guide anyway, so I bid farewell to Mr Chuan and head confidently back in.

I'm lost within minutes.

For once in my life I'm grateful for the sound of other tourists as they give me something to quietly backtrack towards: pleas for help tend to be at odds with the whole bullwhip-and-fedora getup.

Beng Melea is not the biggest temple, nor is it the most spectacular. But it has something to offer that deserts temples the moment the hands of restoration go near them.

And it's this that makes it hard to beat. 

