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The sweet and lush aroma of frangipani fills the air of the reception area. Opening my door at the Boddhi Tree guesthouse in Phnom Penh, Cambodia reveals a well appointed room skillfully blending traditional Khmer touches with all the expected modern conveniences. Cambodia has suffered more than its fair share of misery and abject poverty reflects in the eyes of many of its people. Thirty years of civil war which reached a nadir with the ravages of Cambodian Maoist revolutionary Pol Pot's regime in 1979, left a country torn apart and generations deeply scarred. In recent years the country has been associated with some of the more unsavory elements of the tourism industry. But now local business are giving tourists an opportunity to spend money in a way that is making a real difference to people's lives.

"There are many choices in the way we travel that would benefit the local economy," says Manuel Garcia founder of the Boddhi Tree.

The Boddhi Tree which now consists of three hotels/guesthouses and a café in the capital Phnom Penh was Cambodia's first social enterprise. More than 90% of their staff are taken from NGO projects helping the disadvantaged and are often former street children or have dropped out of school. Once taken on by Boddhi Tree they are given one year of extensive training in the hospitality industry along with English lessons. "We aim to provide a space for young people to grow and mature," explains Garcia.

This, however, doesn't leave guests as guinea pigs in some great social experiment. Service levels are top notch and the Aram offers all the facilities and character one would expect at a boutique hotel.

Boddhi Tree also aims to protect the environment with, where possible, the use of organically produced food purchased at fair trade prices. To reduce the carbon footprint bioclimatic concepts are used to minimize energy consumption and a water purification system eliminates plastic waste from giving bottled water to guests. There is even recycled toilet paper.

With Jasmine Valley, nestled in the foothills approaching Kep National Park, the emphasis is on the environment.

This eco-lodge consists of treehouses and mud brick huts arranged along a stream and enveloped by jungle. Each is equipped with a solar panel and battery system for electricity. "It means people are power conscious and are aware of how much they are consuming," says Owen Beck, the Australian founder.

Jungle living though doesn't mean an abandonment of comfort. Whilst there is no hot water or television there is Wifi Internet provided via satellite and a natural swimming pool fed by water running off the hillside.

Permaculture principles are used in the garden, which produces much of the fruit for the restaurant; which serves a mixture of good quality locally sourced Western and Khmer food. Staff are encouraged not to kill snakes as they fulfill a useful purpose in killing pests that might otherwise damage plants. Beck believes in carving out a career for his staff based on their aptitudes and hopes to see them use Jasmine Valley as a springboard to bigger and better things. Coming from a very poor village with often little education their lives are being turned around.

Eating out also offers the opportunity to make a difference. Friends in Phnom Penh is perhaps the best known restaurant, but there are plenty of others. These restaurants provide tourists with world class food whilst providing the employees with a career opportunity.

Jacob's Well the retail face of Caterhelp is in the words of founder Frank Woods a way of "employing the unemployable". Formerly with Hagar, he has been helping disadvantaged Cambodians since 2003. On arrival he discovered that whilst it was possible

to train these people no one would give them a job and so it was necessary to create businesses to give them experience. Jacob's Well works with former human trafficked males to give them an alternative future.

Directory

The booklets produced by Canby Publications are a good source of identifying social enterprise projects. These are available from Phnom Penh tourist information and in some restaurants
www.canbypublications.com

Accommodation

Boddhi Tree – 3 locations in Phnom Penh www.boddhitree.com
Jasmine Valley – Kep www.jasminevalley.com

Restaurant

Jacob's Well – Phnom Penh, currently finding new premises
www.caterhelp.org

Souvenirs

Daughters of Cambodia – Phnom Penh www.daughtersofcambodia.org
Dorsu – Kampot www.dorsu.org

impact on helping disadvantaged groups. Daughters of Cambodia, in Phnom Penh, employs former sex workers to produce mainly sewn homewares and T-shirts. "Daughters adopts an alternative approach in which sex workers leave the sex industry voluntarily, are provided with a job, and are empowered to change their own lives within their own community, culture and context, avoiding NGO dependence," says administrator Sokea Im. The provision of alternative jobs is crucial for keeping them out of the industry.

Dorsu which offers similar products to Daughters of Cambodia, takes a very different approach. This social enterprise based in Kampot, employs a small band of women in a safe environment and ploughs the profits from selling goods into subsidizing the Chumkriel Language School which has over 400 students.

"It's going to take a long time for Cambodia to recover," claims Beck. But it would seem that these social enterprises are really making a difference to the lives of Cambodians and helping to build a sustainable future. As tourists we have choices in how we spend our money and who we support. "One way is to go down to the level of the street," says Garcia, - so rather than lining the pockets of some faceless tour operator you can help a local person earn a livelihood. "Many people in Cambodia need our help but we can't take them all," says Mam Kim Sam the HR manager of Boddhi Tree. However by choosing such businesses we can help more such people turn their lives around.

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CARING CAMBODIA

How tourism in Cambodia is saving the environment and building futures for its disadvantaged.

By Mark Andrews

Pictures: Courtesy Boddhi Tree

