

Ethical travel post-Covid: The importance of connecting with community in Cambodia

Keywords: ethical travel; sustainability; Cambodia

Abstract

In the decade prior to the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent halt to tourism in early 2020, Cambodian tourism was rapidly increasing. However, the majority of these tourists (58%) only visited one region— Siem Reap — the gateway town for the heritage listed Angkor complex (Asian Development Bank, 2022). This saw the overdevelopment or ‘overtourism’ of the region (and the country more broadly) with large investment from key markets such as China. While a key focus of Siem Reap’s *Provincial Tourism Development Master Plan 2021-2035* is to boost the mass tourism numbers, this conflicts with the national approach. The emphasis of Cambodia’s *National Tourism Recovery Roadmap 2021-2025* is on resilience and sustainability. It is the latter that is the focus of this study.

In retaliation to Cambodia’s environmentally unsustainable tourism expansion, as well as to an unearthing of the exploitation of children in the tourism industry (Guiney, 2018: Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015), several groups and community organisations began to emerge which delivered and supported alternative (sustainable) tourism in Cambodia (Carter et al. 2015). Our research emerged in response to the burgeoning responsible tourism offerings and the literature on sustainable tourism in the Global South. It is also a response to concerns that travel organisations and travellers can perpetuate global inequalities and extend neo-colonialist structures in developing countries (Chilufya, Hughes, & Scheyvens, 2019). Using a qualitative approach, we ask: *how ethical alternative forms of travel can best get done in practice?*, particularly given global inequalities, neo-colonialism and post-crisis.

We undertook online semi-structured interviews with 11 local community-run tourism owners/operators that proclaim to be ‘ethical’ in nature. These are members of *Collective for Good* and/or *Experience Mekong Collection* which showcase responsible and sustainable travel experiences in Siem Reap and the Greater Mekong Subregion respectively. As a research team we conducted broad thematic analysis manually and via NVivo and came together to compare our coding. Our major themes centre on defining ethical business as ‘doing the right thing’; cultural challenges to ethical business; cultural and value tensions; community as enablers to ethical business; and Covid disruptions. Based on our findings, we present a best practice framework for practicing ethical travel in Cambodia that may be transferable to other countries, especially those in the Global-South.

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