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In Cambodia: The Tuk-tuk That Could

By Roderick Brazier

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After decades of misery and conflict, Cambodia is now a hot destination. A staggering two million foreign tourists are expected to visit Angkor and other destinations in 2008. The benefits are real and numerous; decent jobs have been created in the tens of thousands. Other benefits abound, including growth in tax revenue, and the expansion of labor-hungry auxiliary industries such as handicrafts, food supply and distribution, and transport. Moreover, as more tourists leave with happy memories, Cambodia will shake off its reputation as a shadowy, grim place, and assume standing as a normal developing country in Asia; an intangible gain but one that many ordinary Cambodians yearn for.

There is close to unanimous support for the growth of tourism in Cambodia. So it was surprising to read a recent opinion piece in the Boston Globe, written by Dante Ramos, calling the benefits of Cambodia's tourism boom are uncertain. In a classic "good news is really bad news" op-ed, Ramos made several highly contestable claims:

1. Tourism is causing wear and tear on the temples. The Angkor temples are not delicate. They are built from rock that has withstood almost a thousand years of tropical weather and periods of warfare. Tourists' shuffling sandals may, in their millions, wear down a few stone walkways. But such trifling effects are more than offset by the diligent and excellent preservation programs funded, in part, by revenues raised from visiting tourists.

2. Tourism fuels the theft of antiquities.

The looting of antiquities from the Angkor complex slowed dramatically following the restoration of security in the late 1990s. More recently, tightened admissions procedures and perimeter security have almost stamped out pilfering from the main structures at Angkor. Tourism has, in fact, played the key role in the protection of Angkor.

3. Tourism is a "fast money industry".

Tourism may be the very opposite of a fast money industry. Investors cannot simply shift a hotel or golf course when it suits. Moreover, the tourism industry typically remains an important part of a destination country's economy regardless of its stage of development. Investors can reasonably expect that a unique attraction such as Angkor will attract huge numbers of visitors next year, in five years, and twenty years from now. One need only look at the impressive investments in hotel properties in Siem Reap to see that the sector is not fed by "fast money".

4. Tourism delays political and economic reform.

This is Ramos's most serious claim. He is certainly correct that Cambodia desperately needs both political and economic reform. Presently, a small clique of politicians and hangers-on run the country. The elite's appetite for wealth and control is causing great tension and resentment, especially through the wanton seizure of land from the poor and vulnerable.

It is hard to see, though, how the growth in tourism could make this situation any worse. Certainly, some land may be grabbed here and there to make way for tourist developments, but when compared to the vast swathes of land grabbed to make way for plantations, one can only conclude that tourism's share of blame for this awful phenomenon is tiny. In the long-term, the best chance of serious reform in Cambodia will come with the emergence of a class of Cambodians whose incomes do not depend on government largesse or preferment. Tourism, whose benefits are spread across many thousands of private businesses, can contribute to this positive social shift.

Ramos ended his article by quipping that Cambodia needs more than a "tuk-tuk economy". But the tuk-tuk economy that Ramos ridicules has delivered thousands of Cambodian families from poverty, and will remain a source of security and prosperity for them and others for decades to come. Today a tuk-tuk, tomorrow a Toyota.
