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## Promoting Southern Asia as an exotic destination: a viable asset or a short term perspective ?

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Master course (2<sup>nd</sup> year)

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## Promoting Southeast Asia as an Exotic Destination:



*is a Viable Asset or a  
Short-term  
Perspective ?*



## Promoting Southeast Asia as an Exotic Destination: a Viable Asset or a Short-Term Perspective?

As soon as it was discovered by the Western world a few centuries ago, Southeast Asia started to inspire and fascinate. As centuries went by, conquistadores became travelers until these travelers became *tourists*: these bustling conquerors of a new kind.

Straightaway, the unknown began to be subjected to our own colonialist perceptions and loose approaches of otherness. What used to be exotic, because it was untouched by the illnesses of our modern worlds, has turned into what is intrinsically within our constant reach. Exoticism has become something we deal with frequently and eagerly aim at.

Our lives are full of goals we desperately seek to attain. Travels and tourism have successfully lured their practitioners into thinking this ‘better other living elsewhere’ has always been within reach.

If our willingness to control and define otherness according to our own standards is inherent to all tourists, it now turns out to be the contrary. Exoticism is now chasing after markets and ruling over a powerful marketing machinery that does not fail to have important consequences over destinations, hosts and guests alike.

In response to that, tourists and the industry as a whole are trying to manage exoticism so that it does not turn down on what it has been primarily brought up for. However, how coherent is this willingness to manage otherness and conflict with the Other? How does Southeast Asia promote its exoticism in the first place?

This is what I will try to answer in this work...



“  
If travel is to be broadening, it must  
encompass a fragment of pain”

Glenn W. FERGUSON

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## Acknowledgments

The subject was born during my very first travels throughout Southeast Asia. The Orient excites and never fails to fascinate. The Philippine turquoise waters bathing in the sun, the cosmopolitan influence of colorful Kuala Lumpur or the chaotic traffic congesting Phnom Penh's streets with squeaky tuk-tuks and thousands of roaring motorcycles color this disorienting immersion of our 'selves' into distinctive otherness. Exotic vacations are a Westerner's dream and I felt oh-so good to have such a privilege.

This work is the result of countless fruitful and beneficial encounters with many amazing people. Southeast Asia could be where hospitality came from – its peoples are mostly truly kind-hearted, its landscapes all too awe-inspiring and its cultures strikingly fascinating. I will never be thankful enough to the people who gave the priceless chance to materialize my professional ambitions. To only name but a few, Mrs. Line Bergery, Professor of Management at Toulon University, would be one of these people. I do not think I ever had the opportunity to thank her for accepting me into this course. Although my application to the Master's of Management of Tourism and International Relations was primarily denied, Mrs. Bergery convinced of my deeper motivations gave me a boost to proceed.

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## Introduction

*... In the course of March 2009, temperatures in Siem Reap, Cambodia, are rising, vegetation is turning brown under the daily burning sunshine and the water level of the nearby lake is at its lowest - it has not rained for several months already. April, the hottest month of the year, is about to come soon. Like any other day in Siem Reap, tourists are everywhere. A group of Russians are on an incentive tour around Indochina, Exotissimo Travel is taking care of them. One of the top-listed activities for MICE (Meeting, Incentive Conference Event) tourists coming to Cambodia is a visit to the floating village of Chhung Kneas on Tonle Sap Lake. Operations are running smoothly, clients seem to enjoy the experience until the Russian interpreter comes to a colleague of mine and myself. Although the majority is making the most of this once-in-a-lifetime experience, taking pictures endlessly, some clients, like Kristina, start to complain about what they are seeing. The interpreter tells us that she did not expect to see garbage floating and lying on the riverbank and to put up with the pungent smell of homemade dried fish. Exotissimo Travel promised exoticism; yet, this is not quite what Kristina and some other fellow tourists had envisaged.*

What is therefore exoticism and how does Southeast Asia builds its tourism on it? The question occurred to my mind as I started to work in Southeast Asia, in June 2008, as a Marketing Manager for a Philippine tour operator. My interest for the subject was then strengthened as I entered Exotissimo Travel Cambodia (the name of the company turns out to be a mere coincidence) as a MICE Manager Intern in January 2009. I realized throughout these two internships the importance of exoticism in a thriving yet much aggressive region where tourist markets are quarreled over for they generate major revenues.

Indeed, from a global perspective, tourism is a booming industry in the entire world. Southeast Asia appears to be one of these promising destinations that could well end up taking over the European leaders in a few decades. In response to an age-old fascination for the East, Western tourists are showing more and more interest in Southeast Asia (and Asia as a whole). When it comes to describing the region, the word “exotic” seems to prevail in public discourses- it is overly used to name what is different from us and what differs from our daily lives. However, if exoticism is inherent to “otherness”, do we know more about its true meaning? Are we actually able to give a clear definition of the term? As I will analyze

exoticism, the transposition with exotic tourism will help us give light to this vague notion that has yet succeeded in taking hold of today's tourism industry.

While images of Cambodia manage to nurture dreams of a Southeast Asian exoticism, the Philippines' own exotic otherness is far less taken for granted. What does influences tourists' thinking and what are their deeper expectations of exotic tourism in Southeast Asia? Far from bridging hosting destinations and incoming guests, the battle for exoticism is relentless and heavily competitive. Paradoxically, the international eagerness to unite countries into one single entity is turning down on its goodwill. As Southeast Asia appears much disparate, tourism wittingly orientates towards what is more likely to enhance an always more fruitful business. It selects arbitrary features that will help develop authenticity into a superficial performance that meets tourists' preconceived perception of an exotic breakaway.

In the meantime, as many questions are being raised, one major problem stands out: Does the ongoing marketing of Southeast Asia as an exotic destination introduce a viable asset or expose a short-term perspective? In spite of the *prima facie* difficulty to define exotic otherness, our analysis will intend to explain the rationale behind this tourist trend. Firstly, I will focus on our incapability to coherently define exoticism; the etymology of the actual word as well as the origins of this Western fabrication will be discussed and will unfold the reasons of such an impediment. Secondly, I will emphasize the growing marketing machinery supporting the dream of a Southeast Asian exoticism. Thirdly, I will highlight the negative aftermaths of a mismanaged exotic tourism and express the need for the industry to improve tourism in Southeast Asia through new managerial approaches. Finally, I will introduce the first actions towards a more sustainable exotic tourism and the implementation of new marketing and management.

## **I/ Defining exoticism:**

Phnom Penh: the name can't help but conjure up an image of the exotic. The glimmering spires of the royal palace, the fluttering saffron of the monks' robes, and the luscious location on the banks of the mighty Mekong; this is one of Asia's undiscovered gems. But it is also a city on the move, as a new wave of investors move in, perhaps forever changing the character, and skyline, of this classic city. Phnom Penh is a

crossroads of Asia's past and present, a city of extremes of poverty and excess, of charm and chaos, but one that never fails to captivate.

(N. Ray and D. Robinson, *Lonely Planet Cambodia*, p.72, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition, August 2008)

The above quote on Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital city, brings up questions that can hardly be answered straightaway. As the reader goes through the entire paragraph, the writer lists down places, people and buildings that support and defend the city as being "exotic". Paradoxically, such a list ends up emphasizing a shady amalgam of confusing snapshots in which the city both showcases "poverty (...) and chaos" and yet "never fails to captivate".

Exotic(ism) has become a household word that one cannot avoid, a notion overly used and verbalized into common speech. However, there is little more we know about its true meaning – can we actually give a clear definition of the Exotic? Is any academic or reference documents reliably providing researchers and professionals with such information? Are we dealing with a word that confuses our minds as much as it illuminates its own meaning? How does the tourism and travel industry apply this very notion to Southeast Asia? My first chapter endeavors to answer these questions and bring light to what humans have entitled *exotic*.

### *A loose academic definition:*

When looking up the adjective "exotic" in different dictionaries, one may wonder at the numerous vague and varied definitions that surprisingly come out. Below are some unchanged samples that illustrate this point of view:

**Exotic** *adj* **1/** introduced from a foreign country, especially a distant and tropical country **2/** interestingly different or strange, especially colorful and rich, and suggestive of a distant land

(E. Higgleton, *Harrap's Chambers Compact Dictionary*, edited 2000)

**Exotic** *adj* **1/** not native or usual; mysterious **2/** very odd **3/** foreign, alien

(*Thesaurus Dictionary*, [www.thesaurus.reference.com](http://www.thesaurus.reference.com))

**Exotic** *adj* **1/** having a strange allure or beauty

(Collins English Dictionary, [www.collinslanguage.com](http://www.collinslanguage.com))

Although dictionaries fail to give a common definition of “exotic”, all three sources credit the word with its “foreign”, “strange” and “unusual” characteristics. When looking back at etymological studies, we learn that the word “exotic” originates from the Ancient Greek *exotikos* or foreign, in other words those “products and people from the non-Greek world” and what differs from “me/I” (E. Willson Gordon, *Traveling to the Exotic*, online article). *Exoticism* therefore appears to be an overly general, highly subjective and arbitrarily motivated term applied to indefinite subjects that diverge from “I” and numerous objects that diverge from “mine”. As a result, the word *exotic*, as well as its derivate *exoticism*, directly connects “I” to the “foreign exotic other” by allowing the former to appropriate the latter through a verbal designation; Huggan explains also to his readers:

Exoticism describes, rather, a particular mode of aesthetic *perception*- one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them.

(G. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, p.13, Routledge ed., 2001)

The verbal use of exotic(ism) clearly conveys relations of power, subjectivity and imperialistic conquest of otherness. I will return to this very notion, later in my analysis. However, one can already affirm that *exotic(ism)* is defined loosely as no academic documents is providing any accurate and precise meaning; a flaw that relates to its hazy etymology and elusive denotation-

Exoticism, after all, remains an at best unstable system of containment: its assimilation of the other to the same can never be definitive or exhaustive.

(Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.32)

### *Travel literature in colonialism: fantasy and fascination in exoticist discourses:*

As we fail to clearly define *exoticism*, there is nonetheless something we do know and understand about this term – the Exotic, ever since the word was brought to common discourse, has always captivated and fascinated traders, travelers and various conquistadores who discovered new lands and territories on the road. As Europe’s most famous empires

started to expand to the East, those who were sent to these then pristine and hidden places, brought back said exotic stories about what they had experienced and seen so the world got to find out (they thought!) about the *exotic* 'outside(r)'. Travel literature in those days enabled unlearned civilizations to indulge into some kind of transposed and imaginative travel. Fantasy, imagination and individual interpretation of exoticist discourses gave birth to varied, all too creative, travel stories in a colonial era when traveler's knowledge was to enlighten the civilized world about the *otherness*. The character Rusticello adds in the prologue of *Travels of Marco Polo*:

Master Marc Pol (...) says to himself that it would be too great evil if he did not cause all the great wonders which he saw and which he heard for truth to be put in writing so that the other people who did not see them nor know may know them by this book.

(Quoted from the analysis of Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, p.94, Cornell University Press, 1991)

Because what these people saw and experienced abroad was too "foreign", "unusual" yet "fascinating"- that is to say inherently exotic- the narratives they put into writing gave way to various mistakenly interpretative and fantasizing accounts; as they were facing myths they could not elucidate, readers and travelers alike were losing their mind over intangible matters that began to arouse fascination and generate fantasy:

The East remains a convenient screen for imaginative projection, as it was for earlier pilgrims and merchants of our acquaintance.

(Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, p.153)

If the Other World has become phenomenal by the time of Arculf and Adamnan, it does not yet seem to provide a significant cultural complement to the West. It is a world of both sub- and superhuman, in which there is no simply human reality but that of the amazed and alienated traveler himself.

(Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, p.43)

Of the Annamites, the inhabitants of Cochin-China, [Dr Morice] says at the outset, that his first feeling with respect to them was one of disgust. Those faces more or less flattened, and often devoid of all intelligence or animation; those livid eyes; and,

especially, that broad nose, and those thick upturned lips, reddened and discoloured by the constant use of betel-nut, do not answer to the European ideal of beauty.

(Transcribed records of Lieutenant Francis Garnier's explorations and narratives in *The French in Indo-China*, p.73, White Lotus ed., 1994)

Let alone that these fantasy-driven narratives successfully forced their way into public interest, none of them was ever questioned. As listeners and readers were unwittingly led to approve unreal and fantastic travel reports, the general willingness to nourish and unfold these exotic myths, by way of acquiescing or non-questioning their accuracy, revealed the undeniable lack of understanding of and knowledge about the Other and the East:

This should not be mysterious: the history of travel, exploration, and discovery is mainly an achievement of men of action and unlearned people – not of scholars like Photius and Lilius, who thought they could distinguish fact from fantasy and preferred the former. (...) The Marvels material appears at the geographical limits of knowledge – at the borders of the map, the farthest reach of the journey.

(Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, p.50)

The disturbing alienness of 150-foot berries and gems that grow on trees: for the original audience these matters are relieved of their problematic nature by the simple fact we are talking about the East.

(Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, p.82)

As the first man to see the whole world, [Marco Polo] exists in the mythic-heroic sphere (...). He is literally a living legend, and it is from that order of existence (...) that the reader can *believe it fully*.

(Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, p.95)

Knowledge is incompatible with exoticism, but lack of knowledge is in turn irreconcilable with praise of others; yet praise without knowledge is precisely what exoticism aspires to be. This is its constitutive paradox.

(G. Huggan via T. Todorov, 1993, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.17)

Although these narratives mentioned monsters, deadly fauna and unprecedented savagery, people's fascination and interest in them never quite seemed to fade away: just like a good

thriller movie at the theater, all those hair-bristling and nail-biting stories aroused onlookers' excitement, providing diverse discoverers with a favorably responsive, highly loyal and thrill-seeking audience/readership that enhanced and fueled travel-related exoticist discourses in colonial times.

Further, what made this new genre so popular might be the fact that these stories made the exotic other closer and more palpable to its western audience – reported (and made-up) stories allowed people to visualize the exotic and, to a greater extent, to attain and 'lay hands on' the formerly unreachable other. Colonialism was all about conquering new lands and expanding one's own territory; in that respect, the exotic pursuit of colonial travel literature, amongst other media, held with what colonialism did best and entitled westerners to cross-cultured possessions. Huggan argues as well that "[t]he wonder beheld in exotic peoples (...) may precede their violent subjugation" (*The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.14).

However, because of its fascinating and appealing oddness (one has to bear in mind that knowing of the 'other' favored social distinctions and represented 'knowledge', it still does nowadays), the exotic was rather meant in a positive way. Exoticist discourses therefore turned the exotic into an aesthetic commodity that would transpose foreign exotic cultures to a western culture through processes of assimilation and commodification, so that the 'strange' could remain different yet familiar enough to be inserted into mainstream occidental lifestyle. The two following quotes portray this objectifying aspect of an aesthetic exotic:

As the process of commodification clearly illustrates, cultural difference also has an aesthetic value, a value often measured explicitly or implicitly in terms of the exotic.

(Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.13)

Its members found themselves there in the midst of a population differing in race from any they had previously met with. They seem, these Moutsen, to be of Caucasian origin. [It] gives them a certain resemblance to the inhabitants of some parts of Brittany.

(*The French in Indo-China*, p.42)

We are able to confirm that, be it through a process of assimilation to one's own culture or commodification of the alien culture, the exotic is meant to allow possession of the unattainable other by way of unveiling its mysteriousness and aestheticizing its alienating

inner characteristics; J. Beplate puts forward this process of possession as he mentions “the conventional purpose of travel literature (...) [is to] export the exotic back home” in his article *Who’s exotic now?*, published in the *Times Literary Supplement* on August 19, 2005. This colonialist discourse of exoticism in which discoverers/colonizers come into possession of the exotic other, has been passed on until now, these legacies are still visible in our present cultures. I will refer to a newly revived interior-design wave that combines oriental colors with occidental touches – the ‘colonial’ home-decoration style. It turns the foreign exotic into presentable trophies and objectifies an originally revered Buddha statue by simply displaying it on a pedestal table as a mere symbol of fabled and aestheticized otherness.

To parallel the effect of colonialism on the notion of exoticism to a more recent phenomenon, I will try to give, in my next paragraph, an updated definition of exoticism in a present tourist context, at times when “we do not travel to discover the world but because the world has already been discovered” (Ton Van Egmond, *Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, CAB International, p.6, 2007) and which therefore associates to exoticism a much different and more complicated motive.

### *Postmodern exoticism: a quest for a retreat in Shangri-La:*

In today’s world, travel has been given a different meaning: we travel to places we already know, have seen or heard of somewhere, from discoverers to travel agents have reported about their encounters and findings, the world has been largely inspected. The unknown never seems so unfamiliar to hardly anyone anymore. Based on a great many accounts, we all think we know what to expect about the exotic other, and what our journey abroad will be made up of as we walk into a (or rather log onto an online) travel agency to book a trip. Through generalization, the exotic is being stereotyped more than ever – it has nurtured visions, expectations and needs travelers seek to satisfy when traveling. Unlike its colonial counterpart, the postmodern (or postcolonial) exotic (Huggan), no longer a peradventure passive encounter with otherness, is now a quest we may all put a lot of ourselves into throughout our travels. This colonial quest for the exotic is now transposed into a biased remembrance of a captured yet preserved and uninfected otherness, of a pleasurable past that ‘stands exempt from the evils of our civilization’(Chris Bongie, *Exotic Memories*, p.145, Stanford University, 1991), the desired mirage that appears in the horizon:

Presently the ground leveled, and they stepped out of the mist into clear, sunny air. Ahead, and only a short distance away, lay the lamasery of Shangri-La.

(James Hilton, *Lost Horizon*, p.66, Pocket Books, published June 1939)

It is legitimate, therefore, to ask whether this pursuit of an aestheticized voyage, what some will comment as nostalgia or exotic, may ever be achieved or travelers devote themselves to an idealistic enterprise they may never terminate:

The exoticist ‘elsewhere’ conjures up a vision of Golden Age which has long since vanished – if it ever existed.

(Huggan, *the Postcolonial Exotic*, p.179)

Nostalgia is paramount in our postmodern tourism industry and is yet sustained by a process of blinded aestheticization of the exotic other – nostalgia appears to be a socially-fueled way of thinking through which the ‘I’ ignores more about the ‘exotic’ than it believes it knows. How tourists actually perceive and experience the exotic is an ostensibly nurtured caricature sealed into social conformity. Tourists have no command over their ‘gaze’, just like they do not control their perception of the exotic – a mere contextualized construction that primarily intensifies “the collision between ego’s culture and alien culture” (Mason, 1996) and guides people to the right path, to the appropriate perception of otherness:

Tourist gazes are filters of touristic perception – they provide a medium for what tourists see but also a guideline as to how they *ought* to see.

(Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.180)

The tourist gaze is structured by culturally specific notion of what is extraordinary and therefore worth viewing.

(John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., p.59, 2002)

Nostalgia, through exoticism, provides tourists and travelers with a blinding veil behind which life abroad is too aestheticized and overly fantasized, where even “tourism creates the illusion of converting suffering into spectacle” (Huggan, *the Postcolonial Exotic*, p.203) .

This reinforces rejection of one's own daily life and the undeniable interest in a (more) exotic and pleasurable one;

Places are chosen to be gazed upon because there is anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered.

(John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, p.3)

T. Van Egmond strongly affirms that the tourists' search of an exotic other shelters their willingness to escape their own society and what one of Van Egmond's respondents to his own survey labels "getting away from the Westernization of things" (*Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.68). The strong belief in an elevating exoticism thus offers a comfortable retreat from it all as it conjures up images of "peace, rusticity and happy poverty" (Thomas Gray, 1769), where comfort is sought in 'authentic' retreats. Indeed, Van Egmond agrees with Cohen's remark that "tourists seek to experience vicariously the authentic participation in the centers of others, who are as yet less modern and less 'disinherited'" (*Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.15). Later in his emphasis, Van Egmond argues himself that "the most annoying experiences in exotic destinations are: coming across either familiar standardized Western facilities (...) or other groups of Western tourists, let alone compatriots" (p.119), a statement that clearly stresses on one's self-alienation and eagerness to wallow in self-perpetuating nostalgia through exoticist discourses. The below excerpt, taken from James Hilton's famous novel *Lost Horizon*, pictures the very first moments of Conway and the rest of his party amidst a conversation with Chang, one of their hosts, after they entered the Shangri-La, a beautiful and peaceful earthly piece of heaven in the Himalayas whose ageless inhabitants exude lifelong happiness – the conversation highlights a significantly biased vision of the aestheticized exotic;

- You seem a very fortunate community, and most hospitable to strangers. I don't imagine, though, that you receive them often.

- Seldom indeed, replied the Chinese, with measured stateliness. It is not a traveled part of the world.

Conway smiled at that. You put the matter mildly. It looked to me, as I came, the most isolated spot I ever set eyes on. A separate culture might flourish here without contamination from the outside world.

(James Hilton, *Lost Horizon*, p.72, Pocket Books, published June 1939)

Notwithstanding, the tourist's quest for exoticism originates from deeper socially-consented and psychologically-nurtured, sometimes intangible and unattainable, motivations: the search of an authentic experience. Many scholars agree that the exotic-driven quest for the authentic is tightly related to antediluvian human concerns (and needs!) for a spiritual drive – Paradise. In that respect, authenticity epitomizes truth, purity, reliability and, last but not least, symbolizes a stage of timelessness and success; in other words, it relates to what humans most aspire to reach in a living. Klaus Westerhausen pointedly quotes Dean McCannell alongside as they both regard tourism as “a present-day form of pilgrimage; both involve a quest for the authentic experiences in the broader search for a mystical, ultimate truth” (*Beyond the Beach: An Ethnography of Modern Travellers in Asia*, p.235, White Lotus, 2002). Further, Huggan also focuses on the self-sufficient triptych exoticism- -authenticity-spirituality that fuels today's major tourist trends;

The exotic locations advertised by the industry are often invested with a spiritual quality, spirituality itself may be conceived of as exotic, as a mystique made accessible by travel (Not too accessible, however, for the appeal of the exotic ‘elsewhere’ is, precisely, that it always be out of reach (...)).

(Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.194)

Along with the very notion of spirituality, pleasure holds a crucial role in present tourist modes; according to John Urry, the ‘romantic tourist gaze’ emphasizes upon “solitude, privacy and a personal, semi-spiritual relationship with the object of the gaze” (*The Tourist Gaze*, p.43). Although they both encourage and sustain the pursuit of a fulfilled bliss, pleasure and spirituality also diverge from each other – spirituality is attained through heavenly contentedness whereas pleasure is sought after through material/physical satisfaction. Interestingly, exotic-driven tourists are involved into immediate hedonism as well as they indulge into spiritual voyages; Van Egmond notes “pleasure is the only goal. People seek pleasure for pleasure's sake” (*Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.27) and quotes Cohen by asserting that “if the culturally sanctioned mode of travel of the modern tourist has been that of the serious quest for authenticity, the mode of the postmodern tourist is that of playful search of enjoyment” (*Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.57). Pleasure and spirituality do gather tourists in that they both aim at an authentic yet idealized, even idolized, exotic that never unveils its mystique – an almost

attainable paradise that, like the Shangri-La<sup>1</sup>, reproduces the natural sequence of time and events in which the quest for the exotic follows the cyclical pattern interest-experience-abandonment, an in-depth parallel to what Mary B. Campbell opens her essay with:

Soon after the Fall, human beings took their first journey- in this case, into exile from Paradise. We are all of us, a displaced people. The movement of travel, whether it redeems or merely repeats that original displacement, belongs in the circle of elemental experience with “birth, copulation and death”...

(M. B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, p.1)

Studying the exotic as a passing yet repeated tourist quest is paramount. Although, I will continuously come back to this very notion and superimpose its inner distinctive aspects with that of the travel and tourism industry in Southeast Asia, I will explain hereupon the twofold intrinsic characteristics that marginalize exoticism and maintains it “out of reach”. Indeed, the exotic remains an equivocal and hardly definable term as it continually manages to slip away from general understanding and inexorably fades away. The exotic remains unattainable as such because; on the one hand, it symbolizes a transient experience as tourists come and go since “home is a place to be escaped from, but also a place to which to return” (Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.205) and also, for the exotic is rightly entitled to otherness as long as its ‘foreign’ and ‘unusual’ character subsists; on the other hand, it survives by reason of its illusory traits through which one may approach “a series of pointedly exaggerated, at times caricatural, cultural (mis)readings aimed at a Western model reader confronted with the limits of his/her cultural knowledge and interpretative authority” (Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.43) and inauthentic features by which the search of the exotic provides a temporary yet safe surrogate “bubble” (Cohen) as “pampered tourists (...) require a home away from home in isolated luxury” (Westerhausen, *Beyond the Beach*, p.60). From the same perspective, the American author-narrator, Glenn Ferguson, on a visit to a theater in China, writes in his novel “With carpet, comfortable seats, and a red-velvet curtain, we were convinced that we were in nirvana” (Glenn W. Ferguson, *Traveling the Exotic*, p.186, Sunstone Press, 2005).

If tourists may never achieve their real quest for exoticism, today’s tourism industry, notwithstanding, has managed to render exoticism even less reachable – in an industry that

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<sup>1</sup> Conway and his fellow travelers leave the Shangri-La. As the character comes back years later, he faces disillusionment and almost no interest for what primarily fascinated him.

banks its benefits from making people dream, seriously motivated marketing supports have interfered between hosts and guests and have sustained all sorts of social, economical, political and ethical gaps. Huggan further quotes Root as for the ever growing success of a sellable exotic that has developed itself into the “currency at play in the marketplace of cultural difference” (Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.158). South-East Asia is no exception to the phenomenon; the region is rather ranked ‘number one’ and massively promoted by the tourism industry as home to the most exotic places on Earth.

## II/ Promoting Southeast Asia as an exotic destination:

Southeast Asia is the generally accepted name for a series of islands and peninsulas which lie East of India and West of China. Southeast Asia is blessed with abundant sunshine and plentiful rain. (...) Southeast Asian [countries] share some similarities from [their] ancestors, artifacts up to the influence brought by India, China, Muslims and Europe. (...) [These] similarities lead to unity among the nations<sup>2</sup>.

(*About Southeast Asia*, [www.asean-tourism.com](http://www.asean-tourism.com))

When it comes to exotic vacations, Southeast Asia appears to be the *ultimate* destination and keeps ranking up as such in the public opinion. Indeed, this region of the world has based its fame on an aestheticized way of living and its year-round “abundant sunshine”; in other words, on its unrivaled and valuable exoticness. However, one might pointedly wonder whether there is *one* Southeast Asian exotic or the region houses multifaceted exotics that cater and appeal to numerous tourist markets. How do Southeast Asia and its member nations promote and pass on their ideal(ized) exoticness to tourists?

In this part of the world where most of the local economies are booming and moving at their fastest, tourism is highly welcome, exploited and stimulated as a general assurance to economical prosperity. Whilst the region highlights its oriental exoticism, tourism is strictly oriented towards the same concept. The marketing of exotic tourism will therefore illustrate my second chapter through which I will demonstrate how authenticity, diversity and liberty are utilized to foster tourism-driven discourses that attracts tourists into exotic fantasy.

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<sup>2</sup> I have slightly modified some elements in the above quote by reason of a quite poor use of English. However, syntax, semantics and the author’s overall idea have been kept perfectly unchanged.

### *Promoting national uniqueness in unformed regional identity:*

Traveling to Asia has never been as confusing as it appears today. Asia as a continent and economic region is divided into smaller economical and cultural territories that are themselves split up into smaller historical sections. For instance, a tourist going to Laos is, yes, going to Asia but first and foremost, going to Indochina in Southeast Asia. However, this distinction does not quite occur to the majority – in fact, the tourism industry in Asia has sustained an ‘exotic Asian’ that has in turn partially deprived local countries from their local uniqueness; even Southeast Asia is sometimes referred to as a symbol of Asia *per se*. Respective member countries are to reactively emphasize their uniqueness; nevertheless, a uniqueness that must fulfill enough of stereotyped pre-requisites, nurtured in the term of ‘Asian’, to be accepted and supported by tourists. In that respect, I will focus on the marketing of exoticism implemented by tourism professionals and how they deal with an inner obstacle that both unites and divides Southeast Asian countries.

First of all, it is fundamental to draw a more precise definition of Southeast Asia by listing down countries that take part in its economical activity: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, East Timor and Vietnam (*Le Bilan du Monde 2009*, Le Monde, p.138). Interestingly, the tourism industry has cut out Southeast Asia into a slightly different model: one may notice the cultural division between Northern Southeast Asia and Eastern Southeast Asia, where the northern lands are predominantly Buddhist while the southern islands remain mostly Muslim (The Philippines and Vietnam being exception to both). In that respect, tourism professionals, such as locally implanted tour operators for instance, straightforwardly utilize this distinction to their own advantage. Exotissimo Travel, a Destination Management Company specialized in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam, is a relevant illustration of this trend:

We honestly do not see the region as five separate countries, but rather as one single Southeast Asian entity representing one vast touring opportunity

*(Exotissimo Professional’s Guide, p.5, 2009)*

Revealed in its very name, Exotissimo Travel focuses on a commodified and generalized Southeast Asian exotic performed in a “vast touring opportunity”. Is there any diversity amongst the *vast* region Exotissimo is selling? If I do not intend to answer to this question in

this chapter, the observation is self-evident; although there is an immense diversity between these five countries, Exotissimo Travel, on behalf of the tourism industry, has assembled nations and sold these territories to visiting outsiders as one abstract entity, confined in stereotypes – that Southeast Asia (let alone the entire continent!) be Buddhist. A brisk look at brochures and guidebooks promoting Southeast Asian tourism only reinforces but this statement (see **Appendix I, Buddhist Monks**); an almost–universally-acknowledged sentiment Glenn W. Ferguson formulates as follows :

The artistic, aesthetically-pleasing, picturesque Thai temples are enjoyed in myriad shapes and sizes. (...) Buddhist temples are a source of constant appeal.

*(Traveling the Exotic, p.241)*

The image of a saffron-robed monk equipped with a strapped jar slung over the shoulder used by Exotissimo to picture its five destinations in its latest brochure has been carefully thought through, so has the Lonely Planet Cambodia’s latest front cover picture. All representations expressed through photography are marketing tools, I will return to later on in this chapter, that reply to the needs of the industry’s stakeholders to capture exotic images that can sell.

In that respect, this analysis allows us to uncover one of the reasons lying behind the scenes of Cambodia’s tourism. The great interest given to the temples of Angkor Wat and the overall touristic denial outside this *traveler center*<sup>3</sup> could be explained in that Angkor, and in particular its sought-after ‘Wat’, has helped meet tourists’ expectations by confirming stereotypes. As a result, whilst the rest of the territory has been shied away by most of incoming tourists, Angkor Wat has built up the pride of the nation and been overly branded in uncountable ways: it appears on the Ministry of Tourism’s official logo and campaign, labels locally made products designed to cater for mass consumption, brands up numerous channels of the tourism industry (hotels, restaurants etc.), embroiders the national flag and so on! (see **Appendix II, Encore Angkor!** )

In short, Southeast Asian exoticism inspires because of its spirituality and religious practices. Its exotic otherness has favored a spiritual quest/interest that ‘cashes in’ on Buddhism – a religion, the tourism industry has managed to *exoticize* through colorful representations of

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<sup>3</sup> This term is taken from Westerhausen’s work *Beyond the Beach*.

monks, Buddha statues and other *exotica*. Exotissimo Travel is no exception to this marketing method; such representations are enthusiastically used in their logo. Buddhism has been used so profusely in selling a Southeast Asian exoticism that this element is now posted as a main feature of the region's varied destinations. In response to this phenomenon, how do non-Buddhist Southeast Asian countries stand out from their neighboring competitors? What kind of marketing do they all implement? Selling another exoticism, opposed to stereotypes of an exclusively Buddhist Southeast Asia has become a much awkward and challenging marketing job that local authorities have intended to take the reins of. In that respect, Malaysia and the Philippines will be discerning subjects to exemplify my point and illustrate the present struggle to promote 'another exotic' able to defy the usual Southeast Asian 'exotic other'!

In the course of my internship in Cambodia, working for an internationally based tour operator, I got to meet several business partners coming from various countries. Over the month of April, I attended a meeting with some of these professionals – a few minutes into it, as we were comparing the economical health of some neighboring countries with that of Cambodia, someone mentioned that “the problem with Malaysia is their [tourist] business solely relies on Muslim markets and a *halal* oriented structure...!” In the meantime, my General Manager at Exotissimo, when talking about the Philippines, argued that “no one comes to Asia to see churches and cathedrals!”. In the same vein, a friend of a friend's contacted me via Facebook this past February as she was more interested in Cambodia's monks and all sorts of *Buddhas* than she was in her friend's sojourn in the Philippines, a distinctly Catholic country (see **Appendix III, Stereotypes and Generalization**). Undeniably, religion, once turned into a cultural exotic, is one of *Northern* Southeast Asia's<sup>4</sup> best marketing assets and most fruitful exotic appeal – an attacking approach that has forced other countries like the Philippines to react and put forth their own culture amidst the tourist oppression of an exoticized Southeast Asia. In accordance, an anonymous author published online on June 18 this year an article entitled *Tourism and Thoughts on Marketing Filipino Culture* in which they deplored that “We [Filipinos] look outside and finding that it has nothing like we see in our neighboring Asian countries, we wail and declare we have nothing close to anything distinctly Filipino”. And yet, the Philippines *does* avail of a cultural distinction: a culture that, although we shall agree on its distinctive remoteness from

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<sup>4</sup> I consider 'Northern' Southeast Asia to be limited to Buddhist countries – that is from Myanmar to Vietnam, excluding Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia located in the Southern non-Buddhist area.

surrounding countries, tourism professionals are intending to deflect toward the exotic path of the ‘sellable Asian destination’ by focus on *unusual* features.

The Philippines and Malaysia: two exotic jewels left to fend for themselves in the tourist quest for a ‘true’ Southeast Asian exotic. In accordance, local authorities have come out with very interesting TV commercials that I will analyze and compare. I shall start first of all with the latest official campaign launched in 2006 by the Department of Tourism (commonly named DOT) of the Republic of the Philippines: *Philippines More Than the Usual*.

To thwart its marginalization from general tourist trends in Southeast Asia, the Philippines is defending its uniqueness and its melting pot of ‘more-than-the-usual’ features that could appeal to outside clientele. Although the country is aware of being far off the usual Asia and precisely much distant from what tourists *think of* Asia, the Philippines promotes its exotic otherness through diversity and difference all over a beautiful archipelago made up of 7,107 islands. The Philippines is therefore eagerly advertized as “More Than the Usual Asia” (**see Appendix IV, More Than Usual Exoticism**) and a not less inviting destination as such. In the eye of putting forth its own exotic appeal out of this marketing battle, the DOT’s campaign showcases vivid colors, multi-cultural festivals, pristine paradise beaches, an abundant wildlife, modernity and a most-wanted opening-up to the rest of the world:

We are Oriental...and we are Western too. That’s why no matter where you’re from, the Philippines will feel like home.

*(Wow Philippines TV commercial transcription, off-screen voice)*

Modernity, open-mindedness and the overemphasized smiles are key elements to support a successful *differentiation strategy*. The Philippine DOT subtly addresses the issue of safety by reassuring its viewers through images of peace, smiles and modern facilities – one must bear in mind the crucial respect of safety standards as a major and decisive element in choosing one destination over the other, a psychological requirement that Abraham Maslow ranked second in his 1943 ‘hierarchy of needs’. In intending to sell its unusual exotic, the Philippines is well aware that the exotic should not be too exotic, that standardized procedures are to be respected, that the future tourist is to be comfortably reassured. “Feel[ing] like home” has therefore never meant as much: the tourists’ paradoxical search of an alienating exotic that will not put their life or psychological health at risk cannot be overlooked. Modernity, such as

the overview of Makati's skyscrapers (Manila's business district) for instance, allows the DOT to emphasize natural beauties and a modern lifestyle at the same time and provide the viewers with a portray of an exotic destination able to cater to tourist demands, not to mention its ability to give way to a *strategic positioning* vis-à-vis competing neighbors: although Southeast Asia used to be marketed as untouched by modern civilizations, the tourism industry is now aware of its fast-paced economical growth and its mushrooming gigantic metropolis, such as Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur, where millions of shopaholics and 'big-city guys' are flocking into. Modernity is consequently attached to comfort, standardized living and last but not least to safety; Westerhausen writes "insecurity and fear of the unknown prevents many people in the West from leaving their cozy status quo" (*Beyond the Beach*, p.124).

Standing far away from the massively sought-after Southeast Asian exotic, both geographically as an archipelago and culturally as a mainly Christian country, gives *carte blanche* to boost the promotion of an authentic and more preserved exotic that also goes along tourists' prior expectations according to which "a destination should be situated in a picturesque or culturally interesting environment with friendly locals, good weather, cheap prices and tolerant law enforcement officials. It should be neither commercialized, overcrowded, environmentally damaged nor unsafe" (Westerhausen, *Beyond the Beach*, p.53). In accordance with a tourism-oriented approach of Southeast Asia, where countries are likely to melt into one single entity, the Philippines has developed a surprising marketing strategy that paradoxically gives up on a possible usual Asian otherness and exploits an "unusual" exotic that can work in its favor. Comparing the Philippines to the rest of Southeast Asia has therefore become a strong marketing strategy that local authorities are all too eager to believe and invest in; below is an excerpt from the introductory lines on the Philippines made by the *Lonely Planet*,

There's no question that the Philippines is a little more challenging to visit than some other Southeast Asian countries. For starters, it's separated from the Southeast Asian mainland by several hundred kilometers of ocean. (...) The people of the Philippines are as warm and friendly as you'll meet anywhere, and the island and mountain vistas are truly superb – some of the best in Southeast Asia. And with over 7000 islands in the archipelago, it's easy to get that off-the-beaten-track feeling, something that is getting harder to do in most other parts of Southeast Asia.

(*Lonely Planet Philippines*, p.14, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, June 2006)

Notwithstanding, while the Philippines advertizes its unusual uniqueness, Malaysia looks at the problem from a much different perspective. Indeed, Malaysia Tourism, an institution operated by the local Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism has been defending its Asian identity and spent much of its work rallying its image to that of Asia from the tourist's eye. As a result, Malaysia has adopted a communication campaign through which it highlights *identity strategies* (Carmel Camilleri, *Stratégies Identitaires*, 1990) based on integration and conformity into the Asian 'mainstream exotic': *Malaysia Truly Asia, the Wonders of Asia in One Exciting Destination*. Nevertheless, I must remind at this point my readers of Malaysia being an openly Islamic nation that also depicts its religious identity on its official flag (see the representation of the crescent moon). Interestingly, Malaysia, through its identity-oriented slogan and tagline, does not seem to portray an image of an exclusively Muslim-driven destination: how 'Truly Asia' is therefore Malaysia? Or more particularly, how does it market itself as such and intend to claim its (Southeast) Asian exoticness?

Malaysia is home to three ethnic groups: the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. It is legitimate to conclude at first that Malaysia *is* 'Truly Asia' for it culturally represents different and much distinct parts of the continent found in its peoples' diversity, a statement further confirmed in the latest TV commercial broadcast by Tourism Malaysia in which future tourists are invited to "Discover a multi-cultural harmony", and a video clip that features Chinese musicians, Indian dances and Malay craftsmanship (**see Appendix V, True images of Asia**). However, such a conclusion is only partly true! Via its marketing campaign, Malaysia puts forward its exotic appeal through impassable images of pristine white-sand and turquoise-water beaches, fine cuisine, tribal communities, lush flora and fauna and shopping bargains. In other words, Malaysia offers to tourists the best-selling 'attractions' available all over Asia into one single destination – Malaysia as a potpourri of Asia's biggest sellers thus questions the percentage of authenticity and uniqueness of something the tourism industry and its stakeholders have been longingly seeking after, what we shall now commonly name "the exotic". However, a closer look at the Malaysia Truly Asia commercial permits a clearer and more in-depth analysis.

Malaysia does avail of unique features and some other "world's bests" it proudly advertizes through tourism (**see Appendix V**). Although the promotion of the country's tourist assets

focuses on similarities with and closeness to the rest of Asia, the effectiveness of the campaign is still gambled on its ability to prove a more varied yet much *different* Asia; the pristine beaches featured in the video, the endangered orangutans, as well as the smiling tribal peoples all stand for an unspoilt image of the Asian exotic and nurture the gap between western-infested Asia and a different, aestheticized and protected one. Malaysia therefore characterizes an earthly paradise where the beaches are not as damaged as Vietnam's vacation coast (i.e. Hanoi) or Thailand's coastal islets (i.e. Phuket), where its cosmopolitan food courts showcases all Southeast Asian cuisines, where fauna is cared for (while orangutans are said to be devastated in neighboring Indonesia)... where attractions at their 'best' commodify the whole into one buyable object/destination. Further, it is necessary to remind ourselves that, in their socio-psychological quest for an authentic exotic, tourists' prior expectations are myriad as they seek an authentic yet safe exotic. Malaysia, just like the Philippines, has not forgotten to reassure and comfort its Western viewers: the acting characters seen throughout the videos are all white-skinned and go around high-end and deluxe facilities (nice hotels, fine restaurants, top-end art galleries and shopping centers etc...) while in the meantime another stress is set on beautiful sceneries and pristine natural beauties. We may approach this marketing paradox as a much thought-through process where, in Elizabeth. W. Gordon's words, "the exotic is made palatable by containing, managing and packaging difference so that it meets Western expectations and does not challenge them." (*Traveling to the Exotic*, online article).

Southeast Asia as one entity allows us to conclude on its ability to both unite and divide its member countries. Out of heterogeneous cultures and landscapes, we may say that *there is something exotic enough for everyone* if the destinations, themselves, adopt the appropriate marketing policies. However, if Malaysia and the Philippines have understood that they must reassure foreigners through images and words that, on the one hand, break with the stressful and boring routine of their daily lives and, on the other hand, still manage to "provide what is largely a home away from home" (Westerhausen, *Beyond the Beach*, p.188), Southeast Asia has yet to figure out the answer to a more socio-psychological issue - that of the tourist's own identity and true expectations. As there is not one predefined type of Westerner, neither is there one exemplary tourist. Although I will not list down the different nationalities, social classes and tourist groups targeted in Southeast Asia's promotion of exotic destinations for it would necessitate an in-depth study *per se*, I will focus on the distinction between *a tourist* and *a traveler*. In a context of ever-growing concern for authenticity where the exotic is both

praised and resented, this very distinction is falling into abstract definitions. Is Southeast Asia therefore branching out its exotic appeal or is there only one marketed exotic aiming at a single kind of ‘tourist’?

### *A marketing dilemma between tourists' and travelers:*

Ton Van Egmond quotes Peter Welk:

Tourists and backpackers alike might well be traveling to the *same* places, visiting the *same* sights, eating the *same* food, and visiting the *same* national parks, although they might stay in *different* accommodation, visit *different* restaurants and bars, mingle with *different* people.

(*Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.99)

While this assertion seems quite simplistic, our analysis will try to explain that the distinction between tourists and travelers has become less and less clear and that both seek an exotic that brings them closer, more than it pulls them apart.

First, be they tourists, travelers, backpackers, drifters, holiday-makers or designated by any other terms, all leave home and get to a foreign country for a common and unique motive: breaking up with their daily routine! Some arrive with divergent perspectives, but all remain too eager to experience, *see* and reach something different that will enable them to come back home with something to tell and show to others less traveled; this appears as an inner quest for *self-actualization* (Maslow, 1943), an enhancement to a post-travel social and psychological elevation. I put the above stress on ‘see’ as tourists, as well as travelers, never really ‘experience’ or ‘reach’ the exotic they are looking for – the travel and tourism industry sustains a business in which images and representations prevail, it is an industry of visual and superficial perceptions that only reveals but the outside layer of intrinsically more complex features. The way we see and perceive things when traveling is modulated through what Urry terms the ‘tourist gaze’, a pre-modeled perception of things nurtured by images and representations captured mentally prior to traveling physically. We eventually decide to go to *this* or *that* destination because we expect to see or not to see objects and subjects we already confined into a firm pre-categorization;

The contemporary gaze is increasingly signposted. There are markers that identify the things and places worthy of our gaze.

(J. Urry, *The Tourist Gaze*, p.44)

Although, tourists and travelers claim two separate motivations and intend to avoid each other, it is this very gaze that seems to unite them around a same exotic. Were this statement untrue, travelers would fly into the Philippines in greater numbers while tourists would remain loyal to Thailand's beaches, backpackers would leave Cambodia's tourist belt centered along Siem Reap - Phnom Penh – Sihanoukville and dare to set foot in Ratanakiri and Koh Kong Provinces, tourists would have never reached the then pristine beaches of Boracay (Philippines) and Koh Samui (Thailand), tourists and travelers would get away from each other and never cross roads. And yet, today's travel and tourism industry conveys a much different reality.

Tourists Vs. travelers: who is Southeast Asia targeting? And who does its exoticness appeal to? To answer this question, one might be able to tell tourists from travelers - an interrogation tougher than we may think. First, Jean-Didier Urbain demonstrates in his work *L'Idiot du voyage* that all traveling persons are doing so in the eye of escaping their actual present lives, a state of psycho-sociological malaise that makes itself known by, what he terms, the *mépris paradoxal* or 'paradoxical contempt'. This contempt of the self remains a key element in tourism marketing and understanding visitors' decision-making process; indeed, the quest for an exotic other betrays an inner quest for a 'better self', a 'better life', an 'authentic lifestyle' supposedly found in worshipped otherness. Tourists and travelers are prone to deny their own daily social habits, they believe, are caught in-between boredom, stress and all sorts of Western fabrications - an oppression they intend to release in seeking an authentic experience cloistered in comfortable exoticism. If we are not happy with our meaningless lives in here, we go and get a better one (even temporarily) out there: T. Van Egmond justifiably explains that "we are looking for meaning in the life of others" (*Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.14). This is precisely because we travel in order to reach a better inner self that we do not consider ourselves to be tourists when traveling: besides, tourists never say that they 'tour', they would rather *travel*. In this respect, tourism professionals have had to observe this psycho-social tendency and align themselves with it; The Electric Pagoda, an online tour operator, proudly posts on its homepage "Not a Tour Person? Neither are we!

Travel independently or in groups of 10 or less”. In accordance with this observation, the tourism industry has advertized an anti-tourist tourism that deludes its participants into thinking they are not tourists themselves (J.D. Urbain, 1991)<sup>5</sup>. However, we are nothing but tourists when we decide to leave home in the search of an exotic other, just like we ‘stick to’ our tourist status when we see in other tourists’ behaviors what we resent seeing as *tourists* ourselves. This *mépris paradoxal* therefore uncovers a general tendency according to which “Most of those who leave home for purposes of leisure prefer to be seen as ‘travelers, guests, visitors, adventurers, possibly even explorers’” (T. Van Egmond, *Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.48), a denial of the self that never fails to incorporate these people into the vilified rank of mainstream tourists, more than it helps differentiate them from such tourists and *vice-versa*.

Not only do travelers and tourists vainly intend to denigrate their ‘traveling’ counterparts by believing blindly in two distinct sociological categories but, along their quest for an authentic exotic, they also do so by trying to avoid each other physically (geographically even!). Similarly, T. Van Egmond tells us “In their search for authentic experiences, tourists like to visit the back region, i.e. go ‘backstage’” (*Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.15). Despite the majority of traveling persons supposedly aiming at avoiding tourists masses, compatriots and other ‘non-exotics’, no one seems willing to go for an unsafe trip or travel – no matter how ‘backstage’ or ‘off-the-beaten-track’, safety issues are always given a second thought when it comes to traveling. Besides, Rachid Amirou mentions the tourist’s search of a safe “center” while out of home, in the same way a “comforting indoors”<sup>6</sup> (R. Amirou and P. Bachimon, *Le tourisme local. Une culture de l’exotisme*, p.76, L’Harmattan, 2000) where travelers and tourists alike can take shelter. Likewise, whereas *the Lonely Planet* introduces Phnom Penh as the ultimate “image of the exotic” (see chapter 1), it alternatively gives travelers advices in its paragraph ‘Dangers and Annoyances’ (p.81), reminding its readers that “it is important to take care”. Consequently, the tourism industry has understood that today’s travelers (be they explorers, adventurers etc.) are tourists all the

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<sup>5</sup> Revised from the original text taken from *L’Idiot du voyage. Histoires de touristes*, Petite bibliothèque Payot, re-edited in 2002, in which the author writes that “le discours de promotion touristique doit être anti-touristique (p.125) ... faire croire au touriste qu’il n’en est pas un (p.127)”.

<sup>6</sup> The original term is “*un dedans rassurant*”. What Amirou explains in such words could refer to Cohen’s “bubble” in which tourists seek comfort, safety and familiarity – that is to say, an alienating exotic yet not too exotic and frightening.

same. Because safety and comfort are intrinsic prior requirements to tourists and travelers, travels and tours are to be marketed as respectful of this demand. To illustrate this point, I have extracted a particular example from Exotissimo's *2009 Professional's Guide* where it reads in the 'Adventure' section:

Although Cambodia is best known for its rich Khmer history and the era's remarkable temples, the country's lush landscapes, rivers and dirt roads are also a haven for those who crave an *open-air adventure*. With a *well-established tourism industry* in the region, *a wealth of services* has emerged to *fully cater for adventurous travelers* in search of new experiences.<sup>7</sup> (p.56)

Legitimately, one might question the authenticity of a so-called 'open-air adventure' built on a striking paradox that has yet become commonplace in tourism marketing. Is Cambodia therefore 'adventurous' because it is able to picture some 'dirt roads' or because 'services' are now myriad to turn these dirt roads into an exotic lure and 'cater for adventurous travelers'? Let alone the collocation of two allegedly antagonistic terms – 'tourism industry' and 'adventurous travelers' – within the same paragraph, this marketing approach exemplifies a growing tendency to subtly utilize exotic images and symbols of upcountry and remote places to nurture *nonexistent* hidden paradises (I will return to this argument later in this chapter) populated with non-locals, namely tourists and travelers alike. Indeed, the latest publication of Thomas Cook Signature's brochure introduces two of Thailand's most famous insular destinations as follows:

Koh Samui is "a precious jewel set in aquamarine seas, unspoilt, lush and breath-taking. The two words of Koh Samui have become well-known and adored by beach lovers around the world." (p.252)

Phuket is "surrounded by miles of gorgeous coastline which encompasses a vibrant, culturally rich center is the dazzling gem of Phuket – justifiably Thailand's most popular resort." (p.264)

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<sup>7</sup> I turned some elements into italics to highlight the discursive paradox between 'adventure' and the 'wealth of services' that are here to define and advertize Cambodian adventure.

Once again, the words used in the above descriptions unwillingly demonstrate that Southeast Asia has become a unified spot likely to appeal to both tourists and travelers alike, where this exotic appeal remains malleable and adaptable, where an “unspoilt” island (supposedly perfect for isolated travelers) is yet famous “around the world” and where a “gorgeous coastline” and a “culturally rich center” are the essential ingredients to a famous and “popular resort” (the term *resort* being emblematic of leisure and pleasure vacations mostly in world-class facilities and highly-standardized venues; a term illustrating commercialized superficiality and therefore a decontextualization from the natural and cultural special features the text seems to be putting forward *prima facie*). In this passionate battle for a quiet, remote and exotic heaven where paradise-seekers consider themselves as anti-tourists, thousands of other tourism professionals have been drawn towards marketing tourists and travelers as ‘explorers’ and ‘pioneers’: Asia Online, a French-owned and -run online travel agency, has developed an “Off-the-beaten-track” section (“*Hors des sentiers battus*” in the original text) where a 15-day trip to Western Cambodia enables participants to ‘explore the least frequented areas of the country (...) before a relaxing stay on the beautiful beaches of Sihanoukville’<sup>8</sup>. The authenticity as a dictionary would define it and the one tourists and travelers may be looking for are undoubtedly very much distinct – in the case of Asia Online’s product, this raises a twofold question: is it coherent to package up a temple visit (where culture and spirituality are overemphasized) with a beach excursion (where all kinds of pleasures prevail)? How accurately exotic and authentic is the product in question?<sup>9</sup> Although I do not intend to answer these questions in this analysis, it may be interesting to give a further look at the marketing strategy developed around this ‘anti-tourist’ tendency through which the so-called travelers stand closer to mainstream tourists rather than they do to genuine explorers. As an illustration, Huggan regards the issue with a similar point of view, the tendency to portray an anti-tourist vision of travel and tourism is an illusion that deceives but the practitioners themselves:

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<sup>8</sup> The original text in French reads “Voici un circuit qui vous fera explorer les zones les moins courues de l’Ouest du Cambodge (...) avant de vous reposer sur les belles plages de Sihanoukville”.

<sup>9</sup> The inclusion of Sihanoukville into the product draws our attention: on the one hand, Sihanoukville is not located in Western Cambodia but rather in its Southeastern part, on the other hand, Sihanoukville is far from being ‘off-the-beaten-track’ and although it used to be a laid-back coastal town is closer to what the *Lonely Planet* has termed the “Costa del Cambodia”, where masses flock into on a daily basis. Further, as I write, a new air route from Siem Reap to Sihanoukville is to be opened very soon while the construction of a bigger airport is still under negotiation in Siem Reap.

Baranay in *The Edge of Bali* satirizes the flagrant hypocrisies of the anti-tourist tourist: that sensitive, sometimes tortured soul whose felt contempt for the vulgarities of package tourism and romantic belief in the myth of an unsullied Native culture – a culture that s/he feels duty-bound to protect from the ravages of consumer society – merely reinforces his/her own conspicuously privileged touristic status. (...) She knows, for example, that Bali is a manufactured paradise, a construct imposed upon the island to reinforce the ‘interrelated ideologies of colonialism, orientalism and tourism’.

(Baranay through Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.198-199)

The previously-mentioned ‘tourist gaze’ shapes our perception of the objects and subjects we look at when traveling and predetermines for us what is exotic from what is not. According to Urry’s work *The Tourist Gaze*, this gaze falls into two main categories – the “collective gaze” and the “romantic gaze”, while the former focuses on commonly visited and largely sought-after *sights*, the latter focuses on a search for more natural, isolated, ego-pampering *sites*. The ongoing touristic trends consequently lead us to think that the industry is heading towards a “romantic” exotic. Rachid Amirou (based on Turner’s analysis) parallels Urry’s version of the ‘tourist gaze’ by saying that we, travelers and tourists alike, are torn between the *societas* we deny and the *communitas* we aspire to find refuge into for they are believed to depict images of simplicity, authenticity and truer reality. In short, scholars agree we would intend to escape *collective societas* and reach *romantic communitas* in turn throughout our exotic travels. Interestingly, it seems that we always travel in groups – when we are not traveling with a group, we will eventually fail to avoid any such group when arriving at the destination for our search of the exotic leads us all to come across each other eventually wherever we may go. In that respect, Bangkok Airways’ tagline – *Asia’s Boutique Airline, Exclusive Service to Exotic Gems* (see **Appendix VI, Bangkok Airways**) – is an extremely relevant example. On the one hand, I shall remind my readers that Bangkok International Airport is today’s Southeast Asian major hub and welcomes masses of Western tourists who fly direct from Europe each year. On the other hand, Thailand remains an ‘absolute must’ in Westerners’ itineraries which shows that most of travelers and tourists will fly into Bangkok first and head towards an *exotic* extension destination afterwards. The slogan *Exclusive Service to Exotic Gems* helps us illustrate an irony in which there is no “exclusive service” but somewhat massively consumed flights from a much frequented center that ‘exports’ some of its travelers to outside so-called “exotic [untouched] gems”, which will be in turn consumed up in mere greediness (see chapter 3). T. Van Egmond adds that “interest in exotic people and culture has two

contradictory sides, the colonialist and the romantic” (*Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.118), through which our colonialist vision of an exotic other enhances a romantic perception of this exotic otherness – we travel as conquerors and set foot in comforting images of a better other.

Because of our eternal and inner motive of *self-actualization* we blatantly aim at when traveling, we never fail to fall blindly into the carefully-manipulated exoticist discourses and images led by marketing professionals. Fantasy, imagination, and utopia: as we aspire to reach the exotic, do we ever manage to attain what it really inspires?

### *Exotic visions: from image to imagination through Imagineering:*

Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881) that “To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive”<sup>10</sup>: how accurate is this statement? How does Southeast Asia nurture its exoticness through images manipulated and designed to please the tourist’s eye? Do we eventually “arrive” to our destination?

In accordance with tourists’ prior considerations, tourism has implemented a marketing machinery that trades on our mental images of an exotic other and what we, admittedly, do not know. There is therefore a symbolical mental rift where our minds get lost between what we know “too well” (our daily routine) and this cultural and spatial “unknown” and through which it nurtures our exotic imagery<sup>10</sup>. Amirou further explains that tourism is consequently dealing with the gap between our “dreamed” (*rêvé*) and “lived” (*vécu*) experiences. Unlike what we may think, the images used to promote tourism tend to extend this gap between our daily lives and the vacation destination as it creates a mythical vision of an aestheticized otherness – to sustain and feed this ‘myth’ is paramount as it is a key element in the decision-making process of the tourist (*Le tourisme local*, p. 61 and 73). Hôtel De La Paix, one of Cambodia’s most prestigious and luxurious venues, exemplifies relevantly the importance

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<sup>10</sup> This crucial statement that helps us understand the present marketing strategy the tourism industry is using for the promotion of exoticism is taken from Amirou and Bachimon’s work *Le tourisme local. Une culture de l’exotisme*. The original text reads on page 74 “[il existe] une aire intermédiaire entre le « trop connu » (vie quotidienne) et l’inconnu spatial et culturel. C’est ce tiers espace symbolique qui va contenir les rêveries exotiques, les rituels de vacances et les images mentales d’altérité”.

given to images to nurture ‘palpable’ visions of exoticism (see **Appendix VII, Exoticism in Pampered Luxury**). With a price range nearing USD300 per night and a complete set of deluxe facilities, the De La Paix stands, at first, much distant from the rest of Cambodia’s territory, a country listed amongst the poorest in the world. And yet, the hotel cleverly advertizes its ‘exotic’ features to be in line with Cambodian arts and lifestyle. Indeed, the property displays exotic features; its French name, the considered staging of palm trees, the modern version of *Apsara* statues in the lobby, the ‘jungly’ touch inspired by flaming torches and relaxing water features or the temple-shaped architecture of the building strongly contribute to promoting the hotel’s exoticness. The hotel consequently sets itself in comforting images of a better and luxurious otherness, it stands as a transitional refuge in-between tourist’ *tough* lives and Cambodia’s *tougher* (and hidden!) reality. Similarly, Huggan, on behalf of Todorov, tells us that “Exoticism posits the lure of difference while protecting its practitioners from close involvement” (*The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.22), that is exoticist discourses and images never genuinely allow tourists to reach this very ‘exotic’ advertized and idealized through tourism marketing. Images (words as well) convey aesthetic and ‘decontextualized’ (Huggan) symbols that altogether participate in the development of an exotic other; once turned into sellable goods, these *modified* images project a veritable exotic that is conveniently glorified for its *authenticity*. What appears as a constituent paradox (how can images reflect authenticity?), has in fact become the industry’s major focus. Sustaining the authentic exotic through symbols and images, a *marketing of myth and fantasy* I intend to develop in the below paragraph

What [tourists] seek is not objective authenticity (i.e. authenticity as originals) but a *symbolic* authenticity which is the result of social constriction. Symbolic authenticity has little to do with reality. It is more often than not a projection of certain stereotypical images held and circulated within tourist-sending societies, particularly within the mass media and the promotional tourism materials of Western societies.

(T. Van Egmond, *Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.57)

Legitimately, we shall agree with Van Egmond’s point of view. Indeed, symbols are key elements the tourism industry banks its profits on – Southeast Asia being certainly the most relevant example to illustrate the over-use of symbols and redundant images to commercialize its ‘exotic’ features to the Western world. Indeed, white-sand and palm-fringed beaches where white-skinned people can soak up the sun, luxurious spa treatments Westerners can indulge

into, the saffron-robed monks wandering around ancient Buddhist temples and pagodas alike, *champey* (frangipani flower in Cambodia) or *sampaguita* (variety of jasmine flower in the Philippines) that ornate tourists' faces and dishes (let alone all sorts of colorful lotus flowers), local inhabitants pressing hands in prayer and bowing to greet the passer-by and rice paddies where triangle-shaped hats mask faceless icons are some of the countless branding images that symbolize Southeast Asia in brochures and other advertizing materials (see **Appendix VIII, A War of Exotic Smiles and Flowers**), through which an aestheticized and always positive image of the region is shown – needless to remind my readers that the tourist in search of exoticism is undeniably looking for a home away from home, and would not stand images of pain, *sad* poverty<sup>11</sup> and other non-tourist realities the destination truly has to offer. Tourism therefore shows to the outside world its own version of authenticity, as it only allows through images of a tolerable exotic otherness that does not frighten the Western traveler. If we refer back to the two official TV commercials launched by the DOT Philippines and Malaysia Tourism, the appearance of occidental foreigners all through the respective video clips reinforces the idea that destinations must meet Western considerations and expectations. However, such a marketing approach also intends to conceal fantasy behind images of fake pioneers who serve as an illustration to comfort and reassure travelers – *they* have been there and had a taste of this exoticism, images are therefore considered authentic, travelers can therefore go and follow these predecessors. Here is the true message meant to be broadcast behind it.

Images as in photographs consequently play a crucial role in tourism – Urry explains that “much of what is appreciated is not directly experienced reality itself but representation, particularly through the medium of photography” (*The Tourist Gaze*, p.78). Indeed, photography is omnipresent in tourism – brochures are visual, our mental imageries shaped and predetermined before we travel, what we experience all through our travels as well as the postcards we send out to relatives and the souvenirs we bring back home remain visual perceptions first of all. Before we even touch, smell, hear or taste the exotic, we *see* it! However, the exotic we perceive is in fact a mirrored reality transposed onto palpable materials: this image machinery is doubly interesting for, on the one hand, it translates a mere *commodification process* that lures participants into thinking that exoticism is always within

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<sup>11</sup> In comparison with the above-mentioned ‘happy poverty’ most tourists look for when traveling to Third-World countries.

reach and, on the other hand, it nurtures a *domestication myth* in which travelers are gifted with a mighty yet not absolute power over the exotic. These two notions of domestication and commodification are well-addressed in Huggan's work *The Postcolonial Exotic* where the author argues

The exotic functions dialectically as a symbolic system, domesticating the foreign, the culturally different and the extraordinary (...) but to domesticate the exotic fully would neutralize its capacity to create surprises, thereby integrating it 'into the humdrum of everyday routines. (p.13 and 14)

Exotic artifacts circulate as commodities in the global tourist marketplace; it is precisely their availability that renders them exotic. (p.204)

It is important to remind that Southeast Asia contains some of the poorest countries in the world, which allegedly are thought to be deprived of any valuable capitals<sup>12</sup>. Just like colonizers and pioneers who converted the savage into the exotic other a few centuries ago, we as travelers and tourists mercifully attribute value to this exotic as we intend to turn its representations/images into an authentic other, more tangible and consumable, in line with our standards and prior expectations. Nevertheless, this process results in our being even more incapable of grasping the exotic 'as it just comes up'. In their blind eagerness to consume unauthentic and standardized objects, tourists' imagination is therefore stimulated through sociological pressure and what the industry accepts to 'stage up' to please the latter – what Dean McCannell translates into *staged authenticity*.

To many scholars, there is no genuine 'authentic' exotic. In fact, most argue that this authenticity is staged; it is designed, remodeled, performed, represented, repeated and circulated *ad infinitum*. This authentic tourism is willing to sell to its participants is nothing but a decontextualized version of original objects or subjects turned into consumable goods. Huggan parallels this explanation and tells us

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<sup>12</sup> Europe being the Old Continent, in its age-old belief of superiority, has always had a contemptuous look upon other continents considered to be home to savagery and uncivilized tribes.

The search to domesticate and attribute value to exotic objects depends to some extent on their removal from their original cultural/historical context. The aesthetics of decontextualization is also at work in so-called ‘ethnic’ and/or ‘tribal’ products whose authenticity is a function of their cultural dislocation.

(*The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.16)

In that respect, the Khmer *krama* (traditional scarf usually wrapped on the head) wrapped around tourists’ necks upon their arrival at the airport, the *Batik* masks (ceremonial and spiritual offerings) and other tribal arts from Eastern Malaysia sold a hundred miles away in Kuala Lumpur’s tourist markets, the *Apsara* (dances representing celestial nymphs, originally performed for the King and his highest Officials) performed in Pub Street in downtown Siem Reap, the Thai massages (originally used for its curative and medicinal properties) offered in Bangkok’s biggest shopping malls and the Philippine *barong* shirts or Vietnamese *aodai* dresses (both traditionally worn for important occasions) sold to tourists<sup>13</sup> are commodified and decontextualized exotics that, although they are locally produced and were/still are part of the local culture, can only be found and bought near tourist centers. The tourism and travel industry therefore bridges the gap between the practitioner and the exotic; it turns into commodities, exotic objects tourists intend to reach mentally or physically. And indeed, today’s tourism reveals that this commodification process of exoticness has fully integrated the industry. In that respect, Thai Airways’ slogan – *As Smooth As Silk* – relevantly illustrates what we have just advanced. From the medieval times when silk was traded from Asia to Europe as a luxurious good *par excellence*, silk has remained a much-valued and heavily sought-after product all over our Western societies. For silk is produced massively in Southeast Asia, Thailand, for being one of the biggest suppliers, has understood that its exotic silk had the ability to attract tourists and nurture the imagery of a luxurious, comforting (‘smooth’) and authentic exotic. Consequently, the use of the word “silk” in Thai Airways’ slogan translates verbally a commodified appeal; it depicts an invitation to taste and test a little bit of this renowned Thai exoticism from the very beginning of the trip, it symbolizes the

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<sup>13</sup> All the listed elements result from personal assessments confirmed throughout personal travels in Southeast Asia and professional experiences during my two internships.

tourist's never-ending and constant quest for the exotic 'out there' (a mission led beyond the limits as this example shows us that it may also be reached up in the air<sup>14</sup>!).

In this mind-consuming quest for the exotic, it seems that tourists never reach what they are seeking, as if all were fantasy concealed behind imagery, an imagery that would prevent tourists from 'arriving' eventually. Tourism therefore brings into play a heavily controlled industry that manipulates and standardizes destinations and demands alike – fantasized images of otherness fall into exoticist discourses that help nurture demands for a fabled aesthetic. Exoticism in tourism results in what Van Egmond characterizes as being "McDisneyized" (*Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.23) and goes further in his argument by saying

New disciplines emerge in academia to study *Imagineering*: how to create concepts that bring the thrill, adventure, surprise, novelty, boredom alleviation modern consumers demand. (p.43)

The term "Imagineering" was invented by Walt Disney himself in 1952 to describe ongoing activities and plans to develop theme parks and any other branches of the Walt Disney Company in line with Disney's renowned image and grandeur. Egmond's point in saying that today's exotic-oriented tourism is influenced by a phenomenon of McDisneyization, seems extremely interesting. Indeed, as we mentioned, images are used by the tourism industry to nourish tourists' imagination that in turn nurtures the myth of an exotic other. What strikingly intrigue most scholars is that tourists, generally, are willing to travel and pay for a staged authenticity of what they wish to reach, just like we pay knowingly for an aesthetic vision of a fantasized and comforting bubble at Disney theme parks. Further, the attraction named 'It's a Small World', a boat cruise enchanted with singing puppets representing several nations from across the five continents, is a relevant example for our analysis. Indeed, the Asian part of the ride displays aesthetically presented scenes from Japan, India and Thailand – we may therefore notice that the presence of the latter as an 'official' representative of Southeast Asia is far from being neutral. Thailand, as the most popular destination amongst its Southeast

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<sup>14</sup> It could be interesting to refer to Amirou (see above) as the flight experience, advertized through symbols of exoticness ('silk' in this case), could epitomize the *ultimate exotic* for it creates a bridge between our daily routine and the vacation destination, what Amirou terms "le tiers espace symbolique".

Asian neighbors, symbolizes the ultimate exotic tourists expect and seek when traveling to the region. The symbols and costumes used for the attraction – such as the Thai Apsara – commodify an ‘authentic’ Southeast Asia into an exotic and staged representation of the region as a whole (see **Appendix XI, It’s a Small World**). From a parallel perspective, this voyage through the continents stages our own continuous quest throughout the world for a better and more authentic exotic. However, if we get to have an insight into what the ‘world’<sup>15</sup> has to offer, we never fully reach what we are here for; just like the passing boat along showcased exotic scenes, this happens to be mere ‘imagineered’ fantasy<sup>16</sup> as we end up going back to our starting point, to our daily routine.

Southeast Asia is an exotic destination heavily marketed as such. Nevertheless, this exoticness conveyed and showcased to the outside world relies on dream and fantasy – tourism has developed an industry where imagery translates imagination into stereotyped images. Southeast Asia has never been more willing to maintain its exotic features so these can be sold to the Western world. Dream is a key element and tourism professionals know it too well. Below is the rationale given by the ASEAN to explain its logo:

Every traveler has his own mental images of what makes an ideal holiday destination. The seashells on the beach. The corals and other underwater wonders. Blue skies. Verdant rainforests and many more. These are commonalities in ASEAN. ASEAN therefore is many things to many people. (...) It is a graphic representation of what we want the world to perceive when they think of ASEAN. That it consists of 10 "parts" which, when seen as one, can be a dream. (...) The look altogether suggests peace and tranquility on one hand and its upward strokes, on the other, suggest vibrancy, dynamism and even idealism. The Visit ASEAN logo, sells dreams - 10 dreams in one - which beautifully enhances the tagline, Asia's Perfect 10 Paradise.

(ASEAN Tourism website, *Visit ASEAN Logo* webpage)

As the exotic Southeast Asian appeal keeps being nurtured much eagerly, the impact of tourism over the region is more and more frightening and the aftermaths all too close to a

<sup>15</sup> Only the most popular and well-known countries are represented.

<sup>16</sup> I find extremely interesting that, quite coincidentally or ironically, the World (through the attraction) be sketched in *Fantasyland*, one of Disney parks’ five themed lands.

point of no return. What are the costs to be paid in this conspicuous and jutting quest for exoticism?

### III/ Exotic tourism: drifts and drawbacks of a relentless quest:

What tourism makes apparent here is exoticism's narcissistic impulse: the frustrated desire for the other turns to self-loathing, even self-destruction. (...) Tourism, far from protecting its paying customers, makes them vulnerable; it creates an environment of misunderstanding that can easily transform into conflict.

(Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.203)

Indeed, the tourist's quest for an exotic other does turn into conflicting situations very often. Despite the *prima facie* vision of the 'exotic' as a positive experiential breakaway and the tourism industry's ability to commodify otherness into an aestheticized appealing force, the aftermaths of our post-colonial quest for the exotic tend to end up in a much less pleasing reality where the commercialized white-sand beaches disappear behind barriers of concrete, where freedom stirs up social illnesses between hosts and guests, where those trying to go 'backstage' actually appear to be actors *onstage*... where exoticism, in its most deceptive apparel, shows up its true inclination.

Our study has revealed that our frenzied quest for exoticism has almost no restraints. Now that the world has been discovered, we must 'travel and see', set foot where our ancestors went, explore beyond the limits and come back home changed, elevated and knowledgeable above all. As we pursue blindly and desperately our search of exoticism from a destination to the other we inevitably leave indelible footprints behind – if one must agree that the interactions generated have had some positive effects on hosting destinations, such as the creation of currency exchange or aid for economic development, other consequences have been much more unfavorable. Can we still afford exoticism in Southeast Asia? This chapter will explain the multidimensional characteristics of this relentless quest we mean to lead throughout our travels... and the price we are to pay to achieve our goals.

## *Mass tourism: a multidimensional conquest*

Everything is qualifiable as exotic, destinations at the very least! While we fail to give a clear definition of exoticism, it is easier to admit tourists and travelers alike tend to be looking for the same exotic Otherness – an earthly paradise where participants feel like home and yet manage to break away from their daily routine, a comfortable retreat yet different and unfamiliar. Further, because of its hardly definable features and its strong adaptability to various markets, exoticism is believed to have the ability to please everyone’s taste and to be predisposed to mass consumption – Huggan gives us a clear analysis on this point:

Late twentieth-century exoticisms are the products, less of the expansion of the nation than of a worldwide *market* – exoticism has shifted, that is, from a more or less privileged mode of aesthetic perception to an increasingly global mode of mass-market consumption.

*(The Postcolonial Exotic, p.15)*

The tourism industry has revealed that exoticism’s strength paradoxically relies on its absence of meaning, that as we have failed to clearly define the term, the industry could turn this failure to its own advantage and tool up with a powerful marketing asset able to extend itself out to get everyone’s (not to say anyone’s) attention. Business developed around exoticism is therefore highly structured – travelers in their search of preserved exotic areas act as pioneers, and as they make their ‘new’ discoveries known to the world, outsiders start to catch up with much enthusiasm. Step by step, the once remote and untouched area becomes a traveler center before it ends up being a major destination. Exoticism is a self-sufficient magnet; exotic destinations have the unique ability to inspire exoticness when discovered and to generate an evolving exoticness when conquered by following *consumers*. Indeed, once exoticism starts to be packaged by the tourism industry it is doomed to be consumed up endlessly until it no longer features what it used to be famous for in the first place. Westerhausen discusses that

Wherever travelers venture in the search for yet unspoiled destinations, they become agents of change in their own right by initiating a process that frequently ends with a perceived ‘hostile takeover’ of their destination sites by conventional mass tourism.

*(Beyond the Beach, preface IX)*

The growth of mass tourism as the apex of exotic destinations seems inevitable. The invasion of tourists first operates as a conquest over space; exoticism is sought through the skies and the horizon in a two-dimension enterprise. Indeed, travels appear as conquests over lands and territories, a conquest carried out both horizontally and vertically: potential ‘centers’ (which become resorts shortly after tourists start coming in) spread out in peripheral zones while they also grow and rise up to the sky. In fierce competition to promote one’s own exoticness, tourist buildings reach their highest – a serious problem in Vietnam’s coastal towns such as Nha Trang where “along the beachfront drive, a row of high-rise luxury hotels is going up, each one striving to see just how high it can go” (Asia Calling online article, *Big and Bigger on Vietnam’s Holiday Coast*), airports mushroom out and new routes open up regularly – Siem Reap International Airport may have a sister building soon a few yards off its main entrance, a new flight operating to the coastal town of Sihanoukville was to be launched in last July 2009 while, in the meantime, other major hubs spread out on the outskirts of strategic metropolis (i.e. Kuala Lumpur Sepang Airport in 1998 and the region’s latest and most colossal addition- Bangkok Suvarnabhumi Airport in 2006) . However, this seething mass consumption of both land and air is bound to leave an indelible trail behind; Urry explains that “the physical smallness of Singapore means that extra tourists cannot easily be accommodated except by even more hotel buildings which would only be possible by demolishing the remaining few Chinese shophouses which in the past have been one of the main objects of the tourist gaze” (*The Tourist Gaze*, p.51) while, in the same vein, Westerhausen argues that “as far as travelers were concerned, the completion of the airport [in Koh Samui, Thailand] indicated that it was time to move on” (*Beyond the Beach*, p.203). Interestingly, one of the main characteristics of exoticism therefore results from its self-destructive features that, on the one hand, invite groups to consume up what it offers and, on the other hand, provoke individual resentment and rejection once this exotic object no longer meets tourists’ expectations that were precisely built and nurtured before it was spoiled by fellow predecessors.

However, can we avoid this self-destructive mechanism, which makes exotic destinations collapse or slide off into oblivion eventually? If we cannot provide our readers with a satisfying answer, we know alternatively that our “first trip commonly goes to well-known destinations, where many predecessors have set foot” (T. Van Egmond, *Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.44). Tourists are consequently prone to follow in

others' footsteps – we shall refer here again to the importance of safety and comfort in people's prior expectations; indeed, the remote beautiful beaches seen on TV or in brochures are those much unlikely to be visited by any tourists as they are considered too exotic and untouched by 'civilization' to be safe and 'comfy' (traveling is a leisure activity after all!) – the presence of others, like us, before our own therefore promotes safety and security and intends to reassure. This psycho-sociological construction, predisposed to fuel an exoticist mechanism, remains a key element to understand the statutory evolution of exotic destinations. Besides, Urry explains that masses bring the exotic destination to life; as a result of our *collective tourist gaze*, he tells us that “many visitors to hotels and restaurants are only there because of the attractions available in the area so there may well be much support given to enhancing local facilities, to increasing the number or attraction of potential objects of the tourist gaze” (The Tourist Gaze, p.50). Tourists follow and catch up with predecessors in hordes towards destinations where images of an aestheticized lifestyle – the ultimate exotic - have been nourished, promoted and passed on; in that respect, Westerhausen quotes Tony Wheeler, the founder of *Lonely Planet*, as the latter says “There are bottlenecks, places where everyone goes. (...) If you travel Southeast Asia, you'll wind up in Penang or Bali. If you travel South Asia, you'll pass through Kathmandu” (*Beyond the Beach*, p.243).

Undeniably, all tourists go to and through tourist centers. Unsurprisingly, there are places that stand out as destinations or resorts. Be it Phuket, Penang, Bangkok, Bali, Siem Reap, Hanoi, Boracay, Pattaya, to mention a few, all color the tourist's quest for a Southeast Asian exotic. As previously mentioned, tourists track each other in their respective quests<sup>17</sup>; it seems we all throw ourselves into a *global gold rush* to alleviate the boredom and insignificance of our daily lives. The metaphor is here quite relevant and doubly accurate; not only do we try to alleviate some of the illnesses of our routine but we intend, above all, to *elevate* the later to new heights and reconnaissance – a social elevation made possible thanks to material possessions or rather, I should say, through the *idea* of enrichment. It is necessary to remind our reader that exoticism, in its postcolonial context of commodification (Huggan), imposes a relation of submissiveness and power, in such a way that the gazed exotic object/subject/place is made palpable, more tangible and likely reachable. The symbolic gold rush in which

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<sup>17</sup> There are no genuine anti-tourist tourists as we always end up using the same facilities or frequenting the same venues. By seeking uniqueness, we never reach a true otherness but rather gather in familiar centers where we find 'a home away from home'.

tourists physically get involved through their travels translates a fierce quest for material goods – the tourism industry therefore adopts exoticist discourses where otherness is *materialized* through the reference of luxury, jewels and other precious items praised in the globalized sphere of influence. The use of recurring words such as “pearl”, “silk”, “jewel”, “emerald”, “gold”, and others, may consequently be intentional and somewhat well thought-through. Gold-driven tourists going to Malaysia might well find exoticness in the country’s varied jewels – Langkawi and Penang for instance, two of Malaysia’s most popular destinations connected to the outside world by two respective international airports; two islands proudly branded as ‘Truly Asia’.

Our exoticist perception of the world translates an inner quest for a better lifestyle in absolute freedom. While the tourism industry is luring its practitioners into thinking the exotic they are after is always within reach, their freedom enslave the exotic other’s. As our exoticist discourses commodify otherness into palpable aestheticism, our neocolonialist self-empowering position over the gazed object turns exotic people into consumable goods in the same way. Exoticized bodies become eroticized and exploited as to enable travelers to ease deeper frustrations, such as the travelers’ need for possession and power over the Other and, first and foremost, over their own *Self*.

### *Sex Tourism: from exoticism to eroticism*

As I started to *google* the term ‘exotic’ on the web, recurring links to “exotic dancers” and “strip-teasers” were coming out of this search. It occurred to my mind that exoticism and eroticism were quite identical in many ways. Interestingly, dictionaries, such as the *Oxford English*, explains E. W. Gordon in an article, gives an American version of the term ‘exoticism’- “pertaining to strip-tease or a strip-teaser”. If the sex tourism industry in Southeast Asia has developed so well, this paragraph will intend to comment a few reasons and the rationale behind them by analyzing the strong connection between the two terms.

This paper has shown so far that the tourist’s quest for an exotic other reflected our postcolonial ability to represent otherness through fabled and fantasized objects that were utilized to alleviate the boredom and illnesses of our own societies and satisfy the needs of our own psyche. In other words, this psycho-sociological quest all travelers and tourists carry

out while abroad is nurtured through an aestheticized myth – the *ultimate exotic*. Although, we have seen, this very exotic is not easily accessible, if reachable at all, we try to get as close as possible to our goal by buying, touching and consuming aestheticized (not to mention unreal and ‘staged’) representations of this exotic. Our quests always go beyond the limits – as we manage to commodify exotic objects into postcards, souvenirs and other fetishist imagery, this postcolonial attitude of ours leads us to appropriate, excessively freely, exotic subjects as well. Besides, the very exotic attribute given to people changes their status to simple commodified objects designed for a predisposed marketplace to please and meet the tourist demand. In the same way, Van Egmond argues that ‘exotic people can easily be subject to projection of nostalgia, Utopia, search for ‘otherness’ and difference’ (*Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.118), that is to say prone to nourish fantasizing realities in which the tourist can comfortably indulge.

Further, scholars register some of the various motives that would drive tourists to consume exotic bodies as well. On the one hand, Urry discusses the tourists’ “untrammelled pursuit of the ‘pleasure principle’ on the other” (*The Tourist Gaze*, p.91). On the other hand, Huggan, via Bhabba’s words, explains that “fetishism plays a crucial role in colonialist fantasy-structures, which draw on the relationship between the exotic and the erotic to set up narratives of desire, and partial containment of the culturally ‘othered’ body” (*The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.18). Both authors agree that this process of fetishist commodification of “othered bodies” facilitates the transition that turns fabled exoticism into tangible eroticism. Eroticism, just like exoticism, falls into fantasized perceptions of ‘reality’ where possession, enabled through consumption of bodies, gives power over the exotic other and, above all, helps control travelers’ own self, inherent needs and deeper desires.

In fact, Van Egmond, via Wang, explains that tourists’ pleasures are torn between a *poetic Eros* and a *carnavalesque Eros*. When it comes to tourists’ quest for an exotic other, found in so-called exotic bodies, it is the latter that tends to nurture their deeper desires and instinctual pleasures. This carnivalesque Eros brings us to transgress the norms of our home societies by satisfying our own pleasures through playful experiences that, we believe, will remain invisible from the judging eyes of people back home. In that respect, Urry argues that “particularly important in tourist pleasures are those that involve the energetic breaking of the mild taboos that operate on various forms of consumption” (*The Tourist Gaze*, p. 92).

Eroticism, just like exoticism, translates a physical venture and a psychological voyage into a fabled unknown and a voluntary transgression of social conformity and norms. In addition, Urry tells us that an in-depth analysis of exoticism and eroticism alike supposes “the resistance of the protestant ethic” (*The Tourist Gaze*, p.155) and would have originated from countries such as Germany, Great Britain, or even America. And indeed, with absolutely no intentions to fall into stereotypes, the American market remains a huge consumer of sex tourism in Southeast Asia, ever since the Vietnam War. To describe the economic special zone of Clark-Angeles in the Philippines, what some vulgarly labels “Asia’s Biggest Brothel”, the *Lonely Planet* reads

Despite the efforts- false or otherwise – of the women working in the bars and clubs, Fields Ave is a pretty joyless place. Scores of Western men, most a decade or three older than their female companions, are lost in solitude. (...) Some are Europeans, obviously just here for the sex; others are Americans, many of an age that would have made it possible for them to be at Clark – and Angeles – at the height of the Vietnam War.

(‘Around Manila’ section, p.133)

If the American presence into Southeast Asian countries has undeniably helped turn exoticism into eroticism, these aftermaths originate first of all from the postcolonial desire of the Occident to commodify and control the Orient to its own advantage. Vera H.C. Chan tells us that “the East was perceived as the female counterpart to the masculine West, both an object to covet and a subject of conquest” (*Asian Pop Exotic, Erotic Asia*, online article, September 2004). Indeed, the growth of an exotic-driven tourism has nurtured, what I would name, the myth of the *creature de rêve*; through recurring images of long dark hair gracefully framing smiley faces embellished with fragrant flowers delicately put behind the ears, exoticism is turned into a ‘cult of the aestheticized body’. These very clichés are used profusely by the tourism industry; women, perceived or rather dreamed as mermaids of the East, appear in airlines’ commercials and point-of-sale advertizing, tour operators’ brochures, hotels’ websites and so on (see **Appendix VIII**). The commodified bodies, heavily marketed through different materials, are no longer separate objects of exoticism, they now belong ineluctably to the actual exotic scene and become part of this consumable exotic by definition. As we push our analysis a bit further in that direction, tourism, for it produces services, involves providers and consumers to interact altogether on frequent bases. Urry’s thought on the very

notion of ‘services’ in tourism is ironically meaningful, he says “Many services are what are known as high-contact systems in which there is considerable involvement of the customer in the service” (*The Tourist Gaze*, p.61) – when it comes to exoticized eroticism, this interaction customer-provider suddenly makes even more sense and springs into focus as it allows tourists and travelers to get involved into a three-dimensional quest that satisfies their spiritual, material and physical aspirations. Indeed, some tour operators in Southeast Asia propose, amongst other services in their tours and travels, to provide ‘hospitality girls’<sup>18</sup>, some other travel-related websites help find a girlfriend or a spouse - a striking example would be *Thailand For You* ([www.th4u.com](http://www.th4u.com)), which tagline sums up our above analysis on eroticism by saying “Meet Exotic Thai Girls, Ladies, Women and Models” and which homepage introduces its varied services and reads

Speaking of Thai women, the women with many faces acclaimed the world over as Oriental beauties with raven exotic eyes, black silky hair, suntanned shiny skin and slender girlish-looking bodies. A sexy look electrifying attraction as profound as viagra stimulates men sexual desire. Her gracious smile, even a shy one, may be of such adventurous nature, enough to undermine one's courage. Take a look at some pics of beautiful, exotic and sexy Thai top elite girls.

([www.th4u.com](http://www.th4u.com), homepage)

Eroticism could therefore be analyzed as the most reachable part of exoticism for the contact allowed between the tourist and its desires is ‘real’, direct and authentic and takes place physically. The fact that exotic women have been reduced to mere physical eroticism and transposed into the commodified category of exotic objects takes on a new meaning in countries like Thailand where exoticism has inevitably drifted towards a large-scale eroticism that encounters virtually no limits. Patpong, one of the most (un)famed streets in Bangkok’s red-light district, is an interesting example to illustrate our analysis – commonly named ‘pussy clubs’ have mushroomed out and invaded a neighborhood where pimps and barkers of a new kind try desperately to draw tourist crowds into creepy dark places where ‘pussy shows’ are being performed. Urry defines tourism in the same vein and argues that “tourism is

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<sup>18</sup> I shall refer to Urry as, while he mentions Thailand and the Philippines, says of the former that “the state encourages the use of ‘hospitaliy girls’ in tourism, and the Ministry of Tourism recommends various brothels” (*The Tourist Gaze*, p.56). In countries, such as Cambodia, these girls are not proudly advertized but still remain officially available in many tourist venues (hotels, spas, bars etc.).

often about the body-as-seen, displaying, performing and seducing visitors with skill, charm, strength, sexuality and so on.” (*The Tourist Gaze*, p.156). Further, the erotic game that exotic tourism is playing in Thailand and other Southeast Asian nations turns out to be uncontrollable – exoticism brings masses into a destination while a certain percentage out of these masses consumes eroticism, we might legitimately argue that the sex industry is therefore much dependent on tourist masses. Indeed, in our present context of worldwide financial crisis, Thailand, as Southeast Asia’s major destination, has experienced an important decline in the number of visitors in the course of this year. As a further aftermath of the crisis, the drop in visitor arrivals has taken a toll on the country’s sex trade where sex workers in Bangkok and Phuket, for instance, head home without business (Michael leung, *Thai Sex Workers Feel the Squeeze as Global Recession Hits Tourism*, Asia Calling website).

Undeniably, exoticism in Southeast Asia has partially changed the region from a life-sized ‘souvenir store’ to a giant *sex store*. The process of commodification of the exotic other could therefore peak into eroticist subjugations. Nevertheless, if exotic tourism finds its limits in mass and sex tourism, as I have explained in this chapter, another dimension of such tourism is to be analyzed. How truly authentic is exotic tourism? Is exoticism not destroying what it aspires to promote?

### *From exothentic to ex-authentic tourism:*

Tourism is first and foremost an industry of services. In our societies of consumption, business competition and clients’ expectations stimulate an obsession with constant improvement and being at one’s best. What results from this outlined observation is the current need for standardization – it goes without saying that exotic tourism is no exceptions to such a trend.

First, we shall say that standardization and exoticism are pleonastic counterparts. Indeed, the first step of standardization of exotic tourism stem from the very use of symbols and images that are utilized to promote exoticist visions of travel and tourism. As Urry mentions in his work “It is unusual to see postcards or tourist photographs containing ‘landscapes’ of waste, disease, dead animals, poverty, sewage and despoliation” (*The Tourist Gaze*, p.129). On the contrary, the white-sand beaches or the saffron-robed monks are recurring images that tells us

more about tourists than about the actual destination or the gazed object itself. These images sell and are to be used profusely to satisfy the future tourist's prior considerations about what is to be seen, in other words, this worthy exotic they are seeking. Good touristic images imply that our perception of the destination be modified through a twofold process that combines semiologic reduction with semantic intensification of the destination's deeper characteristics (Amirou and Bachimon, *Le tourisme local*, p.39). Exotissimo Travel's caption, attached to their logo, corroborates this statement (see **Appendix XIX, Symbols of Southeast Asia**), as the present images epitomize 'Asia' from a Westerner's eye and reduces its diversity to enduring symbols of Asian exoticness.

Besides, I will refer to my above analysis where I explained that the trinity Southeast Asian countries-Southeast Asia- Asia have been mostly reduced to one single entity, one unique sellable exotic otherness divided into only few differences (from one country to another). In the same vein, Urry explains that exoticist imagery results in a "war of smiles", where this once typically-local smile (from a country or another) is standardized into a regional asset that serves tourism marketing to its own business advantage. Smiles become key elements of the essential background process that nurtures 'authentic happiness'. However, our study reveals that this willing preservation of "happy poverty" sought abroad by tourists, especially in Third-World countries, is all made up and predisposed to be consumed up by foreign travelers. In Siem Reap, a great many tourist-oriented venues use 'happiness' as a major marketing element to put forth an authentic and freer lifestyle, deprived of the evils of westernizations. And yet, the *happy hours* of free-flows in bars, the *happy pizzas* topped with marijuana or the *happy-endings* offered at the end of a massage session in exchange for a bigger tip symbolize through alcohol, drugs and liberal sex what some paradoxically consider the great evils and ultimate debauchery of the Occident. How 'happy' or 'authentic' do tourists therefore want Southeast Asia to be? This could be the true question to bear in mind. What is sure to be justly answered is the concerned destinations have to be as happy and authentic as to meet tourists' prior expectations- as a result, authenticity in exotic tourism is more about the lack of authenticity in the tourist's own environment and his strong need to go back to it outside his daily routine than about the intrinsic features of the destination itself. In reality, Urry explains that standardization and exoticist discourses "provide protection from many of the features of the host society" (*The Tourist Gaze*, p.52) where tourists search for a reassuring Same into an exotic Other.

Exoticism is selling “postcard-like sites” (Van Egmond), some aestheticized and standardized destinations where the exotic experience allows participants to break away from their daily lives, without never really escaping their own ‘bubble’. Exoticism functions as a mirror of one’s self; just like a reflection of one’s own image, tourists travel to a standardized exotic destination knowing they will eventually go back home, back to the same standardized life. This allows us to argue that tourists never fail to be after an exotic other that meets their own standards, more than the distinctly different lifestyle they assume to be looking for. Van Egmond says that

Real villages are dirty and smelly, waste and garbage are everywhere. Poverty is often distressing. Tourists do not like real local food that doesn’t meet their hygiene and quality standards. A ride in a local bus is perceived as ‘cool’, but traveling by local transport isn’t appreciated at all. A night with a local family, as is part of some adventurous packages, might be an interesting experience, as long as the next night will be in a comfortable bed.

*(Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries, p.85)*

In the same vein, Ferguson reports that his prior expectations were satisfied when authenticity (as in ‘local, plain and unchanged’) was less to be expected; he tells us that “Courtesy of China Eastern Airlines, the meal served on the flight to Japan was the most appetizing on the entire China trip. It would appear that you must be up in the air to be exposed to enticing Chinese cuisine.” (*Traveling the Exotic*, p.189). The relevance of the quote relies on a twofold explanation; on the one hand, as I mentioned before, exoticism translates an untrammelled spatial quest where land and sky are conquered, where tourists attempt to achieve their goals beyond any available space (the sky being possibly its ultimate try), on the other hand, it reveals that tourists’ expectations of exotic authenticity are solely pleased when authenticity itself is ‘staged’ and standardized to the norms of the tourism industry and adapted to tourists’ needs. How can ‘real Chinese cuisine’ be enjoyed ‘up in the air’ onboard a state-of-the-art aircraft outside the borders of the actual country? This question raises the tensions between what is authentic and what is not to tourists and the degree to which exoticism should be authentic. Exotissimo Cambodia’s MICE products demonstrate this inner conflict caused by the tourist’s search for authenticity: ‘Gala dinners’ are MICE-oriented products that allow us to exemplify this statement. Indeed, be they serviced in Angkor temples or local houses, gala dinners are always ‘performed’ by a well-synchronized orchestra of five-star catering

establishments (such as Le Méridien, Raffles or Sofitel) and school-trained professional Apsara dancers, menus put forth European gastronomy, and local support staff who have operated behind the scenes, set it all up and made the event possible are asked to leave the frontstage area so that clients cannot see them. Authenticity is therefore set up and transformed into deceptive visions of inauthentic shows and performances where food, landscape and culture are adapted to meet the tourist's standards of quality and what is worth viewing; Urry explains

Isolated from the host environment and the local people, the mass tourist travels in guided groups and finds pleasure in inauthentic contrived attractions, gullibly enjoying 'pseudo-events' and disregarding the real world outside.

*(The Tourist Gaze, p.7)*

Further, this search for an exotic other, in accordance with tourists' standards, results in the inevitable adaptation and modification of things through a process of *modernization*. Indeed, the exotic is controlled and commodified; the souvenirs stores that sell Buddha statues or the deluxe hospitality properties that accommodate incoming tourists are consequences of this inevitable modernization of exoticness. Although tourists pretend to be looking for authentic off-the-beaten-track experiences, these tourists are compelled to revert to what tourist infrastructures can offer to them. As argued earlier in my analysis, the most beautiful beaches, jungles and other fabled preserved areas are those most unlikely to be visited – this is due to the lack of transportation and transport infrastructures (roads, airports, daily flights etc.) and absence of information in the first place (Who would ever know about Cambodia's northeastern provinces, for instance?). And yet, modernization is accepted by exotic-driven tourists until it gets to a certain extent and destroys, according to their beliefs, the very atmosphere of purity and authenticity these people have come for. Paradoxically, this loss of authenticity leads some tourists to peripheral areas turned into destinations as well; Caramoan in the Philippines remains a key example to illustrate this assertion. Indeed, while the peninsula and islets of Caramoan used to be a quiet, 'untouristy' and pristine place, the area became famous with reality-TV shows such as the French directed *Koh Lanta* series in 2008. To accommodate the film crew as well as participants, Gota Beach Resort was built along a secluded beach. As of today, the resort serves new flows of drifting tourists in search of authenticity out of modernization and other tourist crowds. Ironically, the construction of the resort in the middle of the area displays the first steps taken by Caramoan towards

modernization and standardization of ‘pristine exoticism in real adventure’. Most frequently, Southeast Asian beaches are used as relaxing extensions to a more cultural and busy trip: after a trip to Siem Reap, tourists head for Sihanoukville’s beaches or Thailand’s, travelers in Northern Luzon will go to Panglao’s coastal sun or Palawan’s... beaches fall into authentic extensions, not less modernized and fringed with high-end facilities, off the beaten track of less authentic tourist centers.

When going to the beach or the countryside, tourists expect an encounter with the true, the authentic, the genuine. This refuge provides for them opportunities to meet up with indigenous tribes/communities and see a truer way of living. However, the experiences provided tend to be as staged as any other bits and pieces of their exotic tour/trip- while tourists think they get to experience the exothentic, tourism actually gives them a glimpse into the ex-authentic where everything is choreographed to serve tourists more than the destinations itself. Huggan explains that “Minorities are encouraged, in some cases obliged, to stage their racial/ethnic identities in keeping with white stereotypical perceptions of an exotic cultural other” (*The Postcolonial Exotic*, p.95) while Van Egmond says that “Some tours, adventurous more than conventional, include visits to local communities. The group pays a visit to one or more indigenous families to have lunch, dinner or even spend the night. The carefully selected families have children around, have ‘indigenous’ furniture and kitchen equipment and, in general, represent ‘traditional life’, but have been trained to serve tourists” (*Understanding Western Tourists in Developing Countries*, p.79). In the end, tourists leave the countryside and get back to major cities where airports and other ports of entry/exit are located, eat in restaurants and drop by the last souvenirs store en route before they leave the country. The search for exoticism is therefore cyclical, endless and renewable; if tourists claim they are looking profoundly for an *exothentic*, they never fail to get trapped again into inauthentic, rather *ex-authentic*, venues and places where performance, aesthetic and attractiveness regulate the destination’s standardization process.

Marketing exoticism in Southeast Asia has partially led to self-destruction. Are we all too eager to do anything to sustain a destination’s exoticness? Can we implement marketing and managerial tools to control exoticness? Are there better ways to promote exoticism and maintain authenticity? I will try to answer this truly complicated interrogation in my last chapter.

## **IV/ Managing exotic tourism: the early stages of egalitarian otherness:**

Exoticism; although it is used by the tourism industry to promote positive images of a destination's assets, a more in-depth analysis shows that the truth behind the scenes of this staged authenticity is much more distressing and less glorious. Indeed, the aftermaths of exoticist discourses impact negatively over the destinations and the gazed exotic objects themselves; tourists act as conquerors in search for a better self, a better other and an overall better lifestyle. Addressing such an issue with managerial tools seems therefore appropriate and much needed. Yet, dealing 'sustainably' with exoticism implies an extensive understanding of tourists' psycho-sociological expectations and tourism's inner characteristics- just like tourism, exoticism is all about *dream*; fantasy, and *lies* to a certain extent, is a crucial stimuli for both.

However, a management-oriented study of exoticism is to be carefully approached as the inner difficulty relies in a twofold paradox: on the one hand, the very thought of 'managing the exotic' could make it even less authentic, for it would have to be modified, adapted and controlled (and would consequently lose some of its appealing realness to many tourists), and on the other hand, this management could rationally make this exotic even less reachable, for it would be too perfect, even more aestheticized and spiritually unattainable (to the extent of being unnatural). How can Southeast Asian countries implement managerial strategies to sustain their exotic appeal? I will not develop a comprehensive part on sustainable exotic-driven tourism, as this would necessitate a longer and further analysis *per se*, but will try to give a few answers and guidelines that go along the widespread theories on sustainable tourism. To do so, I will base my examples on Boracay, Philippines and Siem Reap, Cambodia for obvious and less apparent reasons- firstly, because I worked as a Manager Intern in both countries, and am therefore more likely to illustrate what I experienced myself, secondly, because these two highly popular destinations in Southeast Asia are relevant supports to analyze and audit observations of exoticism, and thirdly, because these two allegedly identical models feature in fact much different intrinsic characteristics.

### *Enhancing destinations' renewal:*

A genuine management of exoticism should therefore be able to thwart the negative aftermaths of the latter- such as those mentioned in our previous chapter, namely massification, destruction and standardization. We shall consequently begin our study with the process of mass phenomenon caused by an uncontrolled exotic tourism.

Angkor Wat is to Siem Reap what White Beach is to Boracay – two reductive symbols of greater respective sites. Indeed, when it comes to these two destinations, exoticism took off from the very moment these places were universally known as home to majestic age-old Buddhist temples and to an endless white-sand beach running along turquoise waters. With no surprises, when ‘googling’ *exotic Siem Reap* on the web, the result comes out to exotic travel agencies, such as Exotic Angkor Travel ranked number one in the listing. Siem Reap is sold and mentioned in tourist brochures under Angkor’s name (its ancient predecessor, which ruins are located approximately 4 miles away), just like Boracay became a household name thanks to its White Beach. Unsurprisingly, these highly marketed exotic sites become the main focus of the tourists’ gazes: it conveys that these people need to be seen, like conquerors of the gazed exotic, more than they want to see the actual object for its own sake. By this very process, tourists start to flock into the same spot where what was shown prior to traveling has to be seen, pictured (postcards, photographs) and finally taken away (souvenirs and remembrance). Nevertheless, the increase in tourist population generated by a powerful marketing of exoticism results in the inevitable concentration of tourists just around, sometimes exclusively within, these exotic spots/centers: tourist distribution is unequal and ends up revealing a blatant mismanagement of touristic spaces. Hotels and resorts rise up confined within saturated areas where airports and other main tourist infrastructures remain accessible easily (see **Appendix X, Saturated Spaces and Unequal Distribution**) and all is synchronized to meet the ever growing tourist demand. On the one hand, while Boracay neared a total of less than 100,000 in tourist arrivals in 1996, the same destination amounted more than 350,000 visitors in 2007<sup>19</sup>, on the other hand, Siem Reap followed the same trend as a total of less than 310,000 tourists was tallied in 2004 while 2008 accounted for almost

<sup>19</sup> These figures are taken from *Boracaybay.com*.

670,000 arrivals<sup>20</sup>. Each tourist, in their own quest for exotic otherness, settles down in areas conveniently chosen that serve their own colonizing purposes. As a consequence, a genuine management of space in exotic destinations is crucial; masses need to be divided into smaller units equally spread out in turn over peripheral zones. In that respect, hotels and other hospitality businesses should open south of Siem Reap (in the direction of Tonle Sap Lake) or north of Angkor (in the direction of Thailand's border, behind Mount Kulen for instance) while in Boracay new hotels should be developed off the coastal areas of the island (more inland) and in neighboring islands such as San Jose. However, while the construction of hotels needs to be controlled (as of today, 17 new hotels are being built in Siem Reap, 8,000 rooms will total the town's hotel room capacity<sup>21</sup>, let alone the countless number of guesthouses) and guided, that of other tourist facilities has to go along the same path as well. Indeed, the creation and maintenance of land, sea and air routes would implement draining systems able to scatter masses around and facilitate travelers' free-moving and generate (less pre-conducted) itineraries. Also, the number of arriving flights (airplanes being the major means of transportation for both destinations) should be limited per day and week so that onboard seat capacity from incoming flights never exceeds 50% of the destination's room capacity.

Further, to manage the exotic will help us thwart the negative aftermaths of misdirected standardization that turn down on exoticism itself and what tourists primarily come for. In my opinion, the reductive assimilation of both destinations to one prevailing symbol – White Beach for Boracay and Angkor Wat for Siem Reap- reveals that Southeast Asian exoticness relies on *beaches and Buddhist temples*, two inherent features of the Asian exotic, which reinforces stereotypes that depreciate the region as a whole into one single entity and an overly fantasized and decontextualized object. Joey R. B. Lozano deplores that “The billboard that conspicuously stands on the white fine sand says it all: “Welcome to Boracay Island, the Number 1 Tropical Beach Resort in the World” (...) This is Boracay, an island of less than a thousand hectares and some 6,000 residents, proudly described by one brochure as ‘Paradise’” (*Boom and Bust in Boracay*, online article) whilst, in the meantime, Angkor Wat is showed on

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<sup>20</sup> These figures are taken from the « Executive Summary 2008 » reported on *Tourismcambodia.com*, and take into account arrivals via Siem Reap International Airport only.

<sup>21</sup> The above observation is based on an article written by Chun Sophal published in the *Phnom Penh Post* on August 4, 2009.

Cambodia's national flag and ornates the official logo of 'Tourism Cambodia, a Kingdom of Wonder'. Standardization of tourist places or objects into one unique symbol is to be avoided; what is to be understood is a true management of exoticism marketing and image industry. Indeed, a wider vision of authenticity and truth is to be promoted. Exotic gazed objects, in our analysis namely the white beach and the Buddhist temple, need to be recontextualized into their social, cultural and historical context. To allow a *recontextualization* of exotic objects, priority must be given to education – the tourism industry must instruct its practitioners to 'truer' and wider images of otherness. Siem Reap is not Angkor Wat but rather a town and a whole administrative Province, first of all: tourist opportunities are myriad, local markets, floating villages on Tonle Sap Lake, cropping fields and other Buddhist temples color the Province and should be visually broadcast to outsiders. In the same vein, Boracay's other beaches, indigenous tribes, unrivaled marine fauna and flora have to be promoted through images that create a complementary equilibrium between them, an interconnected balance that will benefit to the whole territory and open it up to more tourist interactions.

Paradoxically, if misguided standardization negatively impacts on the object of the tourist's gaze, standards are essential to promote and sustain a better exotic tourism: this is another constituent paradox that makes studies on exotic tourism so challenging. In that respect, we shall refer to what is known as acceptability and conformity, or presently termed *sustainable approaches* that help us head towards a better (utopian sometimes!) and long-term exotic tourism. I will therefore focus non-exhaustively on what the tourism industry of Boracay and Siem Reap should prioritize. Firstly, from an *environmental perspective*, Angkor Wat's as well as Boracay's main environmental assets have been jeopardized. Angkor Wat ruins are collapsing (both materially and spiritually) while White Beach is getting somewhat 'creamy-colored'. It belongs to local governments to thwart these ongoing damages that threaten the respective exotic appeal of these sites. Temples must be restored and brought back to their original context while Boracay's coast must be controlled before it suffers from the beach that made it famous in the first place, and before this beach itself dies from tourism. Joey Lozano explains through a biologist's observations that the proliferation of calcareous materials thrown into the sea could well end up changing the color of the beach's natural whiteness, in the meantime, the mushrooming resorts along the coast could act up as a giant wall that could prevent winds from bringing up onto the beach the essential debris of dead corals that have made up the actual beach strip. In Siem Reap, the impressive amount of waste floating onto the river or along the roads is turning down on Angkor's attractiveness and environmental

equilibrium. Secondly, from a *social and ethical perspective*, the ‘exoticization’ of people must be avoided for it leads inevitably to prostitution and sexual violence, as the tourist is given a further opportunity to conquer otherness and commodify objects as well as bodies. As of today, prostitution avails of a twofold status in Cambodia and the Philippines: while the local governments advertize officially their aversion to prostitution, the latter is neither legal nor illegal, yet knowingly prone to *laissez-faire* politics. One of the main difficulties that exotic tourism faces is to enhance a genuine respect for the local populations and to avoid falling into postcolonizing relationships between hosts and guests. In the example of Boracay, the tension between locals and visitors is undeniable; the indigenous Ati inhabitants of the island have been pushed aside (expropriated even) to enable resorts and tourist venues to rise up. Indeed, 25 Ati families only remain until now on the island while only one person out of them all has been offered a tourism-related job (according to Joey Lozano). In July 1998, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources secretary, A. Cerilles, announced that he was in favor of titling lands to resort owners in Boracay (the remaining few Atis are asked to leave the island in the meantime). Also, giant real estate companies such as Fil-Estate keep buying lands on the island, which accelerates the exclusion of local tribes whose income remain too low to stay and pay. Boracaybay.com argues that in the past few years, the added value of lands has amounted to approximately 30% per annum. Interestingly, when I ‘googled’ the phrase *exotic Boracay*, one of the toplisted results that came out was *Boracayislandproperties.com*, a thriving locally-based real estate company. As a consequence, instructing tourists and locals alike could be an interesting solution towards understanding each other and avoiding conflicts: a few words about local communities, traditions and do’s and don’ts could be written on paper and distributed to incoming tourists in major ports of entry while, local governments could in turn advertize on TV or in schools about the actual tourists and their expectations. The process of commodification that enables tourists to possess and exercise power over the exotic object is to be controlled and populations are to be informed about it. The right to land-owning should be managed and locals should be prioritized and granted access to ownership. Thirdly, from an *economical perspective*, the inflation of local prices is another drawback amongst exotic tourism’s various consequences; studies have showed that it nurtures tensions between hosts and guests. Indeed, Lozano exemplifies his argument with the price of fish in Boracay – a price that has gone up from PHP20 a few years earlier to PHP60 per kilo today. Similarly, the price of rice, which both feeds locals on a daily basis and caters for hotels and restaurants’ demand, is believed to have tripled these past 5 years in Siem Reap and remains the most expensive rice in the whole

country. Prices must follow local standards rather than international demand; if not, the priority greedily given to incoming tourists would end up colonizing exoticness on a much larger-scale and wiping local communities out of the map. Further, as we speak of exotic tourism, we have explained that authenticity could never be reached, that we were dealing with ex-authentic destinations instead where authenticity was inevitably ‘staged’ (McCannell) as there is no such thing as anti-tourist tourism (Urry and Huggan). The major role of the tourism industry is therefore to stage *sustainable* visions of authenticity; to do so, natives and locals are to be kept and put forward, they must be represented ‘backstage’ and ‘frontstage’ and be operators as well as managers of the “tourist scene”. In the same vein, tourism revenues made locally should be reinvested into the local manpower, minimum salaries should be increased so that the gap between hosts and guests be reduced. In the case of Angkor Wat, the entrance fees (USD20 per person for a one-day pass) could be reinvested into better philanthropic purposes. Instead, 17% of the fees go to a local hotel chain named Sokha Hotels & Resorts (ironically showing off its “exotic” features via its logo and tagline – *A Journey to Cambodia’s Exotic Gems*).

Implementing a sustainable management of exotic tourism in Southeast Asia is not an easy task. While tourists are flocking to conquer their own share of exoticism, the tourism industry has made out of exoticism a conqueror *per se*. Indeed, exoticism has turned against tourists and is now drawn towards more and more greedy business. The industry has therefore made countries, provinces, cities and sites fight against each other for tourist markets – and to do so, many display aggressively their exotic ‘advantages’. In that respect, if national harmony is often disregarded (as destinations within a same country compete shrilly with each other, i.e. Boracay Vs Palawan, Siem Reap Vs Phnom Penh), a Southeast Asian synergy could be considered as an alternative solution and turn the region’s exotic assets to sustainable fruition.

### *Implementing regional synergy:*

The aftermaths of colonialism in Southeast Asia have transformed Southeast Asia into a patchwork of differences and inequalities. Indeed, while the Occident have been fighting for lands and territories in the Orient, this large-scale conquest has resulted in the mutual distancing and estrangement of the countries. While Indochina was claimed by the French, Malaysia and Indonesia were British, the Philippines Spanish then American and so on. Southeast Asian countries have been influenced and ‘updated’ by their colonizers. This

distressing common historical background, far from uniting them all, turned out to be a great opportunity to divide the region into more manageable and smaller areas. On the contrary, tourism has tried to bet on a ‘vast touring opportunity’ (Exotissimo Travel). Yet, some parts of this massive entity are still being shied away by tourists and general interest. Further, by nurturing the notion of a single touring entity, would tourism not be reinforcing the colonialist ideal of a controllable other? In fact, turning the region into one single entity strengthens its historical/cultural/spiritual reduction more than it helps develop a stronger and bigger unity – tourism’s willingness to turn the region into a unique entity could convey the postcolonialist nature of the industry’s true goal. Not to mention that inequalities tend to abound even more as, as we deal with one single entity, competition within this territory becomes higher and more violent. If a ‘unique entity’ does not seem to be an appropriate solution to address exotic tourism in Southeast Asia sustainably, time has come for the region to reunite its member countries into a powerful and solid *regional synergy*.

We shall begin our analysis with the importance of airlines. Until now, airplanes are the most popular means of transportation for tourists going to Southeast Asia. If many travelers tend to use alternative transports, such as buses or boats, all travelers (with the trivial exception of minor markets) get to the region by plane first. National air carriers are often the first promoter of a destination’s image – the journey to exotic destinations is first and foremost a journey in the air. This transitional space enfolded between tourists’ daily routines and their dream vacation is undeniably crucial – it conditions the tourist’s mind and *stages* true features of exoticism. It is important to bear in mind that vacations (tourism *per se*) are all about dream; exoticism, although it can backfire on itself when mismanaged, is the ‘perfect fit’ to promote dreams (here again, one can cleverly establish a link between exotic vacations and the first step of one’s journey being enjoyed up in the air – wouldn’t this be the metaphorical embodiment of dreams?)- in that respect, Japan Airlines’ slogan reads “Dream Skyward” while one of Vietnam Airlines’ latest slogans says “Dream, Fly ... and Dream Again”<sup>22</sup>. It goes without saying that national carriers generate a major source of revenues for local economies, and remain a coveted bonanza. Yet, as of today, not all nations in Southeast Asia operate their own carriers; Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are the most relevant examples. While these three countries suffer the consequences of their mighty neighbors, Cambodia and

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<sup>22</sup> The herein translation has been translated by myself. The original text, posted on advertisements in the Parisian subway, reads “Rêvez, volez... et rêvez encore”.

Laos are subjected to transport services to and from Vietnam, in the meantime Myanmar and Cambodia submit to Thailand's business and political stability (or vice versa). Indeed, in the case of tourism in Cambodia, the industry is much dependent on Thailand's oppression. On the one hand, during Bangkok's latest uprisings in November 2008, the then ongoing crisis led to the temporary closure of the region's busiest airport. Consequences happened to be determining for Cambodia's tourism; arrivals from Bangkok were suspended long enough for the local tourism to decline in the whole country. On the other hand, the launching of Siem Reap Airways in 2000, a supposedly Cambodian airline is in fact a wholly owned subsidiary of the Thai-owned Bangkok Airways, shows that Thailand's fearful pressure over Cambodia's tourism is irrefutable. Consequently, raising funds to support local governments in the creation of their own national carriers is one of the first actions to undertake towards a genuine sustainable tourism in Southeast Asia.

Although Southeast Asian countries are all unique and varied, the notion of exotic tourism tends to erase their respective nature by integrating them all into one hazy ideal of a powerful entity. In response to this, the tourism industry should thwart the trend by promoting diversity, interconnection and concord between the member nations- this is what I termed *regional synergy*. And yet, despite the region's goodwill to implement a regional marketing material (see ASEAN), the efforts made to put forth its "Ten Paradise" do not seem conclusive. To reach a more sustainable exotic tourism, the region should rather promote idiosyncratic features that highlight the complementary nature of its valuable constituents and install real managerial tools to enhance the region's assets. As a result, in my opinion, the official marketing campaigns led by the Philippine and Malaysian governments (see section II.1) are both misleading and mistaken. On the one hand, the slogan *Philippines More Than Usual Asia* suggests a pejorative vision of the rest of the continent in the chosen term "Usual Asia", which ironically implies that the Philippines 'is better' and 'has more'. On the other hand, the slogan *Malaysia Truly Asia* stresses the fact that competition relies on a pernicious we-have-it-all discourse. Synergy is therefore to be sought through a true cohesion between member nations. As we cannot stop the natural process of competition (knowing that this very competition is also visible within a same tour operator selling different destinations, i.e. Exotissimo Travel rewards its managers according to the annual sales of the country they are based in, a managerial system that enhances a high intern competition between its five destinations), the industry should focus instead on a competition based on the countries', sites' and destinations' *unique* features – "We have what they don't, just like they feature

what we don't ourselves", this should be the future discourse of a more fruitful, complementary and sustainable tourism in Southeast Asia. From a managerial perspective, if we are to manage exoticism through the promotion of diversity and uniqueness, the industry should highlight the distinctive features of the destinations; in other words, make sure that countries remain as authentic as possible. However, preserving countries from external influence could be the climax of anti-modernism: this very notion is contrary to tourism itself, as We, postcolonial travelers from the civilized world, conquer the world in search of exotic and 'untouched' environments. Once again, the answer refers to dream and psychological expectations of travelers: the industry is bound to stage and nurture dreams of an exotic authenticity. Managerial tools can therefore be applied only to the way these dreams are staged to please tourists; in other words, a new management could control exoticism sustainably by making sure hosting populations are respected, that tourism is fully acting in favor of local economies and not destroying them, that the environment is preserved and protected and that competition is fair and monitored through a strong international cohesion.

Besides, if exoticism is sorely manageable, for it concerns and refers directly to an indeterminate variety of tourists' prior expectations, the issue could be solved through niche markets, thus much smaller than their mass tourist counterparts and more controllable.

### *Heading towards niche markets:*

The difficulty of exotic tourism relies on the hardly definable notion of exoticism. If we fail to give a clear and exhaustive definition of exoticism, this is mainly because exoticism refers to what is intrinsically different, strange and unusual. According to the few elements that help us clear the definition, we shall legitimately argue that exoticism is almost applied to anything that differs from the tourists themselves and their own psychological, social and economical environments. By dividing exoticism into possible niche markets, we may help control exotic tourism more adequately.

Exoticism is highly subjective; this individual judgment is so flexible that it can fit any particular demand. We shall argue that exoticism follows a cyclical fashion- what is exotic today to some tourists, may not be exotic for others, and might not be exotic to the former anymore tomorrow. This is a major obstacle to exotic tourism. Indeed, this rotation that operates between exotic objects/subjects/sites conflicts with the implementation of long-term

revenues and overall sustainability. In that respect, by putting forth well chosen niche markets, the tourism industry in Southeast Asia would help keep up with changing demands and support an alternative business able to take over the negative aftermaths of mass tourism. As far as tours include several regional flights (especially international), the very notion of 'touring' is consequently to be banned from sustainable discourses: indeed, while being aware of tourists' shorter and shorter vacation periods in response to the increasing number of working hours, the idea of a tour implies that tourists are not given much time at a destination and that everything is made to keep them moving. If tourists are rushing to 'tour around', one may arguably say that they will only be likely to stay close to tourist centers and will never have the opportunity to get away from major destinations where airports, for instance, conveniently service daily flights that will bring them in turn to the other leg of their tour, another popular destination. However, cross-border touring is still possible for backpackers or gappers alike as, on the one hand, these tourists, unlike their regular short-term traveling counterparts, benefit from much longer vacation breaks and, on the other hand, in spite of their willingness to stand out as non-tourists, we have shown they are important consumers of exoticism as well (as there is no such thing as anti- and non-tourist activities!), backpackers have always been a reckoned part of the Southeast Asian tourism industry, ever since the 70's. If today's industry needs to make sure that backpackers' activities do not turn down on destinations themselves (just like what happened in Koh Samui, Boracay, Sihanoukville, the Vietnamese coast etc.), backpackers still remain a thriving market for the region- they tend participate in more upcountry activities and sightseeing and head towards less-(not *off-*)beaten-track destinations, taking therefore major part in the opening up of some peripheral zones and in a more equal tourist distribution through cross-border activities. Nevertheless, one of the main challenges to be faced with backpackers is the small amount of revenues these tourists bring into the countries. If they travel a lot, these tourists are most frequently low-budgeted college students, yet, it has been proven that their expenditure sustains more sustainably local economies as, except for international flight tickets inescapably bought to leading carriers, they ever hardly deal with big businesses (such as hotel chains, international tour operators etc.) and tend to patronize local-owned and -run SMBs. However, we have seen that the soaring increase of backpackers originated from a democratization of tourism. While low-cost airlines are spreading out throughout Southeast Asia (i.e. Cebu Pacific and Air Asia being the major carriers in this industry), cheap hotels and guesthouses have flooded over the market of cheap travel. Further, as democratization leads inevitably to massification, such a tendency to get wider markets has resulted in uncontrolled tourist arrivals and distribution.

Interestingly, the backpacker market has branched out into tourists of a new kind – the *flashpackers*<sup>23</sup>. Flashpackers are technology-savvy and older backpackers, staying in more stylish accommodation (Claudine Berry), in search of comfortable exoticism. Flashpackers are also higher-budgeted than their backpacking counterparts. A better segmentation of backpackers and flashpackers could help reach a balance between the negative consequences of democratization of travel and tourism and more sustainable sources of revenues. The Southeast Asian exoticism has long been associated to cheap travel, therefore resulting in mass tourism. Flashpackers, in that they concern a more privileged category of people, could be a better expedient market.

Besides, in response to the financial crisis this year, the tourism industry in Southeast Asia was generally all too eager to discount and bargain its offer. Is price reduction the appropriate answer to a declining tourism? The answer is unfortunately NO! One major reason is that the ‘cheapening’ of the region would further reinforce what has long been a curb to the development of sustainable tourism in the region. In my opinion, Southeast Asia should give more priority to upmarket clientele. There is indeed an increasing demand for boutique hotels and services and first class quality, it has been shown that tourists are willing to pay more for better services and finer products. A possible alternative tourism could therefore be found amongst richer clients. This niche market is yet booming in Southeast Asia; the number of boutique hotels is increasing all over the region to please tourists in search of local-owned (more authentic?) small businesses, implanted on peripheral zones of destinations. These tourists are reliable customers who make out they can help local economies by donating money and raising funds. For instance, many boutique hotels in developing countries now offer to guide their clients towards donating funds or goods to those less-privileged. The Aman Resorts, a hotel chain yet highly prestigious and sustainably-driven corporation, has understood this factor. In-house guests are invited to help local communities, while 10% out of all sales is divided and given back to their local staff and the company sponsors local NGOs to demine war fields, replant trees, preserve fauna and support other projects of development etc.

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<sup>23</sup> The term is taken from an article by Claudine Barry entitled “Connaissez-vous les flashpackers?”, on *tourismintelligence.ca*, operated by the Quebec University of Montreal.

Further, these clients are the number-one customers of exotic luxury – they are the ones targeted in exotic images of pampered luxury, spas, beach relaxation and so on. Indeed, this elite market could be the enhancement to more sustainable economies generated by an elitist tourism. In the same vein, local/regional nouveaux riches should not be excluded from tourist developments in Southeast Asia. Cambodian, Vietnamese, Philippine or Indonesian nouveaux riches are increasing. Although, they only total a minimal percentage in tourist arrivals, these clients are discernible promoters of regional tourism; they are intrinsic part of the media circle and public interest and can generate a fast-growing word-of-mouth publicity about a destination. As a result, many tourist professionals have understood that such clientele could serve tourism and serve in turn destinations- tourism alliances such as Virtuoso, an international organization made up of elite travel professionals, have originated from the ever growing demand for premiere quality and a respectable industry that combines sustainability with post-tourism<sup>24</sup>.

Finally, the industry should focus on what Urry terms post-tourism. As we cannot stand in the way of exoticism and authentic-driven discourses, niche markets, such as the elite (financially or intellectually speaking) market, could give the industry a much clearer and long-term vision of clients, who although they claim they are looking for exoticism and authenticity, do realize they are tourists, rather post-tourists, themselves and, instead of trying to marginalize their own status, prefer to support it by contributing in more sustainable ways to indulge in leisure activities that will enhance a better guest-host relationship.

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<sup>24</sup> Post tourism is introduced in Urry's work, *The Tourist Gaze*, as a new tourism, which customers, although they indulge in 'exothentic' trips, are totally aware of their tourist status and realize that authenticity is purely staged.

## Conclusion

I have explained throughout this paper how difficult it is to define the exotic. Indeed, no clear definition can be given. As exoticism is supposed to term the Other or what is distinctly different from the Self, exotic tourism is allegedly the societal transcription of an inner search for otherness, of our need to escape at least temporarily our daily routine. Similarly, this is precisely the main center of interest of tourism *per se* – vacations permit practitioners to break up with their routine. However, exoticism and tourism depict another similarity; just like traders, pioneers and colonizers who, in the early history of humankind, reported exotic features from primarily unknown lands and peoples they intended to conquer, tourism has proven to set up a neo-colonialism in which tourists either try to recreate home away from home or desperately seek refuge in a comfortable otherness. These two motivations generate the particular distinction between tourists and travelers, a distinction made up and firmly believed by tourists and travelers themselves. Nevertheless, our analysis has showed that there is no such thing as non-tourist travelers, neither are there tourism practitioners who do not indulge in exotic-motivated activities. In that respect, the inherent discernment between these two categories of practitioners lies in the ability to designate subjectively certain things as exotic; what is exotic to some, is for others taboo, shocking, even repulsive. In other words, we are our own arbitrary judges to tell the not-exotic-enough from the too-exotic.

How does the tourism industry in Southeast Asia therefore find the balance in-between these extremes? The answer has proven to be much complicated. When it comes to exotic tourism in Southeast Asia, one shall first of all explain Southeast Asian exoticism. As we come across the same difficulty to define the exotic, another question is raised – is there a unique Southeast Asian exotic? The industry has successfully focused on oriental exoticism; however, the distinction between member nations, the region and the continent is quite blurred. The evolution of exoticism into a self-colonizing trinity has blended Southeast Asian countries, Southeast Asia and the Asian continent into one single entity. As a result, with no surprises, the region's exoticism has been developed through assimilative imagery of spirituality and "happy poverty". The inherent feature of Southeast Asian exoticism has been heavily related to Buddhism and its derivative values and principles. Southeast Asia is now believed to be a land where poor people live better, where daily life is an earthly paradise, where spirituality guides everyone into the right path. Yet, it goes without saying that

Southeast Asia is much more multi-colored than that but what seems to be ‘selling’ is this fabled version of a uniformed Southeast Asia (we could also question the relevance of dividing the continent into hazy sections). Consequently, a high competition between the region’s varied nations has come out as each is striving to display more exoticness than the other. The marketing battle between the Philippine and Malaysian campaigns is undeniably confirming this assertion: who is more, less or better Asian? This has unfortunately become the true question for professionals. Besides, the tourism industry has managed to transform romantic images of exoticism to collective imagery via a process of imagineering. The marketing of exotic tourism in Southeast Asia is first and foremost highly visual; images are perceptible through photographs, postcards, brochures and other media that contribute to a strong marketing machinery able to condition our minds and expectations via aestheticized visions of authenticity.

Unsurprisingly, if tourism has succeeded in promoting staged authenticity out of an aestheticized exoticism, this marketing policy has resulted in a certain amount of disgraceful consequences that reveal more about what is happening behind the scenes. One of the first major aftermaths of exotic tourism is its mass phenomenon. Indeed, mass tourism has become a direct correlative to exotic tourism; tourists, as soon as predecessors have set foot somewhere, try to follow in hordes and conquer what they have been promised through travel narratives of previous experiences. Further, tourists, in their search of exoticism, appear to spread out all over discovered sites (until they naturally become tourist destinations). Their multidimensional conquests invade land, air and societies; I explained previously that tourists embark on a horizontal (land), vertical (air) and diagonal (societies) colonization. Exotic-driven tourists therefore proceed to destinations they (think they) know, as they go where others went before, where all is set up to welcome, accommodate and please them. As perfect conquerors, exotic-driven tourists will go beyond the limits to reach their goals. If they are capable of invading spaces, they also intend to get control over objects and subjects through a process of commodification. Every aspect of exotic otherness is turned into graspable and palpable objects, and bodies are no exceptions to that. Exoticism has thus led to eroticism, through which tourists transgress the norms of their daily lives; this further stresses that tourists want to break up with their own societal conformity and routine. If mismanaged, exotic tourism brings about the destination’s loss of authenticity. The tendency I termed “From exothentic to ex-authentic” shows precisely what is happening to exotic tourism: in its

own self-destruction, it tends to end up selling formerly authentic sites, which then become 'sights'.

Instead of a simple marketing, a genuine management of exotic tourism should be consequently implemented. Nevertheless, doing so is far from being easily applicable. Exoticism and tourism have almost become synonymous; managing exoticism would therefore suggest a reevaluation and revision of tourism as a whole. As tourists, we all seek to satisfy our dreams and prior expectations. However, these dreams and expectations keep changing. As we intend to manage exotic tourism it is important to understand that tourists primarily conquered the exotic other. Yet, today's tendency is rather going the opposite direction – exoticism is now conquering tourism in search for more and more markets and controls tourists' perceptions. To thwart this tendency, exotic tourism should be developed more coherently. In the case of Southeast Asia, one solution could be found in a more relevant regional synergy, which introduces more than what the ASEAN superficially aims at, where all countries would not compete fiercely against each other by claiming better exotic features than their neighbors but rather stand out in unison by putting forth their *complementary* exotic features and adopting a one-region-many-opportunities discourse. Another solution could then be found in a better segmentation and the opening up to niche markets. As exoticism has been applied to uncountable destinations, it is essential for the region to focus on niche markets that represent more definable and controllable markets than (mass) exotic tourism. Southeast Asia has long enough been democratized and cheapened so to open to wider clienteles and bring revenues into the region. Yet, this has proven to be a much unsustainable direction. Niche markets such as higher-budgeted clienteles (flashpackers and nouveaux riches) are consequently more suitable for sustainable exotic tourism; since their expenditure is more important and their interest is drawn towards boutique services and products, local-owned and -run tourism businesses can utilize some parts of their revenues and invite tourists to raise funds for better causes.

Finally, it is difficult to say whether exotic tourism heads towards a short-term perspective or represents a viable asset. Exoticism is unfortunately inevitable as it refers back to age-old colonizing perceptions of the world and this is especially what drives today's tourists to escape their daily lives and indulge in aestheticized versions of exotic otherness; this is the constituent paradox of vacations and tourism itself. However, the true question lies rather behind the need for the industry to find the right balance between what is exotically

acceptable to what is not. Speaking from professional experiences, my two internships in Southeast Asia gave me many opportunities to look more in-depth through the notion of Southeast Asian exoticism. On the one hand, my stint as a Marketing Manager at Intas Destinations in the Philippines made me realize how difficult it was for the country to face neighboring competition, to market Western clientele and to put forth its own exotic assets when the Philippines, being first of all a Catholic country, does not meet tourists' expectations of Southeast Asian exoticism and is believed to be a country unworthy of their gazes. On the other hand, my internship as a MICE Manager at Exotissimo Travel in Cambodia brought up many professional challenges. While the incoming groups were all asking for original, unusual and authentic tours, all were interestingly requiring the same standards, the same activities and showed great interest in *staged* authenticity ('Gala dinners at the temples with Apsara performances' being ironically chosen by all and ranked the number one MICE product) and highly standardized services (hotels were obviously deluxe properties, while the rented floating houses were remorselessly showcasing better features than opposite floating slums etc.). In both countries, the genuine management of exoticism implemented was rather oriented towards this symbolic authenticity tourists knowingly wanted to believe in, experience and enjoy.

Urry's post-tourism approach makes even more sense; exotic tourism is a psychological voyage into otherness where dreams are to be satisfied before going back home eventually. According to Urry, post-tourists are absolutely aware of this brutal discrepancy between the exothentic and the ex-authentic and are learning to go along rather than against it. As we are trying to manage exoticism, are we not inevitably mistakenly reviving its colonialistic nature? If we push our analysis further up into the management of exotic tourism, it is legitimate to ask whether we fail to define the exotic Other because we do not retrospect primarily over our own exotic Self. Could an adequate management of exotic tourism be found in the reevaluation of our own societies rather than in those of others? One may pointedly argue that we should give up on exoticism and start to question ourselves, our own motivations and our home societies. In the meantime, while the answer to this much complicated matter will still be pending, many more, like Kristina, our Russian client in Siem Reap, will still agree that what they are offered is not quite what they expected.

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## **Appendix Synopsis**

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Appendix IV – More Than Usual Exoticism

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Appendix VI – Bangkok Airways

Appendix VII – Exoticism in Pampered Luxury

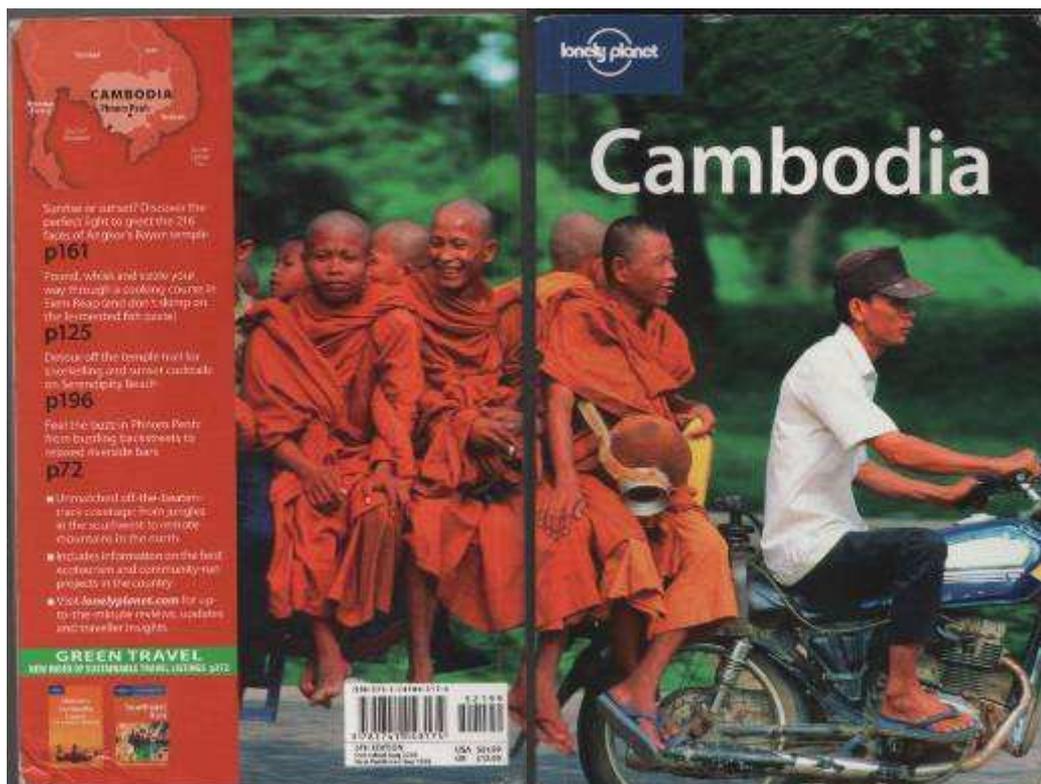
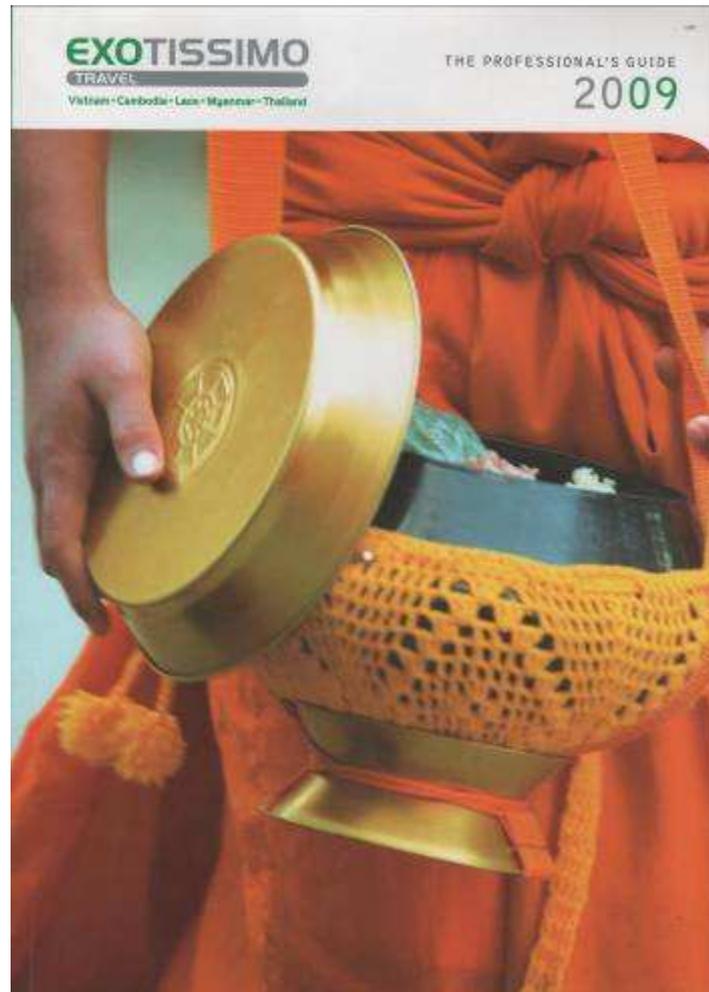
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Appendix X – Saturated Spaces and Unequal Distribution

Appendix XI – It's a Small World

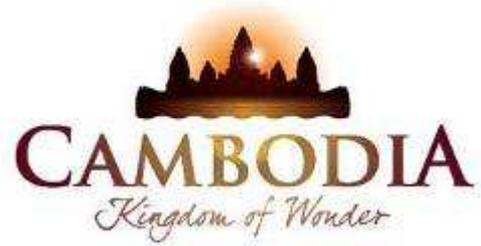
## Appendix I – Buddhist Monks



## Appendix II – Encore Angkor !



Bill of 500 Cambodian riel



Official Logo of Cambodia Tourism



Angkor Beer – Slogan “My Country, My Beer”



Borei Angkor Hotel, Siem Reap



Angkor - cigarette brand



Cambodia Angkor Air (open Aug 2009)



Angkor Palace, Siem Reap



Cambodian flag

## Appendix III – Stereotypes and Generalization

The screenshot shows a Facebook inbox conversation between Elodie and Matthieu Thiery. The interface includes a top navigation bar with 'facebook', 'Home', 'Profile', 'Friends', 'Inbox (3)', and user options 'Matthieu Thiery', 'Settings', and 'Logout'. Below the navigation bar are tabs for 'Inbox', 'Sent Messages', 'Notifications', and 'Updates', along with a '+ Compose Message' button. A search bar for the inbox is also visible.

The conversation is titled 'Between You and Elodie'. It consists of the following messages:

- Elodie** (February 28 at 11:40am): "sit, je te fais une demande d'ami parce que j'aimerais bien voir toutes les photos que tu prends au cambodge! je suis un peu jalouse, autant celine aux philippines ça me tente pas mais là ya plein de bouddha et de moines et ça j'aimerais bien voir! Profite bien!!! Biz, elodie" (This message is highlighted with a red box and pointed to by a red arrow).
- Matthieu Thiery** (March 2 at 3:15am): "pas de soucis...je t'ajoute de suite! ce pays est magnifique... tu verras par toi meme. et toi comment va la vie en France?! enjoy the pictures!!!! Bisous".
- Elodie** (March 2 at 10:30am): "merci merci!! le vie en france est surement moins intéressante que ce que tu vis au Cambodge! mais tout va bien c'est les vacances donc repos! bisous".
- Matthieu Thiery** (March 2 at 12:15pm): "mais de rien!!! bisous".

At the bottom of the conversation, there is a 'Reply:' text box, a row of attachment options (Record Video, Post Link, Give a Hug!, Send a Funny Photo!, Add Music/YouTube, Add (fluff), Send a High 5!, more), and buttons for 'Send', 'Back to Inbox', 'Mark as Unread', and 'Delete'.

Facebook conversation, February-March 2009.

## Appendix IV – More Than Usual Exoticism



Taken from the official TV commercial of the Philippine Department of Tourism.

Available on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fISouZYFpww>

## Appendix V – True Images of Asia



From Tourism Malaysia TV commercial.

Available on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pEFkFyIo9LY>

## Appendix VI – Bangkok Airways

Exclusive Service to Exotic Gems

Exclusive Journeys to Asia's Exotic Gems

ASIA'S BOUTIQUE AIRLINE  
Preferred Service to Exotic Gems

WINNER 2007  
WORLD AIRLINE AWARDS  
ASIA  
BEST REGIONAL AIRLINE

WINNER 2007  
WORLD AIRLINE AWARDS  
BEST REGIONAL AIRLINE

WORLD AIRLINE AWARDS 2007  
WINNER  
SKYTRAX  
BEST REGIONAL AIRLINE

For four decades, Bangkok Airways has been one of the most widely respected and acclaimed airlines operating in this dynamic region. Today, Bangkok Airways flies to natural and cultural destinations across Asia and is constantly pioneering new routes to exotic destinations. Our emphasis on trust, commitment, care, knowledge and innovation has enabled us to create a unique identity as Asia's Boutique Airline.

www.bangkokair.com

WINTER 2008  
TIMETABLE  
October 26, 2008 - March 28, 2009

Bangkok Airways promotional leaflet (2008-2009)

# Appendix VII – Exoticism in Pampered Luxury

**CAMBODIA**

## Hôtel de la Paix

THE DECO-INSPIRED GEM NEAR ANGKOR WAT IS RECAST WITH STYLE AND ELEGANCE

Architectural Interior and Landscape Design by Bentley Design Studio  
Town by Susan Szefer/Photography by Robert McLeod

**W**hile a student at Cambridge's architecture school, Bentley was the Architectural Institute of America's first female president. When 1984 saw her return to Harvard in 1984, she had the choice of designing a building for the university or joining an architectural firm. She chose the latter, and in 1985 she joined the firm of Robert McLeod. "I had really liked what I had learned at Harvard, but deep in my mind I knew I wanted to do something else. I think I had been born to do it. Bentley Design Studio in Bangkok. The firm was doing the landscape design for well over 100 hotels in Asia. This is a great design school program," he continues. "So when I was asked to handle every aspect of a hotel in Siem Reap, Cambodia—the architecture, the interior design and the landscape design—I felt confident with the opportunity."

Bentley was enthusiastic to build a new hotel on the site of an old one. The original Hotel de la Paix opened in 1926, 50 years ago. Widely known as La

Paix, it had been a place with a tragic history. Bentley says that it had a very interesting history. It was built by a Frenchman about four miles from the main entrance to Angkor Wat, the temple in the center of the wonderful Angkor temple complex. It also had an unusual history. From 1975 to 1979... the killing field steps of the Hotel de la Paix... Bentley saw the hotel before it was demolished in 2004.

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ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST  
THE INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE OF DESIGN  
AUGUST 2006  
SPECIAL ISSUE: EXOTIC

www.architecturaldigest.com

Taken from *Architectural Digest*, issued August 2006.

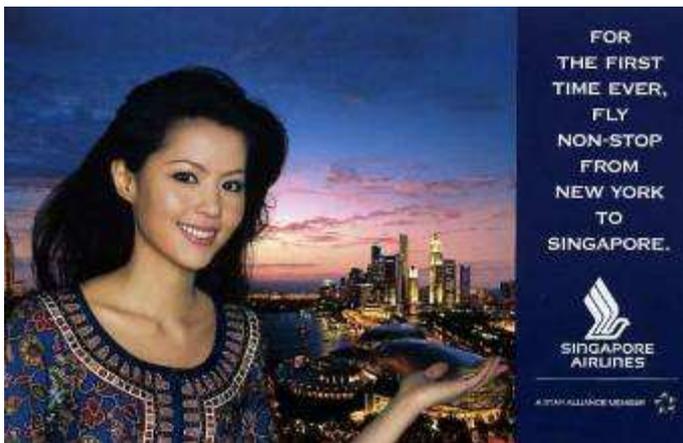
## Appendix VIII – An War of Exotic Smiles and Flowers



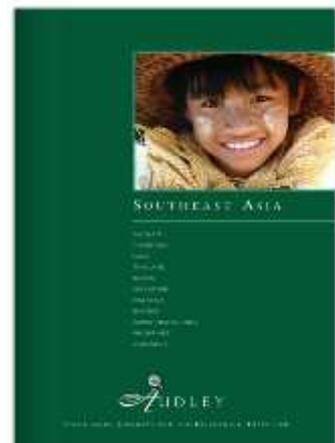
Thai Airways, online advertizing



Vietnam Airlines, online advertizing



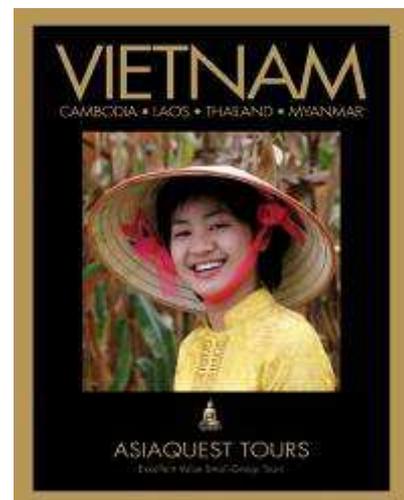
Singapore Airlines, official website



Audley, Southeast Asia Brochure 2009



Prince d'Angkor Hotel & Spa, official website



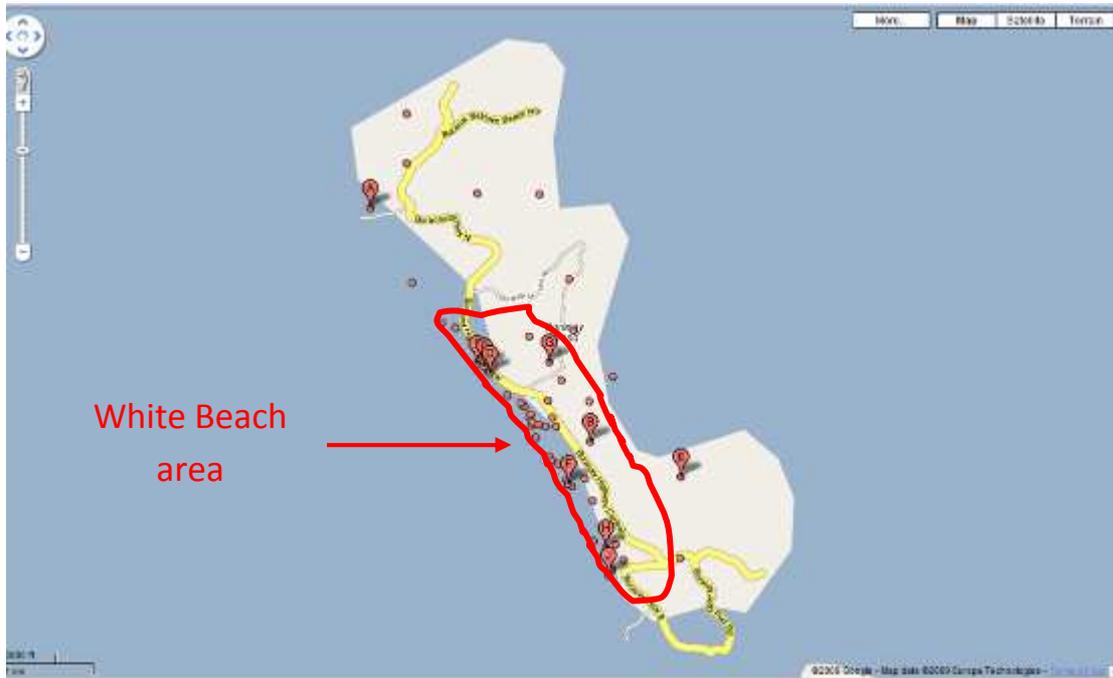
Asiaquest Tours, Vietnam Brochure 2009

## Appendix XIX – Symbols of Southeast Asia

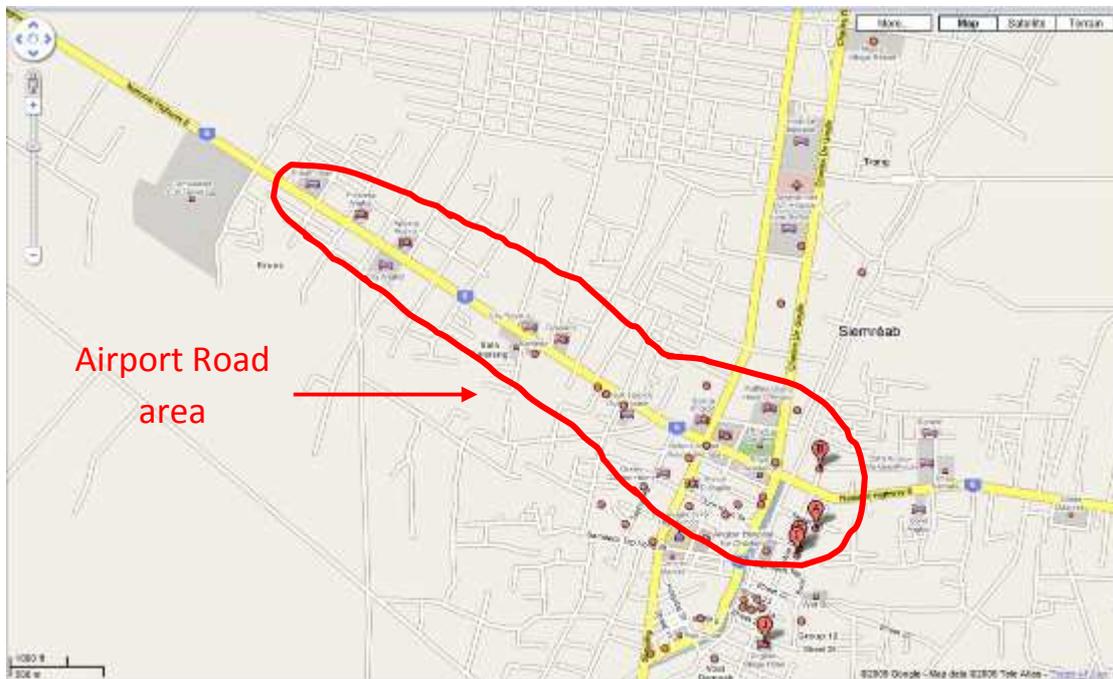


Caption used as a branding icon by Exotissimo Travel. These selected images are to symbolize the five destinations and what characterizes them best. It happens that the Group changes these images at times. However, the symbolic pictures of the region as a whole are always focused on nature, spirituality, purity, generally Asian authenticity.

## Appendix X – Saturated Spaces and Unequal Distribution



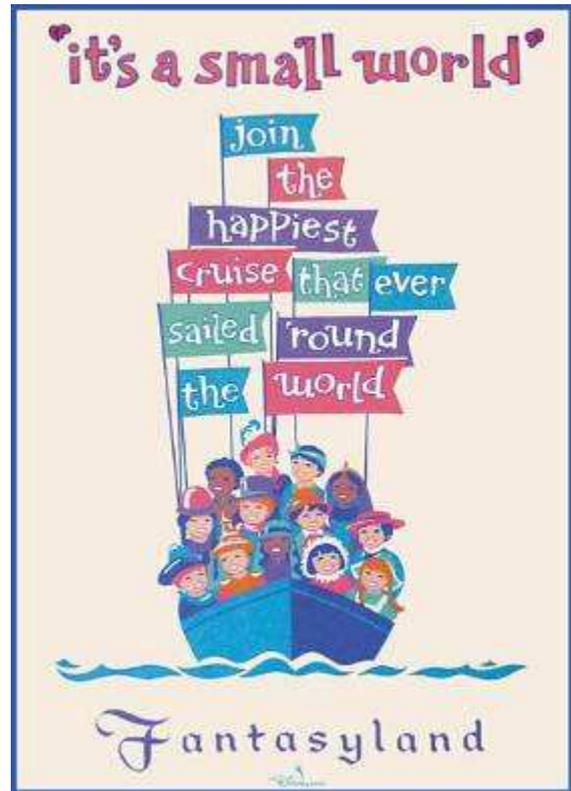
Boracay Island Map, by Google Maps



Siem Reap Town Map, by Google Maps

*Legend: red dots on both maps represent hotels (non exhaustively)*

## Appendix XI – It's a Small World



Thai Apsara costumes