

## Thailand Tourism: What Needs to be Done?

With Suvarnabhumi not even yet back to full steam and thousands of travellers still stranded in Thailand, it may be a little early to start looking at what Thailand needs to do to kick start the tourism industry it's economy so dearly needs. But with many hotels reporting less than 10% occupancy rates, and more gloom projected, now may be as good a time as any.

Billions of dollars have been pumped into making Thailand a world class destination, with improved infrastructure, hotels, spas and resorts that rank among the best in the world. But this year, little by little, serious cracks have been appearing in all the efforts made by TAT and the industry within Thailand as a whole.

At first there were protests, just a few here and there, scattered in areas that were easily avoidable by tourists. Then a few small bombs, a state of emergency declared in Bangkok. And then, the first very serious blow to tourism of the year came when the airports of Hat Yai, Krabi and Phuket were all closed by anti-government protestors, leaving thousands of innocent tourists stranded.

These issues, combined with an ever-worsening global economy meant that the high season in Thailand, which traditionally starts in November and lasts until around May, was already much quieter than in previous years. The streets of Bangkok, Hua Hin, and other areas of Thailand were not as bustling with tourists eager to spend, as they normally are at this time of the year.

Then the unexpected happened. PAD, the anti-government protestors, took siege of one of Thailand's main economic life lines and closed Suvarnabhumi International Airport and Don Muang Airport, both in Bangkok. Holding the airports siege for 8 days made the closure of the smaller airports in the south now seem like a small push in the chest compared to the massive knock out blows that were to follow.

The tourism industry in Thailand is nothing but resilient, it overcame the 1997 financial crises, the tsunami, SARS, 9/11 and other problems, but today it is fighting a much more fearsome opponent - chaos and uncertainty.

So how will it overcome the damage caused by the anti-government protestors? Is Thailand safe to visit?

At first, Thailand will need to look domestically for its tourism revenue, through very special deals for Thai residents and also the domestic MICE market. The latter especially, may now be reluctant to send 100 or 200 people on a trip overseas when there is uncertainty on how, or when, they might come back.

But International tourism is not dead. The government, TAT, and private sector need to combine, to give travellers that do come back to Thailand some form of assurances of what will happen if ever the protestors returned to close the airports. Which is exactly what the protestors have already threatened to do. Insurance companies are unlikely to foot the bill, but if a recognised plan by each sector within the industry can be put in place, that will at least counter some of the concerns that travellers may have. Solid guarantees need to be given.

This is also a golden opportunity for bodies such as PATA to stand up and be counted. To organise roundtables, seminars with other organisations such as SKAL, TICA, TAT, the media, AoT etc that all within the industry can attend without any charge to brainstorm and try to come up with solid plans to move forward.

So is Thailand safe? Ask this question three weeks ago and an immediate answer would have been yes, Thailand is safe. However, nobody could have predicted what the PAD protestors would consequently do, nobody could foresee how much damage was about to be caused by their actions to the economy, and Thailand's image. And nobody can predict what will happen tomorrow, one week from now or further down the road. This is the uncertainty and chaos.

Thailand is an amazing country, with one of the richest and most beautiful cultures in the world. It has a cuisine which is celebrated and enjoyed daily the world over. There are pristine beaches, incredible bargains, excellent deals, there is

something for everyone in every price range. So to answer the question - is Thailand safe? "Yes, but", and it is not the tourism industry that can remove the "but", that can only be done by the Thai people themselves and their political system.

Tourism, and the ability to do trade through travel, is of such a great importance to the Thai economy and people of Thailand as a whole, it should, and must, be welcomed by all, no matter what politically allegiances one may have.