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TAT chooses to stay grounded

By DON ROSS

A strategy to turn Thailand into the Tourism Capital of Asia has been replaced by a more down-to-earth plan at the Ministry of Tourism and Sports that seeks sustainable tourism goals.

It was given a whirl during a press conference, last week, drawing little comment from those present other than the observation: So what's new.

Dubbing Thailand Asia's tourism capital came from an over enthusiastic team caught up with the task of pleasing Mr Thaksin Shinawatra by mixing a large dollop of dreams with a splash of reality to form business plans. Now the National Economic Development Board has adopted a sustainable economy policy for the nation and tourism planners are falling in line to declare that all that talk about tourism capital status was plainly misguided.

Everyone in the travel industry knew that to be a fact, the day Mr Thaksin's government floated tourism capital aspirations. At the time, the prime minister ordered the Tourism Authority of Thailand to secure 20 million tourists by 2008. Unfortunately, there were just too many factors such as regional health scares and natural disasters that it could upset a drive to pack tourists like sardines in high-rise hotel blocks.

But it also failed to take into account what Hong Kong, Singapore and other cities such as Shanghai and Beijing in China were doing to attract tourists. If sheer numbers were the benchmark, then China would most certainly deserve the title Tourism Capital of Asia. If quality and tourism revenue was taken into account then Hong Kong and Singapore could take the title.

Fortunately, Thailand's tourism planners have finally recognised the folly of attributing to oneself a lofty status that fails to bear up to scrutiny.

Now the Committee on National Tourism Policy agrees that a tourism strategy should dovetail with plans laid out for all economic sectors, rather than spin off on a tangent unrelated to other industries. If the overall game plan is to achieve a sustainable economy then the same benchmark should also apply to the tourism business, the committee argues.

This should bring tourism in line with the think-tank of the NESDB that has stated clearly economic aspirations should be based on a sustainable economy outlined by HM the King.

The new tourism strategy runs from 2007 to 2011 and it rolls out with a clear statement that the vision to establish Thailand as the tourism capital of Asia this side of 2010 is redundant.

Tourism growth rates under the new banner of sustainable tourism are still ambitious at an annual five to seven percent a year, but they are way below the 10 to 12 percent required to lift tourist arrivals into the mega league.

Last year, Thailand welcomed 13.65 million visitors and should close this year with 14.8 million. According to the most recent targets, 2008 should see the country generate 15.7 million visitors.

Private sector tourism leaders welcome this latest indicator that suggests the Ministry of Tourism and Sports permanent secretary, Dr Sasithara Pichaichanarong, is prepared to ditch projects that do not fit a policy that lead to a green and sustainable travel business.

Her goal is to improve human resources, introduce standards particularly involving guides and tour operators and upgrade what she calls heritage management.

Some travel executives would like the Ministry of Tourism and Sports to ditch more than the Tourism Capital of Asia tagline. They point out that tourism planners have created more hubs than spokes. Even the simplest of bicycle wheels has one hub for 20 to 24 spokes, but in tourism the drift was always to declare everything except sex as a viable theme to create a new hub.

It is not that travel executives are against hubs, but they do reckon that are just so many hubs that can appear in the media before the readers fall over laughing.

Mr Thaksin's government was famous for adding a hub here and there to the extent the Tourism Authority of Thailand was guilty of sleeping on hub duty. It just could not cope with all the hubs it had to already without the government suggesting Bangkok it should add another to its collection.

When flower lovers descended on Chiang Mai, someone raised his hand and said that's the stuff hubs are made of. Then an official counted how many spas there are in Bangkok and declared the city a hub spa. During the sweltering heat of a Dubai summer, the rich and sickly travelled to Bangkok for medical check-ups and we had a medical hub. That was one of the hubs that gave birth to lesser hubs such as herbal health, Thai massage, wellness and even sports medicine.

Then there was the sophisticated fashion hub that spawned numerous fashion weeks in Bangkok, while a film industry hub was less successful despite having two film festivals of sorts competing in the city.

Bargain hunters clearly signed off on Bangkok's right to call itself a shopping hub and to reinforce that goal, there are now nationwide sales July and August when discounts range from 30 to 70%.

Then to round off the selection of hubs, there was the regional tourism hub sometimes called Gateway to the Mekong Region.

This presents Thailand as the hub for travellers, who want to explore neighbouring countries such as Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and the Yunnan and Guangxi provinces in China.

These six countries are members of a group known as the Mekong Sub-Region Tourism Working Group. In that framework Thailand has always considered itself to be premier tourism hub, despite emerging competition from Vietnam that clearly challenges that concept.

All of these tourist-related hubs have to be viewed in the context of a much wider burst of creativity that gave the country shipping, technology, automobile, telecommunications, logistics, aviation and even duty-free hubs.

As the sustainable tourism policy gains momentum policy makers might point out that a proliferation of hubs poorly promoted is contrary to the core strategy.

Perhaps sustainability means choosing just a few hub concepts that are clearly within our grasp. One would be aviation. There is no doubt that if the full weight of government support was thrown behind efforts to raise the quality bar at Suvarnabhumi Airport and deal with the issue of expansion and additional runways, Thailand could claim the status of a regional aviation hub second to none this side of 2015. That is probably the only hub that really counts in tourism.

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