

# Sustainable Tourism



## Sustainable Tourism Development in an Emerging Destination - Cambodia

Miles and miles of lush, green paddy fields, wallowing water buffalos and majestic temples hidden in the jungle off the beaten track - a lustful backpacker wilfully looks for his next adventure... Concrete jungles of 3, 4, 5 star hotels opening daily, trendy wi-fi lounges and a tour bus full of tourists checking in to a pre-booked hotel... Which one fits your image of Cambodia? The correct answer is both, and it's the careful balance between the two that needs to be addressed in order to ensure Cambodia remains a beautiful country and cultural melting pot - using tourism in a positive measure as a means to pull the country out of stark poverty.

Tourism is growing rapidly as the European tour operators see the opportunity to join the densely populated Korean and Japanese markets who use their own airlines, hotels, restaurants and tour buses. Very little money actually makes a difference to the local economy and only a few linkages are made to counteract this. Examples would be where locally produced arts and crafts, paintings and beautiful silks are purchased by tourists, and hotels and restaurants buy locally produced foods.

There are many stakeholders in place. Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), charities, tour operators, hoteliers and tourists who seemingly want to make a difference and try to ensure everybody benefits. Problems occur when nobody actually talks to one another. As an emerging market many things are out of the individual stakeholders' hands, but collaboration at this level is essential.

At a destination level, guests are informed about different community projects and activities. They are encouraged to stay longer and engage in different ways to meet the real Cambodia. Guests can build water filters for villages lacking clean water or join conservation tours. Guests are asked to leave behind unwanted clothes weighing down their backpacks, which are donated to local orphanages. Hotels are offered advice on sustainability issues, be it environmentally, economically or socially.

Soria Moria, a boutique hotel in Siem Reap, has committed to social responsibility. Its vision is 'to become the first choice of workplace for Cambodian locals, by focusing on quality and development of the staff through best business practice, following labor laws, in addition to offering on-site hospitality training and education on a higher level.'

At a booking level, an alternative approach implemented by Worldhotel-



link.com aims to offer travellers an informed choice to purchase hotels and tours online with a commitment to sustainability. This is achieved by highlighting responsible tourism initiatives, and tracking implementation. Online buyers can meet their potential hosts and decide whether they want to stay with Mr Kunn and his family, or support Sala Bai, a local hotel school offering scholarships to the underprivileged, or stay at Hotel de la Paix - a 2006 Responsible Tourism Awards nominee.

This online booking model, once unique to Siem Reap, has been replicated globally specifically in developing countries aiming to reduce poverty. Initially set up by the Mekong Development Sector with aid from the World Bank to support small B&B's who get missed by the bigger web tour operators. As such, with the bottom-up approach, the money will be distributed more evenly and directly benefit the local community.

Whether we like it or not, it's inevitable that mass tourism will reach Cambodia. To make it sustainable all stakeholders must play their part, communicate, be transparent with their projects and ensure that everyone will benefit from the tourism spend.

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