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It's safe to holiday in Southeast Asia

By Nuraina Samad

BUT it takes more than a headline to convince tourists who have been exposed to countless TV scenes on the tsunami devastation. For many in the industry, the Asean Tourism Forum in Langkawi afforded an opportunity to begin repairing the psychological damage, writes NURAINA SAMAD.

WHEN Suthasinee Limpichati meets foreign tour operators and travel agents, she tells them the same line - that not all of Thailand was devastated by the tsunami of Dec 26 and Phuket and the affected areas are now safe for tourists to visit.

"I have to or they will not know the true situation in my country," said the director of sales of Pavilion Queen's Bay in Krabi.

Suthasinee was referring to the bad publicity her country received in the aftermath of the tsunami.

She was at the Travel Exhibition at the Asean Tourism Forum (ATF) 2005 which ended in Langkawi on Friday.

Thailand put up 127 booths, the second highest number after Malaysia which had 173 booths.

There were a total of 511 booths showcasing hotels, resorts and tourist products from the Asean countries.

For Suthasinee and the other Thai hoteliers, it is not just about making good business for their establishments.

They are doing it literally for King and country.

This is understandable because tourism is big business in Thailand. It is the second largest revenue earner after the manufacturing sector.

Delegates like Suthasinee regard the ATF as an invaluable platform to woo the tourists back to their countries.

"Things are looking positive for us. There has been very good response. But we have to work hard," she said.

Indeed, optimism and hard work are what lie ahead for the tourism industry in Asean countries this year and ahead.

Government and private tourism bodies agree that there needs to be creative marketing of tourism products, to think out-of-the-box, to effect a change in mindset because the post-tsunami period has never been more challenging for the sector.

"After the tsunami, it seems that all of Southeast Asia is unsafe. It does not help that images of devastation and destruction, although of the same localised areas, have recurred in television screens across the globe," said an American journalist.

So, how to combat the bad publicity without appearing to be hard-selling and insensitive to the tragedy? Without trivialising the devastation, the suffering and loss?

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said, co-operation among Asean countries is critical.

To bounce back and reconstruct itself and return to normalcy, the major players in tourism in the region must put their heads together so that "we can prosper together".

Thailand is going on a full-scale publicity blitz, even as the situation in the country is improving with all its affected areas safe and cleaned up.

An "Andaman Sunshine" campaign is being planned in addition to its ongoing "Happiness on Earth" campaign.

But doing it alone will only give it limited success.

So, it only makes sense that the tourism industry in the region effectively respond to the theme of this year's ATF - "Shifting Paradigm, Prospering the Region".

Should they respond to Abdullah's call to make Asean a mega-destination for everyone, or to that from former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad that Asean countries combine their assets and make it irresistible to travellers, they cannot go wrong.

Already, tour operators in Europe are trying to get the numbers back because the travel industry is a mutually lucrative business.

Nobody loses. Everyone gains, if the destination is right, or made right.

Swiss tour operator and travel agent Emmanuelle Pythoud is working on strategies to get her clients back to Southeast Asia.

She admitted that most Swiss are still trying to come to terms with the devastation in Phi Phi island and Phuket because many Swiss were killed or "someone knows of someone who was killed there".

But she is confident that with effective tourism promotions that are being planned in the Asean countries, pre-Dec 26 levels can be achieved.

There is no doubt, as Dr Mahathir said, that the tourism industry is a "very sensitive" industry where calamity, natural or otherwise, in any country has an immediate and direct impact.

Whether it is the avian flu, SARS, terrorism, the haze, and now the tsunami, Asean countries have seen the impact each of these has on their tourist arrivals.

With the ATF 2005 looking set to improve things, the air is full of optimism come the next ATF in Yangon, Myanmar.

(END) Source : New Straits Times