I stumble out of the spa, so relaxed I have trouble forming the words “aur kun ch’ran,” meaning “thank you very much” in Khmer. My brain has no idea whether I’ve been on the massage table for one hour or two. My muscles insist it must be five or six.

Work your muscles at Angkor Wat.

Then melt them with a traditional Cambodian Herbal Massage

By Johanna Read

A massage anywhere in the world is a welcome thing, but especially so in Siem Reap, Cambodia, next door to the UNESCO-lauded Angkor temples. Visiting these ancient temples is incredible, but involves long days of walking through ruins and climbing up and down steep staircases with unnaturally high steps. My legs complain that I’ve tackled a few too many, and my neck protests that my camera is too heavy. A massage is the solution. I choose a traditional Cambodian herbal massage, not really knowing what is in store. I quickly realize I’ve chosen well. This massage is like no other I’ve had anywhere in the world.

After the therapist gives my back a deep tissue massage, she takes a muslin-bound bundle of aromatics from the steamer bubbling in the corner. I smell ginger and lemongrass. She touches the almost-scalding bundle to her hand, and then presses her now hot palm onto my back. The little tension I had left melts away.

When the bundle has cooled enough, she then gives my back a third massage. This time, she stretches my muscles using the packet of herbs in long deep strokes. Returning the bundle to the steamer regularly, she blissfully repeats the triple massage on each of my arms and legs.

My jelly-like muscles get me back to my room for a deep sleep. They complain no more, not even when I take them up to Angkor Wat’s third tier the next day.