

Michael Hitchcock, Victor T. King, and Michael Parnwell, editors, *Tourism in Southeast Asia: Challenges and New Directions*. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2009; 368 pp. Hardbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-033-1; paperbound: ISBN 978-87-7694-034-8

For more than a century, tourism was a luxury confined to the affluent few. They cruised around the world's major ports but seldom strayed into the countryside except to visit picturesque monuments. That all changed in the 1960s. Rising incomes and low-cost jetliners put foreign travel within the means of middle-income vacationers, making it possible for them to relax in foreign climes.

Soon jaded by European attractions, they ventured into Asia, Africa, and South America. Ostensibly journeying to savor the delights of the exotic, instead they relaxed, dined, and shopped. The earliest mass tourists in Southeast Asia were American soldiers on five-day "R'n'R" (rest and recreation) escapes from the hell of the Indochina wars. Word of the region's attractions and amenities soon spread and by the 1970s, couples and, later, families began jetting to regional cities and beaches. By the 1990s, they had penetrated the rural areas in search of new diversions.

For Southeast Asian nations, the boom was a godsend. It seemed ideal, a business from which anyone could profit, from nations with beautiful monuments to those with little more than arresting countryside. Bungalows morphed into high-rise hotels as jet

planes disgorged growing numbers of, first, groups of tourists, and then individual tourists. By the 2000s, the hunger for the new resulted in tourism's spreading its tentacles into the back-of-beyond, through homestays, "eco-tours", and adventure tourism. It seemed that no place was safe from foreign intrusion.

The business brought riches to burgeoning economies, especially those countries with few other earning opportunities; in many instances, it became their leading foreign revenue earner. The emphasis, however, was on increasing the visitor numbers and little thought was given to its sustainability or to its impact on traditional ways, social inequities, or the damage it wrought on the country's social fabric.

Moreover, it had a dark side. Southeast Asia witnessed the creation of sex tours (including pedophiles), the introduction of drugs and promiscuity, and the eroding of the very cultural values it was supposed to showcase and which visitors had come to see. In tandem with the increasing numbers of arrivals came a rising discontent, especially among the young who viewed the foreigners' sexy, affluent lifestyles as more appealing than the pedestrian pursuits of farm labor and the dreariness of traditional culture and lifestyles.

The boom also witnessed the growing intrusion of foreigners into formerly pristine areas, and the flow of profits, not to rural villagers but to city-based firms. Locals saw only a rising cost of living and the loss of agricultural land. At the same time, countries

which had pegged their prosperity to tourism learned to their dismay that it was subject to economic fluctuations, civil disturbances, natural disasters, pandemics, rising travel prices, and becoming a terrorist target. A string of discouraging incidents since the turn of the century has given pause for thought to the wisdom of placing all eggs in the tourism basket.

The failure of the public to foresee the direction that tourism was going may suggest, simply, that no one was looking. Also, those within the industry seeking greater profits may not have been interested in deducing that, like rampant consumerism on a finite planet, the search for new and exotic locations would eventually exhaust itself. Perhaps little else can be expected from a business that calls itself an “industry” and reduces gorgeous scenery, peoples, and lifestyles to “products”. Tourism’s role in the increasing complexity and interconnectedness of the world is the issue that this book confronts.

The book under review seeks to address some of the above concerns. A collection of 3 overviews and 13 essays, it updates a 1993 work of the same title and by the same editors. The new edition seeks to expand upon the subject and reflect the changing times and nature of the business. As such, it falls short of its goal. Tourism is such a vast and complex subject, and extends to such a wide range of nations with differing religions, social structures, development levels, and lifestyles, that reduction to concrete statements may be impossible.

The book’s primary value lies in its case studies that comprise the bulk of the text. They are vignettes of societies in transition, rather than a discussion of tourism as the title suggests, but they are perhaps the book’s most valuable contributions. These simple sociological treatises reveal elements of cultures and cultural collisions. Among the standouts are the following.

Shinji Yamashita’s “Southeast Asian Tourism from a Japanese Perspective” looks at the Japanese view of the rest of Asia, focusing, in particular, on Bali which Japanese regard as an escape from the drudgery of “salaryman” life to the “paradise” of simpler times. More of the Japanese mindset is revealed than of Bali itself, but the insights are valuable.

In “From Kebalian to Ajeg Bali: Tourism and Balinese Identity in the Aftermath of the Kuta Bombing”, Michel Picard also discusses Bali but in terms of its “Balineseness” and the history of its relations with its overlord, Indonesia. He takes a penetrating look at the Balinese desire to define itself and offers some original thoughts on the success and pitfalls of that endeavor. It makes for engaging reading.

Heidi Dahles’s “Romance and Sex Tourism” expands on the usual sex tourism discussions to ask what each of the partners in these liaisons actually seeks from his/her encounters. As such, it explores new and valuable territory and presents a picture far more nuanced than the normal treatise.

In a similar vein, Yuk Wah Chan’s “Cultural and Gender Politics in China—

Vietnam Border Tourism” veers from a straightforward study of Chinese male sex-tourists and the Vietnamese women who service them to an examination of traditional female Vietnamese values and expectations. While it does not shed a great deal of light on the trade, other than providing numbers, it nicely contrasts the attitudes of the respective parties, placing the age-old antagonism between the two nations in a new light.

Perhaps the most comprehensive study of tourism’s direction is that of Laos by David Harrison and Steven Shippani. From their chapter Laos emerges as one of Southeast Asia’s more successful nations in managing its tourism. Had the theme of the rest of the essays been founded on its excellent model, the book might better have lived up to its title.

The three overviews by the editors are the most difficult to wade through. Their approach is academic and their writing is freighted with meaningless verbiage that contributes little to unraveling and addressing a problem, serving only to trephine the reader’s skull through repeated blows. For example (from p. 29):

“Debates about the industry’s impact and sustainability, and actions that follow on from these debates, are constrained by a silo-like [sic] separation of strands and components, disciplines and discourses; the analytical fragmentation, particularization and reductionism of complex, dynamic, interdependent systems, and processes.”

At best, their opinions seem to have been formed from a great distance rather than to display the same level of intimacy with a culture that is evident in the case studies. Perhaps the difficulty lies in the attempt to corral widely divergent information into an ordered whole. Complicating the matter at times, the writing borders on turgid—the reader struggles not to page-turn in exasperation when encountering a particularly obvious observation; although, to be fair, many statements may be obvious only to those who live in the region. The following (from p. 51) is but one of dozens of examples:

“Overall then there are different kinds of tourism and tourists with different priorities, and shifting perceptions of tourist sites; the character of destinations and host cultures also vary as do the power relationships between the different actors contesting a tourist space.”

The tediousness is also compounded by a tendency to use 10 nouns or adjectives in place of 1. Another of many examples follows here (from p. 28):

“Our literature survey has highlighted a number of recurring themes and perspectives that have tended to map out the field of tourism studies on Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, during this period. These include globalization, identity, image-making, representation, tradition, commodification, massification [sic], promotion and policy-making.”

In short, the reader may want to treat the book as a collection of anthropological and sociological essays,

skipping past the first two and the final chapters to concentrate on the meat of the text, which is enlightening and presents in a capsule account some of the problems—without solutions—to the tourism conundrum as a whole.

Steve Van Beek

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