

# CAMBODIAN CULINARY TOURISM AND GASTRODIPLOMACY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN A POST-COVID-19 WORLD

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## THE IMAGE OF CAMBODIAN CUISINE AND CAMBODIA AS A CULINARY TOURISM DESTINATION

The image of Cambodian cuisine and Cambodia as a culinary tourism destination is not highly regarded or well-defined globally. This is reflected by the absence of Cambodian cuisine or its dishes in global popularity polls and studies such as CNN's "World's 50 Most Delicious Foods", CNN's "World's 50 Most Delicious Foods: Readers' Picks" and YouGov's Global Cuisine Survey, the lack of Cambodian restaurants in global rankings or ratings (such as Asia's 50 Best Restaurants), the scarcity of academic studies into the culinary history of Cambodia and, the underrepresentation of Cambodian cuisine in popular media such as food and travel shows and cookbooks, as well as until recently the non-existence of a real gastrodiplomacy strategy for Cambodia. Even in terms of general visiting tourist numbers and tourism competitiveness, Cambodia falls behind not only most Southeast Asian countries but Asian countries in general.

Global Rank	ENABLING ENVIRONMENT					T&T POLICY & ENABLING CONDITIONS				INFRASTRUCTURE			NATURAL & CULT. RESOURCES	
	Business Environment	Safety & Security	Health & Hygiene	Human Resources & Labor Market	ICT Readiness	Prioritization of T&T	Int'l. Openness	Price Competitiveness	Environ. Sustainability	Air Transport Infrastructure	Ground & Port Infrastructure	Tourist Service Infrastructure	Natural Resources	Cultural Res. & Business Travel
Singapore	5.9	5.9	5.6	5.9	5.9	5.9	5.9	5.0	4.3	5.9	5.9	5.1	2.2	2.5
Malaysia	5.5	5.9	5.3	5.9	5.4	4.8	5.9	5.9	4.0	5.9	5.9	4.5	3.8	2.6
Thailand	4.0	4.8	5.0	5.9	5.2	5.9	5.9	5.9	3.6	5.9	3.3	5.9	3.9	2.0
Indonesia	4.7	5.4	4.5	4.9	4.7	5.9	5.9	5.9	3.5	5.9	3.3	3.1	3.9	2.9
Viet Nam	4.4	5.6	5.0	4.9	4.3	4.1	3.7	5.9	3.9	4.4	3.0	2.9	3.8	2.9
Brunei Darussalam	4.0	5.9	5.5	4.6	5.4	3.4	3.7	5.9	4.1	4.3	3.8	4.0	2.4	3.1
Philippines	4.3	3.6	4.8	5.9	4.4	4.9	3.5	5.9	4.0	3.2	3.8	3.8	3.8	1.8
Lao PDR	4.4	5.3	4.5	4.6	3.4	4.8	3.0	5.9	3.7	2.4	2.9	3.4	2.9	1.3
Cambodia	3.8	3.1	4.0	4.9	3.9	3.0	3.5	5.9	3.4	3.3	2.9	3.9	3.0	1.6
South-East Asia Average	4.8	5.3	4.9	4.9	4.8	4.9	3.9	5.9	3.8	3.7	3.6	4.0	3.5	2.2

Source: The Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report 2019

## THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

COVID-19 pandemic and associated safety measures have had the following effect on Cambodia in 2020:

- The Cambodian tourism sector has lost an estimated 3 billion USD;
- 2,956 tourism-related businesses have been forced to close;
- 45,405 people in the tourism industry have lost their jobs,
- 1.76 million additional jobs in Cambodia were at risk.
- The poverty rate has almost doubled and reached 17.6%.

There is a strong need for Cambodia to increase its tourism competitiveness and diversify the tourism industry to help recover its economy, which is strongly based on tourism, and contribute to the future development of Cambodia with the end of the pandemic in sight.

## GASTRODIPLOMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

- Conducting surveys and studies on the image of Cambodian cuisine abroad and Cambodia as a culinary destination.
- Establishing a body specializing in Cambodian culinary history and culture and funding research on the topics.
- Applying to have Nom Banh Chok (Khmer Noodles) listed by UNESCO under Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.
- Applying for Siem Reap to become a UNESCO City of Gastronomy.
- Establishing and expanding infrastructure for culinary tourism in Cambodia.
- Creating seminars, courses, and cooking classes on Cambodian cuisine for the foreign audience on a professional, academic, and amateur level.
- Providing food businesses in Cambodia and Cambodian food businesses abroad with consultancy, special loan schemes, and other support.
- Collaborating with Cambodian diaspora communities and organizations to hold food events.
- Increasing the number of restaurants abroad, introducing training programs for Cambodian chefs, and making specialized visa arrangements with foreign countries.
- Conducting advertisement campaigns about Cambodian food, organizing food tours for influencers and opinion leaders.
- Promoting Cambodian specialty food products to home cooks and mainstream foodies such as Kampot pepper, Mondulkiri wild honey, Battambang rice, Cambodian salt, coffee, spices, and spice pastes.
- Boosting the representation of Cambodian cuisine in the media through documentaries, shows, magazine articles, television series about the Khmer empire with incorporated elements of cuisine.
- Appointing ambassadors for Cambodian cuisine, both local and international renowned chefs or charismatic food personalities.
- Organizing and participating in food expositions, food festivals, and conferences to promote Cambodian cuisine both domestically and abroad, establishing a Siem Reap International Food Festival.
- Establishing cross-national gastrodiplomatic collaboration with other countries in the Southeast Asian region.

## GASTRODIPLOMACY

Gastrodiplomacy is a type of cultural diplomacy pioneered by Thailand in 2002 that uses long-term public relations campaigns and investments that aim to popularize the national cuisine of a country.

Components of gastrodiplomacy campaigns for Japan, Malaysia, Peru, South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand:

- product marketing strategy;
- food events strategy;
- coalition building strategy;
- use of opinion leaders strategy;
- media relations strategy;
- education strategy.

Six messages and appeals communicated in the aforementioned gastrodiplomacy campaigns

- healthiness;
- diversity;
- mysticism and exoticism;
- an essential part of national culture;
- naturalness and environmentalism;
- beauty of food presentation.

**Reference:** Zhang J. (January 2015). *The Foods of the Worlds: Mapping and Comparing Contemporary Gastrodiplomacy Campaigns*. *International Journal of Communication* 9(1):568-591