

# MEASURES TO DEVELOP CAMBODIAN TOURISM

by MEcon. EM PUTHY

The Kingdom of Cambodia, with its unparalleled cultural heritage and pristine tropical ecology, offers a multitude of fascinating experiences for the modern-day tourist.

At the top of the list is the Angkor complex of temples in the province of Siem Reap where more than 400 square kilometers are dotted with the enormous cultural remains

of visitor is always welcome to share the occasion. Cambodian New Year in April, the Royal Ploughing Ceremony in May, the Spirits Commemoration Festival in September, and the Bonn Kathen, Water Festivals, and Independence Day in November, are all unique opportunities to observe the richness of Cambodian culture and history.

The Kingdom's capital - Phnom

promising. The reason is that the Cambodian Government has implemented an open-air policy to permit flights from big cities of regional countries to enter the Angkor Wat zone and the Cambodian political situation is rather stable. Moreover, the recent American film "Tomb Raider" has been shot at Angkor Wat Temple with Hollywood film star Angelina Jolie. All has revitalized the



of the ancient Khmer civilization. Angkor Wat itself - the world's largest religious monument - dominates the landscape and is truly one of the architectural wonders of humankind.

Along Cambodia's coastline on the Gulf of Siam lie unspoiled beaches as well as pristine coral islands basking offshore in the radiant tropical sun. The Kingdom's forest reserves are lush and hikers can experience the cool scent of clean mountain air as it weaves through gentle stands of luxuriant foliage.

The country's festivals are a chance for Cambodians to celebrate both culture and religion, and the for-

Penh - is home to the National Museum with its priceless collection of Angkorean antiquities. At the National Theater presentations of the epic dance drama - the Ramayana - transport audiences into a timeless realm of myth and legend.

Cambodian artisans, practicing traditions passed down from generation to generation, produce an impressive array of handicrafts in silver, wood, silk, stone and precious gems.

Just because of these endowed features, the Cambodian tourism industry is experiencing a robust growth and its future prospects are

Cambodian tourism sector which has been ailing for a long time.

Nick Lord, the author of the book "Cambodia: A Lonely Planet" said this country was deserved resurrection. "The tourism is about to become crazy. People watch film and want to take a sightseeing tour in Cambodia in order to know it is the real land and say that if Hollywood can come, they can too" noted the writer. As a result, since the Government has drawn up proper policies on tourism and give incentives to this sector as well as the picture of Angkor Wat was pictured by Hollywood cameramen, the number of visitors increase

27-30% per year. In 2001, Cambodian tourism industry attracted 605,000 foreign visitors and earned US\$345 million. Nevertheless, the country's infrastructure has yet to catch up with this rapid growth. In addition, the social and environmental costs are very high in particular cases. Furthermore, most of tourists concentrate in Phnom Penh and Siem Riep. To make the Cambodia tourist sector face a sustainable development and produce huge profits and become a pillar of the economy, some following problems should be settled as soon as possible.

### 1. To upgrade the transport network

The Cambodian infrastructure remains a hard-to-solve problem to the socio-economic development including the tourism growth. Although the Government has emphasized the infrastructure improvement by seeking assistance from international donors, damaged roads are slowly rebuilt because of difficult access to this resource. Even when one road is rehabilitated, the sharp increase in municipal traffic and lack of means of regular maintenance has spoiled it worse than the remedy.

Since the transport infrastructure is backward, many tourist sites have no longer allured sightseers and thus become desolated for many years. The Preah Vihear is an example as well as historical sites in western Cambodia. The obsolete roads also slowed down cross-border tourism. If the transport infrastructure is upgraded, the tourist sector will see a bright future. For example, National Highways 1, 5 and 6 are important links between the country's eastern and western region and their rehabilitation will spur the Cambodian inbound and outbound travel.

The road networks around Tonle Sap Lake must be improved as soon as possible because they also help promote tourism, especially for visitors coming on foot or by ship. This is also an opportunity to develop the ecological tourism around Tonle Sap. Furthermore, river ports in Siem Riep and Phnom Penh should be essentially upgraded.

Airports are also major tools to bolster the tourist sector. When the number of visitors reaches one million per year, the Pochentong airport in Phnom Penh can not meet the transport requirements. The annual growth rate of international visitors in Cambodia indicates that this airport will be overloaded in the next

five years. The same situation is facing the Siem Riep Airport. As a result, the expansion of this airport is a must. Furthermore, the Cambodian tourist authority should upgrade all historical sites destroyed by war. The entertainment centers should be also built in these areas to attract more and more tourists.

### 2. To ensure security, safety and order in tourism

The social security and order and political stability are very important factors in economic and tourism development. Those countries which keep their politics stable and ensure security for visitors will have strong comparative advantages to charm tourists and additionally create most favorable conditions for development investment in tourism, for example, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and so on. Therefore, the Cambodian Government and local authorities must make great efforts to reach this objective with a view to increasing fast the number of international and domestic visitors in the following years. At present, the common trend is short tours, family tours, and group tours rather than delegation tours or package program tours. This taste will make tourist administration face more challenges.

In such a situation, the Cambodian Government should build an effective system of tourist security and safety. This problem requires not only strong endeavors from police, military and tourism authorities but also close collaboration and integration between local governments, relevant agencies, political parties and mass organizations' movements. Only by doing so, can the political security and social safety be maintained for economic and tourist development.

In my opinion, the following measures should be implemented to reach the above target:

- To improve and perfect the system to manage visitors residing temporarily in hotels and guesthouses or coming to dancing clubs, bars, karaoke, discotheque, casino with courteous but very close formalities to ensure safety for visitors and meet requirements of social security and safety.

- To establish the army of "tourist police" affiliated to the national police. The budget will be partly allocated by the tourist sector. This army will be on permanent patrol in the city center, tourist sites, beauty spots and historical sites ...in order to keep order, settle and pro-

tect legal rights of tourists on time when they are cheated or their properties stolen or robbed. This force should be trained in foreign language, security and communications and paid satisfactorily so that they have favorable conditions and motivation for fulfilling their duties.

### 3. To improve tourist information, advertising and marketing

In Cambodia, the activities of tourist advertising and marketing remain restricted. This is an extremely important task to attract visitors as well as promote consciousness of the whole people and relevant agencies. The survey conducted by the Ministry of Tourism in 1999 revealed only 35% of foreign visitors understood Cambodian history and people via tourist operators while 43% of them surf Internet to seek information about this nation. Since the Internet fee drops sharply, the number of Internet users increase fast over the world. Especially, the local and overseas advertising and marketing of the Cambodian tourism sector should pay attention to the following points:

- To specify significant markets for advertising and marketing and proactively participate in international forums and conferences.

- To utilize Internet facilities for marketing tourism products by designing attractive and information-rich websites.

- To publish publications on tourism products and diffuse them in international fairs and exhibitions, conferences, workshops, forums and professional travel agents.

- To produce films, videos and television advertising programs, CD-ROMs, VCDs, and DVDs for targeted markets.

- To advertise tour programs on domestic and overseas television, newspapers, and magazines; undertake close collaboration with international tourism institutions including WTO, PATA, ASEANTA and so on; establish tourist promotion offices and centers abroad and make favorable conditions for local tour operators to set up their rep offices overseas, especially in regional countries including Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Japan, China...

- To design and launch the Gold Triangle Tour based on joint operations among Bangkok (Thailand), Siem Riep (Cambodia) and Hồ Chí Minh City (Vietnam); enhance the size and quality of tour programs HCMC - Phnom Penh - Siem Riep which remain ailing; and reduce ticket price for international visitors

at the Angkor Temple, especially those coming from neighboring countries so that they are given incentives to visit Angkor Wat.

#### 4. To boost human resource and service quality

Like other economic sectors, the human factor, professional skill, and service quality are determinants to the tourist industry development. Tourism is the industry requiring direct and wide contact with customers. It requires professional skills, good and courteous communication style and behavior of the sector's staff, especially tour guides and receptionists.

Cambodian tourist sector is still embryonic in managing and providing services up to international standard for first-class visitors. The CDRI survey in Siem Riep disclosed these visitors felt disappointed at transport means and poor knowledge of tour guides. Tour guides play a very important role in tourist promotion because if visitors have been interested in tour guides' explanations, they will be very eager to introduce tour programs to their relatives and friends. They can do that only if they are carefully trained in knowledge and communication skills.

To meet the above requirements, it is time to work out a national training program with specific plans on fresh and additional training, enhancing knowledge and professional skill of workers in ministries, state agencies, joint ventures and private companies. The training program should include major contents:

- To examine and classify professional skills of all employees engaging in tourist activities; thereby work out specific training plans to meet development requirements of the Cambodian tourist sector.

- To build a training center including hotel services Phnom Penh so that students can learn practical lessons and experience through these services.

- To assign appropriate jobs to those who have been trained in specialized courses and give them more incentives so that they do their tasks well.

- Joint venture and private enterprises are required to offset their budget to pay costs of travel to countries having developed tourism for working, conducting surveys or attending conferences and workshops.

- To set up and promote a special program to improve the peo-

ple's courteous behavior hospitality to international visitors by means of media including television, radio, newspapers, magazines and high schools.

#### 5. To inject investment in recreation centers

At present, Cambodia has a few recreation centers. In addition, their scale remains small and does not satisfy requirements of local and international visitors. Nevertheless, to attract more visitors to Angkor Wat, we should invest in construction of recreation centers and resorts in big cities including Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville, Siem Riep, Kep...with

#### 6. To rehabilitate and protect environment and social order

The Cambodian government is required to pay more attention to the protection of environment and social order. The sex industry is booming like tourism. To overcome this situation, the government's regulations must be strictly executed. The Tourism Ministry should be sure that tour guides and operators recognize these social evils and are trained to keep them away.

On the other hand, tourism development may cause harm to the environment. To reduce this effect, the authorities should plan a program to



modern recreation facilities like Disneyland, Universal Studio in the U.S. or Saigon Water Park, Vietnam Water World, Đầm Sen, Suối Tiên in Vietnam.

This is an urgent requirement helping diversify tourism forms and products and make the Cambodian tourism industry a tourist magnet in the next years. The following investment projects should be realized:

- To upgrade and expand activities and create original and modern entertainment centers in targeted sites.

- To develop current green parks into new recreation centers including Lake Bueong, Porper Phnom, Tonle Baty, Phnom Tamao, Kirirum...

- To upgrade stadiums in Phnom Penh including Olympic, Olymber and sports complexes in big cities and build fair and exhibition centers.

develop more green parks in and around cities, encourage inhabitants to grow trees, and ban them from cutting or burning trees for cultivation.

The Cambodian should also rehabilitate the tropical forests around Tonle Sap, along Mekong River and the coastline. These areas may be developed into ideal ecological tourist sites which are strongly attractive to local and foreign visitors.

These above solutions require huge investment capital. These capital flows may come from the state budget, foreign aids, official development assistance, joint ventures and others.

The potential resources of the Cambodian tourism industry remain untapped. We hope these aforesaid solutions may be useful to the sector's full-fledged development in the first decades of the twenty-first century. ■

#### NOTES

(1) <http://www.visit-mekong.com>