

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GDN-20

The Touristization of Southeast Asia

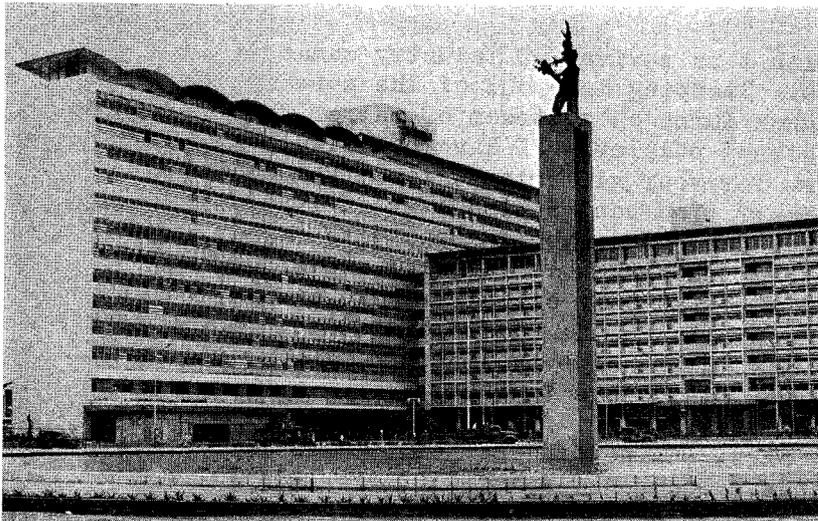
12 Road 5/35
Petaling Jaya, Selangor
Malaya
21 November 1962

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Southeast Asia's contact with the West has largely come through the medium of traders, missionaries, planters and civil servants. The old "world tour" might have included some of the major cities of the region as exotic ports of call, and there was the occasional Halliburton to walk across the Isthmus of Kra and to sing the wonders of Angkor, but these unofficial visitors have been few and far between. In the past few years, however, a new breed has emerged to bridge the great gulf between the cultures of Southeast Asia and the West, the tourist; and he seems to be working an influence no less profound than that of any of his predecessors.

For the tourist (though not exclusively) there are gleaming new airports. National pride demands that each country welcome its guests with the best in modern architecture; and the new jets demand longer and longer runways. The result is a rash of new airport building. Bangkok's plush new terminal has been in use for over a year; Hong Kong just opened a new one a few days ago. Manila's modern terminal is already being expanded, and Kuala Lumpur now has plans for a multi-million dollar airport with a golf course attached. Only Singapore and Djakarta present rather unimposing terminals: Djakarta probably through a greater concern with its revolutionary spirit; Singapore because of its greater concern with industrialization and labor disputes.



Djakarta's Hotel Indonesia...
The changing skyline of Southeast Asia

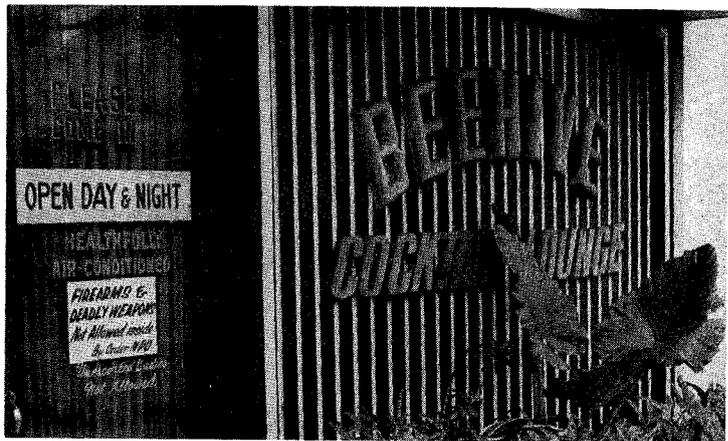
For the tourist the skyline of Southeast Asia is undergoing radical transformation. Where previously only temples broke the squat silhouette of the Asian city, now sky-scraper (by regional standards) hotels punctuate the skyline. The newest is Djakarta's Hotel Indonesia, a marvel of modern design by the Danish-American architect, Sorensen. In contrast with this are hotels like the Majestic in Saigon, which bear the traces of an earlier period. There the high ceilings with their whirling fans, the immense rooms and large bathrooms seem peopled with the ghosts of the colonial period, before air-conditioning allowed the designer to cram twice as many rooms into the same space. These old hotels were for the privileged and the wealthy: civil servants governing the colonies, the few local people of means, and the rare wealthy tourist. Today they are still used by government servants on international assignments, but in addition they are for the growing indigenous middle class, and for the ubiquitous tourist. Only in Indonesia is the tourist orientation so blatant as to all but exclude Indonesians. There the bill is paid in US dollars, and prices in rupiahs are computed at the official tourist rate of exchange, Rps 180 to the dollar, rather than at the black (or free) market rate of Rps 750 to 1,000 to the dollar. The hotel was designed especially to bring in the tourist dollar; Indonesians content themselves with the vicarious thrill afforded by taking the whole family for a stroll through the lobby and arcades in the evening after the kids have been scrubbed and dressed in their Sunday best.

For the tourist, native craft industries are being revived and modernized. Implements previously of a purely functional nature, like the great straw hats worn in the rice fields, are now standard items in all curio shops and adorn the walls of many a home in the West. The graceful carvings of Bali, Malayan batiks (hand stamped cloth), and the famed Thai silks are now almost mass produced. There are some anomalies in this old-new industry, as in Thailand where the revived silk industry is a combination of American entrepreneurship, Japanese silk thread, woven in traditional style by Chinese girls working under conditions approximating the old Japanese paternalistic sweat-shop.

Along with this revival of industry comes a surging new aggressiveness in sales. Stepping into one of the more famous (or notorious) shops in Bangkok turns on a stream of patter that would match that of any Maxwell street peddler. "I have beautiful Thai silk for your wife, how about some for your girlfriend, too? What would you like to drink, a nice cold beer? You want a nice star safire, very cheap, cost much more stateside. Sure you can pay with travelers checks, I give you greenbacks in change....." All the while you squeeze between American G.I.'s (I saw only officers, however) and American ladies dressed for cocktails in the middle of the morning. Many beautiful things are truly inexpensive by American standards; the pile of trinkets grows beside the omnivorous tourist.

And the bars, the new and as yet untapped frontiers of research in cultural change. Southeast Asian displays entrepreneurial vigour in the rapid pace at which these havens of relaxation are opened. Almost every other establishment on the streets of Saigon is a bar, the front

Manila's Bars

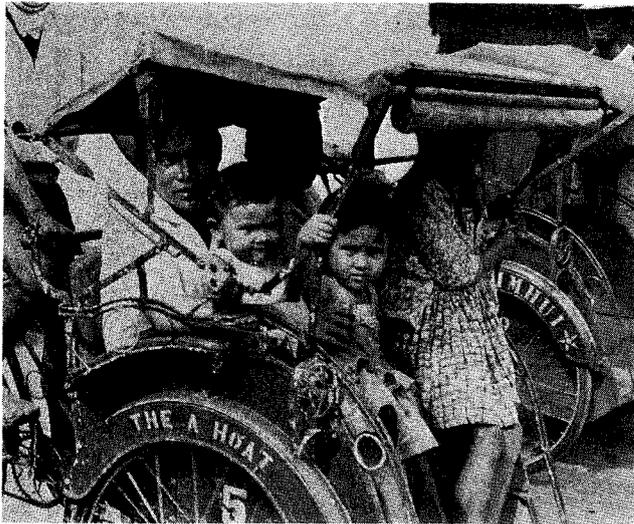


Cheap advertising...

and the Minuteman tradition

open but screened against hand grenades, the dim interior displaying a row of Viet Nameese beauties who have made the switch from French to English with an ease that would be the envy of the entire Berlitz family. (To be sure, in this case the military rather than the tourist has occasioned the change, but the tourist is not far behind.) Everywhere these cool dark interiors beckon the weary unacclimatized tourist suffering under the glare of the tropical sun and the weight of the tropical humidity. One Manila owner with an eye for cheap advertising christened his establishment "The Ugly American Cocktail Lounge." Advertising aside, all Manila bars proudly bear the imprint of the American constitutionally guaranteed Minuteman Tradition: "Firearms and Deadly Weapons not Allowed Inside." Some add: "Deposit Guns at the Bar."

There are also other forms of entrepreneurial talent being called forth by the tourist. On the streets of Saigon young boys will sell you a newspaper at 10 Piastres (about 13 cents). Soon after you will have one on your arm wanting to buy your paper back for 5 Piastres so that he can sell it again. The most ubiquitous of the new entrepreneurs is the cab driver. He has a real nose for the tourist and you can always spot a tourist from a distance by the number of taxis that cluster about him or his most frequent calling places. In Manila you get the added and generally completely gratuitous service of a complete political analysis from the taxi drivers; where would foreign correspondents be without them? In most cities the taxis are metered, but the Bangkok drivers adjusted to this forced preclusion of bargaining by simply refusing to turn on the meter. You agree on the price before agreeing to take the taxi, and here is where the real talent of the driver is displayed. When he accurately identifies not only the tourist, but the particular tourist who has no idea of what the proper fare is and is also unfamiliar with the currency, he makes a killing. An alternative to the taxi, but not to the taxi-driver, is the pedi-cab. Already gone from the streets of Manila and Bangkok, it will eventually give way everywhere to the pressure of rapid automotive traffic. While it remains it provides taxi service for local peoples, and can often be found loaded to a capacity that would astound Ripley.



A well-stocked pedi-cab



My picture, tuan?

And finally the children; between them and the tourist there is a strong bond of mutual fascination and affection. The young ones want to be photographed, they want to look and to talk, and sometimes they ask for money. For his part the tourist seems no less eager to photograph, to talk, and even to shell out a few coins; it is so little to the tourist and so much to the kids. Not lacking in entrepreneurial ability, the beggars have been quick to see this affection of the tourist for the children. It is worth something for the beggar to have a few ~~tots~~ tots in tow, any tots will do, they don't have to be his own. One hears of a fair amount of borrowing and renting of children in this occupational class. I've seen the same beggar with a different pair of kids every day for three or four days. But for the most part, the tourist can see in the Southeast Asia city simply a teeming mass of children behaving like children everywhere. Looking at their condition of life, he may wonder at the source of their happiness, but he finds it delightfully infectious nonetheless.

There are profound forces of change at work in Southeast Asia. Analysts of this change have generally paid attention to such things as nationalism, independence, and rising aspirations. It is past time for the tourist to step forward to claim credit for the change he is creating. He is part of the changing economic structure with his new demands, and he is more significantly, an instrument of the breakdown of the isolation of Southeast Asian societies, a breakdown that is proceeding rapidly and forcing the region into the world community.

Sincerely,

Gayl D. Ness

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