

# Receiving a New Kind of Others: Korean Tourism in the Philippines

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## **Abstract**

This article explores how Westerners and the local Filipino population have received and perceived South Korean tourists in a small Philippine coastal tourism village. Following the ongoing growth in inter-Asian tourism, this ethnographic study investigates how a local population responds to the increase in South Korean tourism in the Philippines.

Keywords: Tourism anthropology, inter-Asian tourism, South Korean tourism, the Philippines, local responses

## Introduction

A small fishing village in the Philippines became a popular tourist site for backpackers, divers, and sex tourists from Australia, USA, and Europe in the 1980s. In the mid- to late 2000s, something changed: South Korean entrepreneurs started businesses in the village, which led to an influx of their countrymen. These “New Others” became significant actors in the local tourism scene. While they were praised for the business opportunities they provided, they were also met with skepticism because of their different appearances and behaviors.

In 2018, 7.1 million international tourist arrivals were registered in the Philippines, an unprecedented number in the country’s tourism history. Of these were 1.6 million South Koreans, constituting 22 percent of the total (DOT 2019).<sup>1</sup> The Philippines had to adjust to a shift in international tourism as Asian outbound tourism had expanded (Winter, Teo, and Chang. 2009). Using an ethnographic approach, this article examines the locals’ reception of South Korean tourists in Sabang, Province of Oriental Mindoro, one of the country’s international tourist sites.<sup>2</sup>

## The Setting

Sabang is a small seaside village (*barangay*) on the northern tip of the island of Mindoro, about 136 kilometers south of Manila. Its main attractions to foreign tourists are scuba diving, tropical beach, and nightly commercial sex. Since the earliest days of tourism development, Sabang has mainly been visited by Westerners.<sup>3</sup> However, an increase of Koreans has become evident, and a few Korean men have settled in the village. These new expats (expatriates) entered the local tourism scene by opening up businesses such as hotels and resorts, restaurants, dive shops, and bars offering commercial sex, all of which have attracted fellow Koreans.<sup>4</sup>

The people of Sabang faced new ways of behaving, eating, traveling, conducting business, to say nothing of speaking (or listening) to a language foreign to both Filipinos and Westerners. In short, they had to relate to a new group of tourists and expats: the New Others. It is in light of these transformations that I examine how the Filipinos and Westerners in Sabang have reacted to these new arrivals. How are Korean tourists perceived and received? How does the local population interpret their presence? And perhaps most importantly, in what ways is the “newness” of the Korean tourists and expats experienced and explained?

### **The Tourism Industry in Sabang**

Western men found their way to Sabang in the early 1980s while backpacking in Asia. Some of these first tourists fell in love with local women, got married, and decided to settle. The couples, together with their relatives (i.e. based in the Philippines), opened up dive shops, cottages for rent, eateries, and other businesses. Later on, local Filipinos saw a potential niche in developing night-time entertainment. With diving as a primary daytime activity, sex tourism was gradually established in Sabang (Ekoluoma 2017; Wiss 2005).

Sabang’s tourism industry was from the onset a joint venture between Filipino locals and Western men. From the early 1980s to the mid-2000s, Sabang was also mostly visited by Western men, and only occasionally by a few Asian men and Western women. The expats were, for close to two decades, almost exclusively Western men.

In 2015, six Korean men were identified by Filipino and Western locals as permanent residents; one of whom was a missionary and not directly involved in the tourism industry. This could be compared to the presence of, in my and my informants’ approximation, about 200 to 500 Western expats (the number varies throughout the year). Despite the small number of Korean expats, they, together with the increasing volume of Korean tourists, still had a significant impact on local tourism.

Western tourists continue to be the norm in Sabang, outnumbering South Koreans. In off-peak months, especially during typhoon season, fewer than a hundred Western tourists are expected. But in peak seasons—around Christmas and the Chinese New Year—Western tourists reach up to a thousand. Similarly, I was sometimes unable to spot tourists I deemed to be Korean. At other times, several groups of Korean tourists walked around in Sabang, with each one consisting of a handful to some 50 individuals. As in any destination, the number of visitors in Sabang fluctuates throughout the year regardless of place of origin.<sup>5</sup>

### **Notes on Methodology**

I conducted ethnographic field work in Sabang for a total of 18 months between 2003 and 2015, a substantial as well as critical period in the local progress of Korean tourism. The pace of growth of Korean tourism was as much a surprise to me as to the people living in Sabang. In my ethnographic fieldwork, I participated and observed particular events such as barangay fiestas and Christmas celebrations, as well as followed people as they went on with their everyday lives. I also frequented popular meeting sites for tourists and expats, such as pubs and go-go bars. When doing participant observations, I interacted with local Filipinos, Western expats, and international tourists, with people of all strata of the barangay. I also carried out innumerable spontaneous unstructured interviews. In addition, I conducted 60 semi-structured, recorded interviews with local Filipinos and Western expats.<sup>6</sup> These methods all generated a vast amount of qualitative data.

Throughout my fieldwork, the topic of the “new” Koreans came up when I talked to the people in Sabang, in particular from the mid- to late 2000s. My informants were experiencing something they found tricky to deal with. Although my observations and interviews often led me to assume that Korean tourists were not all that welcome, I also learned that this was a simplistic assumption. People, whether Filipino or Westerner, expressed

skepticism, even fear, a sense of distance, and stereotypes about Koreans. But they also communicated curiosity and amusement, and they all saw the potential financial benefits from Korean tourism.

Following standard anthropological ethics and practice, all names in this article are pseudonyms. Information that may reveal the informants' identities have been altered or made vague to protect them. To the extent possible, informed consent has been sought. The people I interviewed and conducted participant observation with were informed of the purpose of my study and had the option to decline participation at any time.<sup>7</sup>

A limited few of my Filipino and Western informants got to know and interact with Korean tourists and expats more intimately than most. Richard (Q.I. 4), a Western European working in a local business, grew frustrated with the degrading way Filipinos and Westerners usually talked about the Koreans. He exclaimed, "People say so much about them, but they've never interacted with them!" Most people I met in Sabang had indeed quite negative perceptions of the Koreans, but, like me, they had actually spent little time with them. Richard was at first hesitant to talk to me about his experiences with working with Koreans, as he initially assumed that I was just interested in denigrating them. "I'm the only one who tries to understand them," he said. Aside from reporting brief interactions through work or commercial sex, few of the people I met in Sabang shared similar experiences of getting to know Korean tourists or expats.

### **Theorizing the Rise of Asian Tourism**

This inquiry on Korean tourism to Sabang is set within what can loosely be labeled as Tourism Anthropology. Recognizing the significance of the growth of tourism in East and Southeast Asia, anthropologists have illuminated various ways in which tourism has developed in the region, and the various local responses thereto. They have studied a wide range

of issues, such as site transformations for tourist consumption in the Philippines (Ness 2003), ecotourism in Okinawa (Murray 2017), heritage tourism in Cambodia (Winter 2007), or at times, the conflicting interrelations between tourism development and religion in Bali (Howe 2005). There is also a quite substantial body of anthropological work on sex tourism from Western countries in Southeast Asia, ranging from ethnographic monographs, various articles, and edited volumes (Cohen 1996; Dahles 2009; Ekoluoma 2017, 2019; Law 2000; Lindquist 2009; Ratliff 1999, 2003; Wiss 2005).

It should be noted that anthropological studies of international tourism in Asia have mostly dealt with Western tourism to Asia, rather than tourism from, and within, Asia. The phenomenon of inter-Asian tourism has not been entirely ignored, however. Some have discussed whether Asian tourism production, or what is constructed as desirable in tourism destinations, differs from that of Western ones (Forshee 1999; Graburn 2009; Thirumaran 2009). *Tourism in Southeast Asia: Challenges and New Directions* (Hitchcock, King and Parnwell 2009) and *Asia on Tour: Exploring the Rise of Asian Tourism* (Winter, Teo and Chang 2009), both consist of contributions from researchers in various fields of the social sciences, many of them hailing from anthropology, who use ethnographic methods to study Asian tourism within and from Asia. However, inter-Asian tourism needs to be further explored, as expressed in the introductory chapter of *Asia on Tour*,

students and scholars of tourism need to address the analytical imbalances that characterize tourism studies today by focusing on domestic and intraregional tourists in non-Western contexts. (Winter, Teo and Chang 2009, 2).

For instance, it has been suggested that Asian tourists would accord with Western-biased presuppositions of what constitutes a tourist, and how they should look like and behave. Teo and Leong (2006) show how Asian backpackers on Khao San Road, a legendary meeting spot for backpackers

in Bangkok, were perceived. They argue that the “West” remains the norm for tourists in Asia, and as a consequence, Asian tourists become restrictively identified as Asian, rather than as tourists.

I aim to address this gap in the literature, as well as the call for further exploration by focusing on the reception of Asian tourists in another Asian tourism site.

### **Koreans’ Tourism-Related Businesses**

The growth of Korean tourism in Sabang signaled new opportunities for tourism production and consumption. Some locals made lucrative deals on land leases; shop owners sold Korean products such as Korean instant noodles (*ramyeon*), cakes and sweets; dive shop owners hired Korean-speaking dive masters to cater to new clients. Richard, a key informant from Western Europe, had a lot of divers and student-divers from Korea. “This place today, it wouldn’t be half of it without the Koreans,” he emphasized. According to Richard, people generally benefited from Korean tourism, as it brought more tourists and thus income to Sabang.

While Korean tourism development was met with hopes of new business opportunities, it was also regarded with hesitation and suspicion. The Koreans and their new, different practices clash with how it “has always been,” i.e. how Filipinos and Westerners conduct business.

For locals, Korean expats tend to make large initial investments, secure rights to attractive properties, and construct large resorts. In Sabang, a large resort has about 30 to 60 rooms; mid-sized ones, about 10 to 30; and the smallest, a couple of rooms. While the larger resorts are not exclusively owned by Koreans, they did tend to make investments that were comparatively bigger and more capital intensive from the onset, a departure from previous practice. During interviews, Filipinos and Westerners said that they instead had started out with small businesses in tourism enterprises and gradually expanded them when resources allowed them to do so.

Furthermore, there were rumors in the village about the living expenses of the Koreans, about the maintenance costs and rent for the resort, dive shop, or restaurant they are in charge of, and about how much they allegedly practiced bribery to facilitate their businesses. In the Philippines, foreigners are prohibited from directly owning land, and are restricted from full ownership of physical structures and enterprises. One could marry a Filipina and put the business in her name, but foreigners in Sabang often opt to form a corporation when starting a business. In a corporation, at least 60 percent of the board members must be Filipinos (Javier 2006; Republic Act No. 7042).

Forming a corporation was a common practice before the arrival of Korean expats. For this, Westerners repeatedly told me that they utilized their local, social connections, which they had developed through their Filipina partners. Koreans, on the other hand, were widely assumed to pay a local Filipino to “sign the papers.” In doing so, he or she became an inactive board member of an enterprise despite noninvolvement. Having passive members in the board was also the general practice of Westerners’ corporations. But for Koreans, this new practice of paying someone to “sign the papers” contradicted the previous Filipino-Western practice of relying on one’s social network and obligations, rather than on outright monetary compensation. Receiving payment is a sensitive subject for Filipinos. The ones doing so are often judged as greedy for “easy money” since they have no further obligations than to put their names on paper.

Korean ways of investing and conducting businesses are interpreted by competitors as unfair, since Korean tourists tend to patronize Korean-owned establishments. Western tourists also stay at Korean-owned resorts and eat in Korean restaurants, but this does not seem to bother Filipinos and Westerners that much. I attribute this indifference to Westerners’ and Filipinos’ shared ideals of a free and open market where individuals can choose as they please. An individual choosing a Korean resort does not upset the norms of capitalism in Sabang, but choosing collectively does. The issue will be further explored when discussing how Koreans consume tourism in Sabang.

I was told on countless occasions various speculations on Koreans' supposed wealth. Many stories alleged that they were criminals who had come to Sabang to escape Korean authorities. Such stories came from people who had no personal connection with any Korean expats living in Sabang or from Filipino employees who had only minimal contact with their Korean bosses. Unsubstantiated and malicious gossip flourished in the social distance between the Korean expats and the majority of the community.

The people in Sabang often expressed a sense of threat from this unfamiliarity: that the Koreans were taking over Sabang's tourism industry. Marita (Q.I. 1), a Filipina, said, "Maybe time will come that they will prevail in this place. Who knows? We don't know their language; maybe they are planning something bad for us." Many Filipinos and Westerners used the term "Korean invasion." Since tourism is practically hailed to be the most important source of livelihood in the village, any change may be perceived as threatening, especially those changes emanating from unfamiliar tourism practices.

### **Korean Tourist Practices and Behavior**

Before Korean tourists came to Sabang in larger numbers, tourists, generally backpackers, divers and/or sex tourists traveled individually or in small groups. Traveling independently has remained the norm among Western tourists in the village. Korean tourists, on the other hand, tend to come in large groups on packaged tours, a familiar but uncommon concept in Sabang. This makes them noticeable and distinct: they arrive at the same time, often in a private boat, and large numbers stand outside resorts waiting to be checked in.

Like any other tourist, Koreans dive, snorkel, eat, drink, go on excursions, and engage in commercial sex. They have dinners involving large groups. Westerners also dine and party together, but their dinners are mostly arranged and attended by expats, and for a specific group of tourists traveling together.

Consuming and practicing tourism collectively has made the Koreans' "odd" behavior a source of amusement among Filipinos and Westerners. The Korean tourists in Sabang are called classic derogatory terms based on international stereotypes. They are likened to animals or insects: moving in "flocks," "swarms" or "herds" (Culler 1988, 153). Such terms are unflattering; Western tourists in Sabang mostly self-identify as independent travelers, and ridicule package tourism.

For Western tourists, Koreans act in an unattractive and ignorant manner, and behaving in ways unbecoming of a good tourist. Aside from traveling and consuming tourism in groups, Koreans in Sabang tend to stay for a short period of time—only for a weekend or for a few days. They represent the antithesis of the Western tourists' ideal of independent traveling (see Abram, Waldren and Macleod 1997; MacCannell 1976; Urry 1990).<sup>8</sup> Western tourists in Sabang generally value backpacking, solo travel, and experiences of cultural authenticity, including close, personal encounters with the "exotic" and the "erotic Other." Many of them told me how they preferred to stay in Sabang for longer periods of time—up to several months. As such, they claim to have insights into how Filipinos "really" are and how the Philippines "actually" functions (Ekoluoma 2017).<sup>9</sup>

Some Filipino and Western entrepreneurs are distressed by the tendency of Korean tourists to patronize Korean-owned, and Korean, establishments for lodging, food, excursions and diving. Flora (Q.I. 2.), a Filipino owner of a small business, reckons that although her enterprise is doing well, she has seen a decline in the number of Korean customers since Korean establishments opened in Sabang. "A lot of Koreans want to stay with their own people. Since I don't know how to speak Korean, they choose to stay with those who can. They want to stay with the same people. It's Korean to Korean only," she said. However, as Korean tourist arrivals were rather insignificant before the ongoing development started, this sentiment seemed to be directed to the future, a fear of perhaps not being able to tap potential income brought by new Korean tourists. Filipinos and Westerners are at a disadvantage to make any significant earnings

from Korean tourists because they lack the means to attract this particular group of tourists, such as necessary language skills, social networks with potential tourists, and knowledge of Korean tourists' preferences and tastes, among others.

The Koreans' deviation from the norm also applies to the local commercial sex scene. Many Western tourists complained that their Korean counterparts tend to go to bars (which usually open at around 7 p.m.) that offer commercial sex early in the evening. Westerners generally go to the pubs in the beginning of the evening, and proceed to the go-go bars to engage a sex worker at around 10 p.m. or later. But by this time, Western tourists grumbled, the Koreans had already taken "the best girls." Regarding their Korean customers, the sex workers I talked to said it was for financial security to engage a customer so early in the night. Tablets and cellphones with translation programs helped overcome language barriers.

### **Western Norms in Inter-Asian Tourism**

Research has indicated differences in Asian tourists' motivations and preferences from those of Westerners (Graburn 2009; Forshee 1999; Thirumaran 2009). From what I have observed, there are only few, and to me, rather insignificant differences between Korean and Western tourist activities in Sabang. Still, Koreans are identified as "new," "different," and "strange." But even the smallest of these differences are significant since tourism may be a "vehicle through which distinctions are made, making consumption a creator of social distance" (Stringfellow et al. 2013, 79). Furthermore, considering that "tourist" or "tourist behavior" does not have singular universal meaning and that tourism is learned, tourists' own sociocultural backgrounds significantly affect the way they perceive and practice tourism (Adler 1989; Ahmad 2014; Lee, Scott, and Packer 2014; Stringfellow et al. 2013).

Filipinos and Westerners often point out that Koreans only recently have been able to travel abroad, since restrictions for holidays outside South Korea was not lifted until 1989 (see also Kim 1999). When Filipinos and Westerners in Sabang reflect on why they deem Korean tourism practices as different, the former often identified by the latter as travelers who have yet to learn how to be “proper tourists” who are “inexperienced,” “uneducated,” and “lacking international experiences” (see also Chan 2009). The Koreans’ behavior deviates from Western-biased norms, and these perceived differences, even of Asian tourists in other Asian destinations, confirm Western-biased notions of tourist and tourism (Winter, Teo and Chang 2009).

Notions of what is desirable in tourism, and what is considered to be the “correct” way of being and behaving as a tourist varies throughout the world. This calls attention to how tourism is “a performed art” (Adler 1989). Other Asian tourists have been described as having travel motivations, preferences, lifestyles, and tastes (or a form of “tourism habitus”) as a result of their own unique histories, cultures, and societies (Ahmad 2014; Graburn 2009; Lee, Scott and Packer 2014; Stringfellow et al 2013; Thirumaran 2009; Yamashita 2009). The cultural origins of Korean tourism consumption lie outside the scope of this article. But what is pertinent is that people in Sabang are unfamiliar with Korean culture and history, which Westerners and Filipinos nevertheless use to explain the differences in behavior and preferences between Western and Korean tourists.

Mahal (Q.I. 3), a Filipina who worked at a large, Korean-owned business for a couple of years, contemplated how a hierarchical Western-Asian order might affect Koreans. She believed that the Koreans behaved differently because of issues of social status: “You know, the Koreans they’re always thinking that they are in a low place. They want to be up, they want to... Like some foreigners [Western], they are in a top level, and then the Koreans feel they are on a low level. That’s why they have an inferiority complex.” In Mahal’s experience, there is a hierarchy in status and power

between Westerners and Koreans in Sabang, explaining why Koreans behave differently from other people. Richard also interprets Korean behavior as stemming from insecurity. He said that though his Korean clients are very sociable and generous, they are also very shy in speaking in English. For Koreans, according to Richard, “It’s all about saving their face; they’re proud and very shy. Since few of them know English, they keep it to themselves: it’s simply just too embarrassing not being able to talk with others in English. If people understood that it’s due to shyness rather than rudeness, they would be less antagonized.”

In Sabang, another aspect that frames the Koreans as different is the downplaying of narrated cultural gap between Filipinos and Westerners. Instead of cultural differences (Ekoluoma 2017; Jocano 1997, 1999), similarities are emphasized. Postcolonial ties, affinities, and shared history between Filipinos and Westerners become prominent when examining local Korean tourism development.<sup>10</sup> The Koreans then are strange and unknown in the face of Western-Filipino mutual understanding and solidarity.

## Conclusion

Korean tourism in Sabang continues to represent an emerging market, with potentials of expanding both production and consumption. This development stirred up hopes of profiting from these “New Others,” but it has also been met by skepticism. Filipinos and Westerners remain much in control of the tourism sector, in terms of ownership and the mandate to dictate “proper” tourism practices: what is appropriate, valuable, or correct. They represent how tourists should behave, and perceive Korean tourists as deviants from the norm. It must be stressed, however, that the reception of the New Others pertains less to what Koreans do in Sabang than with how they do it.

In a postcolonial discourse of difference, Korean tourists become marginalized and the Western-Filipino norm maintains a dominant

position in Sabang (Teo and Leong 2006; Winter, Teo and Chang 2009). However, the case of Koreans, Filipinos, and Westerners in Sabang can perhaps also indicate that norms and ideals are dynamic and may change over time, especially if we consider the negotiation of the cultural differences between Filipinos and Westerners. Thus, while Western norms have become accepted and embedded in the foundations in Sabang's tourism, Korean expats and tourists challenge these standards. As such, Koreans may not always be identified as the different "New Others" if notions of what constitute "tourism production," "tourism consumption," and "tourist" are renegotiated to accommodate a wider range of tastes and practices.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author did not declare any conflict of interest.

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## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In international as well as Philippine documentation of incoming international tourists, there are no distinctions made between different purposes of stay in the country. A “tourist” may for example be a business traveler or someone who travels for leisure. Before the shift in Philippine inbound tourism, the international tourist arrival in the Philippines was dominated by travelers from the USA, Australia and European countries, together with other significant Philippine business partners, such as China and Japan (Cruz 2000; UNWTO 2019).
- <sup>2</sup> South Korean nationals will hereafter be referred to as “Korean.”
- <sup>3</sup> “Western” in this article refers to primarily Caucasians from the USA, Australia, New Zealand and to foremost Western European countries. This echoes my informants’ use of the term “Western.”
- <sup>4</sup> Specific data such as the number or type of tourism establishments, local tourist arrival, nationality of origin of the owners of the various enterprises in Sabang are not readily available. This is due to several factors. Many records, including digital ones, have been destroyed in floods or typhoons. Foreigners also often set up their businesses in the name of their Filipino spouses or other Filipino nationals for bureaucratic purposes, while they act and function as owners in the practical sense. I will return to this issue later on in the article.
- <sup>5</sup> Local tourism records do not take note of tourists’ nationalities. However, since Korean tourists and expats were fairly easily identified by language, physical appearance and behavior, it was not difficult for my Filipino or Western informants or me to make somewhat educated guesses which tourists could be identified as Korean.
- <sup>6</sup> For more information about variants of ethnographic and qualitative interviews, see Heyl (2001) and Spradley (1979).
- <sup>7</sup> As a white female staying in Sabang for an extended period of time made me recognizable, and my distinct impression was that the majority of the people I met during my field work were aware that I was there to study tourism.
- <sup>8</sup> These are romanticized ideals of tourist sites. In practice, most Western tourists demand comforts relating to both “commercialization” and “development,” such as wanting lodging with airconditioning, imported food, reliable electricity, a fast wifi, comfortable transportation, and so forth. However, most Western tourists stay in Sabang for a minimum of a week, often longer, which also makes it possible for them in their perspective to claim “authentic” experiences of life in Sabang in a manner they deem short-term visitors such as Koreans cannot.
- <sup>9</sup> Earlier, similar reactions among Westerners to new groups of tourists—for instance, the Japanese, who are accused of commercializing pristine sites, in contrast with Westerners who seek authenticity and leisure—have been reported in Boracay, Philippines (Smith 2001) as well as in Bali, Indonesia (Yamashita 2009).
- <sup>10</sup> There is a shared history between Filipinos and Westerners in the form of colonialism. The Philippines was first colonized by Spain (1565–1898) and then the U.S. (1898–1946). The period resulted in, among a myriad of consequences, notions of sociocultural connections

and affinities between Filipinos and Westerners. Since the 1980s, one can identify a more recently shared history in Sabang: that of developing the village into an international tourist destination. In the latter, a form of Filipino-Western agreement has evolved, where both explicit and implicit modes of behavior, business practices, norms, and patterns of interactions have become more or less agreed upon. These commonalities are not a result of a seamless blending of Filipinos and Westerners. On the contrary, there have been—and continue to be—rifts and conflicts between active parties in Sabang. Many of the past and present conflicts revolved around various postcolonial conceptualizations of cultural, religious, educational, racial, gendered and moral differences between Filipinos and Westerners (Ekoluoma 2017; Wiss 2005).

### Quoted Informants

- Q.I. 1. Semi-structured interview with “Marita”, by Elina Ekoluoma, Sabang, 16 June 2006.  
 Q.I. 2. Semi-structured interview with “Flora” by Elina Ekoluoma, Sabang, 26 June 2006.  
 Q.I. 3. Semi-structured interview with “Mahal” by Elina Ekoluoma, Sabang, 22 August 2006.  
 Q.I. 4. Unstructured interview with “Richard” by Elina Ekoluoma, Sabang 15, March 2011.

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