

# VISITOR OVERLOAD

## Siem Reap Scrambles to Accomodate Millions of Tourists

By Phann Ana  
and Adam Piore

**S**IEM REAP TOWN - The ancient Angkorian ruins here survived centuries in the jungle and decades of civil war. But can they survive all the tourists?

Some of those charged with protecting them are no longer so sure.

"We don't have enough infrastructure to welcome mass tourism," laments Tep Vattho, who heads the development department of the Apsara Authority, the government agency entrusted with managing the Angkor Archeological Park.

"We are not ready. If one million come a year, the environment will be destroyed very quickly," she said.

Like it or not, mass tourism is already here. And the government is engaged in a rush to catch up with it. All told this year, tourism offi-

cialists are expecting not 1 million tourists—about the number that visited last year, breaking all records—but twice that, according to Siem Reap's Provincial Governor Sou Phirin. As many as 500,000 visitors are expected between November and December alone, when Cambodia kicks off the Angkor-Gyeongju World Culture Expo 2006.

Already, fleets of tour buses and a growing army of motorbike taxi drivers clog the narrow roads leading to the temples. In the Angkor park, thousands of pairs of feet tread everyday on ancient stone walkways—so many that the government is considering requiring visitors to wear protective plastic slippers. Downtown, hotels sprout up like mushrooms, and garbage floats in the town's river.

Siem Reap's population, meanwhile, is exploding too. They have flocked from the eastern provinces of Kompong Cham, Sray Rieng, and Prey Veng, driving up the town's

local population by 50 percent over the last three years, from 100,000 in 2002 to 150,000 this year. Their number is expected to climb to 185,000 in 2015 and 210,000 in 2020.

Chaotic, ramshackle encampments line the road leading out of Siem Reap town, housing thousands of arrivals looking for work in the hotels and construction trades.

"It's bad because it's a small province, and a small town," says Chhouk Vanchhom, bureau chief for the town's tourism department.

"There are too many people, and it's difficult to supply and feed them," he said.

Already the town's infrastructure is beginning to buckle.

During the dry season, raw sewage clogs the ancient irrigation web that used to fertilize the rice fields on the outskirts of town—and floats down the river that flows through Siem Reap.

"Some hotels put sewage in the river and it smells," says Tep Vattho.

"There are squatters along the banks. We have an irrigation web. But actually this irrigation web has become a sewage web because of development."

At twilight, traffic stalls in the city center and the supply of electricity is stretched thin, with involuntary blackouts in parts of Siem Reap after dark.

Some doomsayers even worry that the burden placed on the area's natural water table by the growing number of residents and visitors could eventually cause the earth beneath the mighty temples of Angkor to collapse into depleted underground water pockets.

In recent months, government officials have launched a number of initiatives aimed at averting potential disaster—including new road projects, a 20-hectare reservoir, a town beautification plan, and a new electricity agreement with Thailand that will significantly boost the town's power supply.

The French government is financing a \$5 million wastewater plant on the east side of town, and the government is seeking funds from the Asian Development Bank to build another.

But this is likely only the beginning.

About 87 hotels are now operating in Siem Reap, and more than 150 are planned, Chhouk Vanchhom said. In the last two years alone, property values along Route 6 have tripled from \$300 to \$900 a square meter, he added.

The most ominous trend, however, might be this: The tourists themselves are changing.

Increasingly, busloads of budget tour groups are being drawn to Siem Reap instead of free-spending, up-market solo tourists. Planners fear the growth of such "mass tourism" is not sustainable. They worry that the strain of mass tourism is making the town even less attractive to the moneyed, discriminating tourists that could provide Siem Reap with a more profitable and stable future.

"In short, the town itself is neither attractive nor comfortable enough for non-group tourists to move around by themselves," say the authors of an October, 2005 study financed by



A girl begs for Riel as tourists look on from their bus

Visitors climb  
Angkor Wat  
at sunrise



the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

If the trend is not checked, warns the JICA study, poor management could eventually collapse the current tourism boom, transforming Siem Reap district into "a declining area of Cambodia."

"The monuments of Angkor might be left with empty hotels, waste and unemployment," the report states.

This is unlikely to happen, but it does give cause for reflection.

It was 1860 when French explorer Henri Mouhot left Bangkok and hacked his way through the jungle, emerging amazed before the "lost city" of Angkor.

Actually, the ruins were already home to a prosperous monastery, and previous explorers had documented Angkor. But it was Mouhot's account of his journeys that fueled French interest in Angkor Wat, made it world famous and led to the first flood of foreign resources to restore it.

For more than a century, French archeologists led efforts to excavate the temples and the nearby archeological treasures in Angkor Thom, until Pol Pot's army forced them to flee in the early 1970s.

For much of the 1970s and 1980s the temples languished in international obscurity—though they remained a point of pride for the Cambodian people.

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization sought full protection for Angkor's ancient temples as soon as the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements made it feasible. It took a year for Angkor to win an inscription on Unesco's World Heritage List and the List of World Heritage in Danger.

Preservationists were so eager to take action that they bypassed some of the Unesco requirements—leaving them for later. The designation cleared the way for a flood of foreign aid totaling more than \$50 million between 1993 and 2003 for restoration and some security.

"Not enough for security in all the park," says Nao Hayashi-Deni, cultural program official at Unesco. "But still considered a success story compared to other worldwide heritage sites."

In 2003, Unesco voted to set up a committee on sustainable tourism, complete with a panel of experts to evaluate the impact of develop-

ment plans on the wide Siem Reap area. But so far, no one has provided funding to hire the experts.

"Donors tend to invest money in the temples themselves because it's more visible and easier to showcase their activities," Hayashi-Deni says.

The government, meanwhile, has largely encouraged the building boom, and the tourism explosion, rather than regulating it. And with good reason. Despite widespread belief to the contrary, many in the province have benefited from the boom.

In 2004, international tourists spent \$97 million in Siem Reap, of which more than two-thirds stayed in the province, according to the JICA study.

Local employees in the tourism sector pulled in salaries totaling about \$14 million, or 14 percent of tourism expenditures. More than 5,000 people work in hotels alone and overall tourism created about 29,400 jobs in Siem Reap.

But Cambodia has missed out on some opportunities.

Tourists spend about 50 percent of their vacation money on airfare, and Cambodia currently does not have a national airline. In addition, many of the products used in hotels and restaurants came from foreign sources

because Cambodia cannot provide them.

Still, local "resellers" brokered the sale of about 78 percent of those products—about 60 percent came from Siem Reap and 18 percent from other parts of Cambodia.

On the ground, however, the benefits are not always so easy to see.

Siem Reap province remains one of the poorest in the nation. On a recent day, as tinted tour buses sped by on a nearby road, Sot Sos, 40, squatted on a rickety bridge with a fishing net, trying to dig out the day's meal for her two children. Sot Sos, who relocated to a shack next to a garbage-strewn riverbank in 1993, sells dried lemon peels at the market. She says her life has barely changed in recent years.

"I never see any profits," she shrugged. Asked her opinion on the changes to the town, she responded: "I just worry to solve my stomach problems."

And for some, the situation is actually getting worse. Sok Sarin, 43, moved to Siem Reap in 1993, and lives in a stilted home along the banks of the river with his wife, four children, and two cows. For much of the time, he has supported himself by helping to install electricity and water pipes. But he says competition for jobs has become fierce in recent years.

"It's really hard to get a job nowadays, because there are a lot of young electricians coming here," Sok Sarin says. "More and more people come, so business just goes down and down and I've lost a lot of opportunities. I want to change my career."

Nor are Cambodian outsiders the only new competition. Increasingly, local operators in the tourism industry are losing business to a growing number of foreign-owned and operated companies.

Cho Seung, owner of Angkor Power Ltd, is typical of the new breed of businessman. A South Korean, he opened his restaurant two and a half years ago, and has tapped into network of business contacts largely inaccessible to local Cambodians. During the high season, he serves between 200 and 300 customers a day—almost all are fellow Koreans. During the slow season it can be as few as 10. The key to his business, he says, is making connections with Seoul-based tour companies.

Cho Seung employs about 80 local workers during his high season, and about 70 during

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Children swimming in the Siem Reap River. Local officials complain that it is filled with raw sewage.



the low season. But the growing presence of foreign-owned business networks disturbs some, who see less profit for Cambodia as a result.

"The Korean tourists come with their own companies, they have their own souvenir shops, their own guesthouses, their own guides and their own buses," complains Tep Vattho. "They bring some money," but it does not compare with their impact on infrastructure, she added.

It's just one more reason that local tourism officials are becoming increasingly concerned about the growth of mass tourism.

According to JICA, "The central issue is that environmental and economic sustainability is increasingly endangered by the current mass tourism," the report says. "It tends to give intensive burden on environment and bring about limited local economic benefits."

Without any intervention, the number of visitors to Siem Reap could rise to more than 4.3 million by 2020, a number that would likely overwhelm the town, cause declining services and could lead to "recession, bankruptcy, and unemployment when the current boom is suddenly over," JICA warns.

One solution is to try and convince tourists to visit other parts of Cambodia.

Chuch Phoeuring, secretary of state for the Ministry of Culture, says that Preah Vihear temple's impending designation as a World Heritage Site may loosen the load on Angkor Wat in the coming years.

"The government plans to help the tourist flow by paving roads and promoting other areas like Preah Vihear and beautiful ecotourism sites," he says.

But even if the government is successful in limiting the number of tourists—a prospect that many find dubious—JICA maintains that changing the type of tourist visiting Siem Reap still remains crucial to its future.

Mass tourists tend to stay in "down market hotels." Those in down market hotels stay an average of 3.1 days and spend \$94, while those at \$50-and-higher hotels stay 2.5 days and spend \$283. Put another way, Cambodia could make more than twice as much money from high-end tourists who stay for shorter periods of time.

Using a projection, JICA estimates that for the same number of people—about 2,007,000 in 2020—mass tourists would spend \$433 million and contribute a total economic impact on Siem Reap of \$771 million.

However, high-end visitors would spend \$702 million and create \$1.24 billion economic impact.

But reversing the trend won't be easy.

Tourists from the East Asian countries of South Korea, Taiwan and Japan lead the charge of group tours.

Japan, along with the US, Australia and UK provide the most high-end tourists, accounting for around 70 percent of individual tourists in the "three star and higher" price range.

In 2004, South Koreans edged out the Japanese as the top tourist group, with 128,423, compared to Japan's 118,157. Between January and August of 2005, some 147,940 Koreans visited, the majority traveling in group tours.

The mass tourism trend in South Korea began with direct flights to Siem Reap from Seoul on Asiana Airlines. An increasing number of operators are now chartering planes, and ferrying over tours groups on the cheap, offering package deals that run as low as \$300 for a couple of days' stay.

Tep Vattha says that Korean and Chinese tour groups in partic-

ular are often too large and made up of inexperienced travelers, who are loud, inconsiderate and oblivious to the fragility of the temples.

"We want them to have a mutual understanding. But that does not mean we do not like them," Tep Vattha said.

JICA maintains that sprucing up Siem Reap town is the key to attracting more quality, free-spending tourists. Already, the town boasts a number of world class hotels. Even mass tourists might be willing to forgo their ubiquitous tour buses for local drivers, and stay in the nicer hotels, if the town were made to seem more pleasant, safer and easy to maneuver, the argument goes.

The campaign to improve the town is already underway.

On a recent day, Siem Reap's Governor Sou Phirin sat in back of a Toyota Land Cruiser and pointed out a number of new improvements.

Freshly dug ditches line the road leading along the moat fronting Angkor Wat. Electricians will soon lay cables to power lamp-posts, and on Oct 5, Thailand will begin providing some 13 megawatts of power to help them. It will more than double Siem Reap's existing supply—the Russian government constructed a 2 megawatt generator in 1985, and Japan funded a 10 megawatt generator

in 2006.

Siem Reap inaugurated a new French-funded international airport early this month. The government recently finished a road that loops in front of the airport, to National Route 6, and around to the temples. The new road creates an additional path to the temples and will help mitigate traffic.

In the years ahead, it will also improve in appearance. Newly planted saplings line the road, promising a scenic respite from the concrete and dust of over-development in downtown Siem Reap.

In the center of town, city officials are hoping to transform the river's stinking, garbage strewn banks into a verdant public promenade, redolent with the smell of flower blossoms. They've already started the initiative.

When Sou Phirin took over as provincial governor early last year, one of the first things he did was to initiate a river cleanup program. The river "should not be the open sewer," he said at the time.

Says Tep Vattho: "We are lucky to have a river in the center of the city. We could put cement along the banks and it would be fine. But we want to create a public garden with a promenade that tourists will want to visit and the public can appreciate. We will put trees—some with yellow blossoms, some with pink ones. The red blossoms will indicate access to a pagoda."

The government relocated about 250 families in 2003 living along a small stretch of the riverfront to 4 hectares of land about 6 km outside of town. The banks now are green, and bare—though the promised blossoms are not yet in place.

An additional 600 families living along another three km of riverfront may be relocated in the coming years, says Mao Chamroeun, deputy director of the provincial office of land management and urban planning.

Whether the relocation actually goes smoothly remains to be seen. But the progress along the initial patch of grass is apparent.

"Four years ago, the river smelled bad—it was a toilet," Tep Vattho said.

"Now we clean it every day. People clean the grass."

Even so, Tep Vattho doesn't think mass tourism will ever abate. A more realistic hope, she says, is balance.

"We cannot stop them and we still need them," she says. "But we want infrastructure first, and we want them to change their behavior. If we can send men into outer space, surely we can solve this problem."

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