

Bakheng Tourism: Setting New Standards for Angkor

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The sun always sets in the west

Standing at the bottom of Phnom Bakheng's eastern staircase—the main point of entry for visitors today—one cannot fail to notice the major erosion which is now occurring. Indicative of the threat facing the site as a whole, this staircase has been transformed in a few short years by one force in particular: tourism. And quite simply, tourism will continue to be the pivotal factor defining how successful efforts to preserve, protect, and restore will be in the future. In response, this brief paper suggests that a detailed understanding of the tourism industry must be at the heart of a heritage management and interpretation framework for the site.

The following pages call for a more rigorous understanding of both the tourism industry and the nature of tourist consumption in the Angkor–Siem Reap region. We need to develop better accounts of the multiple ways in which the site is valued by visitors traveling from a variety of countries, including of course Cambodia itself. It is highly likely that the introduction of site interpretation will only further increase the number of daily visitors to the site. If we are to develop policies capable of alleviating this ongoing pressure, we also need to comprehend the economic, social, and institutional forces that shape current patterns and rhythms of consumption.

Phnom Bakheng is suffering rapid damage not because of its architectural beauty or magnificence, but because of its prime hilltop location for watching the setting sun, an experience described by countless travel brochures as “the ideal way to end your trip to Angkor.” In this respect, this hilltop site parallels Mount Fuji in Japan, Uluru in Australia, or Mount Kinabalu in Malaysia, in that tourism at these landscapes is consistently shaped by the desires of visitors to catch either a rising or a setting sun. The challenges facing Phnom Bakheng today demand that we move beyond ideas of the site as a *phnom* understood in religious or cosmological terms toward an account that addresses the significance of this hilltop location within contemporary tourism. Indeed an approach that fully grasps such touristic processes is urgently required if Phnom Bakheng is to be preserved for Cambodia's future generations.

Bakheng as space: Moving from the architectural to the social

In essence the impetus for a management program for Phnom Bakheng has stemmed from ever-increasing levels of tourism, both domestic and international. Identifying the rapid changes currently occurring at the site, the International

Coordinating Committee for the Safeguarding and Development of the Historic Site of Angkor (ICC) has described it as the “most threatened temple in Angkor.” Diagnosing the nature of this threat is crucial, therefore, as is developing a strategy to reverse the current destructive trends. In order to better achieve these goals I would suggest that a shift in how Phnom Bakheng is conceived as a space would be beneficial. Within the framework of the Zoning and Environmental Management Plan (ZEMP) and the ICC, sites like Phnom Bakheng have been seen predominantly as physical landscapes and as static geographical spaces. To meet the challenges of tourism, however, this needs to be complemented, or perhaps even replaced, by a framework that situates the site within a broader social landscape conceptualized in terms of networks and flows.

It is widely known that Phnom Bakheng suffers from a distinct pattern of tourism, whereby 80 to 90 percent of visitors arrive to capture the last moments of daylight, a situation that leaves the site empty for most daylight hours. More research needs to be undertaken into the processes and forces that create these extreme peaks and troughs. At the heart of this approach would be an appreciation of how Phnom Bakheng sits within a broader network of tourism.

Understanding these connections would focus attention on the ways in which the site is locked within tourist itineraries that must include visits to the region’s key highlights, such as Angkor Wat, the Bayon, Preah Khan, and Ta Prohm. In order to fully appreciate why Phnom Bakheng is eroding and deteriorating faster than any other site within the Angkor Park, however, attention also needs to be given to a range of seemingly less-connected forces, whether they be local or geographically distant. These might include the influence of souvenir shopping and dining schedules along Route 6, recommended routes in guidebooks, ticketing policies, or the role played by airline schedules and travel itineraries composed in offices in Shanghai, Tokyo, Paris, or Singapore. While this might seem an ambitious agenda to pursue, the logistics of approaching this problem will be addressed below.

In the meantime, I want to illustrate this point further by briefly considering two specific examples. Firstly, all group, or “package,” tours to Angkor today include—without fail—a trip to a souvenir shop in Siem Reap. Typically part of the return journey to the guest house or hotel, and often scheduled for just after a sunset visit to Phnom Bakheng, these stops have become a defining feature of the daily rhythms of Siem Reap’s tourism industry. With the average length of stay having now settled around the two-day mark, tour guides have sought to maximize their commissions within these shops.

Secondly, Japanese tour operators are commonly expected to provide their clients with at least one sunset view during the course of a visit. Any deviation from pro-

grams that promise such highlights risks customers’ submitting claims for compensation or reimbursement. Bearing in mind that these itineraries are written more than one year in advance, we can see that Phnom Bakheng forms part of an international tourism industry built upon a structural rigidity designed to deliver both reliability and predictability.

These two very brief examples form part of a complex network of local, national, and international forces that has arisen during more than a decade of rampant tourism growth. If we are to successfully address and appropriately redirect these forces in the future, it is imperative that Phnom Bakheng be analytically situated within this broader social landscape.

Understanding the tourist as consumer: From the universal to the particular

Past discussions of tourism policies proposed for Angkor often focused on ideas of promoting a “cultural tourism” industry. In essence, a language of cultural tourism reflects a desire to maximize the economic gains of tourism while simultaneously reducing the detrimental impact of the industry; understandably, it attempts to minimize the negative impacts of a more pernicious “mass tourism,” and in so doing sets out to introduce “high quality” facilities. Within this framework an ideal visitor has been identified: the cultural tourist. Who is this cultural tourist? What are his or her physical characteristics? Does this tourist stay in certain hotels, read certain books, eat certain foods, or, indeed, spend certain amounts of money? In posing these questions, I would suggest that the cultural tourist is an idealized prototype with no empirical reality.

Crucially, policies that rely upon such an idealized prototype obscure the multiple and complex ways in which Angkor is being consumed as a heritage and tourism landscape today. As numerous academic and policy studies on sites like Stonehenge, the Acropolis, the Dome of the Rock, or Uluru have revealed, heritage landscapes are places where multiple meanings and values converge and coexist, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes in real tension [Bender 1999; Yalouri 2001; Tilley 1994; Smith 2004]. As these authors illustrate, heritage and tourism landscapes can never be reduced to one sole, definitive meaning. Such a realization has major implications for site presentation and interpretation. Rather than presenting the “historical facts” of Phnom Bakheng to an idealized cultural tourist, greater attention needs to be given to the diverse range of visitors to the site and the values they attribute to it.

For a number of reasons—the detailing of which lies beyond the scope of this short paper—policies for Angkor have been largely underpinned by a western-centric

understanding of tourism. As a consequence, the idealized cultural tourist has been implicitly constructed in European, cum western, terms. Significantly, however, such understandings and models have been uncritically applied to all tourists and forms of tourism. The current situation at Phnom Bakheng makes this situation untenable for the future.

Over the last five to ten years, the number of Asian tourists arriving in Cambodia has grown extremely rapidly. Tourism at Angkor is no longer dominated by visitors from France, the United States, or the United Kingdom. Rather, the statistics are now shaped by the influx of visitors from China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and ASEAN countries, most notably Thailand. A more comprehensive appreciation of how sites like Phnom Bakheng are made meaningful and valued by visitors from these various countries is urgently required. For example, Han [2004] and NyÏri [2006] have both recently demonstrated how Chinese readings of cultural and natural heritage landscapes significantly differ from western conventions.

The idea of collective memory further illustrates this point's relevance to Angkor. One of the most prevalent themes within Angkorian tourism today is the notion of discovery and exploration. Although commonly recognized as historically simplistic, the story of Angkor as a lost civilization rediscovered by the botanist Henri Mouhot in 1860 continues to shape the touristic encounter today. Reproduced in guidebooks, themed hotels and restaurants, this account privileges a Eurocentric understanding of Cambodian history. The associated idea that Angkor remained buried in the jungle for over five hundred years erases both local and more Pan-Asian histories.

Instead of reproducing a Eurocentric account of jungle discovery and subsequent restoration that caters to nostalgia for a golden era of European travel, the interpretation of sites like Phnom Bakheng needs to be oriented toward Asian audiences. Situating the site in its Pan-Asian historical, religious, and cultural contexts is one example of how this can be achieved. In her excellent article "Pilgrims to Angkor: A Buddhist 'Cosmopolis' in Southeast Asia?" Thompson [2004] provides evidence of a detailed and rich history of Asian travel to Angkor spanning several centuries. A similar theme has also been pursued by Edwards [2006] in her study of twentieth-century "graffiti" at Angkor, an account that foregrounds such texts to call our attention to previously ignored vernacular cultures and histories. Together these studies provide valuable signposts for a more holistic understanding of Angkor's landscape.

Particular attention needs to be given to how the site should be interpreted for visitors from across Cambodia. Far too often Cambodians have been ignored in the management and presentation of Angkor. The strategic development of Bakheng

offers an opportunity to redress this imbalance. To this end, a more detailed understanding is required concerning how Phnom Bakheng is used as a leisure space, as an active religious site, as a place for local community formation, and as a space of national heritage. Rather than remaining at the margins of policy, such knowledge needs to be at the heart of Phnom Bakheng's ongoing development and management.

Defining new paths of excellence

In the above two sections a number of challenges and agendas have been identified. Together they call for a better understanding of the cultural, social, and economic dynamics of tourism. This joint project of the Authority for the Protection and Management of Angkor and the Region of Siem Reap (APSARA) and the World Monuments Fund (WMF) has identified a clear set of problems, and this paper suggests that moving from a phase of diagnoses to solutions requires a sophisticated account of how Angkor is both produced and consumed as a tourism landscape.

In the first instance, both conservation and site interpretation need to reflect the diversity of Phnom Bakheng's audience. Phnom Bakheng and Angkor are first and foremost Asian heritage landscapes, and they need to be preserved, presented, and managed with that in mind. This means that—far more than merely presenting information in a variety of Asian languages—heritage policy should be informed by insights gained from frameworks like the Nara Declaration and recent studies of other heritage sites within the region. In more concrete terms it is recommended that a program of research be conducted within the three-year funding schedule that ascertains how Phnom Bakheng should be presented to, and made meaningful for, Cambodian and broader Asian audiences. Semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and comparative case studies are examples of strategies that can be adopted here. This knowledge can then guide answers to questions around historical continuity, artistic and religious significance, or the importance of Bakheng as a contemporary "living" site. The rapid growth of Asian tourism, both domestic and intra-regional, poses new challenges for heritage policymakers across the region today, and this APSARA-WMF project for Phnom Bakheng can provide a model of excellence from which others will learn.

By adopting a strategy that demonstrates how the Siem Reap tourism industry is directly impacting Angkor's key monuments, the WMF and APSARA will also present the ICC community with a radically new approach to site management. The problems at Phnom Bakheng exemplify why heritage management and tourism need to be seen and tackled as *one single entity*. The only way sites like Phnom Bakheng are going to survive over the long term is if current patterns of consump-

tion change (see fig. 6 and 7 in folio). Undoubtedly this is no easy task and will not happen overnight, but my own research has demonstrated that a will and enthusiasm exists within the private sector to improve the current situation.

To date, heritage policies have been directed toward resisting and deflecting the commercial sector in Siem Reap. As an alternative, I would suggest that a working group engaged directly with this sector be established. In attempting to relieve the pressure on Phnom Bakheng, one natural theme to pursue would be the development of alternative sunset sites, both within and beyond Angkor Park. To achieve such goals, the first step would be to identify key stakeholders within the tourism industry such as tour operators, travel agents, taxi drivers, tour guides, and the Siem Reap Hotel Association. Periodic meetings and a variety of publications could then share and disseminate knowledge across this community. Given the “copycat” nature of the Siem Reap tourism industry, even a small-scale venture involving a limited number of participants will snowball over time to deliver significant results. The major dangers facing Phnom Bakheng need to be presented as a collective problem in which the private sector is consulted and encouraged to become a partner in resolution. Only when various industry perspectives are shared, understood, and incorporated into policies can realistic alternatives that reduce the intense pressure on Phnom Bakheng be realized. There is little doubt that developing such a strategy poses major challenges in itself, and implementation will be far from easy. But a model of communication and proactive collaboration is the only sustainable solution for protecting Phnom Bakheng and other sites around Angkor for the long term.