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Pact to make region single tourist destination

ASEAN leaders took a bold step to boost tourism by signing a tourism agreement yesterday, to make it easier to travel in the region and market Asean as a single destination.

Aimed at resuscitating the industry following the drop in travel since the Sept 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, they also agreed to reduce trade restrictions and integrate services to maximise the complementary nature of tourist attractions.

The agreement also aimed to develop, upgrade and expand facilities and services, while creating favourable trade and investment conditions for the public and private sectors.

All 10 Asean leaders signed the agreement at the Asean Summit.

They were Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri, Prime Minister of Laos Bounnhang Vorachith, Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council of the Union of Myanmar Gen Than Shwe, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai.

International visitor arrivals to Asean in 2001 grew by 6.43 per cent from the previous year, with 41 million international visitors last year, an increase of 2.5 million from 2000.

The tourism industry generates an annual revenue of about US\$26 billion (RM98.8 billion) for businesses in Southeast Asia.

In making travelling easier within Asean, the agreement provided for extending visa-exemption arrangements and phasing out travel levies and taxes for Asean nationals, while harmonising visa procedures for international travellers.

It also encouraged the use of smart cards for business and frequent travellers from Asean countries, as well as universal symbols and multilingual signs for international travellers.

Asean members also agreed to ease the process of issuing travel documents and progressively reduce all trade barriers.

In the area of transport, they agreed to liberalise air services progressively, and improve airport management and related services while encouraging co-operation between regional airlines.

The agreement also called for policies to encourage cruises, ferry travel and leisure-boat activities as well as co-operative measures to support road safety and travel insurance.

The accord encouraged Asean countries to preserve their natural, cultural and historical heritage, and adopt environmental standards and certification programmes to monitor the impact of tourism on local communities, culture and nature.

In addressing safety and security concerns, the agreement provided for stepped-up co-operation and information-sharing on immigration matters among law enforcement agencies.

The initiative for an Asean Tourism Agreement was mooted by Hun Sen in Brunei last year.