

Pivotal role for tourism

INTERVIEW WITH YUTHASAK SUPASORN

GOVERNOR, TOURISM AUTHORITY OF THAILAND



YUTHASAK SUPASORN has been the Governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand since September 2015. Mr Supasorn holds degrees in Economics from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand and Keio University, Japan. He has more than 20 years of experience in management positions at government agencies and state-run organisations. Before taking up his position at the Tourism Authority, Mr Supasorn was Executive Vice President and Chief Financial Officer of MCOT Public Company Limited, the leading state-run public broadcaster in Thailand. Prior to this he held senior roles at the Public Sector Development Commission and the Ministry of Industry.

Ao Nang is the vibrant tourist centre of southern Thailand's Krabi Province

What is the history and vision of the Tourism Authority in Thailand?

The Royal Thai Government established the Tourist Organisation on 18 March, 1960, to promote and market Thailand as a tourist destination to both international and local travellers. In 1963, it was renamed the Tourist Organisation of Thailand (TOT), with Thailand's first international tourist office opening in New York in 1965 and the first domestic office opening in Chiang Mai in 1968.

As Thailand's tourism continued to grow and increasingly played a pivotal role as one of the country's top revenue earners, the government saw the need to place greater emphasis on promoting and marketing the kingdom as a tourist destination among international travellers. Thus, in 1979, the government passed a bill that brought the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) into existence.

Now in its 58th year with its head office in Bangkok, 40 offices in Thailand and 28 offices overseas, TAT has helped Thailand become a preferred destination among international travellers.

How is Thailand's tourism sector performing?

The number of visitor arrivals grew from 81,000 tourists in 1960 to 35 million in 2017 and is expected to reach 36 million in 2018. In addition, Thailand's tourism revenue

rose from 2.23 trillion Baht in 2014 to 2.52 trillion Baht in 2016, exceeding the set target of 2.4 trillion Baht. The year saw TAT announcing a determined strategy to build quality, focussing less on visitor arrivals and more on expanding tourism revenue.

Over the past few years, TAT has actively focussed on promoting Thailand as a 'quality leisure destination' that highlights a new era of tourism as measured by visitor expenditure, average length of stay, and the overall quality of visitor experience.

TAT's ongoing efforts to move from mass to 'quality' tourism is successfully producing positive results with Thailand ranked third in global tourism revenue for 2017 by the United Nations' World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO). The same year saw the Thai tourism industry recording its highest revenue in history, achieving 1.82 trillion Baht from 35.3 million international visitors and 695.5 billion Baht from 192.2 million domestic trips.

What are the key themes of Thailand's tourism strategy? How is this being implemented?

TAT now places greater emphasis on sustainable tourism, aiming at delivering a quality product and boosting the average length of stay, expenditure and repeat visitation.

Under the successful *Amazing Thailand* branding, TAT's latest marketing concept of 'Open to the New Shades' highlights a kaleidoscope of colour through five distinct travel segments: Gastronomy, Arts and Crafts, Thai Culture, Nature and Thai Way of Life. The aim is to encourage visitors to discover new perspectives in existing attractions, or indulge in experiences in new tourist attractions.

Some of the examples of the new "shades" are how Songkran Festival is celebrated differently and uniquely in each region; there are various kinds of Phat Thai and uncountable types of Tom Yam soups to enjoy. Among Thailand's 77 provinces, there are many more interesting attractions to offer in terms of culture, heritage, and cuisine.

All TAT overseas offices are currently working with their partners and tour operators to convert the new marketing concept into substantial sales targeted at specific customer segments; such as, Luxury, Weddings and Honeymooners, Female Travellers, Families and Gen Y.



Please explain the role of the 'Go Local' campaign.

In 2018, TAT also launched an “*Amazing Thailand Go Local*” campaign, a landmark project to promote the kingdom’s emerging generation of secondary destinations, better balance the distribution of tourist arrivals between urban and rural areas, even out the seasonality factor between the months of travel, and encourage more travel during weekdays to reduce pressure on the weekends.

The aim is to promote 55 second-tier tourist provinces nationwide to inspire at least 10 million visitors to visit local destinations. It is expected to even out the ratio between Thai and foreign tourists from the current 70:30 ratio to 65:35 and to generate at least 10 billion Baht to local communities in 2018.

TAT wants tourism and related activities to really benefit the local people and give them a new source of income and pride. This project will allow many local communities off-the-beaten track to show off their unique Thai-ness while looking forward to a brighter future.

What are the key tourism milestones and highlights for 2017 and 2018?

In December 2017, TAT celebrated the opening of an exciting new chapter in Thailand’s dynamic culinary evolution with the launch of the first Michelin Guide Bangkok. The second edition, The Michelin Guide Bangkok, Phuket and Phang Nga 2019 will be released at the end of this year. In January 2018, Thailand successfully hosted the ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF) in Chiang Mai. This May, Thailand’s strategy to promote gastronomy tourism paid off with the 4th UNWTO World Gastronomy Forum which took place in Bangkok from 30 May – 1 June 2018, the first time this event was held in Asia. These are very successful innovations.

The United Kingdom has always been an important market for Thailand. What are the current trends?

The United Kingdom has consistently been one of Thailand Tourism’s key international source markets. As such it is recognised as a mature market in its travel behaviour in and around Thailand and in 2016 had a repeat business rate of 71 per cent. In 2017 the UK was the 11th largest source market to Thailand with 994,469 UK visitors travelling to Thailand and the 5th largest market regarding spend with tourism receipts of 76.62 billion Baht.

There are four characteristics of the UK market which demonstrate its delivery of quality tourism: a high level of visitor

spending; a long Length of stay; a strong dispersal throughout Thailand; and year-round travel to Thailand.

These characteristics have informed TAT’s strategy in the UK and detailed below are three examples of how this is being translated into TAT’s 2018/2019 marketing and promotional plans:

• Luxury to Local

With the knowledge that the UK is a higher spending, mature market TAT will promote secondary cities, resorts and local tourism products to attract repeat visitors looking to experience new areas. The experiences will have a particular focus on local tourism which is highlighted in TAT’s work with the Thailand Green Awards (<http://www.greenthailand.co.uk/green-excellence-awards>) which looks to shine a light on the very best examples of sustainable and responsible tourism.

• Year-Round Travel

Compared to all of Thailand’s other long-haul source markets, the UK delivers the most consistent all year-round level of visitor numbers. In 2017 the lowest month of September attracted over 60,000 visitors or 6 per cent of the year’s total. TAT will work closely with UK tour operators to promote best value low season holiday packages to encourage and grow this trend.

• Thai Food and Thai Tourism

TAT has identified the strength of the two of Thailand’s world class exports, food and tourism. In the last 10 years Thai food has been the fastest growing food in the UK and now boasts over 2,000 restaurants around the UK. TAT will look to develop strategic promotional partnerships with a number of major Thai Restaurant Groups to encourage more people to *Eat Thai* then *Visit Thai*.

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Thai cuisine is a major global success

