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A Coincidental Trip to Cambodia

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A Coincidental Trip to Cambodia

Abstract

In a timely coincidence, Henry Alford's recent travel article, "Banishing the Ghosts in Cambodia," recently tantalized this reader with visions of a destination vacation in mind. Written for the travel-inspired readership of the New York Times, Alford's version of Cambodia as a newly reborn hotspot for far flung Westerners approaches the point of lulling his decidedly non-Cambodian audience into pleasantly myopic vision of a plush Cambodian phoenix fully risen from its mired ashes. Amidst the outcropping of chic resorts and beautiful beaches reincarnated from the elegant, pre-Khmer Rouge moment of Cambodia's forgotten past, Alford banishes the ghosts of Pol Pot's genocidal legacy with pen in hand by appealingly casting a white, Western light on the glistening seaside resorts that lie just beyond the fringe of Cambodia's inner darkness.

Keywords

Human rights, Cambodia, Post-war reconstruction, Peace, Stability, Corruption, Repression

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A Coincidental Trip to Cambodia

by Rebecca Otis

In a timely coincidence, Henry Alford's recent travel article, "[Banishing the Ghosts in Cambodia](#)," recently tantalized this reader with visions of a destination vacation in mind. Written for the travel-inspired readership of the *New York Times*, Alford's version of Cambodia as a newly reborn hotspot for far flung Westerners approaches the point of lulling his decidedly non-Cambodian audience into pleasantly myopic vision of a plush Cambodian phoenix fully risen from its mired ashes. Amidst the outcropping of chic resorts and beautiful beaches reincarnated from the elegant, pre-Khmer Rouge moment of Cambodia's forgotten past, Alford banishes the ghosts of Pol Pot's genocidal legacy with pen in hand by appealingly casting a white, Western light on the glistening seaside resorts that lie just beyond the fringe of Cambodia's inner darkness.

Unlike Joel Brinkley's featured article in this month's Roundtable, which sharply cites the insipid level of governmental corruption and ongoing horrors faced by the Cambodian people today, Alford fuzzily focuses upon the far more audience-friendly aspects of Cambodia, such as the availability of cheap prescription drugs, affordable standards of luxury and, of course, sex appeal. Only lightly referring to the "spooky" history and distantly recalling the [Khmer Rouge](#) in abstract isolation, Alford readily focuses upon the finer points of Cambodia's touristy appeal. Indeed, who can resist the tantalizing vision of sprawling poolside beside the likes of muscular, young Belgian men in designer swimsuits and gorgeous Danish girls lazing on "good sand?" Yet, clearly, if sex is not the draw, then the bonus prize of collecting enough cheap effervescent codeine tablets to bring home as gifts for one's friends seems to bring Alford's Cambodian adventure to a positively bubbly conclusion.

Perhaps not coincidentally, however, Alford's light travel missive is strongly indicative of the legacy of disconnect between Cambodia and the rest of the world. Understandably, Brinkley draws upon this concept in his current piece. Tellingly so, Brinkley writes, "Cambodia is trying to make it in the twenty-first century, whereas Washington is still stuck in the 1970s." Perhaps where Alford would like us to believe that stopping for a delicious mango shake on the Cambodian roadside and paying actual "retail" prices for jewelry made from Khmer Rouge bombs and bullet shells will render all things well and good, Brinkley more concretely observes that a perception skewed by an outdated vision of Cambodia is one of the many elements plaguing the nation today.

But what is this "outdated vision?" As Brinkley explains, it begins with the perception that the severity of corruption and ongoing human rights violations in Cambodia today pale in comparison to the Khmer Rouge's inflicted death toll of 2 million. Yet, for example, where the legacy of the Nazi genocidal regime continues today as the standard to which the Western world holds itself *against*, so as not to repeat in the smallest form, it would seem that the legacy of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia is quite the opposite. Held only *to* (rather than against) the precedent of the Khmer Rouge, Brinkley notes the system in which the Cambodian government and its employees are enabled to act with immunity and self-interest.

In light of the destruction and aftermath of Nazi Germany, one recalls that the nation-building effort on behalf of the German population was grounded in the intent to resolve the milieu of social and political issues that gave way to the rise of Nazi power in the first place. Dissimilarly, however, it would seem that little effort has been made in the nation-building efforts of the Cambodian case. But of course, where Germany had the acute attention of the West on its borders and doorstep, Cambodia only captures the lazy attention of glassy-eyed tourists looking for thrills and cheap adventure.

At most, Brinkley's piece causes this reader to want to know more about Cambodia today and where it is going. Certainly Cambodia is cursed by its past, but where lies the cure? Finally, I have come to seriously reconsider my next vacation destination in light of the consideration that one can be equally complicit in governmental impunity and corruption by merely indulging in low cost jaunt to the "good sand" beaches of Cambodia.

Rebecca Otis (ABD Ph.D., University of Denver), Women's Studies and International Relations, Hobart & William Smith Colleges. Her research interests include human rights, feminist methodologies, and Islamization in the Middle East. Her research on Palestinian women in the second intifada has taken her to Jerusalem, Israel, where she is currently a Visiting Research Fellow at the Rothberg International School at the Hebrew University. She explores human rights and gender from an interdisciplinary perspective, and can regularly be found teaching English to women and girls in a Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank.