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## **Tourism Development in Thailand**

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## An Overview

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‘Tourism has become the world’s largest industry and an important social factor in our world. It has become an unofficial civil right and normalization in Western society to escape and “get away” from a monotonous life.’ (Hitchcock et al. 1993:16) For Thailand, tourism has grown to be the leading source of foreign exchange and has been booming for years now. Thailand is one of the most popular destinations in Asia for international and domestic visitors, because of its richness of natural beauty, temples, well-known hospitality, famous and unique cuisine, and Thai ancient kingdoms. With all its resources, Thailand captures the attention of a wide range of visitors. The attractions of Thailand have often been featured in film and media, making Thailand even more attractive. For the country itself, tourism has become an important economic factor. The most popular destinations are the coasts as well as Bangkok and the hills in the northwest.

The main goal of this essay is to analyse tourism development in Thailand over the last few decades. I will highlight the weaknesses and strengths of different tourism sectors, the evolution of tourism in Thailand and the image of the country held by international visitors. Central issues, such as sex-tourism, commodification and trivialization of the culture and the need for sustainable tourism development will be addressed. Unfortunately there is not much recent literature in English language available. Most empirical studies of these issues date back to the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However there is some online data and some recent articles by European scholars.

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## **Tourism Development since the 1970s**

Starting in the 1970s, tourism began to increase due to U.S. American G.I.s visiting Thailand. Tourism in Thailand is comprised of three major elements: Hill tribe village tours and jungle trekking in the north, island and beach tourism in the south and sex tourism primarily in Bangkok. The degree of importance of each sector has changed over the years and additional attractions have been developed. The main activity is located on a north-south axis including the three cities Chiang Mai, Bangkok and Phuket. Thailand in general has been marketed as an exotic and erotic destination, creating an image for westerners as an 'enchanted Oriental kingdom, throughout much of modern history' (Cohen 2001: 156).

With the first Tourism Act in 1979, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) was set up. It was primarily responsible for the promotion of tourism in Thailand. The primary work of the TAT was the promotion of Thailand's national image in order to attract tourists. Furthermore, education and development of human resources in tourism sectors was encouraged. (cf. Tantisirirak 2007: 56)

As a result, a shift occurred, with tourism promotion moving away from the above mentioned destinations and activities, toward promoting other cultural attractions, such as archaeological sites, historical parks, and festivals. The tourism sector grew along with social change and rapid economic progress in Thailand, including the financial, industrial, communication and service sectors. By the mid-1990s, tourism development clearly affected mainstream Thai culture, with both creative and debasing impacts. Yet to Cohen (2001) these impacts were not yet so fundamental that one could talk of a phenomenon of 'touristification', meaning the addition of superficial frills at the expense of authenticity, to cater to tourists' expectations. However, the impact of tourism on the way of life of small ethnic groups can be seriously detrimental and some tribal villages have suffered extreme de-culturation. The commodification of art, culture and sex diverges from the contributions of tourism 'to the preservation of crafts and customs which would otherwise have disappeared, as well as the emergence of new artistic styles' and cultural performances. (cf. Cohen 2001; King 2008: 63-64) Since the turn of the millennium, the Tourism Authority of Thailand has put much effort into the promotion of wellness resorts, health spas and traditional Thai massage centres as tourist attractions, trying to replace the image of sex tourism and prostitution. Over 9 million tourists travelled to

Thailand in the year 2000. (Pandey 2001) The number of arrivals is rising constantly, making tourism one of Thailand's primary foreign income sources.

### **The crisis of the last years**

During the last few years, occurrences such as the outbreak of SARS and Bird Flu and the Tsunami of 2004 impacted tourism negatively, but without causing its complete collapse. The SARS crisis in 2003 caused a loss of income of eleven million dollars in Southeast- and Northeast Asia. (Semone 2005: 5-6) Nevertheless, Thailand managed to compensate for the deficit by an increase of 16.5 percent and an augmentation of revenue of 25 percent to 384 billion Baht in the following year. (Herdin 2006: 195) After the devastating Tsunami in December 2004, the southwest, including the cities Krabi, Phuket, Phang Nga, Satun, Ranong and Trang, saw a massive loss of tourists in 2005. However, the total of arrivals to all of Thailand showed only a marginal decrease of 1.15 percent. The market remained almost constant, but a shift in the local touristic flow was seen, bringing an increase of attendance to world cultural heritage sites, such as Ayutthaya and Sukothai. Arrivals climbed again the following year, increasing more than 20 percent in the year 2006, in spite of the military putsch against Prime Minister Thaksin. Today, Thailand's tourism industry is still booming. During the high season, hotels and airlines are fully booked. One could even argue that Thailand is immune against any catastrophe. (cf. TAT 2008; Herdin 2008: 263) The number of international and domestic travellers has increased again from 2005 to 2008 in terms of both cash value and number of visits. International arrivals rose from 11.52 million in 2005, to 13.82 million in 2006 and 14.46 million in 2007. The number of visitors to Thailand in the year 2007 totalled 83.23 million. (TAT 2008).

The potency of Thailand's recovery from such crises, as mentioned before, can not only be ascribed to the professional marketing of the country as an exotic paradise, but also to the Thai culture, which is highly attractive to tourists. The 'Land of Smiles' with its connotations of a hedonistic lifestyle, as well as the constant pursuit of harmony, is mirrored in the service sector, which is highly honoured by foreigners and tourists. (Herdin 2008: 264) The positioning of Thailand as an exotic destination attracts not only group tourism, but also individual tourists and special interest travellers, such as cultural, wellness, adventure, health and eco-tourists. These niches are especially promoted by the TAT. Another promising opportunity for

bringing high-quality tourism into the country is the promotion of Thailand's World Heritage Sites. (Herdin 2008: 264) A great potential can be found in the living culture of Thailand, and its artefacts all over the country. These include the impressive ruins, which are amongst the most important in Southeast Asia, prehistoric archaeological excavations and various museums. Furthermore, the uncomplicated coexistence between foreigners and locals as well as unhindered access to all religious sites allows visitors diverse and enjoyable experiences. Compared to all-inclusive beach tourism, heritage-tourism can be seen as a niche. However, a lack of coherent coordination amongst heritage-tourism sites makes it difficult to package special interest tours. The sites are not logically affiliated, with the only connection being their designations as world heritage sites. This fact makes it hard to define clear target groups for this special market. (Herdin 2008: 267-268)

Over the years, Thailand's tourism has won various international awards, such as the Swedish and Norwegian 'Grand Travel Award' for 'World's Best Tourist Country' in 2008. In the previous year it was awarded the Destination 'Best City Destination for Leisure' Award. The country was honoured for its affordability, safety, vibrant culture and good food. (TAT 2009)

## **Travel & Tourism Competitiveness Report 2009**

The World Economic Forum (2009) bases its annual country rankings in travel and tourism on three major categories within an overall competitiveness index: regulatory framework, environment and infrastructure, and human, cultural, and natural resources. In the most recent report in 2009, Thailand is listed right after Malaysia in the region in 8<sup>th</sup> place and is ranked 39<sup>th</sup> in the world. Compared to 2008, Thailand has improved its position by three places. It is gifted with rich natural resources and a strong affinity for Travel & Tourism. In this sector it ranks 24<sup>th</sup>. The attitude of the population towards tourists is ranked 13<sup>th</sup>. This is strengthened by the sector's strong prioritisation by the government. Like Malaysia, Thailand has an outstanding destination-marketing, with many successful campaigns and good price competitiveness.

On the other hand, there still remain some weaknesses. In spite of the prioritisation of the tourism sector by the government, there are aspects of the regulatory background which are not particularly conducive to developing the sector. Some of these aspects are the rigorous

foreign ownership restrictions, visa restrictions for many visitors, and the long time required for starting a business in Thailand. Furthermore, environmental sustainability is ranked low at 99<sup>th</sup>. This is especially problematic considering the importance of natural resources to the country's tourism.

## **Interaction between Southeast Asian countries**

The tourism policies of all South-East Asian countries are not reciprocally designed, but individually planned focusing on how to draw more visitors into each country. The model of tourism cooperation in South-East Asia is illustrated by ASEAN cooperation in tourism. However, there are some weaknesses which originate from the management in the area of cooperation and implementation. International tourism cannot be effectively promoted by a single nation:

*Only international tourism cooperation can deal with transboundary issues from a region wide perspective. For better policy implications each government is expected to cooperate more to help with the expansion of regional tourism. With the geographical advantages which connect many neighbouring countries in the region, Thailand has the strength in the area to attract more tourists and channel them to the other tourist areas as well as act as a tourism hub. However, it is important for Thailand to deliver what it promises, to be responsible for the industry and to continue to innovate and add value of tourism industry in the region, so that people will continue to choose Thailand as the main gateway and tourist destination. (Prerksapop 2005: 2-3)*

## **Sex-tourism**

Because tourism developed through the Rest and Recreation (R&R) Program for American G.I.s in the 1970s, sex-tourism is a constant part of Thailand's tourism industry. Today, Thailand suffers from an image as a sex tourists' paradise. The number of visitors coming for sexual purposes, as well as the number of locals working in this sector are difficult to measure. However, revenues from the sector are believed to amount up to 27 billion dollars every year,

and recent sources indicate that up to one million women are working in sex tourism (McGeown 2007). In the 1990s the number of sex-tourists decreased significantly compared with the previous decade, while the total number of arrivals has increased. (cf. Gätz 1994) Some scholars even attribute the positive economic development of Thailand to sex-tourism and prostitution in the tourism industry. Thailand's 'economic miracle' has been built largely on the backs of women. It is built on a foundation of capitalist patriarchy: a development model which employs the exploitation of women for rapid economic growth. (Bell 1997: 55) The fact that sex as a main tourist attraction is easily accessible has been one of the primary reasons for the rapid growth of tourism in Thailand. (cf. Cohen 2003) The governments' Prostitution Prohibition Act made the sex-business illegal in order to create the outward impression of a clean image. However it only caused a shift of the business to massage salons or 'girly bars'. (Angerer 2002)

The centre of sex tourism has always been Pattaya, which was an important base of the R&R program in earlier days, but also Bangkok and its entertainment district Patpong. However, prostitution is not only limited to these areas, but spread all over the country in different versions.

### **From traveller centres to mass tourism**

In the 1960s and 70s another form of tourism emerged. Drifters and backpackers originally represented fun, personal freedom, authenticity, and spiritual enlightenment. Since this drifter style travel began, however, many locations that were once favoured by this segment of travellers have been gradually transformed to suit conventional tourism. This development was helped by the expansion of local infrastructure in order to maximise profit. The trend can be observed in many locations in Thailand in the last years. (Westerhausen 2002: 175)

Within a short period of time, Phuket turned from an untouched island into a tourist mecca. Aside from the numerous hotels and traditional markets, an extension of the now well-known nightlife took place, with beer bars and girly bars being opened. At the end of the 1990s, many tourists who valued Southern Thailand but wanted to escape from the expanding mass tourism, followed the traces of travellers and backpackers to Khao Lak. It still had the image of a beautiful paradise, where beaches had remained unaffected. However, along with the

increasing numbers of tourists came investors, and within a year most low budget bungalows had to give way to the first big resorts and hotel complexes. After the crisis in Asia in 1997 and 1998, tourism thrived due to low prices and exchange rates. The strategy was to promote the new economic crowd-puller Khao Lak internationally. This proved to be truly successful and tourism infrastructure expanded rapidly. It could not be called a quiet, untouched area anymore. (Herdin 2006)

However, other locations, such as Kho Phangan or Kho Tao in the southeast and Kho Phi Phi in the southwest, have remained attractive destinations among travellers seeking authentic experiences. The continued existence of these destinations shows that tourism apart from mass tourism can still be viable business. Characteristics of such locations are the unattractiveness for other touristic groups on the one hand and difficult access on the other hand, which limits the maximum number of visitors that can be accommodated. (Westerhausen 2002: 175)

Nowadays, this special tourism niche has developed to a largely institutionalised tourism alternative in Thailand and Asia. Westerhausen (2002) talks of a 'mix of diverse tourism roles fashioned into a distinct way of life'. In past decades, a distinct alternative tourist culture has developed among Western travellers. However, in my opinion, it has become just another form of mass tourism. This point can be illustrated by the famous Khaosan Road in Bangkok or the beaches of Kho Phi Phi Don. Wherever one goes, one will be surrounded by Westerners. Most Thai people inhabiting those places live there for professional reasons. The backpackers and other travellers outside the mainstream follow a sanitised and institutionalised version of the earlier way of travelling sought by the earlier drifters. A specialised infrastructure has been created that works aside the conventional counterpart, representing a separated tourism segment, while the times of original explorers are long gone. (Westerhausen 2002: 253)

## **Commodification and exploitation**

Another attraction for international travel is the chance to experience 'cultural tourism' and with it a different way of life. Unfortunately, the representations of cultural practices lose authenticity and are more and more staged for tourism purposes. The famous floating market in

Thonburi is a case in point. The commodification of tourism can also be labelled trivialisation. This refers to the adaptation of traditional practices to fit into tourism schedules. Furthermore, local art and craft products are mass-produced. (cf. SSABSA Support Materials 2005) The promotion of cultural heritage and tradition could deplete traditional resources. This shows in a drift away from cultural values, and their transformation into commercial 'products.' Culture is degraded to a product that is easily consumed without any kind of deeper examination or preoccupation. (Herdin 2004: 268)

The culture of the Paduang Tribe and the long neck women is promoted in Thailand's Mae Hong Son Province by tourist guides and operators. The glossy, brightly coloured pictures of the neck-ringed women capture the attention of the foreign visitor. On the other hand, if the culture would not have been preserved for tourism purposes the traditional practice of ring-necking had died out. So tourism does not only have negative influences on local cultures. Besides that, tourism generates income to support the families of the Paduang tribe, and the alteration of the women's bodies and posing for photographs for tourists is a far more desirable consequence of tourism than prostitution, for example. However, cultural identity is threatened when the traditional practice becomes an instrument for the pursuit of revenue. The lifestyle and culture is changed in accordance to the needs of the tourist market and the original meaning gets lost. In speeding up the process of neck ringing, the tradition is whittled away and the culture is trivialised. One could argue that the decision of wearing the neck rings and welcoming visitors is not forced upon hill-tribe people. Nevertheless, it 'turns women into objects – commodities to be gawked at and photographed for money – to be viewed and commented upon'. Furthermore, the well-being of entire families depends mostly on the revenue that many hill-tribe people earn from tourism. (SSABSA Support Materials 2005)

It is very important to take special care and protect not only the culture and traditions, but the country itself. Destinations pioneered by travellers are often subject to expropriation and exploitation by both national and international mass tourism operators. (Westerhausen 2002: 171) The history of the region of Khao Lak is an example here: for 200 years, tin mining was a major occupation among the locals. Since the 1960s the rapid growth of the economy accelerated the exploitation of natural resources with the government granting concessions, allowing foreign companies to conduct offshore mining. By the beginning of the 1980s, tin was

almost completely exhausted. What was left behind was infertile land. In the mid-eighties, prawn breeders came to the region, constructing aqua-cultural basins. Within a short period of time, the remaining parts of the natural coast protection were also destroyed. (Herdin 2006)

### **The need for sustainability**

The idea of sustainable development came about in order to make economic development, social justice and the protection of the country and the environment compatible with each other. The goal is to minimise environmental impacts and social deterioration. Therefore, tourism has to be managed and strategically planned to provide a variety of benefits that contribute to sustainable economic growth.

With the flow of tourists into Thailand, revenues have been increasing and will increase further. However, the environment has been damaged, and culture and traditions have been affected as well. The overexploitation of the forests, diminishing water resources, and consequences such as littering are examples of the disadvantageous impacts of tourism development in Thailand. As mentioned before, the ruin of cultural heritage, as well as growing crime and prostitution, are obvious social impacts. (Tantisirirak 2007)

To guarantee both the quantity and quality of tourism services side by side with sustainable development, the Thai government has realised that it is essential to improve the implementation of national policies by tourist operators and agencies. In the 4<sup>th</sup> National Economic and Social Development (NESD) plan from 1977 to 1981, a tourism development plan was first implemented. The goal was to solve major tourism problems. According to the plan, tourism standards and services would be upgraded and the responsibility of tourism-related organisations would be improved. Specific issues, as natural resources and environmental development were incorporated. The plan contained human resource management in tourism marketing and suitable competitive tourism-related infrastructure development. The following 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> NESD plans have continued promoting sustainable development, embracing environmental matters, social, and economic development. Several policies and strategic plans called for sustainable approaches at the Ministerial level and involved implementation at the local level. (Tantisirirak 2007: 55-56)

The Touring Business and Tour Guide Act from 1999 accentuates the responsibilities of tour guides and encourages good tourism conduct to boost the sector in the long run. The Federation of Tourism Industry of Thailand Act from 2001 addresses the coordination of government officials with private sectors to assure tourism quality control and standards. The uniqueness of traditional culture and tourist attractions is valued in line with environmental conservation. Therefore, the government has further established a Ministry responsible for the preservation, recuperation and control of natural resources and the environment. Land use, forests, water resources, wildlife, fisheries, and also energy and mineral extraction laws are implemented under the constitution. Tourism plans include pollution control, waste management, environmental impact assessment, natural resource tourism and cultural heritage laws. At present, the government is trying to enforce a variety of regulations and incentives to encourage relevant stakeholders to improve sustainable tourism development and to protect the environment against damages caused by tourism activities. (Tantisirirak 2007: 56)

## **Conclusion**

Thailand is still lacking in truly successful tourism management. Thailand is lucky to have a rather positive image amongst tourists, bringing rapidly growing numbers of international visitors into the country. The price that has been paid is the almost reckless destruction of natural resources and commodification of art, culture and sex, creating a gap between the image of Thailand and its reality. (Cohen 2001: 170) As peoples' choices of where to travel has much to do with the images they have, it is crucial for the Thai government to optimise this image. Thailand is known as an exotic country and still a safe place to visit. It has become increasingly popular through films like "The Beach" with Leonardo DiCaprio. It is subject of television programs, essays and travel tips. Almost everyone knows something about Thailand. It might be the delicious cuisine, beautiful silk, backpacking, magnificent temples, prostitution or natural paradises. (Van Esterik 2000: 3) Over the years the image of Thailand has clearly improved, but sex-tourism and trivialisation still remain issues. The need for sustainable development remains a focus of international debate.

Due to a lack of foresight and the pursuit of quick profits, preconceived notions of resort development cycles allowed different forms of tourism to compete side by side with each other. Unfortunately, little thought was given to long-term sustainability. The benefits of the tourism

sector could have been maximised, with advanced planning and the separation of visitors at different sites. (Westerhausen 2002: 180) It is the responsibility, not only of the Thai government but also of the tourism industry and operators as well as the tourists themselves, not to exploit the country and culture, but to achieve sustainable tourism management. (SSABSA Support Materials 2005) Tourists, as important parts of the industry, have to make sure that, by visiting a foreign country and seeking the experience of traditions and culture, they do not commodify it. Tourists do have a great influence over the future of Thai culture. It would of course be wrong not to visit hill tribes (as an example) anymore, because if tourists stay away, the hill tribes would lose part of their livelihood. But what can be done is to create an enriching experience by learning about the customs and history of the people they will be visiting, instead of solely enjoying their appearance and taking pictures. Tourists could try to learn at least some basic vocabulary of the language of the country they visit. But the most important thing in my opinion is to be sensitive to local customs, to observe the population, to learn from their traditions and customs, and to treat them with respect, instead of dealing with them like with products. In order to create such awareness, tourists have to be informed of the impacts of their activities so they can make wise travel decisions. The government, as well as the private and voluntary sectors, could do so through competent traveller's guidance. (see also Tantisirirak 2007)

Further research and studies related to sustainable development are needed to further develop strategic plans and tourism management. A better understanding of the characteristics of tourism could improve sustainable tourism approaches. Community-based research should be conducted in this case to pay more attention to the social and environmental impacts of tourism activities in Thailand. The focus should be placed on cultural and traditional tourism and the requirement of public participation. (Tantisirirak 2007)

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