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PERSPECTIVE NEWS - Sunday 09 September 2001

GUEST COLUMN / TOURISM

Going ethno in Isan

Abundant potential exists to attract well-educated, well-heeled international tourists wishing to experience Thai life at ground zero

Sven Mauleon

Are all tourists sun and fun seekers? It seems so when I take a superficial look at travellers' faces around Thailand. But there is so much more to this country _ nature, culture, adventure and, yes, people. These attractions offer new opportunities to the less developed regions of Thailand.

In 1998, nearly 8 million tourists visited Thailand, generating US\$6 billion in revenue. Fifty percent of them came here for the first time. In 1995, 45 million tourists went to Spain, spending US\$25 billion! Why such a vast difference in tourism revenue? The potential of such a richly endowed country like Thailand is surely as high as that of Spain.

To increase tourism revenue, Thailand can opt for more of the same mass tourism, exploiting more of its beautiful coastlines and archipelago. Or it may opt for a new kind of tourism catching "New Tourists" looking for something more than sun, sand and sea.

How can Thailand tap these opportunities while avoiding the negative effects on nature and people? The evidence of uninhibited exploitation is omnipresent here and everywhere. New tourism does, however, create possibilities for nations gifted with scenic, historical or ethnic assets.

The trend away from mass tourism follows the pattern of any mature market. It splits into segments of different preferences. Early to break away was the sports segment _ e.g. golf and scuba diving _ which is important to Thailand, and the Big City travellers, who are important to Europe.

Modern tourism focuses increasingly on experience and feelings. From physical white-water rafting to mental rafting in new cultures. People want to discover new places.

Today we see new emerging segments, the eco-tourists in search of nature (such as African safaris) and the ethno-tourists looking for people and culture. Trips to India are now being organised to give tourists a chance to "live and eat local". In the US, tourists visit native Americans, and in Sweden the nomads are a major attraction.

People want to meet other cultures, learn about new traditions even confront themselves with new perspectives on life and society.

A former aid worker started the Swedish tour operator Las och Res (<http://www.lasochres.se>). Its concept is basically to give the curious traveller a chance to meet and get to know people of another world. They arrange trips to India, Mongolia, the South Pacific, Latin America and more. People are invited to prepare themselves by participating in seminars before the trip. They are strongly advised to respect the culture and traditions of the people they visit. They get a chance to actually live and share the daily lives of local people. These are the things "mass tourists" never even get close to even though they may believe they understand Thai mentality after two weeks in Phuket.

GENUINE VENUES

Thailand has an untapped potential for this kind of tourism. And the rural regions of Thailand may benefit. The question is where to find the genuine venues as yet unaffected by the large-scale invasion of holidaymakers? The northeastern region of Thailand, or Isan, is just about being discovered by travellers. As is often the case, the backpackers are the first to come. Here the visitor can find places and people whose way of life is different from theirs.

Thailand is a land of beauty and charm. It rightly qualifies as a leading tourist destination.

Some regions and some people have prospered. Some, however, only provide cheap labour. Customer preferences now shift. So time is on the side of regions like Isan.

It is time to bundle and describe the hidden assets of remote places into attractive tourist packages. It will require considerable efforts to prepare for small-scale businesses in tourism. The new tourists are not looking for big hotels and cities. They look for local people, their traditions and lives. They are keener on

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mental rather than physical white-water rafting. They are well educated. They browse the Internet to find the new destinations. They ask friends.

The virtual grapevine on the Internet is more important than the traditional brochure depicting pools and beaches only.

Some tourists bring in money and spend. Others go places and return home to tell others. Backpackers maybe frowned upon for their looks and modest spending but most of them are well educated. They travel for fun and experience and they are more curious than the traditional tourist.

One day they return home to take up a job, telling other people about their adventures, part of their fun. Then, some years later they will make a nostalgic trip back to places they once visited _ but now as established and maybe well paid professionals.

The popular Lonely Planet and Rough Guides are bibles amongst them, read as paperbacks or on the Internet. Cleverly handled backpackers can be a most valuable marketing channel. They already are, in their own right, the avant-garde of tourism. There is something to learn about new tourism from the backpacker's interest and behaviour.

A basic ethno-tourist concept might be to give the visitor a feeling for what it is like to live in a completely different culture and society under living conditions very unlike their own. The traveller gets a first-hand impression by living instead of watching. The traditional holiday experience is often limited to having fun and relaxing in the sun. The impression they get from their host country is often of a sight-seeing or cabaret nature, a poor substitute to reality.

Maybe the visitor should be offered to stay with a typical rice farmer in Isan, participating in daily chores of the family, or sharing a normal rice farming day. It may not sound exciting to the Thai reader, but what a difference from bar life in Patpong!

HOW TO MAKE IT WORK

Support for local tourist business is necessary to pursue these new trends. A more important question is how these trends can be made to benefit a larger segment of the Thai population. How to get villagers involved in small-scale tourism? Not just as rural street vendors but by offering the visitors a chance to learn about local life, a reality they never met before.

The government will have to support efforts in tourism business development and promotion, including the use of IT (for promotion as well as education). Global marketing requires clout and considerable resources but "producing" for the new tourists is local and can be done on a small scale.

Some of the key issues that must be addressed in Thailand's efforts to adopt new tourism would naturally be:- How to offer the visitor an experience of added value to the traditional mass offer, an added value reflecting the tastes of new tourism. - How to exploit those opportunities without the undesirable effects on people, culture and nature? - How to spread the income from tourists to a broader base of the population?- How to develop the networks and co-operation among small-scale businesses that are likely to facilitate the successful pursuit of new tourism?- What should be the future image of Thailand abroad?Thailand has a golden opportunity to boost rural development and reduce poverty now. Its people stand a lot to gain. Why leave the new tourists to competitors in other countries?

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