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## CAMBODIA'S NEW RULES FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL: WHAT HAS CHANGED AND HOW DOES IT REALLY WORK?

In response to several COVID incidents linked to international travel and foreign diplomats, the Cambodian Ministry of Health is sharpening the measures applicable to most international travellers arriving in the country. Under the new regulation, found in Announcement 226 of the Ministry of Health ("the New Regulation"), a 14 day quarantine at a Government facility or a hotel will become the rule, not the exception. The New Regulation enters into force today, on 18 November 2020.

### How Does Travelling to Cambodia Work in Reality?

Cambodia is one of the few countries where one can still travel into by airplane. There are flights landing several times per day. The connection with Incheon airport is quite reliable, and at least when this author has taken the flight, they are entirely full. And from Incheon, one can fly to most large international destinations.

A few of the conditions to be allowed to board a flight to Cambodia, which still stand, are quite challenging:

- If you are a foreigner, you must get a **visa** from a Cambodian embassy

### Highlights of this note

- ▶ How Does Travelling to Cambodia Work in Reality?
- ▶ What Happens When Arriving at the Cambodian Airport?
- ▶ Where and How Long is the Quarantine?
- ▶ What Will be the Impact of the New Regulation

(unless you already have one): e-visa's and visa on arrival is no longer possible. You will actually need to get through to an Embassy overseas. This is in many cases very difficult. Some embassies are not open, or do not respond, or are reluctant to help.

- You must get **tested within 72 hours** to departure. This used to be a very difficult back in the summer. Nowadays, at least in Europe, China, Korea, it is often

possible to get a commercial PCR test before you fly. The 72 hour requirement imposes some puzzling because many PCR tests actually take 72 hours to process, which puts you right on the verge of having a test that is expired for Cambodian purposes. This author did 2 different tests just to be sure one would be on time. There are a lot of rumours about having test result letters that are properly stamped by the clinic or lab, apparently some passengers have been refused on board at certain airports around the world. Nobody asked me about stamps, though.

Cambodian citizens need **not get tested** before they fly. They have the right to board a plane and go back home to Cambodia even if they are positive. That's also the rule in most European countries for their returning nationals, but in Cambodia it means risking a quarantine for everyone else on the plane -on which more below-. Of course, everyone, including Cambodian nationals, are tested upon arrival at the airport, quarantined and tested again after 13 days.

- Other conditions **insurance and guarantee**, and these are actually easily manageable. Foreigners need to have medical insurance and you need to have US\$2,000 cash or credit to put up a guarantee once you

arrive (to cover medical and accommodation expenses) (on that, see more below).

### **What Happens When Arriving at the Cambodian Airport?**

First of all, Cambodian nationals and foreigners are separated. Then, for the foreigners, there is a first paperwork check looking at your test, your insurance, and those who qualify are identified as "VIP" for the "fast lane". This means that your company or organization has pre-registered you on a designated website, and either you were "sponsored" or "invited" as "a investor/business person, company staff, experts, skilled worker and family members". In such case, your company got a QR code and you show this code to get access to the "fast lane", which is just a separate lane a few metre next to the normal lane to get your mouth and nose swabbed. The first check is done twice by two separate staff, who sign their names when they confirm they have both checked the papers. In my experience they work very hard and efficient, but there can still be a big line forming.

After this first check, you pay the US\$2,000 (not if you're sponsored), and there is another paper check.

Then, you get your passport stamped and your paperwork scanned, but your passport is not returned. The MOH staff keeps it, it goes with your test to the lab.

In my limited experience, the taking

of swabs at the "fast lane" is not at any faster than the "normal lane", and whether or not there are big lines of waiting mostly depends on how many flights arrived at the same time. The last time I did this the whole process was quite efficient and there was hardly any waiting.

In this whole process, staff at the airport is very efficient, friendly and polite.

Checks and tests complete, you wait for busses to take you to the quarantine hotels.

### **Where and How Long is the Quarantine?**

This is where the New Regulation made some important changes. In the past months, arriving Cambodians and foreigners would be brought to either (i) a free but rather rudimentary quarantine facility or (ii) a hotel that has accepted MOH standards of quarantine and kept there only 2 days, that is until the result of the swabs taken in the airport upon arrival (the "First Test") come through negative. The rule has been that only when the entire airplane came back negative, you would be released to continue the rest of a 2 week quarantine at home or another, normal hotel. In practice, it has happened only a few times that 2 days in the quarantine hotel became 14 days.

That 2 day waiting period is now no longer relevant for most travellers. Cambodians and all foreigners except foreigners sponsored by





*Phnom Penh airport during COVID*

a company or an organization as mentioned above will now always receive a 14 days stay quarantine at the quarantine facility or hotel.

The way to become sponsored has also been tightened. The category of foreigners not sponsored but invited by a company or an organization (which means the traveller must pay by himself for medical and accommodation) has been abolished. Furthermore, sponsored individuals must apply with a schedule of places and persons the individual plans to be and meet. This is also a novel feature of the New Regulation. Supposedly it will help MOH to find the individual easier once released after 2 days, and to find people he was in contact with.

In my case, the hotel quarantine

lasted each time 2 days. The choice of hotels only became possible from September onwards, and by now there are half a dozen hotels accepted by MOH, many of which are very comfortable. You cannot leave your hotel room, no pool or gym, but food deliveries are usually possible with cleaning precautions.

After the hotel quarantine and a negative result for you and the rest of the airplane you came in on, you complete the quarantine at your home or hotel of your choosing. I always take it seriously, but there does not seem to be much control. On the 13th day of that home quarantine, you present yourself for another test. If that is also negative, your quarantine is over.

## **What Will be the Impact of the New Regulation**

To recap, the most meaningful changes introduced by the New Regulation are in my view:

1. The default 2 weeks period facility/hotel quarantine for everyone, even if you and the airplane tested negative, except sponsored arrivals;
2. The schedule of places and meetings that the sponsored arrivals must submit and maintain;
3. Cancelling the category of "invited" persons.

In the short term, immediately after the 18th November when the New Regulation entered into force, there will be a sharp dip in international travellers arriving in Cambodia. Returning Cambodians and incoming foreigners may delay their trip once they know they must spend 2 weeks in quarantine, no matter what. But within a week or so, I think passenger numbers will be up again. Most foreigners will find a way to get sponsored by a company or an organization, because their reasons for coming to Cambodia were already compelling in the first place. And many returning Cambodians simply have no choice but come back if they lose their job overseas, regardless of the quarantine.

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