

Sketching a Hospitality and Tourism Recovery Plan for Thailand During and after Covid-19 – Discussion Paper

ร่างแผนฟื้นฟูการบริการและการท่องเที่ยวของประเทศไทยช่วงระหว่างและหลังการระบาดของโรคติดเชื้อไวรัสโคโรนา 2019 – เอกสารอภิปราย

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Abstract

The Thai national economy was heavily dependent on hospitality and tourism after COVID-19. With the arrival of COVID and subsequent lockdowns locally and the cessation of international cross-border travel by aircraft, ship, rail, and road, the drop in the contribution of hospitality and tourism to the Thai economy had been significant. This discussion paper proposes a staged recovery plan for hospitality and tourism in Thailand and suggests how domestic hospitality and tourism can be undertaken to speed up the recovery process whilst encouraging Thais to appreciate and engage more readily with their unique culture. The current paper was written in 2021 and reviewed and revised in November 2022.

Keywords : Covid-19; Thailand hospitality and tourism recovery plan

บทคัดย่อ

เศรษฐกิจของประเทศไทยต้องพึ่งพาการบริการและการท่องเที่ยวเป็นอย่างมากในช่วงหลังการระบาดของเชื้อไวรัสโคโรนา 2019 จากผลกระทบของโรคดังกล่าวและการล็อกดาวน์ที่เกิดขึ้นในแต่ละจังหวัดภายในประเทศ รวมถึงการห้ามเดินทางข้ามพรมแดนระหว่างประเทศ ไม่ว่าจะเป็นทางเครื่องบิน ทางเรือ ทางรถไฟ และทางรถยนต์ ส่งผลให้การมีส่วนร่วมของการบริการและการท่องเที่ยวที่มีต่อเศรษฐกิจไทยมีความสำคัญลดลง งานอภิปรายฉบับนี้ จึงนำเสนอแผนการฟื้นฟูสำหรับกิจการการโรงแรมและการท่องเที่ยวภายในประเทศไทย พร้อมส่งเสริมให้คนไทยได้ชื่นชมและมีส่วนร่วมกับวัฒนธรรมอันเป็นเอกลักษณ์ของตนเองมากขึ้น โดยเอกสารฉบับนี้ได้เขียนขึ้นในปี 2021 และมีการทบทวนและปรับปรุงในเดือนพฤศจิกายน 2022

คำสำคัญ : โรคติดเชื้อไวรัสโคโรนา 2019 แผนฟื้นฟูการบริการและการท่องเที่ยวของประเทศไทย

Introduction

Before the arrival of Covid 19 in Thailand in 2019, Thailand was heavily dependent on Hospitality and Tourism from both international arrivals and domestic tourism.



Source: Thaiwebsites (2022)

Thailand responded quickly to the arrival of Covid by staging a series of lockdowns of shopping centres, places of entertainment, and interprovincial travel (Thairath, 2020). The approach was to minimize the spread of infection until Herd Immunity could be achieved when 80% of the population had been vaccinated. The development of effective vaccines was fast-tracked in China, Russia, the UK and USA Thailand also constructed a Covid vaccine production facility in Ayudhaya based on the UK Astra Zeneca vaccine. The Ministry of Public Health began offering free Covid testing at mobile facilities throughout the country and later free vaccination Centres.

Objectives

To propose a recovery plan for hospitality and tourism in Thailand

Literature Review

In 2021, Thailand developed the Phuket Sandbox program where fully vaccinated tourists could enter Thailand and after isolating in nominated hotels could if clear of Covid were free to travel within the southern provinces. That program was successful in building local confidence which led to Bangkok Chiangmai and other provinces doing the same (Wongmonta, 2021).

Thai people responded well to the restrictions imposed by the government, and readily accepted the wearing of face masks and the need to wash hands frequently; all of which limited the immediate impact of Covid in Thailand (Thairath, 2020).

Members of the Thai Royal family linked with international partners to secure vaccine supplies to quickly begin a national vaccination program (Miller, 2021). His Majesty King Vajiralongkorn, through the Crown Property Bureau, arranged to build a local AstraZeneca vaccine manufacturing facility in Thailand in 2016 and which is now supplying vaccines locally and to neighbouring countries through its contractual partner Astra Zeneca Thailand (Siam Bioscience, 2021). The Chinese, Russian and US Governments have supplied a range of their vaccines to Thailand and neighbouring countries to help alleviate the shortfall required to quickly vaccinate most Thai and neighbouring country citizens. (The Straits Times, 2020)

Before the arrival of Covid many countries including Thailand experienced over-tourism. Locals were becoming disenchanted with the overcrowding of their most popular tourist destinations, accommodations, and transport systems (Globetrender, 2019). Not to repeat the mistakes of the past, new approaches to hospitality and tourism have been proposed and adopted.

A Way Ahead – Where and How Do We Go from Here?

Looking back, after the arrival of Covid people in many countries believed that they did not want to return to the over-tourism situation of the past when covid restrictions ease (Globetrender, 2019).

A proactive approach was adopted by residents of Bali Indonesia, for example, took the opportunity with a few tourists visiting to engage on a community-wide basis to collect discarded plastic waste from their watercourses and paddy fields to recycle the plastic (Mogul, 2021). When tourism in Bali was at its peak, the community did not see the extent of plastic pollution in their environment. With the lull in tourists' numbers, community members identified the pollution and set about cleaning it up.

At the initial time of this writing (September, 2020) Covid vaccinations are ramping up in many countries with the desire to reach herd immunity believed to require 80% vaccination of their populations.

In September 2021 England had restrictions to boost its economy by returning many businesses to pre covid levels of activity (Walmsley, 2021). Throughout 2022 that program appears to have been successful.

After a slow start with vaccinations, it is believed that Thailand may not reach countrywide herd immunity until mid to late 2022. However, Thailand has focused on reaching herd immunity on the island of Phuket by September 2021 which has permitted a return of vaccinated international tourists by air and by sea without the need to quarantine upon arrival (BBC News, 2021).

In the interim, The Tourism Authority of Thailand commenced advertising and promoting internationally through the media to put Thailand front and centre in tourists' minds when travel restrictions eased throughout Thailand (TAT News, 2021).

The adage "think globally act locally," may be appropriate for Thailand's Hospitality and Tourism sector. In this respect, the television media have been travelling Thailand identifying provincial historical sites of cultural importance and unique gastronomic importance.

A study by Wongmonta (2021), discussed a Bubble Tourism scenario for a series of local tourism hubs to promote and attract domestic tourism which was adopted by several provinces. The Royal Thai Government offered Bht 300 discounts on meals and accommodation around the provinces.

Another very interesting and relevant academic paper by Madhyamapurush (2021), titled Post Covid-19 Travel Behaviour of Thai Tourists in the Northern Region of Thailand focused on Tourism to Chiangmai. The study involved 400 Thai Tourists who responded

to an online survey. Results were most encouraging and confirmed by an earlier study by Swarbrooke & Horner (2005) in most respects such as gender age range preferred mode of travel and accommodation.

Finally, a very useful source of the impacts of Covid 19 on Thai Hospitality and Tourism was conducted by Vithayaporn (2021). Which focused on fifty peer-reviewed journal articles on the impacts of Covid-19 on the Thai Hospitality sectors of Accommodation, Airlines and the overall economy. The study provides a comprehensive yet concise overview of Covid on the Thai Hospitality and Tourism Sector 2019–2021.

This researcher recalls that because of the 1998 global economic meltdown the Royal Thai Government instituted the OTOP (One Tambon One Product) program which highlighted one product per village arranged attractive packaging and promoted it locally and internationally. The OTOP program continues to this day. The Royal Thai Government has resumed promoting Phuket as a sea, sand, sun, golfing, and boating destination. Similar promotions have been applied to the wider Thai hospitality and tourism sector. We could characterize this initiative as One Province (or Tambon) One Destination or OPOD or OTOD.

For example, two years before the arrival of Covid, this writer liked to explore Bangkok and Thonburi to learn deeply about Thai culture and history in each area. Those visits were usually made on Sundays when vehicular and pedestrian traffic was less, and people encountered were relaxed and more inclined to engage with me and with each other (Barrett, 2014). I witnessed numerous cycling international tour groups in the back streets of China Town

Another friend with similar interests in exploring Thailand has ranged beyond Bangkok and Thonburi and has now covered many of Thailand's provinces. He has an extensive website and publishes several e-books on his travels (Lim, 2021).

According to NHK World – Japan (n.d.), in Ibaraki province in Japan, there has been an upsurge in people purchasing plots of forested land to escape large cities such as Tokyo on weekends and public holidays. Landowners maintain the forested land for the government which improves environmental conditions. There has also been an increase in people using public forested camping sites. These moves have boosted income to upcountry communities and for campers to purchase fresh local products more cheaply than in the large cities. Entrepreneurs provide GPS maps to assist visitors seeking campsites, shopping areas, and locations of interesting tourist sites. Thai people could emulate these trends.

In the recent past and up to the present, Amarin Television has produced several series of television programs such as Tasty Travel, which promote the unique gustatory delights of each Thai province including the Andaman ocean areas. There is scope to expand the

content of these television programs to cover the unique natural and constructed features of each Thai province. Recently, Bangsaen has constructed the Blue Walk an attractive makeover of its beachfront which has been well received by family tourists.

Internationally The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and TV 5 Monde French television have produced both a new series of High density–television hospitality and tourism programs and have also re-run earlier programs covering the unique historical and natural beauty and farming community products such as cheese and other dairy products of both their own country and other countries internationally. Chokechai farm and neighbouring wine–producing areas have long been active in this area and other provinces could follow them.

I believe that Hospitality and Tourism organizations in Thailand can follow the lead of Britain and France in more widely promoting Thailand’s Hospitality and Tourism offerings through international screening of high-quality television and electronic media historical cultural and dining programming to generate interest so that when restrictions ease people will be motivated to travel.

Before the arrival of Covid, Thailand had several, phenomenally successful, cooking schools serving both the residents and international culinary tourists. The Dusit Thani Cordon Bleu cookery school and the Blue Elephant cookery school served both local and tourist culinary students and professionals. A side business for the Blue Elephant cookery school is the marketing of locally produced and attractively packaged, high–quality food ingredients for their recipes. I believe those two strands of the business i.e.; classes and ingredients should be increasingly developed to cover a wider international market.

Overseas examples of promoting national cuisine are NHK International television of Japan which is phenomenally successful in promoting its Japanese cuisine through programs such as ‘Dining with the Chef’. Hokkaido in Japan is renowned internationally as a province producing high–purity dairy products locally and for export. Another NHK program ‘Cycling Around Japan’ highlights the beauty of the country and introduces viewers to the unique people, cultures, products, and history of selected destinations within each part of Japan.

All NHK television programming is available in twenty–two languages for the convenience of a global audience, and I believe that Thailand could emulate that offering by promoting our country its historical sites, cultural offerings, and cuisine. If we build on these now, they will enable us to respond appropriately when Covid restrictions ease nationally and internationally (NHK World – Japan, n.d.)

In September 2022, the Siam Society under Royal Conducted tours of famous Italianate buildings constructed during the reign of King Chulalongkorn (Rama V) with the purpose of promoting interest by local residents in beautiful building in Bangkok. Subsequent to that visit a weekly column is shared in the Bangkok Post Newspaper where renowned Thai scholars conduct visits and write important historical details of significant Thai buildings. Students and others interested in significant Thai buildings are encouraged to engage in this program.

Conclusion and A Way Foreward

With no definite end to Covid insight, Thailand has already proven to be proactive in proceeding to fully vaccinate residents of the island of Phuket and welcoming fully vaccinated national and international tourists by air and sea into the Phuket Sandbox and neighbouring southern provinces. Presently Thailand is open to all international and domestic tourists and slow but hopefully steady return of Thailand to its former position as the chosen travel destination in ASEAN.

Phuket is traditionally a sun, sand, and sea destination but there is scope for promoting much more such as historical sites and cuisine. There are gaps in early Thai archeology and history that would benefit from further study by both local and visiting researchers.

The example of Phuket can be adapted to other provincial destinations in Thailand such as Krabi, Hua Hin in the south and centre and Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai in the north, and Korat in the northeast. However, those destinations have more porous borders with the risk of covid infection from immigrants from neighbouring countries. So high domestic vaccination rates and tighter border controls would be necessary. Buriram has been successfully developed as a football and destination and an international motorsports destination which adds to the variety of tourist and hospitality products on offer.

A carefully managed provincial reopening of specific destinations can be considered for staged implementation after significant numbers of locals have been fully vaccinated and as the community approaches herd immunity. Major Thai provincial cities have adjacent domestic airports which might be modified to international status as happened at Utapao or interprovincial domestic routes could facilitate international travellers. The recent easing of travel restrictions in Australia has seen a surge in international air and cruise tourists who after prolonged lockdowns now wish to travel internationally. Cousins of this writer will again be in Thailand later this year their fourth visit to Thailand a place they love.

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