

**C**ần Thơ City is at the center of the Mekong Delta with an area of 1,389.6 square kilometers and a population of 1,137,295 people. It is 169 kilometers from HCMC and has a system of numerous rivers and canals that provide fresh water to its fertile fields and gardens. Cần Thơ is the only city in Vietnam that occupies a length of 60km along the Mekong River and includes a green corridor composed of many islets, such as Tân Lộc, Sơn, Khương, Âu, and Cái Khế, etc.

Besides Vietnamese residents, there are two major ethnic groups in Cần Thơ. They are Chinese and Khmer communities. They have lived here for generations, and many festivals in Cần Thơ come from their religious and traditional lives. Peaceful existence between the three groups allows their culture and religions to mingle, which leads to popular festivals for everybody without discrimination. These festivals are also recognized and encouraged by local government. There are also some traditional guilds making mates, sampans and boats, fishing net or thin pastry. However, all of these traditional and cultural features are not included in tourism products.

As for infrastructure and facilities, Cần Thơ has 19 tourism sites and recreational grounds (the most famous are Ninh Kiều Quay, Floating Market, Water Park, Mỹ Khánh Village, Western Cultural Park, Thủy Tiên Eco-Tourism Site, Ông Pagoda, and Bình Thủy Ancient House). Most of these sites, however, didn't receive attention and investment from the tourism authorities. Most tourism agencies live on existing resources and tourism products. They lack professional manner and services and have never thought of a long-term strategy for their business.

There are 102 hotels with 2,477 rooms and 4,043 beds but only 23 of them are ranked from one to four stars;

## On Cần Thơ Potentials for Sustainable Tourism

by BÙI ANH TUẤN



along with 26 restaurants of some size, and several dancing halls, theaters, swimming pools, tennis courts, supermarkets. Generally, facilities for satisfying various needs of tourists are poor.

These factors explain why Cần Thơ fails to attract tourists, even domestic ones, and most tourists stay no more than a few days. Most of visitors come there on business.

In recent years, many efforts have been made to give Cần Thơ a facelift. Sidewalks in Ninh Kiều, Bình Thủy and Cái Răng Districts have been paved and lined with trees. The Ninh Kiều Quay has been rebuilt and brought into operation on April 30, 2004, which made it cleaner and more beautiful in spite of increasing flows of passengers.

The Cần Thơ Export and Import of Farm Products Company has invested some VND30 billion in the Phú Sa Tourism Site by the would-be Cần Thơ Bridge. A restaurant, a flower

garden, a small forest by a river and a 30-hectare fruit orchard along with paths and bridges have been built there, making it a scene of the rural South. It also includes a one-hectare pond for crocodiles and cottages on stilts for tourists who want to spend the night there.

The plan to build the Cái Khế Islet Resort on an area of nine hectares with an investment of VND150 billion has been approved and investors are invited to put money in a restaurant and a plaza of 1,500 seats, and a 15-story hotel facing the Hoa Sứ Restaurant and Tân An Temple.

In the 80-hectare Khương Islet Resort, a main road and a bridge have been built. It's estimated that this resort costs VND60 billion. The plan to build road on this islet has been approved by the municipal authorities and it will be carried out in the last quarter of 2006. The HCMC-based Suối Tiên Tourism Corporation also



promised to invest in the recreation ground in this resort.

The tourism authority has helped revamp relics, ancient pagodas and temples, and encouraged traditional festivals, such as Cholchnam Thmay and Donta of Khmer people.

Thốt Nốt District authority has submitted to the municipal government a plan to develop tourism sites associated with traditional guilds and build a line of cable car from Thốt Nốt Town to the Tân Lộc Bridge.

In the near future when the Trà Nóc Airport, Cái Cui Port, Cần Thơ Bridge and Western Cultural Center come into operation, Cần Thơ will have better conditions for developing new tourism products. The development of the Cần Thơ Tourism in recent years has fallen short of all expectations, which shows itself in the following facts.

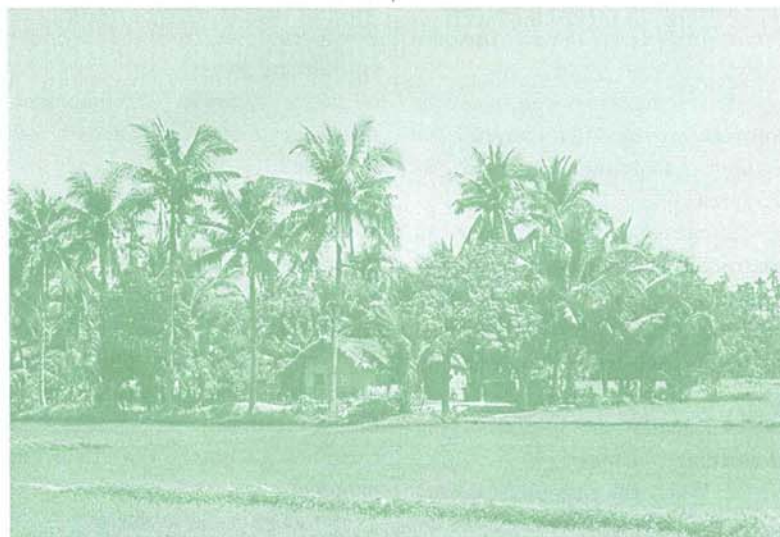
- Flow of tourists: The flow rose quickly in recent years but most of them are domestic tourists. Their stay is usually short and they don't spend too much money because tourism products and services are poor. There is almost no visitor who returns to Cần Thơ because of its attractions.

- Human resource of the tourism industry: The proportion of employees who finished tertiary education and had some knowledge of foreign language is very small. Managerial skills and services are poor and their operations are not professional enough. There are only a few tour guides and they lack experience. Generally, the labor force of the tourism industry can't meet the requirements posed by the task of persuading visitors to come back.

- Participation of local authorities and communities: They fail to realize benefits brought about by tourism services with the result that they become passive in cooperating with tourism agencies.

- Development plan: Although the master plan for the Cần Thơ tourism

industry has been worked out and amended, it could be obsolete when Cần Thơ became a city equaling to a province. In addition, implementation of this plan is not done actively and many infrastructure projects couldn't be completed, which causes obstacles to the development of the tourism industry.



- Role of the tourism in local economy: Tourist receipts are small. Accommodation and food account for the best part of these receipts because most visitors find nothing to spend their money on. In short, Cần Thơ lacks unique and diverse products needed for encouraging tourists to prolong their stay, thereby increasing its tourist receipts.

At present, the tourism industry in Vietnam is developing well and achieving good results with great support by both central and local governments in spite of many difficulties and obstacles. Cần Thơ, with its potentials for tourism development and favorable position in the Mekong Delta, has failed to tap them to develop its own tourism industry and encourage surrounding provinces to achieve the same target. Beautiful scenes, the life on rivers and canals, cheap and delicious dishes made of fresh vegetables and aquatic products, abundant supply of fruits all year

round, fresh air and moderate temperature and hospitality of local residents are Cần Thơ's advantages in attracting tourists from home and abroad.

The absence of such famous landscapes as ones found in Hà Tiên, Nha Trang, Vũng Tàu or Đà Lạt forces Cần Thơ to develop its own tourism products. Based on its natural condi-

tions and cultural traditions, Cần Thơ can develop tours on rivers and canals to visit traditional guilds and vast fruit orchards; get accustomed to the local way of life on boats; and enjoy fresh food and traditional music, or attend local festivals. These products, for the time being, must be targeted at tourists of the middle-class and backpackers who don't require luxurious facilities. Of course, the development of such products requires support and cooperation of local authorities in organizing annual festivals, trade fairs and other cultural events.

In the trend of globalization and international integration, Cần Thơ will certainly face keen competition from other provinces and foreign tourism agencies as well. This situation forces its tourism industry to take measures to make the best use of local advantages and offer unique products to tourists. Its sustainable development will be determined by its effort to protect the environment and traditional culture ■