

# 'Orphanage Tourism' in Cambodia

## When Residential Care Centres Become Tourist Attractions

Tess Guiney

*Abstract: Cambodia's recent history of instability has garnered it international notoriety as a place of genocide, corruption and insecurity. Currently, this perception of Cambodia has resulted in an influx of tourists seeking to volunteer at and visit orphanages throughout the country hoping to combat the perceived poverty and suffering. With only 21 state-run orphanages in Cambodia the remaining 248 (although it is potentially even more) rely significantly on overseas donations with many advertising and heavily encouraging 'orphanage tourism'. Although touted as an altruistic, beneficial experience, awareness of the darker side of 'orphanage tourism' has recently grown and the negative impacts that such practices can have on a vulnerable section of society have become evident. Orphan numbers in Cambodia are at their lowest point in decades, whilst orphanage numbers have undergone a 76 per cent increase in the last five years, coinciding with a 76 per cent increase in tourist numbers. This research investigates the forms that 'orphanage tourism' takes in Cambodia and the impacts of this popular phenomenon on those who are purported to benefit: orphanages and orphans.*

**Key Words:** Orphanage tourism; 'voluntourism'; Cambodia; orphans

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'Orphanage tourism' (visiting, volunteering and performances at orphanages for tourists) has become a burgeoning tourism form in countries throughout the world, however, it is yet to undergo rigorous examination in existing literature. This research focuses on the interaction between tourists and orphanages in Cambodia which, with its history of instability, has become an important site for voluntourism and poverty tourism, of which orphanage tourism is a dominant form. This article seeks to illustrate the pervasiveness of orphanage tourism in Cambodia and the significant impact it is having on those centres participating. Firstly, the methodology of this research will be explained before moving on to examine the existing literature and the gaps that this research seeks to fill. A brief outline of tourism in Cambodia is then given before moving on to examine the form that orphanage tourism in Cambodia takes. Finally, the impacts (both positive and negative) of orphanage tourism will be examined to illustrate the significance of such a phenomenon in a nation such as Cambodia.



## Methodology

The research methodology for this project was qualitative in nature. The constructivist component of qualitative methodology is particularly relevant to my research topic, as a significant portion of my data collection will focus on personal opinion and perception about volunteer tourism and Cambodia as a destination. These are not objective accounts, but rather the impressions and interpretations of specific people (see Sarantakos, 2005). The orphanages interviewed differ greatly from each other making quantitative data collection impossible as not all parameters are the same. Semi-structured interviews as well as focus groups were conducted due to their usefulness in determining opinions and information about various orphanages and about volunteer experiences. They also allowed flexibility as not all questions were applicable in all situations. Complete anonymity of both representatives and orphanages will be maintained throughout this article as it is not my objective to give a road-map of unscrupulous organisations in Cambodia; also I was concerned that without complete anonymity many issues would not be freely discussed.

Interviews and focus groups with 42 key informants were conducted from March until May 2011. These key informants included representative from fifteen different orphanages (22 orphanage representatives, sixteen volunteers), a spokesperson for Friends International (who work with marginalised urban children and youth), and three representatives for a responsible tourism organisation in Siem Reap. Several internet searches identified the majority of orphanage key informants, although several were identified through snowball sampling, as was the responsible tourism organisation in Siem Reap. Volunteers were identified when visiting different orphanages and interviewing volunteers present during those visits. Due to the web-based method used to identify orphanages there could be a particular bias as it does not include those which do not have a website, and therefore potentially favours those which have larger tourism programmes, however, due to the difficulties in locating orphanages this was unavoidable. The bulk of the orphanages visited were in the main tourist areas of Siem Reap, Phnom Penh, and one from Battambang

Nevertheless, one was from Takeo and another from the surrounding Takeo area which are more removed from the main tourist trail. However, it is intended that this will be extended in 2012 during a second research trip to include a wider range of orphanages, including more in rural areas.

## Existing literature

Tourism since the 1980s has diversified greatly and there has been an increased interest in alternative tourism options (Callanan & Thomas, 2005). Niche tourism approaches are often seen as more sustainable, less environmentally or socially damaging and more responsive to tourist and host needs (Robinson & Novelli, 2005; Wearing, 2004). Callanan and Thomas (2005, 183) depict the late 1990s and early 2000s as experiencing the 'volunteer tourism rush' and this has led to tourist activity in previously unknown areas, as has poverty tourism which has taken tourism's reach into previously avoided areas. 'Orphanage tourism', encompassing both volunteer tourism and poverty tourism, is by no means unique to Cambodia; it is occurring throughout nations in Africa, Latin America and Asia (Birrell, 2011; Richter & Norman, 2010; Kelto, 2010). However, it is an under-researched area within the existing literature. Although a vast amount of literature focuses on volunteer tourism (see Wearing, 2001; Guttentag, 2009; Tomazos & Butler 2009, 2010; Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Lyons & Wearing, 2008 to name but a few) there has been a failure to examine orphanage tourism to a significant extent.

The most substantial study on orphanage tourism comes from Richter and Norman (2010) in their examination of 'AIDS orphan tourism' in sub-Saharan Africa. They note that the global perception of an AIDS orphan crisis has created a recent explosion of tourist attention and predominantly western desire to travel and help care for these children. The main concerns raised by Richter and Norman (2010) relate to the impact that institutional care and western visitors has on the social and psychological development of the children. This is a rigorous examination of orphanage tourism and adds significantly to literature on volunteer tourism, however, it appears to be the only existing academic examination specifically focusing specifically

on orphanage tourism. This gap fails to reflect that community welfare programmes, including orphanage volunteering, is the most popular form of volunteer tourism (Callanan & Thomas, 2005).

Other literature does examine orphanage tourism in some form. Lacey et al (2012) examine the potential for understanding the 'other' that can be gained while volunteering at an orphanage. Tomazos and Butler (2008) also use an orphanage volunteering project as their case study, though it is not to specifically examine orphanage volunteering but rather the motivation to volunteer. Barbieri et al (2011) similarly use a case study of volunteering at an orphanage to illustrate the need for greater managerial actions and transparency; however, it is limited in its actual examination of the orphanage and the orphans themselves. Also, although volunteering is an integral part of orphanage tourism, my study seeks to go further than this to also examine orphanage visits and cultural performances which have transformed many orphanages from homes into tourist attractions and are reflective of poverty tourism in many countries. In addition, no data currently exists about orphanage tourism in Cambodia specifically.

My research seeks to examine four key questions:

1. What are the primary forms of tourism interaction with orphanages?
2. How are tourist interactions with orphanages regulated and are there standards in place?
3. How is Cambodia, as a tourist destination, perceived and framed and what contribution do orphanages make to this?
4. What are the benefits and problems associated with tourist interactions with orphanages?

I feel that these research questions produce a well-rounded basis for an examination of orphanage tourism in Cambodia. It considers both the rationale of people participating in such tourism as well as the form it takes and the benefits and consequences it causes.

## 'Orphanage Tourism' in Cambodia

The tourism industry is Cambodia's second largest economic contributor,

amounting to 16 per cent of GDP in 2006; with over two million arrivals per year since 2007 this is on the increase (Chheang, 2008). “The Greater Mekong Subregion has been identified as the fastest growing tourism destination in the world [...] after receiving over 1 million arrivals in 2004 Cambodia’s market is expected to continue to grow by 20-30 per cent growth for the coming years”. Cambodia is perceived as an exciting and exotic destination, and as an alternative to traditional destinations such as Europe (Hitchcock et al., 2009). With the stagnation of Cambodia’s traditional industries, such as textiles, tourism’s influence continues to increase (Hitchcock et al., 2009).

Cambodian orphanages are regulated under the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veteran and Youth Rehabilitation (MOSVY). Currently, orphanages must be registered with MOSVY and therefore follow minimum standards, created in 2008, to continue operation. The minimum standards required of orphanages relate to the provision of medical and dental care along with three meals a day, clean drinking water, regular clothing and other necessities such as sleeping materials and hygiene materials such as tooth brushes and first aid kits. There are also requirements that children are given the opportunity to participate in community, recreation, leisure and sporting opportunities, to practice religion etcetera. Children are to be allowed contact and visits from their families and be able to access counselling if they have come from traumatic backgrounds. Children must also be provided with at least nine years of schooling. There are also requirements for the buildings of orphanages as well as criteria for the management and the caregivers of such centres (MOSVY, 2008). However, from key informant interviews in 2011 it appeared that some orphanages were not visited regularly or that standards were checked thoroughly. One orphanage director even commented that orphanages that were not registered with MOSVY did not have to follow their standards and were not under their jurisdiction, meaning that they could not be closed down by MOSVY.

Although officially registration requires minimum standards of care the situation in different orphanages differs significantly due to the amount of funding that different orphanages re-



Source: Tess Guiney

Daily cultural performance at a Siem Reap orphanage

ceive. There is no government support for orphanages in Cambodia; therefore, orphanages are heavily reliant on overseas donations/charities for funding, leading the way for orphanage tourism. Currently, there is no overarching government policy relating to orphanage tourism in Cambodia. Therefore, different orphanages have their own policies regulating tourists. However, this is set to change with a draft law being created to regulate orphanage tourism.

Visitors were accepted at all but one of the fifteen orphanages interviewed and volunteers were encouraged at all but two. The number of visitors and volunteers varies significantly between the fifteen orphanages interviewed, some receiving hundreds of visitors a month and some receiving very few or none. Many orphanages actively encourage visitors and volunteers by advertising in local hotels, guesthouses or shops, or through distributing pamphlets, some even sending orphans to busy tourist areas, especially in Siem Reap, to encourage donations and visits. Others are even mentioned in Lonely Planet Cambodia, on [www.tripadvisor.co.uk](http://www.tripadvisor.co.uk) or similar travel guides. All the orphanages visited have a website, although this could be a reflection of my research methodology and its limitations, several also have a Facebook or other social media pages.

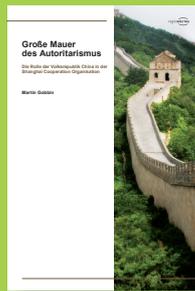
Volunteers are generally short term, a few days to a few weeks, although some do stay long term. Volunteers’ roles differ between orphanages, primarily teaching English or other skills, they take activities or play with the children. Other orphanages use volun-

teers to increase staff capacity rather than to educate the children or for specific needs such as one which sought a volunteer for survival swim coaching and another for piano lessons. For visitors, some have visiting hours that are more about education than interaction with children and some do not allow photography. Others I spoke to said they continued orphanage tourism out of necessity and would prefer to stop if they had alternative funding.

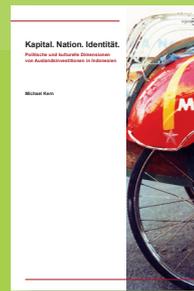
Some orphanages host cultural performances, some every night, or for visitors giving donations. Increasingly, big hotels also ask orphanages to perform for their guests as they recognise its appeal to tourists. Some orphanages receive several hundred visitors per month, the busiest appear to be those which host performances, others had received only five in 2010, and another enforced a policy of absolutely no visitors at their orphanage. The majority of centres take a relaxed approach to visitors, allowing ‘walk-ins’ at any time of day. However, a few take a more structured approach, with visiting hours or organised visits. Similarly, volunteer numbers vary greatly. Two of the orphanages visited have a strict no volunteers policy, three others only allow longer-term volunteers, those willing to stay a minimum of either three or six months. However, the remaining ten orphanages visited allowed volunteers for any length of time, often with no arrangements made prior to arrival. The orphanage of key informant 7, possibly the most popular orphanage in Cambodia for volunteers, received 600 volunteers in the two years prior to my interview. However, others sta-

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ted that they had received three the previous year and none so far that year (interviewed in May 2011).

## 'Orphanage Tourism' impacts

Orphanage volunteering is often described both by sending organisations and orphanages as a meaningful, worthwhile experience which helps those who are disadvantaged in 'developing' nations. However, recent newspaper articles, documentaries and campaigns now indicate that the negative impacts of 'orphanage tourism' can be devastating. This section will outline the main positives and negatives of orphanage tourism in Cambodia.

The most frequently stated benefit of 'orphanage tourism' was the financial benefit from volunteers and visitors; many orphanages stated that without 'orphanage tourism' they would be unable to continue their work. Key Informant 1, an orphanage director, stated simply that

"If no tourists, no donation to this orphanage there will be no staff and no children, no food, no everything here."

Visitors and volunteers donate both at the time of their visit and in the future, some even raising money from friends, family and fundraisers in their own countries. Many volunteers and

visitors went on to sponsor large building projects, to provide equipment or to sponsor children. Therefore, it is clear that 'orphanage tourism' is a significant form of revenue in a nation often defined by its poverty. With significant leakage of money overseas being a common occurrence of tourism in the 'developing world' (see Scheyvens, 2011) it could be argued that 'orphanage tourism' is a more responsive and responsible form of tourism because the money is going to local organisations rather than to international actors. Indeed the majority of orphanages interviewed stated that they avoided large international gap year or volunteer sending organisations because the money did not go to the orphanage projects, but rather to the sending organisation.

There was also recognition that the educational opportunities provided by the volunteers were vital, not only for the children but also for increasing staff capacity. In a country such as Cambodia where the education system is described as inadequate, corrupt or costly for poor families, education is seen as a vital tool to overcome poverty but one that many struggle to achieve (Brinkley, 2011). The opportunity for children to learn English was the primary educational benefit noted, with English seen as the route for employment opportunities. The ability to

acquire free, native English speakers is seen as invaluable: Key Informant 3, an orphanage spokesperson, stated

"I think you can't beat having native speakers to practice with."

and this was repeated by multiple key informants. Several key informants also said that volunteers were able to role model different career options for the children and provided knowledge of the world and other cultures that Cambodian orphans would otherwise be unable to witness. Similarly, some stated that 'orphanage tourism' helps to raise awareness and understanding of the Cambodian culture, with many volunteers interviewed stating that they felt they were able to experience the 'real Cambodia' and gain more insight than conventional tourists. Simpson (2004, 688), conversely, is pessimistic of the knowledge gained by volunteering, concluding that

"The limited critical engagement within gap year projects means that students are able to confirm, rather than challenge, that which they already know."

This appears to perhaps ring true in Cambodia, with many stereotypical descriptions repeated by key informants, such as the oft-repeated 'poor

but happy' cliché often associated with Cambodia. It is clear that many support and encourage 'orphanage tourism' and that it could be providing an important service for the children in Cambodia.

Nevertheless, increasingly awareness has risen about the negative impacts that 'orphanage tourism' can have on the vulnerable children in these centres. The most often repeated concern from key informants was the child protection issues that having tourists in orphanages raised, specifically paedophiles which are a major concern in Cambodia. In 2005 Coates stated that up to 22 per cent of all tourists to Cambodia came for sex, and this statistic, or similar, was reiterated throughout interviews with orphanage directors. Key Informant 2, an orphanage director, stated that he has been approached by a Westerner passing his orphanage asking if it allowed sex with the children, clearly illustrating that indeed this is an issue in Cambodia, and one that is unlikely dealt with in such an upfront manner on most occasions.

Similarly, questions are being asked about whether some forms of orphanage tourism were actually exploiting those children it professes to help. Such concerns generally related to the exploitation of children by the centres themselves. One concern which UNICEF and Friends International

have become increasingly concerned about is some orphanage actors as "unscrupulous people"...engaging in a charity business and using children to make money" (Carmichael, 2011a). Key informants reported cases of children kept in states of poverty to engender continued donations from tourists whilst directors were receiving significant donations for the children (Key Informant 19).

From key informant interviews cultural performances were identified as a particularly problematic practice. Some stated performances were similar to monkeys having to dance for their food, or dolphins performing in shows. One orphanage director stated that one child within their orphanage had been moved by her family to his orphanage because she was so unhappy having to dance every night (Key Informant 35). Another key concern was the practice of orphanages sending children around Pub Street to encourage donations or visits to their orphanage with Key Informant 3, an orphanage spokesperson, stating:

"If you're taking children off the streets...and they're no longer having to beg, what are the ethics of having kids out there at 10 o'clock at night dancing and inviting you to come and visit their orphanage? How is that any

different to them being out there at 10 o'clock at night asking for a dollar from a tourist? And how is it any safer?"

Another serious potential problem identified is that 'orphanage tourism' can actually separate children from their parents with allegations that some orphanages seek out poor families, in some cases even offering money, if they send their children to orphanages. Coates (2005, 8) writes

How do I explain that some orphans have parents, some kids are stolen, some children are sold for a small sum? Sometimes a broker from Phnom Penh will appear in a village and tell a young mother:

"Give me the kid. I'll pay you \$50, and you'll get pictures of the child's happy new life overseas."

And the broker will go away, with the kid in her arms, and the mother will think it's all for the best. But she starts to wonder when the letters don't come – they never arrive – and she never hears another word of her child

Although writing primarily about the trade in children for international adoptions, similar practices have arisen due to the high demand for orphans as a tourist attraction. The Indepen-



Dance at Siem Reap orphanage

Source: Tess Guiney

dent article by Carmichael (2011b) states that the UNICEF representative in Cambodia “Mr Bridle said even those tourists and volunteers who visited with good intentions were sustaining a system that was separating children from their families.” The article notes that many aid organisations in Cambodia “suspect that those running homes for children are enticing more parents to give up their children with promises of food, shelter and, crucially in Cambodia, education” (Carmichael, 2011b). In addition, orphanages are seen as ‘sexy’ for donors and tourists but can actually divert resources and attention from community development projects which keep children in homes and can be seen as taking jobs from locals, increasing poverty. One tourist I spoke with had recently visited an orphanage and stated that he was concerned with some of their projects as the orphanage stated that it was helping some of the children’s families by giving them donation or animals, however, he feared that potentially it could have been in exchange for letting their children live at the orphanage.

There can also be numerous psychological issues due to lack of privacy with children taking on the persona of a performing animal as they may internalise the perception of difference which orphanage tourism encourages (Key Informant 8, Friends International Representative). Literature and interviews with key informants suggest that attachment issues are created due to the inconsistency of the bonds created which is in keeping with Richter and Norman’s (2010) findings. Multiple key informants, both orphanage directors and volunteers, raised concerns about the potential loss that children feel when volunteers leave and the possibility that they will then be unable to form healthy relationships later in life.

## Conclusion

Founded on perceptions of poverty and of aiding ‘others’ in ‘developing’ countries ‘orphanage tourism’ has become a significant tourist form in Cambodia, alongside many other ‘developing’ nations. This research clearly illustrates the prevalence of orphanage tourism in Cambodia. Many orphanages rely heavily on tourists for both

revenue and teachers and claim that it is of great benefit for the children within their centres. Others, however, claim that although primarily founded on the best of intentions there can be many negative impacts from orphanage tourism, especially if there are no regulations in place. The possibility of creating lasting attachment issues, the internalisation of notions of difference, separating children from their families and contributing to corruption in some centres can have significant and long lasting effects. However, although orphanage tourism has been increasingly labelled as problematic it is unclear what could happen to the children in these centres if orphanage tourism ceased and centres were unable to operate which makes this an extremely complicated issue.

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