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Wednesday, August 11, 2010

The Pity Industry

(The following is a C&P compilation of some of the main points I have made in debating the orphanage tourism/voluntourism issue on various travel forums between 2005-2008, primarily on Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree forum.)

Volunteering at a Cambodian orphanage is the newest western tourist fad. Many tourists now want to donate a day or three, maybe even a week at a Cambodian orphanage, perhaps teach a little English, play with the kids, clean the floors, patch the roof, ect, etc. Tourists now schedule this into their holiday itineraries - a day in Phnom Penh, 3 at Angkor, 2 days at the orphanage, a couple more in Sihanoukville for some R&R and then back home to the grind - but to what end? Are they actually helping or are they contributing to the exploitation of Cambodia's most vulnerable - children and orphans?

No doubt, some volunteer efforts have a positive effect, particularly if the volunteer has some special skill, and especially back in the days before they were arriving by the busload with volunteering as part of the tour itinerary. But this faddish wave of tourist 'volunteers' with no special skills and dubious motivations pouring into Southeast Asia is not helpful, even if they think they are. They are driving the development of an exploitative industry that uses children and the disadvantaged to draw in customers, i.e. 'volunteers,' who will pay for the privilege of acting like and feeling as if they are helping poor people. Given the exploding numbers of these tourist 'volunteers' and the amount of money that can be made off of these people, the potential for the exploitation of the commodity that sits at the center of this industry, i.e. orphans, should be obvious to anybody who can stop patting herself on the back long enough to think about it objectively.

Consider very carefully your real motivations before engaging in this sort of dubious 'volunteer work.' Those who are honest with themselves may very well find it's more about the warm and fuzzy feelings generated in themselves by supposedly helping these children than by actually helping them. Think about it, in a country with a huge pool of underutilized human resources, both uneducated and educated, these places don't really need a bunch of short time foreign tourists to play with the kids, wash their hair and teach them football. Well, except in so far as that generates funds/donations for the orphanage, which is what allowing 'volunteers' into the orphanage is really about. As much of the tourist industry treats the third world like a human zoo, **these orphanages are the petting zoos of the Cambodian pity industry**, allowing your average Jane to play Angelina-for-a-Day, whether it is actually beneficial to the kids or not. If the real intent is to help, help fund a reputable orphanage, let them hire real care givers/teachers - local ones who could use the employment, who can serve as role models and with whom the children can bond. Don't take up their time, make the kids dance for their dinner and entertain the tourists.

For those still considering volunteering, consider the following questions:

To what degree are the children being exploited to entertain the foreigners and draw in donations? Sure, the kids seem to be having fun playing with a new set of strangers every few days, but is this what is best for them? Wouldn't they be better served with a stable set of people from their own culture trying to give them some semblance of a normal life rather than an ever changing flow of pitying, gift giving foreigners playing the savior Santa? Leaving aside that the kids may be being exploited by the orphanage to draw foreign money and the kids' time wasted by the foreigners, what is all this activity teaching the kids? What are they learning from this example of pitying, gift-giving white people? And if the orphanage is so poor that it needs foreign volunteers to clean the floors and wash the kids, do they have the resources to do a background check on these foreigners? If not, is it really worth the risk of letting in pedos and other abusers? And if they have Khmers running background checks and supervising the foreigners, wouldn't those local human resources be better utilized to clean the floors and wash the kids?

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are actually helpful, the volunteer game here is simply too dubious to be encouraged.

Labels: Cambodia, orphanage tourism, tourism, volunteering, voluntourism

7 comments:

 **Snap** October 11, 2010 at 4:06 PM

I guess the voluntourism will follow the likes of Thailand, where whole 'packages/visas' can be purchased. I agree on the short term that more damage, than good, could be done.

But, who is getting the money from the well intending tourists? Is it going towards aiding the orphans?

I'd love to volunteer (somewhere) long term, but fear I would get too attached.

Reply

Duncan Stuart November 20, 2010 at 8:51 AM

Interesting post. I'm involved in a school and orphanage near Siem Reap, and as a general observation I'd say that rural based organisations have a better chance of avoiding the photo-op tourists. I also feel that locally run organisations are starting to dialogue with each other a lot more - and once this happens we'll see much more self-empowerment. The relationships will be between like minded social workers rather than simply between directors and offshore supporters. I believe, and certainly hope that this is the case.

In 6 years of involvement I've met and corresponded with a range of volunteers - and what's struck me is how humble, by and large, most of these people really are, and how thoughtful they are about their role.

Lately there seems to have been a backlash toward volunteering in places like Cambodia. Ian Birrell's piece in the Observer recently struck me both as angry and highly sanctimonious. He was happy to sweep all volunteers into the same bucket of shame, and he chose not to find any examples where volunteering has helped make a genuinely positive difference. I found that disappointing.

I think several ingredients can help ensure a more successful outcome. Not everyone I know agrees with the first of these, but here goes;

- 1) Support a locally-run organisation rather than a foreign-based NGO. By and large, local solutions will trump foreign interventions.
- 2) Ensure the organisation is locally designed - a holistic solution to a social problem.
- 3) Bring a skill, a talent that the organisation is asking for.
- 4) Respect, not pity. Support, don't "give."
- 5) Look for transparency and equality. If there are workers getting first world salaries, then they don't really need a volunteer. Do they.
- 6) Visit on the basis that this is going to be the start of a long term commitment.

From out of the last item the project we support has introduced a range of services that lay outside the initial scope of the project - for example teaching of local unemployed adults, provision of free medical care to the community. Volunteers have been pivotal to making these things happen - as much through the commitment they maintained after going home. I guess the key between bad or good outcomes comes down to the quality of relationship. That's where the city-based streetfront orphanages are at a disadvantage.

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