

Burma bleeding

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Ultimately, even the most determined travellers are forced to face facts. They will probably have to settle for another destination as long as a curfew and demonstrations continue to disrupt life in Burma.

Determination is the stuff that fuels the annual trips of a Norwegian group of physically challenged travellers. Some of the group are blind or have very limited vision while the rest are deaf. They were supposed to travel to Burma this week, under the direction of a specialised bike tour company, Spiceroads.

Managing director, Struan Robertson, faced the difficult task of diverting the tour at the last minute from the fabled temples of Bagan to a more mundane setting in northern Thailand.

Every year the Norwegians choose an Asian destination for their cycle odyssey and the chosen venue for a 14-day ride was Burma with the journey taking the group along country lanes to the heritage towns of Mandalay, Bagan and Inle Lake.

It would have to be a serious threat to budge these globetrotting enthusiasts. They travel as a closely knit team, thinking nothing of the challenge they face to even mount cycles and then ride in a strange land. Team mates who have good vision ride at the front wearing bright yellow jerseys for the benefit of colleagues visually impaired, who follow riding half a wheel length behind. Some of the riders are blind so they team up with a deaf rider and share a tandem.

Logistics and the supply of specialised bikes such as tandems, falls on the shoulders of the travel agency.

"I had two groups that had to move from Burma in just a week," he said. "One will go to Cambodia and the other stays in Thailand. There were no questions asked. Everyone understood that the trips continue, but not in the same destination."

One specialised company shifted 30 high spending sports related tourists who were prepared to spend two weeks in Burma exploring its cultural and heritage towns. This is just the tip of the iceberg for the country's tourism business. It now faces its biggest challenge over the next two months to salvage what it can of its peak season tourism revenue. The alternative is go out of business, an unthinkable option for small guest house and shop owners

October marks the gentle roll up to the peak season that gets underway in November and Burma's political troubles could not have come at a worse time.

It gives travel agents just a few weeks breathing space to shift itineraries and recommend other destinations without losing the accounts. It also gives consumers time to reflect on options. One obvious one would be whether they want to spend their leisure dollars propping up a military regime that is prepared to bully and beat monks.

Lonely Planet guidebooks have always motored down a sensible middle path, warning visitors of the serious implications of shoring up a military dictatorship with fresh tourist

dollars, while recognising that if travellers choose carefully they can still pass on a good proportion of those dollars to the small independent Burmese guest house or travel business.

However, considering the latest violence directed at Buddhist monks, even the middle road becomes harder to tread. Could a genuine spontaneous movement of travellers prepared to take their business elsewhere do what official sanctions have failed to accomplish?

Up until violence broke out last week, Burma's tourism was looking bright with visitor arrivals increasing over 20% in the first six months of the year. But the base is small at just 145,000 tourists when compared with neighbouring Thailand that can muster nearly 7 million tourists in the same six months.

At the close of 2007, Cambodia should reach 2 million visitors, Vietnam will gain slightly more than 4 million, Laos should pass 1.4 million and Thailand will exceed 14 million. If all signs were favourable, Burma should have closed this year with slightly less than 300,000.

Even by mid-August there were signs that tourism was going to take a knock as travel agents struggled with the military government's decision to end domestic subsidies that had kept fuel prices artificially low for years.

Travel agents estimated costs for international visitors would increase by at least 30 percent in November, based on hikes to diesel fuel. Hotels and tour operators were expected to quote new prices at the World Travel Market in London this November.

However, for ad hoc group quotes the higher prices were already being introduced in September.

Officially, tour operators will talk up their business claiming minimum cancellations in Burma. It does not suit them to acknowledge that the Burmese honey pot will no longer deliver profits. Ironically the margins on tours from Bangkok to Burma are far more substantial than what is earned on similar Thailand itineraries.

Cut throat competition in Thailand ensures that most tour operators run on the slimmest of margins at home, while trips to Burma, are considered the lucrative icing on a financial cake.

Burma is even more profitable because most European tour operators officially are not allowed to have direct business contacts with Burma. They leave it in the hands of their sub agent or joint venture partners based in Bangkok to sell the Burma content of a Southeast Asia tour. If challenged, the major tour operators, with headquarters in the EU, will say they are not doing business with Burma.

Of all the tourists visiting Burma around 20 percent are generated by international tour operators and the balance are individual travellers; a mix of backpackers who stay in guests houses and buy directly from Burmese owned small business and travellers identified as VFR _ Visiting Friends and Relatives.

Airlines that fly to Rangoon will see a drop in traffic for two to three weeks and then business will pick up as the images of violence fade from public view. Their customers are mainly business travellers who need to travel to Rangoon to negotiate deals with the generals. Then there are the family travellers, Burmese seeking medical treatment in Thailand, studying overseas, or travelling to attend a conference.

Slowly the tourists will return to Rangoon on their way to Mandalay and Bagan and officials will declare that the tourist season that kicks in November has all the promising signs of recovery.

By mid-January, a tourism delegation from Burma will stand next to their Asean colleagues at the 2008 Asean Tourism Forum, here in Bangkok. Ministers from the 10-country bloc will sit behind their flags at a long table raised suitably above the heads of the 200 media representatives gathered in the stalls.

Ministers will stand for the official photograph clutching hands in a show of solidarity that has marked the Asean story since its inception. Then they will sit once more and the chairman, Thailand's minister of tourism and sports, will declare that there is nothing so healthy as Asean tourism that bounds forward from strength to strength.

"Any questions," he will say. Everyone will look at the Burmese flag and the gentleman behind it. But not a word will be spoken.

Don Ross can be reached through this email address: info

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