



Greener pastures for South East Asia

South East Asia's tourism industry has been battling one major setback after another in recent years. At last it seems the tide is turning with international arrival figures growing steadily across the region. JESSICA ZOITI reports.

FLOODS, TSUNAMIS, volcanic eruptions and severe political unrest – there's not much the South East Asian nations of Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam haven't had to deal with in recent years.

Finally, however, it seems the sun is shining on the region's tourism trade with double-digit growth recorded in the year to April 2011.

According to data released by the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), international arrivals grew by 15 per cent, despite outbound figures dropping from Japan, one of South East Asia's most important markets.

Also growing in strength are visitor numbers from Europe, the fast-growing China market and Asian travellers holidaying in the region.

"In 2011 Asia will receive international arrivals at close to double that of the world average growth rates," said PATA deputy CEO John Koldowski.

"It's Asians travelling to Asia – that's the key to all these numbers and the big shift we are seeing globally in the tourism market. It's all happening in Asia now."

According to the PATA report, Vietnam saw a 22 per cent increase in arrivals, Myanmar a 21 per cent increase, Singapore a 17 per cent increase and Cambodia an 11 per cent increase for the month of April.

One of the most encouraging increases is the growth in Thailand. Poor arrival numbers in April 2010 were severely affected by Bangkok's serious political unrest. A year later, however, and the country has seen international visitation rise by 35 per cent.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) is taking advantage of this change in climate and has just approved a strategic marketing plan with the ambitious aim of attracting 19.5 million international visitors in 2012 generating around \$23 billion – a nine per cent increase on 2011.

To achieve this goal, the TAT has identified eight specific marketing opportunities. These are: expanding the high-income market, expanding niche customer segments, encouraging repeat travellers, attracting new markets, helping potential partners with win-

win projects, enhancing the use of IT media applications, helping products and services to attract quality tourists, and increasing the capacity of industry stakeholders to deal with change and tap into new opportunities.

According to the TAT governor, Suraphon Svetasreni, there are many opportunities to increase visitor arrivals, despite global economic and political changes.

"We can see many positive factors, such as continuing economic growth in many countries, particularly in this region, the positive effect of people who do not cancel their travel plans but merely change their destination in the event of unpredictable natural phenomena, and the progressive liberalisation of economic growth and transportation in the ASEAN region," he said.

"In addition, Thailand continues to have a number of unique selling points in terms of a variety of tourist attractions, as a shopping paradise and for online marketing. These factors will help us to reach our targets."



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A trunkful of excitement

Two new packages by Anantara in Hua Hin and Bangkok give travellers an opportunity to have luxurious, unique and distinctly Thai experiences.

ANANTARA OPENED its first property in Thailand's seaside resort town of Hua Hin in 2001. Designed in the style of a traditional Thai village, it's a five-star luxury beachside resort and spa that offers authentic cooking courses, fruit carving demonstrations, a weekly floating market as well as an opportunity to learn the combat art of Muay Thai.

The same year, Anantara Resort Hua Hin launched the King's Cup Elephant Tournament – a sporting extravaganza that, according to the Tourism Authority of Thailand, is now the country's sixth largest annual tourist event.

Elephants are a key symbol of Thailand's history and all proceeds of the tournament are used to ensure their welfare and sustenance, and to develop mahout training and providing greater medical treatment to the animals. This year the event returns to Hua Hin from 3-11 September.

To get into the swing of the game, Anantara Hua Hin is offering a week-long 'Pachyderms & Polo' package. With prices starting from \$280 per night, twin share plus taxes, the package includes lunch and a spa treatment at the pitch, an opportunity to have your photo taken with the players and VIP premium access to all areas. For further information visit <http://huahin.anantara.com/Elephant-Polo-VIP-Experience>

ROLLIN' ON THE RIVER

While most people think of Thailand's sprawling capital Bangkok as a hectic array of tuk-tuks, vendors and crowded streets, it is also a city that relies on its intricate waterways, canals and river for life, giving it the label 'Venice of the East'.

Anantara has just launched Anantara Cruises, painstakingly rebuilding two 100-year-old teak rice barges, Anantara Song and

Anantara Dream, which are authentic Thai vessels with luxurious modern comforts.

Anantara Song caters for up to four couples and has four air-conditioned staterooms, a spacious upper deck, an expansive lounge and dining area with a full bar and a separate sun deck. The colonial grace of this 20-metre, ultra deluxe river boat - dubbed 'The Orient Express of the River' – is evident in every exquisite detail. A two-night, three-day 'Ayutthaya Adventure' aboard the Anantara Song starts at around \$2150 per cabin, twin share, and includes all meals and non-alcoholic beverages onboard, tour programs, and private roundtrip limousine transfers. It is available for private charter for around \$7200.

Guests can also privately charter Anantara Dream for an exclusive two-night, three-day 'Ayutthaya Thousand Golden Temples' tour or 'Ang Thong Mystic River' tour.

Catering for just two couples, it offers two air-conditioned staterooms with king beds and en-suites, and spacious indoor and outdoor living spaces. Private charters on Anantara Dream cost around \$6250 for two nights' accommodation, private limousine transfers, welcome champagne, a private cooking class, all meals and non alcoholic beverages onboard, and a full ground tour program. Further information www.bangkok-cruises.anantara.com



Images: Elephant polo; Anantara Cruises Dream Lounge



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CBT sets sights on SE Asia

China Bestours may know the Chinese mainland like the back of its hand, but its tour division, CBT Holidays, is creating its own reputation as a South East Asian expert.

CURRENTLY THE COMPANY offers around 20 group tours and 'mini-pack' individual tours through Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam - with Burma to be added in January 2012.

CBT Holidays managing director Jimmy Liu recently returned from the region where he was exploring more tour options for the growing Australian market.

"Australians seem to really like the (South East Asia) region. It's very good value for money and the local people are very welcoming, especially in Hoi An," he said.

"In my experience, people go back again and again, and when I was there recently I saw for myself just how charming the town is. Plus, there is just so much to do. The area is very popular with Australians."

Liu confirmed that in coming seasons, the company plans to grow its South East Asia offerings. Of the current programs, however,

he recommends first-time travellers check out the 15-day 'Vietnam Highlights' program.

Starting at \$3450 per person twin share, the tour visits Hanoi, Halong Bay, Hue, Danang, Hoi An, Nha Trang, My Tho and Ho Chi Minh City.

Highlights include a five-hour cruise and seafood lunch along the World Heritage Listed Halong Bay, first class seats at Hanoi's famous Water Puppet Show, a tour of Hoi An's ancient town, temple tours, visits to markets and traditional dance and musical performances.

Included in the price are all domestic and international air travel, airport taxes and fuel surcharges, four-star hotel accommodation, tours, transfers, meals, entrance fees and English-speaking guides. Further information www.cbtholidays.com.au

Image: Halong Bay is one of the attractions on CBT's Vietnam Highlights tour.

Asia Superstar

QANTAS HOLIDAYS and Star Cruises have teamed up to offer travellers the opportunity to cruise the magical waters of South East Asia onboard the Superstar Virgo.

A magnificent 13-deck Mediterranean-style liner, the Virgo offers five room types, half a dozen restaurants, endless onboard entertainment and a thrilling new waterslide experience.

The package includes two nights pre or post accommodation at Singapore's Swissotel Stamford in a classic room and a five-night cruise in one of the Superstar Virgo's Oceanview cabins.

Departing Singapore, the cruise visits Penang, Phuket, Malacca and Kuala Lumpur before returning to Singapore. Guests are given touring opportunities at each port to discover the region's rich blend of culture, history and adventure.

Prices start from \$1395 per adult and \$140 per child (under 11 years) and include all onboard entertainment and meals at selected restaurants. Airfares excluded. Cruises depart from September 2011 through to January 2012. For trade enquiries call 13 27 87 or visit www.qantasholidays.com.au/agents



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Adventure Destinations



Swing, baby, swing

According to a survey by the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), with its 260 golf courses, Thailand is now one of the top golf holiday destinations in Asia.

TAT RECENTLY conducted a survey of more than 3,389 tourists from 68 countries, and while its beaches and islands are naturally a big draw, golf also a very popular motivation for visiting Thailand.

Thailand is perhaps one of the few countries in the world where, rather than closing down clubs, they are actually opening new golf courses to cope with demand.

Apart from its cooler weather, the National Park of Kaho Yai is also home to a number of first class golf courses, surrounded by mountains, waterfalls and exotic wildlife.

Another new course that is capturing a lot of media coverage is The Royal Gems Golf City. This Bangkok golf course replicates famous holes including the Road Hole at St Andrews in Scotland and the back nine at Augusta, and is already becoming a major attraction.

Apart from a variety of seaside, mountain and city golf courses available to test all standard of players, perhaps Thailand's best kept secret is its wonderful caddies. Giving you the yardage, reading the greens or holding your umbrella – and their infectious smiles are hard to resist!

For more information on why Thailand is becoming a golfer's paradise, visit www.golfnakingdom.com

Image: Thailand's courses are capturing world-wide attention

Starwood Deals

STARWOOD HOTELS and Resorts is offering special discounts of 30 per cent off its best available rates across a range of luxury properties in Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Malaysia, if booked before 30 August 2011 for travel until 23 December 2011. The W Retreat Koh Samui is among the many hotels across the region participating in the promotion. Visit www.starwood-ap.com/summer2011.



Image: W Retreat Koh Samui

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Cambodia on the rise

After surviving years of political instability and poverty, Cambodia's latest tourism statistics show that the country is now firmly on the radar of travellers to Asia. KRIS MADDEN reports.

ALMOST 1.2 MILLION people visited Cambodia between January and May this year, representing double-digit growth of 13 per cent over the same period last year.

Cambodia is usually visited as a part of a multi-destination journey including Thailand and Vietnam. Approximately half of the visitors to Cambodia arrive through border checkpoints shared with the country's neighbours, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam; the rest arrive through the two international airports in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap.

However, many people travel to the country just to visit Angkor Wat and its surrounding temples and leave without knowing anything else about this intriguing destination. Each part of the country has hidden secrets and offers completely different experiences.

Beyond Angkor lies the vibrant capital of Phnom Penh, gateway to the remote north-east, a land of hill tribes, wildlife and bold landscapes, and the south coast with hidden beaches and empty islands. Many of these destinations are unknown to the outside world, helping the visitor feel more of an explorer than a tourist. Cambodia will soon be renowned for its abundant natural attractions and empty beaches.

The tourist infrastructure in Cambodia has developed tremendously in recent years, including the opening of quality hotels and restaurants and the upgrading of roads and transport links. Cambodia is more accessible today than at any time in the past and the people of Cambodia are among the world's friendliest and most welcoming. Here's our pick of some new and different ways to explore this fascinating country.

with departures in October and December. Orion has also released a pocket-sized fold-out map of its 2011 and 2012 expedition voyages to Vietnam, Thailand and Cambodia. A useful reference, it captures all the important highlights for each voyage. www.orionexpeditions.com

CAMBODIA CULINARY DISCOVERY

Travel Indochina's 15-day 'Vietnam & Cambodia Culinary Discovery' provides the opportunity to sample some of the local Cambodian cuisine with a full-day Khmer cooking class and visits to local markets. The tour also explores the cuisine of Vietnam with a number of full and half day cooking classes included. Prices start from \$3495 per person and include accommodation, all meals, four cooking classes, domestic and international flights, sightseeing and transfers. Departures from September through March 2012. www.travelindochina.com.au

JEWELS OF INDOCHINA

Helen Wong's Tours' 17-day 'Jewels of Indochina' covers the three vastly different countries of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. The journey begins in Siem Reap and spends a few days exploring the temples of the Angkor Wat complex including Angkor Thom, last capital of the Khmers and home to the Elephant Terrace, Terrace of the Leper King and the 12th century masterpiece, Bayon Temple. Guests also take to the skies in a tethered hot-air balloon for a panoramic view of Angkor, Phnom Bakheng and Siem Reap and enjoy a dinner at the famous Foreign Correspondents Club in Phnom Penh, before continuing on to Laos and Vietnam. Prices start from \$7250 per person and include return economy class fares from Australia (including taxes), deluxe accommodation, all meals, cultural performances, sightseeing, entrance fees and transfers. Departures in November and December 2011. Land only packages are also available for \$6020 per person. www.helenwongstours.com

CAMBODIA BY SEA

Only about two per cent of Cambodia's visitors enter the country via sea ports. However, *Orion Expedition Cruises* is set to change that with the introduction of its new 'Gulf of Siam and Thailand, Temples and the Mekong' expeditions on board the new Orion II.

Sailing between Bangkok and Ho Chi Minh City, the ship will berth at Sihanoukville to allow access to the World Heritage-listed temples of Angkor Wat. Overnight packages include flights, accommodation in Siem Reap and visits to the Angkor temples. There are also options to explore Ton Le Sap, the inland sea of the Mekong. Prices start from \$5705 per person





Luang Prabang wakes up

One of South East Asia's most charming cultural heritage destinations, Luang Prabang in Laos is fast approaching a tipping point, according to a report by Thailand-based hospitality consulting firm C9 Hotelworks.

ACCORDING TO THE LATEST Luang Prabang Hotel Market Update prepared by the company, a large-scale airport expansion and high-speed railway are major indicators of imminent change in the UNESCO World Heritage-listed town.

C9 Hotelworks Managing Director Bill Barnett said a runway expansion capable of handling wide-body

aircraft will open in 2013, and the following year a high-speed railway link to China will become operational.

Data showed a 14 per cent increase year-on-year in airport passenger arrivals in 2010 with 77,978 visitors arriving by air. The total number of visitors to the destination in 2010 was 210,783.

Recent developments include the opening of an 18-hole golf course by a Korean joint-venture company with further phases for a 250-room hotel and 100 upscale villas. At the end of 2010, there were a total of 1078 rooms representing 44 hotels in Luang Prabang. Guesthouses accounted for 63 per cent of total accommodation, with 1816 rooms. By 2012, the number of hotels will increase 16 per cent, including two new branded properties from the Anantara portfolio.

As to the impact on what has largely been a sustained low-impact tourism footprint during the last decade, a short-term identity crisis looks inevitable as one chapter closes and another is set to begin, according to Barnett.

"Unfortunately the next development cycle looks set to focus on growth for growth's sake, which is at odds with the destination's unique DNA," he said.

"Airlift and rail access improvements will see new opportunities emerge for a wider range of hotel products due to an overall upward progression. I expect to see a new mid-scale hotel tier emerge as the broader market edges towards more reliance on volume."

A full copy of the report can be downloaded at www.c9hotelworks.com

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Stress-relief at Koh Samui retreat

Insomnia, fatigue, anxiety and depression – they're all symptomatic of stress and burnout, both common side effects of today's frantic lifestyles.

AN INCREASING DEMAND for stress-relieving treatments has led Kamalaya, an award-winning wellness and holistic spa retreat on Thailand's Koh Samui, to develop a series of stress and burnout retreat programs.

Kamalaya co-founder and doctor of traditional Chinese medicine, Karina Stewart, explained that to solve the problem, much more than a few good nights' sleep was needed.

"For a complete recovery from high stress, you need to target both the physical and emotional condition by adopting a holistic approach that incorporates diet, exercise and therapies that restore and maintain the physical and emotional balance long term," she said.

To help guests make these long-term life changes, Ms Stewart has developed three unique programs catering for varying levels of stress.

Relax and Renew is the most gentle of the three. It uses healing treatments including head, foot and body massage to achieve relaxation and renew energy.

Asian Bliss is a nourishing program for people feeling depleted, anxious, nervous or overwhelmed. It uses Ayurveda and Chinese

medicine to support the nervous system and restore emotional and psychological balance.

The Balance and Revitalise program is more intensive and designed for chronic stress. It combines eastern and western medicine, nutrition, stress release therapies and deeper therapeutic treatments, taking a long-term approach to stress management.

"Some guests arrive at breaking point, whereas others are seeking 'time out' to relax and

rejuvenate, and we guide them through the program that most suits their needs," said Stewart.

Packages start at approximately \$2950 for a seven-night Stress and Burnout program including accommodation, three meals daily, a wellness consultation with a naturopath, a body bio-impedance analysis, complimentary access to a daily program of holistic fitness activities and program-specific treatments.

For more information, and to view Kamalaya's Healthy Lifestyle video series, visit www.kamalaya.com

FEELING STRESSED?

Kamalaya shares its top tips to restoring a stress-free lifestyle at home.

- Wind down at least 30 minutes before hitting the sack, make sure you're in bed before 10pm and aim for eight hours sleep.
- Meditate daily - start with a quiet nature walk or simply sit still for five minutes.
- Take 10 minutes a day to simply slow down, focus on your breathing and how things around you feel, sound, smell and taste.
- Exercise: Even small to moderate amounts improve energy, mood and vitality.
- Eat warm, cooked foods that nourish the body, particularly proteins. Lay off the raw foods, sugar, herbal stimulants, refined carbohydrates and deep fried and oily goodies.
- Stimulants such as coffee and alcohol might make you feel good in the short term, but zap energy and damage your health in the long term.

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Taking to Thai skies

It's been a busy year so far for Thailand's airlines, which have been scooping awards and increasing services to some of the most popular holiday destinations, reports JESSICA ZOITI.

WINNING WAYS FOR THAI

AT THE 2011 Skytrax Airline Awards Thai Airways International was honoured in two categories, taking out the title of Best Airline Economy Class Onboard Catering, and Best Airline Economy Class Seat. It also placed an impressive fifth overall in the World's Best Airline category, jumping up from last year's ninth placing.

Over 18.8 million airline passengers from 100 different nationalities voted in the World Airline Awards. A total of 200 airlines were featured and awards reflected customer satisfaction levels across 38 different items of airline front-line product and service.

In other Thai Airways news, in April the airline commenced direct flights four times a week between Perth and Phuket. From 30 October, this schedule will change to three weekly services. Flights are operated by an Airbus A330-300. Thai celebrates its 51st anniversary during 2011 and 40 years of flights between Australia and Thailand. For more information visit www.thaiairways.com.au

CODESHARE FOR BANGKOK AIRWAYS AND SILKAIR

From 27 September, SilkAir, Singapore Airline's regional airline is set to begin services between Singapore and Koh Samui, Thailand.

The popular holiday island will be SilkAir's third destination in Thailand after Phuket and Chiang Mai.

Departing Singapore's Changi International Airport, the service will be operated with the Airbus 319 aircraft featuring both business and economy class cabins.

Bangkok Airways will be the codeshare partner on these morning flights and similarly, SilkAir will also codeshare on Bangkok Airways' daily evening services between Singapore and Koh Samui, providing travellers with more flight options.

Currently, Bangkok Airways operates a daily direct service on this route with the same aircraft type.

Peter Wiesner, Bangkok Airways Senior Vice President, believes the codeshare agreement will enhance the connectivity between Singapore and Koh Samui.



"By having the codeshare arrangement on the route, it actually allows us to drive more traffic into Koh Samui," he said.

"We are panning on capturing traffic from Singapore as well as through traffic from long-haul routes connecting from a major aviation hub like Singapore's Changi International Airport."

For more information visit www.silkair.com or www.bangkokair.com

Image: Thai Airways now flies direct between Perth and Phuket



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Towers, turtles and temples

If you love great food, shopping, spas, adventure, sun-drenched beaches, and one of the most diverse cultures in the region, chances are you'll love Malaysia, writes MICHAEL WOODS.

ASIA'S GREEN CAPITAL

Whether by design, or sheer luck of being one of Asia's smaller capitals, Kuala Lumpur is particularly green in comparison to its neighbours.

With a smaller population than Sydney it is relatively compact and easy to get around, with an impressive mass transit and monorail system as well as cheap and plentiful taxis.

Named after the point where the Klang and Gombak rivers meet, Kuala Lumpur literally translated means 'muddy confluence', and is a relatively new city, founded in the mid 19th century. With palm-lined expressways and many impressive parks and gardens right in the city centre, KL gives a feeling of space and order.

Being the capital of one of the world's most multicultural societies, its Malay, Chinese, Indian and European influences have endowed the city with architecture, cuisine, and shopping to rival some of the best in the region.



MOSQUES & MARKETS

The architecture is a fusion of tradition and modernity, reflecting both Malaysia's multi-cultural and colonial heritage. Arabesque mosques, former British colonial buildings and Chinese markets compete for space alongside Indian Hindu temples, modern skyscrapers and megamalls.

The landmark Petronas Twin Towers is visible from every vantage point throughout the city, its design said to symbolise strength and grace using geometric principles typified in Islamic architecture.

MULTI-CULTURAL DINING

The other great legacy of this multi-cultural society is its fantastic food scene. For Malay fine dining head to Songket Restaurant on Jalan Yap Kwan Seng. You can join a cooking class hosted by Leonard Tee, followed by lunch at his 'Precious Old China' restaurant where his recipes and dishes reflect the 'Nyonya' tradition which is a fusion of Chinese and Malay cuisine. If you're a fan of spicy Asian cuisine you won't want to go past the Nyonya Rendang Beef!

SHOP 'TIL YOU DROP

A visit to KL these days is as much about the fabulous shopping as anything else. At the foot of the Petronas Twin Towers is Suria KLCC, a landmark shopping destination offering an astounding mix of fashion, food and entertainment. Part of a 100-acre mixed-use project called the Kuala Lumpur City Centre or KLCC, it is one of the largest real estate developments in the world.

The 'Golden Triangle' is KL's most popular shopping and entertainment precinct with Jalan Bukit Bintang offering a dazzling array of shopping, restaurants, bars and clubs.

BEACH BREAKS & NATURE

Perched on a golden sandy beach, facing the South China Sea, less than an hour's flight northeast of KL is the Tanjong Jara Resort. This resort is in a part of Malaysia less familiar to Australians than the more popular west coast resort areas of Penang and Langkawi, accounting for much of its charm.

The 99-room resort gives guests the opportunity to escape and unwind in luxurious, traditional Malay surrounds. The award-winning Spa Village Tanjong Jara is the perfect sanctuary for an hour or a day's indulgence; while nearby Pulau Tenggol Island offers some of the finest diving and snorkelling in the world.

The resort also offers plenty of activities, such as cooking classes, morning market excursions, jungle walks to spectacular waterfalls, and evening cruises on the Yak Yah River to witness thousands of fireflies lighting up the night sky.

A highlight is the chance to visit a deserted beach where green sea turtles come ashore at night to lay their eggs.

Asia Escape Holidays offers a range of package deals to Malaysia including a four-night stopover in KL staying at the Parkroyal Kuala Lumpur including breakfast daily, priced from \$220 pp twin-share. There is also a five-night 'Malaysia Shopping Mega Sale' tour priced from \$205 pp twin share. The company can arrange competitively priced airfares. www.asiaescapeholidays.com

Venture Holidays is currently offering 8-night packages to Malaysia from \$2,365 pp (ex Syd) which include return economy airfares with Malaysia Airlines, four nights at the Parkroyal Serviced Suites, Kuala Lumpur, four nights at the Tanjong Jara Resort, Kuala Terengganu, breakfast daily and all transfers. Valid for departures to 31 January 2012. www.ventureholidays.com.au