

THAILAND TOURISM

Vendors worry Khao Lak hotels

The Phang Nga Tourism Association has expressed concern that eco-tourism in the area may be in jeopardy due to the increasing number of food stalls, beach masseurs and entertainment houses. Chittiporn Suthipibul, the association president, said entrepreneurs on Khao Lak would petition Phang Nga Governor Vichai Praisangob this week to immediately address the issue. They believe eco-tourism is an attractive selling point for the destination.

The recovery in Khao Lak following the tsunami in 2004 has prompted many small entrepreneurs to open food shops, massage parlours and pubs in the area. Mrs Chittiporn said these vendors would hurt the charm of the area, which is a famous destination for families and nature lovers. She said Khao Lak had lost its peaceful environment after tsunami due to the rapidly growing tourism industry. "We don't want Khao Lak to become like Patong beach (in Phuket)," she said. "We need the local authorities to strictly enforce the law against the invasion. If the problem is left unsettled, we are afraid the visitors would move to other destinations."

Khao Lak now has 70 hotels with 4,000 rooms, or about 70% fewer than before the tsunami. Most are premium hotels that cater mainly to visitors from Europe. Last year, Khao Lak attracted 1.8 million visitors, up from 1.1 million in 2006. The figure is expected to top 2.3 million this year. The industry generated about six billion baht in revenue to the area in 2007, with revenue expected to grow to 7-8 billion baht this year. Still, the occupancy rate during the six months of the high season (November to April) was only 40% in 2006 and 70% in 2007.

The rate in the low season (May-October) was only 10% in 2007, down from 20-25% before the tsunami. Doeke Bonga, general manager of the Ramada Resort, said several shops and restaurants started occupying the beach in 2007 for the first time. "As the beaches are crown jewels and therefore public property, none of the other locals occupied the beaches beyond the property lines," Mr Bonga said. "Khao Lak's reputation largely depends on its pristine beaches.

These shops, however, are showing their clear disregard for other local villagers of Khao Lak, as well as the hotels they parasite off," he said. "We as a hotel are not afraid of competition, but feel that it should be done in a fair way. The beach shops are illegally occupying public land, don't have any water treatment system, don't have proper sanitation/hygiene, don't pay taxes, found a way to get electricity and affect the livelihoods of well-meaning Thai shop and restaurant owners, as well as the neighbouring hotels."

Mr Bonga said this is now affecting the community, where citizens who pay rent and taxes in shophouses up the road are put in a less competitive position. It is also affecting the hotel's income, and thus the service charges that the staff share, he said. "The hotel owners have invested millions in rebuilding not only the hotel, but the destination, and are being 'thanked' for their efforts by being undercut by these illegal operators, affecting their restaurants and spa businesses," he said.

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TAT moves to bring in more tourists from Japan

In a move to reinvigorate a major tourism market, the Tourism Authority of Thailand has assembled new packages to attract Japanese professionals and retired people. The TAT recorded 1,291,568 Japanese arrivals last year short of the 1.35 million targeted. The figure was down from 1,293,313 in 2006, mainly because of political instability in Thailand. Anake Srishevachart, the president of the Thai-Japan Tourist Association, said Japanese tourists were sensitive about political stability.

With an expected improvement in the political environment following the formation of the government, Mr Anake said he expected more Japanese tourist arrivals this year. Sasi-apha Sukontarat, executive director of the TAT's product promotion department, said promotions would focus on Japanese female professionals, working and retired people. "Tourism trends for Asian women have changed, with the number of single Asian women and Japanese women travelling abroad increasing," she said.

Last year, 313,973 Japanese women visited Thailand, or 24.3% of all Japanese tourists. The number of Japanese female tourists, particularly professionals, was expected to grow 5-10% this year. The TAT projects Japanese tourist arrivals to top 1.4 million this year. Ms Sasi-apha said the TAT planned a workshop on Feb 14-15 in Bangkok to educate local hoteliers about emerging trends in the overseas travel market.

She said more Japanese visitors favoured travelling alone instead of through tour operators. They are also increasingly using the internet for tourism information, and are more concerned about health and the environment. He suggested the airlines offer more direct flights between target visitors' home cities and destinations

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