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Thailand gains from regional tourism focus - Asean to hit 10% of global tourism by 2030

Thailand is well positioned to benefit from projections of rising tourist arrivals in Southeast Asia, say tourism experts speaking yesterday at the World Economic Forum.

Southeast Asia is projected to see its share of global tourism rise to at least 10% within the next 20 years from 7.4% now thanks to ongoing efforts by Asean members to promote the region as a joint destination.

Thailand is among the few destinations in the world that has enjoyed a tourism surplus over the past decades, along with Spain, the United States and Macau, said Marcio Favilla Lucca de Paula, executive director for competitiveness for the UN World Tourism Organisation.

"Your country has it all to attract foreign tourists ... natural and cultural attractions. And the nature of the Thai people is very welcoming to international tourists," he said.

As of last year, Asean accounted for 7.4% of the 982 million people who travelled worldwide. The region's share is projected to rise to 10.3% by 2030, with anticipated arrivals of 187 million.

Thailand ranks second after Malaysia in terms of international arrivals within Asean, although the Malaysian figure is highly inflated by Singaporean day-trippers. Singapore ranks third.

But in terms of tourist spending, Thailand ranks highest at US\$26.3 billion per year, followed by Malaysia at \$18.3 billion and Singapore at \$18 billion.

"Thailand went through all kinds of crises, from politics to natural disasters like floods over recent years. But tourism has recovered quickly," said Mr Favilla Lucca de Paula.

Overall, Asean has several factors to drive the travel and tourism sector including a dynamic economy with social development, a growing middle class, improving connectivity and a wide array of tourism products from basic to luxurious, he said.

Other panellists at the forum agreed that Asean had strong potential to expand the market further.

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Mari Elka Pangestu, the Indonesian tourism and creative economy minister, said Asean tourism ministers are working on a proposal to develop an Asean common visa for non-Asean tourists to travel within the region.

Modelled on the Schengen visa in Europe, the proposal is expected to be submitted to Asean leaders next year. An open-sky policy within Asean will also come into effect in 2014.

Last year, 82 million people travelled in Asean, half of whom made intra-regional trips. For Indonesia, tourism accounted for 9% of gross domestic product, said Ms Pangestu.

"We have tried to involve as many communities as possible around tourism sites in development to yield benefits and build awareness among youth and the children," she said, adding the sector also created low- to high-skill job opportunities, from cleaners to aircraft pilots.