

goats and soda

OFFBEAT

Exiled From U.S., Cambodian Felons Use American Know-How To Get Ahead

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A tuk-tuk speeds down an urban Cambodian road. One deportee used his English language skills — and sense of humor — to build a successful tuk-tuk tour business.

Christopher Groenhout/Getty Images

A strange thing is happening to the tour business in Cambodia's second largest city. The sleepy town of Battambang is becoming known for its Khmerican service.

Cambodian American deportees expelled from the U.S. after committing crimes are now providing Western-style service to foreign visitors. Sarith Chan built up a successful tuk-tuk tour business by using his American-accented English and familiarity with American customs to attract American and European customers.

It was his dad who first planted the idea in Chan's head. He said he wanted to buy a tuk-tuk so he could make a little money driving people around while he was visiting Chan in Battambang. He was joking of course. Chan's father lives in the United States and has no need for the small change earned by tuk-tuk drivers who cart tourists and locals around via motorcycles with attached carriages.

Chan didn't think anything of it, at least not while his parents were helping him settle into his new home in this northwestern rural provincial capital city. But then his parents left and he was alone and bored in a country he hadn't lived in since he was a baby.

Chan isn't here by choice. He is one of 538 legal permanent residents of the United States who, after running afoul of U.S. law, were deported to Cambodia.

Their presence in the country is the result of a series of laws passed in the U.S. in the 1990s, according to the humanitarian organization Southeast Asia Resource Action Center. These laws made it very difficult for immigration judges to consider the individual circumstances of a defendant in a deportation case. The laws affect non-citizens from Cambodia as well as other countries; the deportation process varies depending on the agreement the U.S. has with individual countries.

The Cambodian deportees are dumped in the capital of Phnom Penh, where they've often had a hard time finding their place. But about half of the deportees have made their way to four northern provinces, including Battambang Province, where many of them were born and lived before fleeing the country after the Khmer Rouge reign of terror from 1975 to 1979, when around 2 million people were executed or died of disease or starvation.

And in Battambang, these ex-felons are the ones helping others find their way around town.

Chan is now in his late 30s. During the genocide, his family escaped to Thailand and later was resettled in Ohio as refugees. From there they moved to California, then to Washington state. Chan's parents never talked about the Cambodian genocide; Chan in turn doesn't like to talk about the path that brought him back to his homeland.

He is more open about his first impression of the land on which his mother wanted him to build a house in Battambang.

"When I seen the land, it was nothing but a banana farm, I was like 'hell no'," says Chan, who is large and talkative.

Half a decade later he calls the spot home. Inside his compound is a pit bull named Spike — and a tuk-tuk. At first he parked his away from the other drivers, not wanting to encroach on their territory. But that was a bad strategy for attracting customers. Next he tried to grab tourists as they arrived at the bus station, but he found it hard to catch their attention amid the crowd of other drivers.

Business picked up when he was hired to take a group of people working for a non-governmental organization to and from work during the week and on tours on the weekend. From there he designed his own \$8-a-day custom tour hitting the main attractions of the Bat Cave, Bamboo Train and Wat Banan Temple, along with some of his own favorites such as a peaceful lake where customers can swim. His laid-back American street style meshes well with Westerners, especially backpackers, who appreciate a guide who gives them plenty of space and makes jokes.

"A lot of people like my tour because I have fun when I talk with them," he says. "The [other] tuk-tuk drivers, they can speak English, but they don't understand inside jokes, clowning, joking."

Chan isn't the only exile who has found a niche catering to tourists in this city. Ry

Mam operates a lounge restaurant that serves pancakes, bacon cheeseburgers and the kind of Cuban sandwiches he ate as a kid in southern California. Mam prefers English to the local Khmer language and feels most at home with fellow exiles, expats and tourists.

The feeling seems to be mutual. Isabel of Germany currently calls Battambang home and stops by Ry's Kitchen on Fridays for a beer and a conversation with Mam. Like Chan's customers, Isabel was attracted by the relaxed atmosphere.



Nheb Thai, one of the deportees, attaches a thatched roof to his pizza hut.

Katya Cengel/for NPR

Mam relies on word of mouth more than overt advertising, an easygoing attitude reminiscent of the West Coast, where many of the exiles grew up. Mam's plans for growing some of his own ingredients on a rooftop garden and adding a conference room where people can watch sports also seem very California.

It is also a long way from where he began when he arrived in Cambodia in 2010, later selling sandwiches from a street cart, making just \$10 a day. As word spread his income increased. He rented a kitchen and more recently opened up his own restaurant. Not long ago, he says, a few customers showed up after a Google search for the best burgers in town suggested Ry's Kitchen.



Nheb Thai's wife, Kim Lun, gets a pizza ready for the oven.

Katya Cengel/for NPR

A big man with a bald head, Mam talks relatively openly about the years he spent behind bars for drug dealing, breaking and entering and other "stuff like that."

Chan's cousin, Nheb Thai, did time for first-degree burglary in the United States before landing in Cambodia in 2003. To make money, Thai would take tourists around on his motorcycle. Now he is opening a pizza joint along the road tourists travel on their way to the Bat Cave. After 13 years in the country, Thai considers himself almost

a local, although he says locals insists he speaks Khmer with an accent. Nevertheless, they still like pizza and he is counting on them and the tourists to buy his pies because, as he says, "everybody likes pizza."

Although Battambang is still a bit of a backwater, it is increasingly becoming a tourist destination. And locals have developed a taste for everything "Western" and coffee shops and pizza joints are popular.

"I got both markets, Cambodian market, American, I got it," says Thai, who is 45.

As for the Americans, Thai understands the need for a shaded spot where they can relax, listen to music and enjoy familiar food, something the women selling grilled rats on the side of the road don't offer. With his cousin Chan taking tourists right past his place, he is pretty sure things will work out.

Bill Herod, an adviser to Returnee Integration Support Center (RISC), says the group encourages those "who present well" to get into the tourist industry. Quite a few have. Others, about 14, have ended up back in jail. Two have taken their lives.

Even those who have found success in tourism say it hasn't been easy. Chan says that local tuk-tuk drivers have not always been friendly to him and that some staff at tourist attractions complain that his clients don't tip. Other guides may insist their tourists tip, but Chan leaves it up to them.

Attracting tourists is a competitive business and Chan believes the locals in the business resent him because he is different and because his English skills give him an advantage.

"It was hell with tuk-tuk to get where I got. It was hell," says Chan.

The Khmericans have a reputation of keeping their American street culture, something that causes friction with locals who are not accustomed to heavily tattooed people who speak in slang and wear baseball hats and baggy shorts.

Sarith Keo, co-director of RISC, says sometimes it seems like the Khmericans "don't care about Cambodian culture." With time, though, they are increasingly becoming a part of it. In June Chan found his business doing so well he was able to retire his tuk-tuk and purchase an air-conditioned Hyundai van.

On his parent's most recent visit they had another idea. Before they left he found himself married.

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