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Heart Strings Cycle Tours, S E Asia

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Title: Heart Strings Cycle Tours, S E Asia

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Abstract:

Cycle tourism is a growing activity. In Siem Reap, Cambodia, tourists can hire bikes with or without guides, to cruise Angkor Watt and the temple complexes, and/or surrounding villages. In Bali, Indonesia, tourists pedal through rice fields, temple gardens, and into Balinese families' compounds. The cycling tourist is the affluent visitor seeking the exotic gaze. Local poor people are positioned as spectacle to be 'consumed' by that gaze, and by pocket-sized cameras or phones.

On my own cycle tours in these locations, either with my own guide or in a small guided group, I met people living in extremely modest conditions. Occasionally we'd stop at a stall to buy fruit, or to drink tea in someone's yard. The guide translated the conversation with the local people. I was commonly asked—via the guide—'how old are you?' and 'where is your husband?' Despite obvious poverty, no-one ever asked for money. The cycle tours were not promoted as 'pro poor' tourism.

Yet cash gifts were slipped into local hands, or left in a cup on the bench. Liberal western compassion might help a little. In Siem Reap, I was aware of the proximity of Angkor Wat and its thousands of tourists each day paying entrance fees—and of the numerous bars and restaurants frequented by visitors. Yet just a few kilometres away, people lived without decent housing, electricity, tap water, or education.

For the tourist who wishes to make an unsolicited donation: is it an assault to the recipient's dignity to give unasked for monetary gifts? On a repeat visit to a Balinese family one year after giving a little cash, I was told that the money had provided food for two months during difficult times. How could one not give, if that is the outcome, even when knowing that such gifting does nothing to address the larger structural issues?

Numerous websites offer advice on handing out cash when travelling. Questions include 'Will what I'm doing improve this person's life, or degrade it? Will it promote greed and dependency, or foster some small degree of autonomy? How will travellers to this place—tomorrow, next month or ten years from now—be affected by my actions?' (www.kashgar.com.au/articles/To-Give-or-Not-to-Give-When-Travelling-Abroad). Donating to reputable aid organisations is the recommended alternative. But on a fleeting visit, there is not time for such investigations. The Red Cross enjoys a solidly positive reputation; but spontaneous gifts to people who the visitor actually met and enjoyed some communication with will be lost if the giver waits until later to arrange a formal donation. The significant impact of that direct human connection cannot be overestimated; it drives the impetus to give. Yes, in accordance with website advice, this giver also buys items from local fund raising charities such as fair trade-style enterprises.

This paper addresses and debates the dilemma and politics of this form of giving, based on experiences on cycle tours in Siem Reap in Cambodia, and in Bali, Indonesia.