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Types of Tourism in Thailand

Abstract

Tourism is one of the largest industries in Thailand. The World Travel and Tourism Council (2014) calculated that tourism generated THB 2,401.1 bn in 2013 (20.2% of GDP) and is expected to grow by 0.1% to THB2,404.4bn (19.6% of GDP) in 2014. By 2024, Travel & Tourism is forecast to support 8,739,000 jobs (20.5% of total employment), an increase of 4.4% pa over the period. This gives Thailand rank eight among the countries with the highest growth rate for overall employment in both direct and overall contribution. Against this backdrop, this commentary discusses the different types of tourism emerging in Thailand.

Key Words: Thailand, Tourism, Adventure Tourism, Eco-tourism, Medical Tourism, Cultural tourism, Wellness tourism, Leisure Tourism, Business Tourism, Cruise Tourism, Sports Tourism, Educational Tourism

Introduction

The World Tourism Organization defines tourism as “the activities of persons travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for leisure, business and other purposes” (UNWTO, 1995). The people involved in such activities are known as tourists. Such movement of tourists can be within the country, which is known as domestic tourism, and outside the country, which is known as international tourism.

Thailand has been seen as a sun, sand, sea and sex destination for decades. To overcome this biased image and to position Thailand as a quality world class destination the ministry of tourism and sports authority of Thailand has taken several initiatives through their past two tourism development plans, especially “The National Tourism Development Plan 2012-2016”. Improvement of tourism image and increasing tourists’ confidence level has

been one of the major strategic directions in the plan (UNWTO, n.d). The new offerings have the potential to develop a more diverse tourism portfolio, which will hopefully translate into a more diverse image.

This article is based on secondary sources of information composed from the official website of the Tourism Authority of Thailand and it tries to throw light on the newly emerging types of tourism in Thailand.

Adventure tourism

As a type of tourism in Thailand with comparatively long adventure elephant riding history many new dimensions of adventure tourism have recently emerged in Thailand. Various kinds of adventure on water, land, and air can be enjoyed in Thailand. This involves exploration of exotic locales and remote areas and engaging in various adventurous activities. According to the Tourism Authority of Thailand's official website (Tourism Thailand, n.d) the major adventure tourism activities in Thailand are:

Caving

Pang Mapha District's geologic labyrinths, collapsed, vertical ancient caves and tremendous caverns are the most suitable spots for caving activity in Thailand.

Trekking

For trekking in Thailand, tourists prefer to go to places like Doi Chiangdao (or Doi Luang), the third tallest mountain in Thailand and Doi Inthanon, the country's tallest mountain of Northern Thailand, Umphang, Khao Yai National Park and Kanchanapuri of Central Thailand (Trekking in Thailand, 2011).

Elephant Trekking

Ever since the ban of logging in 1989 elephants were brought to camps to give visitors and tourist rides and to entertain through shows. From that time elephant trekking has become a popular attraction in Thailand. The Baan Ta Klang Elephant Village of Surin Province, Thai Elephant Conservation Center of Lampang, Thom's Pai Elephant Camp of Maehong Son, Elephant World of Kanchanapuri, Mae Sa Elephant Camp of Chiang Mai and Koh Chang of Trat Province are popular destinations for elephant trekking.

Waterfall Abseiling

Abseiling, a German term meaning "to rope down", is the controlled descent down a rock face using a rope. Waterfall abseiling is rock climbing in waterfalls. Though classified as extreme adventure, it is also getting popular among young adventure loving tourists visiting Thailand (Weddings on a high note, n.d). Doi Inthanon of Chiang Mai Province and Tan Rattana Waterfall in Khao Yai National Park of Nakhon Nayok province are the most popular destinations for this adventure activity (Tourism Thailand, n.d).

Whitewater rafting

The author's early research has found that whitewater rafting is one of the most popular adventure tourism activities in Thailand (Sharafuddin, 2015) and tourists flock to places such as Nakhon Nayok River near Khlong Tha Dan Dam of Khao Yai forest complex, Wa River in the Nan Province and Wang Thong in the Phitsanulok Province of Thailand.

Mountain Biking

Though bicycles have been used for more than a century for short distance commuting, mountain biking and cycling tours are a relatively new concept in eco-friendly tours in Thailand. Due to its sustainable nature, mountain biking has been promoted in Thailand starting from 1995 and is one of the most popular adventure activities, conducted alone or in

combination with waterfall abseiling and other adventure activities. Khao Yai National Park covering four provinces is one of the most popular destinations for mountain biking activity.

Snorkeling

With a vast coastal line stretching thousands of kilometers and wonderful marine life, snorkeling has become a very popular adventure activity in Thailand. Coastal lines and sea shores around Phuket, Khao Lak, Karbi, Samui and Lanta are the most suitable and popular destinations for snorkeling in Thailand.

Sea Kayaking

Numerous beautiful islands and their magnificent beaches, rich marine life, exotic birds, lizards and wildlife have positioned Southern Thailand as one of the major tourists attractions in South East Asia. Sea kayaking has become one of the major adventure activities in destinations such as Krabi, myriad of islands in Phang Nga Bay or Ang Thong Marine National Park.

Zip Lining

Zip-lining is an activity of propelling through a cable from top to bottom with the help of a pulley (Equitable Tourism, 2009). The concept of the Zip-line is adopted from the zip-wire mode of transportation, which has been in use for a long time in remote mountainous areas as an alternative to cross rivers and valleys. With the largest and highest canopy zip-line tour in the world opened and operated at Khao Kheow Open Safari in Chonburi, zip-lining is growing popular as an activity among the young and adventure loving tourists visiting the Chonburi and Chiang Mai Provinces of Thailand.

Skydiving

Though considered to be an extreme adventure activity due to its high risk rates, its reasonable cost and easily predictable weather has made Thailand a favorite destination for skydiving. The most popular destination to skydive in Thailand is Pattaya.

Medical tourism

The Kasikorn Research Center in association with the Ministry of Public Health, Thailand in 2012 found that 2.5 million international patients have flown from various parts of the World to Thailand for medical treatment (PR Web, 2015). With 37 prestigious Joint Commission International (JCI), United States accredited hospitals offering excellent medical services; the medical tourism industry is expected to make 100 billion baht by 2015 (Medical Tourism Association, n.d). Affordable treatment charges, excellent infrastructure and services, World's best post-medical experiences like spas, retreats and massage centers give Thailand a cutting edge against its competitors in this market.

Eco tourism

Thailand has rich natural resources, including more than 1,000 different mammal species, as well as countless marine animals and birds. There are 127 national parks, including over 22 marine parks. These natural forests cover almost 25% of Thailand.

Ecotourism can be defined as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people." (The International Ecotourism Society, n.d). Eco-activities in Thailand include Trekking, river rafting, horse riding, mountain biking, nature photography, bird watching, night safari in national parks and spotting wild animals such as elephants and gibbons in day time. Kayaking and snorkeling are the most popular ecotourism activities in marine national parks. Khao Sok and Sam Roi Yot National Park are popular destinations for bird watching tours.

Cultural tourism

Thai culture features a number of performing arts including drama, Thai dance, and sport. Variety shows that feature a number of different theatrical arts are common in Bangkok, Phuket, Chiang Mai, and Pattaya. The “Siam Niramit” show is the most popular Thai cultural show among tourists visiting Thailand. The show has received the TripAdvisor Award of Excellence in 2012, 2013 & 2014 continuously. Bagging the Thailand Tourism award for 2010 & 2013, and the Prime Minister’s Creative Award 2011, the Siam Niramit show attracts more and more tourists visiting Thailand each year. Theatrical performances of ancient Muay Thai boxing matches, Thai tribal dances, and puppet shows are also popular cultural attractions of Thailand.

Wellness tourism

Thailand is very popular for its wellness tourism. Thai culture with strong influence of Indian culture has developed unique massage and wellness techniques. The massage and wellness techniques are wide in variety / options ranging from one hundred baht to a few thousand bahts. It is popular all around the country especially in the streets of Bangkok, Chiang Mai and in the strands of all the beaches. The most popular destinations for wellness tourism are Hua Hin, Koh Phangan, Samui, Phuket and Pattaya. These destinations offer attractive services with all inclusive spas, oil massage with natural herbs, lemon grass, etc.

MICE

The Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau was established by Royal Decree in 2002 to position Thailand as Asia’s premium business tourism hub. Since then Thailand Convention and Exhibition Bureau has worked well to establish itself as a leader in this sector.

Cruise Tourism

Sea cruise tourism is not so popular in Thailand. The only destination is Phuket covered by Royal Caribbean Cruise line. The Thai Government has signed an MOU with Singapore in the month of June 2015 to promote sea cruise tourism (Sea Trade News, 2015). In contrast, river cruise tourism on the Chao Phraya river is already a very popular activity in Bangkok.

Sports Tourism

Sports tourism refers to “travel which involves either observing or participating in a sporting event” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000). Thailand has positioned itself as one of the predominant destinations for sport tourism, especially in the sub segment of golf tourism. Though Thailand denoted 1993 as the ‘Visit Thai Golf’ year and with a move to implement the Emerald Triangle Development Project to enable golfers to play a round of golf over three countries (Thailand, Laos and Cambodia) without the inconvenience of immigration formalities (New Frontier, 2007) it has as really stepped in to the sport tourism niche market arena after the formation of the “Ministry of Tourism and Sports of the Kingdom of Thailand” in 2002. The ministry in-charge of promoting tourism, managing and organizing all important national and international sports events within the kingdom has taken various steps through strategic planning and developing policies for attracting private sector investment in this niche market. Thanyapura Phuket is a groundbreaking premium sports resort built exclusively with world class sporting facilities for catering to the niche sports tourism market.

Educational Tourism

Traveling in search of knowledge is a key human phenomenon. Students undertake study trips and industrial visits as a common practice in schools and higher educational institutions in Thailand. Also many foreigners come to Thailand to learn, engaging in activities ranging from short term cookery, Thai carving courses offered by private institutions to high end professional courses offered at various national and international universities all around the country.

Conclusion

The types of tourism in Thailand have grown and this has boosted the Thai economy in recent years. However further quantitative research shall be conducted to get more precise statistical results on the emergence of different types of tourism in Thailand. With the neighboring countries like Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam opening their untouched natural resources to the tourism market, Thailand has to think and plan strategically to introduce more new types of tourism to retain its current market and to be a leader in the Southeast Asian region. Continuous research and promotional efforts shall be undertaken by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, so that the tourism industry can contribute more significantly to the nation's GDP for sustainable economic development.

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