

Holidays are when children are at most risk! Responsible tourists must do better.



Responsible tourism in Mondulkiri, Cambodia – picture Nomad RSI, www.nomadrsi.org

Madeleine McCann, is the British toddler who disappeared without trace in Portugal in May 2007. <http://www.findmadeleine.com/home.html>. Yet if Madeleine was a vulnerable Cambodian child, the chances are few people would know about her disappearance or even care. The fact is thousands of innocent Cambodian children right now are being put at serious risk, everyday, left in the care or company of complete strangers, tourists! “Orphanages” are extensively marketed along with traditional tourist spots, to visit, to be entertained by children, and even to stay for periods to work as unpaid staff and finish a holiday with a moral feel-good factor! <http://www.volunteeringsolutions.com/cambodia/volunteer/volunteer-orphanage-cambodia>. This is despite the fact that the main child-care organizations in Cambodia and official authorities are opposed to the practice. <http://genascihk.com/2014/06/19/orphanages-and-volunteering-as-profit-centres-in-southeast-asia>. No child should be exploited or put at risk in this way. There are more ways and better ways to spend your time and money, to be more certain of doing only good, and not to harm children. These ways can even allow you to immerse in local culture without risks.

Now if you really want to help a poor child, especially one who is definitely vulnerable, and to see where exactly your money goes, then the best way is to join a legitimate child sponsorship scheme run by honorable and internationally accredited organizations like World Vision <http://www.worldvision.org/sponsor-child> or Plan International <http://plan-international.org/what-you-can-do/sponsor-a-child>. Or you could contribute to a local organization like mine that has no big overheads. <http://newhorizonsunlimited.org>

If as part of your holiday in Cambodia, you want to visit, experience local people, and help in a responsible safe way, then consider properly organized and supervised community visits. “Eco-tourism” is now popular and you can for example spend time in remote rural villages seeing how families live, farm, cook, and make handicrafts. Your money stays in those communities and you can even “plant-a-tree” or sponsor activities with real direct benefits to the people you meet.

<http://mondulkiri-centre.org/uploads/Responsible%20eco-tourism.pdf>



If you have more time and want to volunteer, for a few weeks or a gap year or more, then the best advice is to do online research and arrange your trip through a responsible international volunteering agency. www.afid.org.uk; www.vsointernational.org; www.challengesworldwide.com. Do not leave it to chance, by casually coming across a stay while in-country. Too many volunteers find too late that they are doing harm and may have been duped. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatlife/9055213/Orphanage-tourism-help-or-hindrance.html>. The crucial question is “Do you have skills that are genuinely needed and not available locally?” If so, then a suitable host needs to be found and a good match made that maximizes the chances of both parties benefiting. That process is a specialist task. It needs professionals at the agency and in the host countries to do the homework. And if the placement is with children, then the same standards of developed countries must apply in developing ones – namely that you must be checked out properly through references and clearances by Police, etc. When arrangements are made properly, overseas volunteering usually works well. The alternative, now labeled “voluntourism” is giving volunteering a bad name.

Background Notes

- 1 I have been acting as in informal co-ordinator for a group of interested people and organizations that see the adverse publicity about “voluntourism” and its spawning of dubious “orphanages” is not yet working. We started to highlight the issue as long ago as 2007, since when the growth has escalated. I keep a file of recent articles. I chose the Madeline McCann lead to add resonance for target overseas markets to alert tourists before they leave home.
- 2 The best, most concerted advocacy plan is the “Childsafe” campaign within Cambodia involving Friends International, World Vision, etc. <http://childsafetourism.org> Twitter: @childsafetravel
- 3 I decided not to try to cover in this article options for ethical tourism such as visiting NGOs with handicraft outlets or who operate restaurants and vocational outlets for vulnerable people, although undoubtedly there are some good ones. Unfortunately, whereas the distinction is mainly clear when it come to “orphanages” (care within a normal family or community is far preferable), this is not so clear in what is a large, unregulated, and often casual sector catering for tourists. I know from my own experience, most recently in Mondulkiri, that some “NGO” outlets are not what they appear to be and some goods are not genuinely locally-produced indigenous products. The Cambodian Government has this year created a new ministry, of Industry and Handicrafts, that may work with the Ministry of Tourism on this issue. Previously the government’s main interest was in ASEAN initiated “One Village, One Product” idea that raised some concerns with some us in community development. <http://www.asean.org/news/asean-secretariat-news/item/asean-launches-one-village-one-product-guidelines>. We take the view that families and communities should not be overly-dependent on one product, as indeed tends to be the case with rice-farmers.
- 4 I was thinking of making the point and adding a plug for HelpAge International, as “In Cambodia, 79% of orphaned and vulnerable children are cared for by older people.” <http://www.helpageusa.org/support-us/giving-tuesday-match-her-generosity>. This is a valid point, but one I thought could detract from the main message in this article.