

Why Cultural Tourism?

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Travels and tours are not recent novelties but have been the natural extension of the spirit of adventure and curiosity, inherent in man since ancient times. In the past, people went on tours as the by-product of travelling on pilgrimage, trading exchange or visits to relatives. However, what was once a by-product has now turned into a worldwide economic activity, and some countries' top industry, generating much-needed foreign exchange earnings.

The tourism industry has extensively been taking advantage of raw materials that surround us everywhere. In the context of tourism, we classify "raw materials" or "tourism resources" into three categories:

1. Art, Culture, Tradition and Human Activities;
2. Historical, Archaeological, and religious sites and objects;
3. Natural sites.

Tourism resources would then be the environment or the eco-system which consists of the relationships between all aspects of the surroundings of an organism, including both living and Non-Living things.

Culture is a social heritage and expresses itself in human behavior, social relationships, fine arts and religious rituals, all forms of production and technology. Although many intellectuals try to give their definitions of culture in different aspects, it is an acceptable man-made productivity to serve human and social needs for a quality of life which passes from generations to generations. Culture is differentiated in a wide variety of patterns that characterise the various societies and peoples, each creating its own culture in its own specific setting, which reflect the unity within a human community.

This indicates that culture is a part of the environment or the eco-system, which include tourism resources. By depending on these resources for tourism, the industry relies most on culture, and its arts.

In the past three decades, Thailand has been undergoing extensive economic and social expansion of an unforeseen scale. As part of the overall strategy, it uses the tourism industry to spur national development, and has, up to a degree, succeeded in achieving certain set goals.

Tourism also has become and been recognized as the economic activity that generates the highest revenue in foreign exchange earnings for several consecutive years.

The current growth and development of the tourism industry set the stage for further economic expansion; in the creation of employment, transportation and infrastructure development. The tourism boom, however, has also spawned negative effects, such as pollution, and the physical impairment of scenery and landscape; increased costs of living, changes in attitudes and values, with adverse impact on the arts and culture.

It is of vital importance to make careful studies so that guidelines are formulated for preventing and remedying such adverse impacts, and foster a sustainable form of tourism.

A new aspect in the tourism industry is "eco-tourism", the concept of which is not a new idea. It is ideal for every tourism planner to conserve and develop tourism resources in its pristine condition. Furthermore, those involved in tourism should



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comply with local, regional and national planning policies as well as participate in the planning process. In this case, the ideal tourists for eco-tourism should be "quality tourists". This does not mean that they have to be wealthy, but both tourists and tour planners should have a sense of responsibility, respect, and contribute towards the protection and improvement of the environment, whether it is natural or cultural.

Although culture is part of the eco-system or the environment, most of the eco-tourism studied and practiced now are only concerned with natural assets,

and are sometimes called "nature-based tourism", "adventure tourism", or "natural tourism". These eco-tourism activities provide trekking, camping, rafting, diving, elephant riding or canoe padding in a natural area. Regretfully, cultural assets are totally overlooked. To emphasize and assure that culture plays an important role in eco-tourism as well, "cultural tourism" should be regarded and publicized as a part of eco-tourism, based on the same philosophical principles.

The main advantage of culture for tourism lies in its diversity. In technical parlance, culture is

subdivided into several categories, e.g. central culture, regional culture, and regional sub-culture. The many forms and varieties of culture offer a welcome and often exciting change from day-to-day living, which is what the tourist basically looks for. The level and extent of the benefits to be gained, however, depend on the type of communication and awareness that exists between the native of the culture and the visitor.

As visitors are most likely to stay for a short time only in any one place, the time constraint prevents them from truly appreciating the cultures they

encounter. The tourist may be impressed with the culture sufficiently to return and try to gain more intimate understanding. It will in time foster tolerance and goodwill among mankind, which is the goal of international tourism. Unfortunately, there is a tendency in tourism promotion to display only the obvious "physical" or "semi-physical" features of many cultural traditions. Purely "abstract" cultures are rarely represented, except perhaps for special interest groups, whose numbers are small. It is ironic that, to cater to the tourists, cultural traditions must be opened to participation from outsiders but should, at the same time, not be exposed to deterioration of its traditional values.

Examples of the cultural assets that are suited to tourist promotion are archaeological sites, historical sources, religious sanctuaries, art works, architecture, dramatic arts, music, festivals, traditions, handicrafts, souvenir creations, and folk lifestyle. It should be noted that Thai culture has been largely influenced by religious faith even though secular elements, through western influence, have begun to exert themselves, especially in the progressive sections of the society. Nevertheless, religious culture is still a living force in the country.

There are, at present, many governmental and private agencies in Thailand whose work are associated with cultural activities, e.g. the Fine Arts

Department, Office of the National Culture Commission, National Identity Promotion Office, Tourism Authority of Thailand, etc. These offices agree that it is our joint duty to assist in the conservation of national "culture" for future generations to appreciate, and benefit from both in education and tourism. As a tourist attraction, culture will have to be viewed as a "valuable commodity", whose appeal, quality and commercial viability are to be enhanced with expert marketing management. It must therefore be treated as a perpetual investment to be supported by the financial returns that it brings.

There is however a vast difference between trade investments and culture. While business entrepreneurs view most commodities in terms of capital and profit, they must adopt a different approach with arts and culture. Here, pride and value borne out of a sense of lasting achievement come to the forefront. They must take into account "the code of ethics" in their transactions because culture cannot be exploited solely for the entrepreneur's advantage. More to the point, consideration must be given to awareness of conservation that takes into account the wider implications for society and national heritage.

All through the years, many Thai government offices attached increasing importance to cultural operations. For example, the Tourism Authority of Thailand launched the inaugural "Visit Thailand Year" and the "Thailand Year of Arts and

Crafts" with unprecedented successes. In August 1993, the government organized a conference on Thai arts and culture at the national parliament. Prominent workers in all fields of cultural promotion were invited to air their opinions and draw guidelines for implementing effective cultural programs and public campaigns. The workshop generated stimulating proposals on various aspects of cultural promotions including cultural tourism.

The government declared 1994 the "Cultural Promotion Year" to raise local awareness and appreciation of the nation's cultural heritage and to increase co-operation on the conservation of all cultural treasures of Thailand. Public relation campaigns and promotional activities to create awareness and understanding of Thai culture were launched by government and private agencies. An extensive cross-section of the public participated in the program. The cultural promotion is extended to 1997 due to its overwhelming success.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) also plays an active part, as a government tourism agency, in drumming up support for the cultural promotional year. Throughout its 30-year record of tourism promotion, the TAT not only focused on increasing tourist arrivals and developing the industry but also implemented measures and guidelines on the conservation of tourist destinations and attractions, including cultural resources that

are abundantly scattered throughout the country. The uppermost aim is to preserve and enhance their characteristic appeal with respect to both national and local traditions. This is borne out by the TAT's policy "to conserve and restore culture, natural resources and the environment in its pristine conditions as well as reflecting Thai identity".

In support of the cultural promotion year and the concept of cultural tourism, the TAT will carry on its traditional programs on cultural operations as follows:

1. to provide training programs that impart knowledge and understanding of the conservation of the environment, archaeological sites, and arts and culture. For example, environmental and arts conservation programs, training of youth leaders, and conservation programs for monks;
2. to promote festivals and traditional fairs in each region that emphasise the distinctive features of the locality;
3. to promote all kinds of handicraft fairs and exhibitions which feature simple, and elegant workmanship and folk lifestyle, derived from, for example, the ancient traditions of *Tai Leu* handicraft village in Phayao Province, and Ban Prasat village, Nakhon Ratchasima province.
4. to produce research and public



Photo by Florence Pichon

relations materials on arts and culture, e.g. handbooks on development and conservation of religious sanctuaries and temples; design and feasibility studies on light illumination for archaeological/historical sites; studies on Khmer heritage, festivals and customs, posters, brochures and leaflets.

Utmost efforts should be made to lend academic and technical support to governmental

promotion of cultural tourism by setting precedents and proper guidelines for its conservation efforts. Cultural traditions are used not merely to attract the multitude of visitors and generate income, but to instil awareness and commitment in all visitors and young people to appreciate the importance of cultural heritage. An equally important objective we can make of cultural tourism is to make use of the advantage to study, and conserve - for the succeeding generations.