

Would you volunteer at an orphanage in your home country? Would you want strangers peering at your children while they are at school? **When trying to decide whether a potential village tour or volunteer opportunity is ethical or responsible an easy rule of thumb is to ask yourself: would I do this in my home country?**

Visiting or volunteering in orphanages, schools, and communities has become a popular pastime of tourists in Cambodia. We know that the majority of people visit these locations because of a desire to give back or to learn more about Cambodia's culture. However, the impact of short-term volunteering or of immersive tours can have serious negative impacts for the very people you're trying to help.

ORPHANAGES

Many orphanages in Cambodia regularly accept short-term, unqualified visitors, donors or volunteers to teach, supervise or interact with the children. Volunteers typically stay for short periods of time, form bonds with the children and then leave. This process disrupts the child's ability to form healthy relationships and can intensify existing feelings of abandonment. According to UNICEF research, this continuous cycle often leads to attachment disorders among institutionalised children.

Between 2005 and 2015, Cambodia saw a 60 percent rise in the number of orphanages and residential care facilities. In 2017 a study found that Cambodia had 406 residential care institutions, or orphanages, housing a total of 16,579 children, a major increase since 2015. A recent study carried out by Columbia University revealed that approximately 80 percent of adolescents living in Cambodia's orphanages are not really orphans at all and have one or more living parents. This is a global issue; worldwide, approximately 80 percent of the eight million children living in orphanages have at least one living parent or family member that could potentially care for them.



Would you make day trips to orphanages or schools in your home country? Why not? If not, why do it elsewhere?

To make the situation more dangerous, a large number of the institutions and orphanages in Cambodia are unregistered or unregulated. A 2017 study found that 38 percent of residential care facilities have never been inspected by the ministry, 12 percent are not registered by any branch of the government and 21 percent do not have a formal Memorandum of Understanding with the government. This limits monitoring and other safeguards enacted to protect children and ensure they are not neglected or exploited.

We know that most tourists and volunteers generally mean well and believe they are making a positive impact in the lives of orphaned children. However, when all the negative consequences are taken into account, it is clear that selecting to participate in orphanage tourism is irresponsible, regardless of intentions.



SCHOOLS & COMMUNITIES

Schools and countryside community visits are increasingly popular options for tourists looking to get an inside look at Cambodian culture in action. Before going on one of these tours it is important to reflect on how your presence might disrupt the community you're going to learn about. After all, you can't just visit schools in your home towns and cities, right? Perhaps you would be welcomed for a tour at a school if you had a legitimate reason or were considering enrolling your children there. Even then, you'd likely need an appointment and you wouldn't be able to just go to see the children play or watch the teachers teach.

A classroom is a classroom, regardless of where you are in the world. There are students, teachers, books, and pencils. It's a place for children to learn and grow and where parents expect their children to be safe and supported. Would you want hundreds of foreign tourists walking around your child's school every year? Of course not, you'd be concerned, not only for their disrupted education but about the potential risks to their safety and wellbeing. Yet, millions of visitors per year want to see children in their schools in Cambodia.

What about tours through your neighborhood? Would you want tourists peering through your doors and windows or taking photographs of your family during dinner or watching your children play in their front yard? We expect a certain level of privacy when in our homes and this respect for boundaries should travel with you no matter where you are.

Of course, it's natural to want to see how different cultures and communities live. The key is to ensure you're doing it in a way that is both ethical and empowering for the communities you're seeking to learn about. Ethical tour companies specialize in truly authentic tours that direct money back into the community and treat community members as business partners instead of a museum exhibition.

SHORT-TERM VOLUNTEERING & VOLUNTOURISM

According to [Save the Children](#), each year 1.6 million people pack their bags and hop on a plane to volunteer overseas. "Voluntourism" is one of the fastest growing trends in travel and the industry is worth up to 2.6 billion worldwide. Typical voluntourism projects often consist of unskilled, or untrained volunteers spending a few hours or weeks building houses or teaching underprivileged children. At the heart of volunteering remains a call to service, and a genuine desire to give back to others. Despite these good intentions, by devaluing local experts and fueling "White Savior" myths, voluntourism can be dangerous and do more harm than good.

TOURS IN SIEM REAP

We recommend the following ethical tour companies in Siem Reap:

- Grasshopper Adventures
- Ayana Journeys



When considering how and where to volunteer, it's important to be informed of what is really happening within the industry. Construction projects remain a popular option for short-term volunteers as they represent a very hands-on, tangible way to give back. At the end of a few weeks or months a community can have a brand-new school, health center, or library. However, the reality is that very few volunteers are actually qualified to build even a basic structure. There have been countless reports of volunteer projects by unskilled, unqualified volunteers being fixed by local professionals overnight or knocked down for materials as soon as the volunteers have left. Often, these types of projects take jobs that skilled, local people, could and should be doing. Resulting in both poorly built, potentially unsafe structures, and money being taken out of community members' pockets.

For volunteers in communities, schools, or other placements where they are working directly with children there are even more serious concerns. Children can form bonds that, when broken repeatedly as a result of short-term volunteering, disrupts healthy development and can have serious implications for their future. It's essential that anyone working with children is properly vetted and trained, however many short-term placements lack child protection measures and therefore place children at risk of exploitation and abuse.

HOW CAN I HELP?

Volunteers are driven to make a difference in the world. Despite the potential pitfalls, there are so many ways you can make a difference both at home and globally. We don't want to stop you from volunteering; we want to help you make an informed volunteering decision that will be positive for you and those you're working alongside.

PRO TRAVELER TIP

Use the **Childsafe Website** to find **Childsafe hotels and restaurants:**

www.thinkchildsafe.org/travelers



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I don't want a little girl in Ghana, or Sri Lanka, or Indonesia to think of me when she wakes up each morning. I don't want her to thank me for her education or medical care or new clothes...I want her to think about her teacher, community leader, or mother. I want her to have a hero who she can relate to - who looks like her, is part of her culture, speaks her language, and who she might bump into on the way to school one morning.

– **PIPPA BIDDLE** FREELANCE WRITER
AND ANTI-VOLUNTOURISM ADVOCATE



Click here to
find out more

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RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL



What are your skills? What are you an expert in? Are you skilled in marketing? Or sales? Are you a graphic designer that can create impactful visuals? Are you a business leader that can provide mentoring and tools? Whatever your skill is, focus on that, and match it with an organisation that has a need in that area. If possible, train trainers and teach teachers. Every teacher you teach will reach hundreds of children for years after you've gone. Building capacity at the highest level possible will help ensure your efforts are high impact and sustainable.

This also means don't volunteer to do something you are unskilled in. If you're not a builder, don't volunteer to build. If you're not a teacher, don't volunteer to teach. If you wouldn't qualify to do a job in your home town, you shouldn't volunteer to do it elsewhere.

Once you've identified your skill and found an organisation ask yourself, is it empowering? Not to you, to them. To whoever you're working with, is the proposed project empowering to that individual or that group? If you can't say with certainty that it is, perhaps you should rework the project or reconsider if it is the best fit.

WORKSHOPS

Consider choosing to attend a workshop or two instead of volunteering. Workshops position the facilitator as an expert instead of the volunteer - far more empowering. They are an incredible way to get in depth understanding about a culture, learn more about an individual's life experiences and cultural insights

and connect with local people in a meaningful way. Workshops also typically equip you with additional knowledge to make smarter choices moving forward.

We recommend the following workshops in Siem Reap:

- **A Miley in Serey's Shoes with Free To Shine**
- **Contemporary Jewellery Workshop with AMMO**
- **Rehash Trash Workshop with Green Gecko**
- **Cooking Class with Baby Elephant**

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

There are plenty of great resources online for you to engage more with the topic of ethical tourism and ethical volunteering. Here's a list of resources we recommend starting with.

- **9 Ways to be a Responsible Traveler in Cambodia and Help the Community When You Have Endless Passion Yet Limited Time**
www.professionalsdoinggood.com/discover-cambodia/9-ways-to-be-a-responsible-traveler-and-help-the-community-when-you-have-endless-passion-yet-limited-time
- **The way we think about charity is dead wrong - Dan Pallotta**
www.ted.com/talks/dan_pallotta_the_way_we_think_about_charity_is_dead_wrong?language=en
- **"So, You Want to Build Me a House?" - When Volunteering Fuels the Wrong Things (Part One)**
www.learningservice.info/so-you-want-to-build-me-a-house-part-one

ORPHANAGES

- **ReThink Orphanages**
www.rethinkorphanages.org/resources-videos
- **The love you give - the untold story of orphanages**
www.loveyougive.org
- **Childsafe Don't Create More Orphans**
www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_T0frGOMZk
- **The Guardian, The Race to Rescue Cambodian Children from Orphanages**
www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/19/the-race-to-rescue-cambodian-children-from-orphanages-exploiting-them-for-profit

THANK YOU!