

Angkor and Beyond: the Asian tourism phenomenon

Geoffrey Gunn

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[We present a two part series on Angkor Wat and Asian tourism. See Shibata Naoji, "Asia/Tourist Hordes, but at What Cost?" Asahi Shinbun, March 15, 2006.]

By Geoffrey C. Gunn

Once a synonym for war and revolutionary terror, we wonder at the rebirth of Cambodia as tourist destination of choice. We wonder at the market forces that privilege an approach to travel keyed to providing the costly facilities and infrastructure required to enable large numbers of rich international tourists to descend upon places that were utterly inaccessible only a decade ago. We wonder, too, at the ability of the market to adjust to risk calculation as dramatized by the Asian tsunami of 2004 and the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005.

Why Cambodia, why now?

Obviously, as Shibata Naoji suggests, push and pull factors are involved. Characteristically, from Bali in Indonesia to Phuket in Thailand to Laos, Western backpackers led the Southeast Asian tourist charge that began in the 1960s. Spending little but staying long, even the most chauvinistic destinations were able to accommodate this cohort into tourist planning. They were not, of course, the only tourists. Famously, as well, during the Vietnam war

Bangkok emerged as the American military's "Rest and Recreation" destination of choice. Still, Thailand was then only attracting some 200,000 tourists a year with the figure for Cambodia at some 60,000 before 1970 when war closed in. But, as tourism massified with cheap air travel in the 1980s, countries such as Thailand and Indonesia began to cash in, upgrading infrastructure, offering visas upon arrival and other incentives. Mass tourism had arrived drawing in visitors in the millions. Westerners were soon joined by Japanese and other Asian travelers, including those from the rising middle classes of the Asian Newly Industrialized Economies. Today they are being joined by perhaps the largest wave of tourist-travelers to descend upon the region, those from China.



A Bali nightclub bombed in 2002

The concept of resort and package tour came to be replicated across the market economies of Southeast Asia, trading upon exoticism, tropical climate, and often the (false) promise of security offered under the mix of military/authoritarian regimes that ran these countries. The writer recalls being handed an emergency tourist police phone number at

Manila airport during the Marcos dictatorship in the early 1970s. On the demand side, tourists were serviced by the production of increasingly informative and sometimes sophisticated guidebooks. Tourist dollars began to figure high in the economies of the region. Multiplier effects rippled through the service industry, rewarding investors but also often reaching into local communities such as Bali. International tourism became a matter of high-stakes state policy. Across Asia even language change was engineered to communicate with outsiders.

Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam were not part of this boom. The author of these lines was plausibly in August 1974 the last visitor to Siem Reap, site of the fabled Angkor temple complex before - actually as - the communist Khmer Rouge took over. Laos and its communist ally Vietnam long held the tourist invasion at bay by simply not issuing visas (The author was evicted in December 1975 though re-invited in 1980). In Laos that policy lingered into the mid 1990s. While pro-market Vietnam has gone even further than Cambodia in wooing foreign investment and rides an economic boom, tourism in Laos, albeit rising, pretty much languishes along with its economy.

But in Cambodia, it would take almost two decades - three and a half years of death and trauma under Khmer Rouge rule (1975-1979) followed by several years of Vietnamese occupation and armed resistance and, commencing in 1992 a major UN peacekeeping operation, before even the basic security conditions were met for tourism recovery. Notoriously, the UN mission and accompanying aid workers - the first returning tourists as it were - also bequeathed unintended infrastructure in the form of "karaoke bars" and hotels or, veritably launching the organized prostitution that has in recent years given Cambodia the dubious reputation of premier sex tourist, even child prostitution, destination. [1] A culture of corruption was also born out of

international aid largesse, whether from loose accounting, naivety or other reasons. Still, the "peace" gave pause for pioneering restoration work on parts of the Angkor complex by Indian and Japanese experts leading to its inscription as a World Heritage monument in 1992. All that was missing were the expected tourists.



Child Prostitutes in Cambodia

Just as post-conflict Cambodia ditched state socialism in favor of market capitalism, so the first foreign investments began to trickle in, including in the hotel and tourism industry. [2] The expansion of tourism in the new-born Kingdom of Cambodia has matched the nation's political vicissitudes. By 1993 "tourism" had arrived, at least in Phnom Penh, the capital, still not without its dangers as more than one foreign entrepreneur met with "accident" or even execution, in one case by renegade Khmer Rouge. Memories are undoubtedly short but when, in July 1997, Cambodian strongman Prime Minister Hun Sen launched a preemptive coup against co-Prime Minister Prince Ranariddh and extra-judicial killings continued

for over a week, certain categories of foreigners - Japanese civilians included - scrambled aboard Australian evacuation flights mounted from Malaysia. Thai visitors will, however, remember the rampage against Thai property in the Cambodian capital in January 2003 following the alleged national slight by a Thai movie actress who claimed that Angkor was stolen from Thailand. This time round Thai nationals were evacuated by Thai military aircraft.

The point is that tourists are notoriously risk averse. Following the terror attack in Bali of October 2002, hotel occupancy slumped from 70 percent to 5 percent and, following significant recovery, took another hit with the second terror bombing of October 2005. The impact upon the service industry was vast, leaving many of the local victims to lament the relative decline of agriculture and fishing which had sustained their livelihood and distinct culture since time immemorial. Notoriously, in the Bali case, outsiders, including the Suharto family and military interests, came to dominate prime land and hotels at the expense of locals. The World Bank, which pushed Indonesia to develop this industry in the early 1980s, would have no answer. The SARS outbreak in 2003 further depressed Asian tourism, just as the great Asian tsunami devastated the resorts and livelihoods around the Bay of Bengal. The benefits of tourism can also be counter cyclical such as demonstrated during the Asian economic crisis of 1997-98 when Western and Japanese tourist arrivals in such hard-hit countries as Thailand and Indonesia actually peaked in part taking advantage of cheaper currencies.

Having emphasized the increasingly Asian character of mass tourism, it is noteworthy that, in the case of Cambodia, it was only in 2002 that Japanese arrivals (at least as recorded in Phnom Penh International Airport), overtook those of the US, ASEAN, France and

China. Out of a total of 1,421,615 international visitor arrivals to Cambodia in 2005, Japan registered 137,849, ahead of the US, France, UK and China (PRC) (59,153). Surprisingly, South Korea topped the list at 216,594 arrivals. [3] To offer some perspective, the number of Japanese tourists visiting Indonesia peaked in 2000 at 643,794, eclipsing Australia (459,994), South Korea (213,762) and far ahead of the US (176,379). In that year foreign visitor arrivals in Indonesia exceeded five million. [4] Thailand, which drew in over 11 million tourists a year before the tsunami, now actively targets Chinese tourists (one million in 2005), second only to Japan, long the dominant market.

The down side

The down side of international tourism, from environmental pollution to cultural loss to people trafficking to the spread of HIV/AIDS is now well established, the subject of international fora, public hand wringing and NGO activism. As the Shibata article points out, Cambodia and the Siem Reap area is no exception. Still the facts are stark in the case of Angkor tourism. Rescued by UN intervention from temple robbers - or "tomb raiders" in the Hollywood version - the fabled monument complex now risks being overwhelmed by human predators and their detritus along with degradation from auto emissions unless serious planning and policing kicks in. The same goes for environmental planning amidst a hotel construction boom. But policing and planning in Cambodia?



A hotel in Angkor

Consider the facts. Given that US\$5 billion has been dispensed to Cambodia by international creditors over the past decade, the record is spotty. After the 1997 coup, some donors like the US suspended aid. Others like Japan continued existing aid programs but refused to initiate new ones. With aid resumed by 1998, donors meeting in Tokyo focused upon fiscal reform; public administration, demobilization; and forestry and environmental reform. Political reform was absent. It was only in 2004 that the World Bank called on bilateral and multilateral donors to link aid to Cambodia with economic and political reform. According to Ronald Bruce St John, growing donor attention to corruption merely addresses the symptoms of the problem rather than the causes. In this argument, the buck stops with the executive power and the political elite which has it in their hands to manipulate national resources.

[4]

Some analysis of who gets what, why and how in Siem Reap would also be illuminating in light of new top-end luxury hotel expansion and in light of the experience of Indonesia (Bali) where lack of transparency and accountability led to wide-ranging abuses across the

development and class spectrum. As Matt Gross wrote of tourism development in Cambodia in the travel pages of the New York Times, “villagers are routinely evicted at gunpoint from their land by the wealthy and well connected...” [5] Enjoy your stay, the natives are really nice, but don’t ask too many hard questions.

Notes

[1] For examples of recent convictions for these crimes see <<http://www.childsafe-cambodia.org/arch.asp>>

[2] See the author’s “Prospects for Reform in Indochina” in Pacific Review, vol.1, no.4 1988, pp.374-384

[3] See the website of the Cambodian Ministry of Tourism <<http://www.mot.gov.kh/statistics.asp>>

[4] Number of foreign visitor arrivals to Indonesia by country of residence (2000-2004), Badan Pusat Statistik/Statistics Indonesia <<http://www.bps.go.id/sector/tourism/table16.shtml>>

[5] Ronald Bruce St. John, “Democracy in Cambodia - One Decade, US\$5 Billion Later: What Went Wrong?” Contemporary Southeast Asia 27, no.3 (2005), pp.406-28.

[6] Matt Gross “Why is Everybody Going to Cambodia?” New York Times, 22 January 2006.

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