Between May 8 and 26, 2008, Professor Richard Laub, Director of the Heritage Preservation Program in the Department of History, Georgia State University, led a group on a study aboard, Landscapes of Memory: History, Culture and Historic Preservation in Thailand and Cambodia, to the rich cultural heritage and landscapes of two countries in Southeast Asia. We began our trip in Bangkok, the capital city of Thailand, before visiting the Ayutthaya World Heritage Site, the Sukhothai and Sri Satchanalai World Heritage Sites, the Thai Elephant Conservation Center in Lampang, and later Chiang Mai. After exploring Thailand, we visited the Angkor World Heritage Site in Siem Reap, Cambodia, before coming back to Bangkok and later departing to Atlanta. During the trip, Dr. Yongtanit Pimonsathean, a Thai professor and historic preservationist, helped us to understand history of Thailand, Theravada Buddhism, the Thai way of life, traditional architecture, cuisine, and the current issues associated with historic preservation in Thailand. Mr. Seiha Lim, a local Cambodian tour guide, explained about his country and the Angkor Wat World Heritage Site.

In Bangkok, founded in 1728 by the first monarch of the present Chakri dynasty, we experienced cosmopolitan amenities and unique cultural and heritage attractions. We visited major Theravada Buddhist temples such as Pho, Arun, and Thailand’s holiest temple, Phra Kaew, where the sacred Emerald Buddha, Thailand’s most revered Buddha image, is kept. We visited two of city’s old communities, Tha Tian and Leun Rit, which represent a good example of 19th century two story brick and stucco shop-houses. These communities are working with academic institutions, the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration, the owners of the shop-houses, and the Crown Property Bureau, to preserve their rich culture and architecture. Several pilot projects were undertaken involving the restoration and repairing of facades, and streetscape improvements. We visited the Jim Thomson House Museum, constructed from six different traditional teak houses with a beautiful collection of art and artifacts from Thailand and Southeast Asia. At the First National Discovery Museum, founded in the three-story Classical Revival style building of the former Ministry of Commerce, we saw various aspects of development of Southeast Asia using the art of multimedia technology. We took a long-tail boat tour along the Chao Phraya River and Bangkok’s timeless canals, which exhibit Thai vernacular architecture, temples, and orchards as well as the waterborne life of the inhabitants who live along the canals.
In the Ayutthaya World Heritage Site, the site of the second Siamese empire founded in 1350 by King U-Thong, we visited Theravada Buddhist temples such as Phra Si Sanphet and Chaiwatthanaram, which are located in the Ancient City that was once considered the most glorious city and trading port in Asia. We visited the Ayutthaya Historical Study Center, a national research institute devoted to the study of Ayutthaya, especially during the period when it was the capital of Thailand. The center is responsible for the museum of the history of Ayutthaya, which exhibits reconstructions from its past. We took a long-tail boat tour of the Ayutthaya Island, which exhibits Theravada Buddhist temples, a Christian church, a Muslim mosque, and traditional Thai houses. These houses are well adapted to the tropical climate. Many are raised on stilts to protect from flooding and dangerous animals. A steeply slanting roof helps to channel rainwater off the house, and natural materials such as hardwoods, bamboo and dried leaves help keep the buildings cool.
Ruined seated Buddha images at the Chaiwatthanaram Temple

A long-tail boat tour of the Ayutthaya Island

In the Sukhothai World Heritage Site, the location of the first Siamese Kingdom established in 1238 and the birth place of the Thai language, we visited the extensive ruins of temples such as Maha That and Sri Chum, which represent a golden age of classical art, architecture and Buddhism. We visited the Ramkhamhaeng National Museum, which exhibits an extensive collection of art objects and antiques of the Sukhothai style. In the Sri Satchanalai World Heritage Site, a satellite city of Sukhothai, situated on a lonely wooded plain about 50 kilometers north of the modern town of Sukhothai on the east bank of the Yom River, we visited city’s most important temples such as Phra Si Rattana Mahathat and Chang Lom. We also visited two Sangkhalok Kiln Site Study and Conservation Centers, which display pottery and pot shards found in the area and information on the evolution of ancient ceramics. At the Sathorn Textile Museum and Shop in the town of Sri Satchanalai, we shopped high quality of ethic Thai Phuan hand woven textiles with uniquely elaborate patterns.

The 13th-century Maha That Temple, the royal sanctuary and Sukhothai’s largest temple with a customary main bell shaped chedi in lotus bud shape and a ruined Buddha image hall

A group picture taken in front of the Sri Chum Temple’s square mondop (an edifice which is square in plan, cubicle in form, with a pyramidal superstructure for roofing), which contains the 14th-century stucco over brick seated Buddha image
The brick and stucco walking Buddha of the 15th century Phra Si Rattana Mahathat Temple is considered a masterpiece of the Sukhothai art. The 13th century central bell shape chedi base surrounded by thirty-nine stucco pachyderm sculptures at the Chang Lom Temple.

In the Thai Elephant Conservation Center in Lampang, we learned how the center promotes the role of Asian elephants in ecotourism and provides them with free medical assistance. We were impressed by the variety of performances of the elephants such as stacking, carrying and pushing logs, and painting. We also had a chance to get close to elephants, feeding them bananas after the show.

In Chiang Mai, the former capital of the Lanna Kingdom founded in 1296 by King Mengrai, we visited the fourteenth-century Phrathat Doi Suthep Temple, one of the most revered Buddhist shrines in Northern Thailand, located on the top of Mount Doi Suthep. The most important temples, notably Pra Singh Temple and Chedi Laung Temple, are situated within the old walled area of the city. Their viharas feature intricately carved and gilded gables, and low, sweeping rooflines. The moat bounding the historic center is still intact, but the walls were largely destroyed. We visited the Chiang Mai National Museum, which provides education and preservation of art and culture of the Lanna Kingdom to the public. We visited the Wiang Kum Kam Historical Site, one of many fortified cities built by King Mengrai as he consolidated his hold on the north of Thailand. In fact, it appears that he may have lived here for a few years before Chiang Mai was constructed. In the evening of May 19 we experienced the most important Theravada Buddhism holiday, Wisakha Bucha, at the Chedi Luang Temple. It was on this day that Prince Siddhattha Gotama was born before he became the Lord Buddha, and passed away. In the procession of respecting Buddhism, each person carried flowers, three incense sticks and a lighted candle, and walked around...
the main chedi three times. At the weekend market, we joined people shopping for arts and crafts, which range from inexpensive wicker rice steamers to valuable antiques, and include many typically Thai items such as triangular cushions, colorful hill tribe artifacts and finely crafted silver jewelry. After exploring Chiang Mai, we flew to Siem Reap, Cambodia, to visit the Angkor World Heritage Site.

In the Angkor World Heritage Site, the former capital of the Khmer Empire founded in 802 by Jayavarman II, we visited large complex temples such as Tha Phom, Angkor Thom and the largest component of this complex, the Angkor Wat. Around the temples the terrain is landscaped by an intricate system of reservoirs, canals, and moats that were used for water control and irrigation. Cambodians depicted the Angkor Wat on their national flag, money and the main beer of the country, the Angkor Beer. We also took a boat tour of the Tonle Sap Lake consisting of the lake and a flood plain of interconnected streams, ponds, flooded forests and wetland vegetation. We visited Les Artisans d’Angkor, where we saw the work of trainees who learn the arts of stone carving, wood ornamental sculpture, the making of small furniture, and the art of lacquer and polychrome. We visited the Siem
Reap National Museum, which shows the ancient Khmer civilization using the art of multimedia technology.

The late 12th-century Tha Phom Temple, which has been left surrounded by jungle.

12th-century Angkor Wat.

A group picture taken at the

A group picture taken during a boat tour of the Tonle Sap Lake.

The 12th-century Angkor Thom, the last and most enduring capital city of the Khmer empire.

I realized that a Thai and Cambodian sense of identities are similarly allied with Theravada Buddhism and the monarchy. Both have been dignified institutions since the Sukhothai period in Thailand and the Khmer empire in Cambodia. The communal sharing of food also plays an important role in Thai and Cambodia culture in such institutions as weddings, garden parties and festivals. During the trip, my team and I always shared high quality and diverse dishes. Some of them have incorporated foreign influence such as curries from India and noodles from China. In addition, it is easy for vegetarians to order food without meat and foreigners requesting a non-spicy meal. I believe that the trip has provided me with an opportunity to increase my understanding of history and cultures of Thailand and Cambodia, which was interspersed with lectures and discussions led by the instructor and local experts in the field. In addition, it gave me with an opportunity to discuss with all participants issues on historic preservation from an American perspective during the visits to historic sites, parks, and cultural landscapes. Despite the hot weather, my team and I enjoyed traveling in the rich cultural heritage of these countries.