CAMBODIA Country-wide greening

By Marissa Carruthers

Huge efforts are being ploughed into developing Cambodia’s eco-offerings to lure visitors once borders open.

The World Bank has launched its biggest tourism investment in the country – the US$54 million Cambodia Sustainable Landscape and Eco-tourism project. This will span eight provinces across the protected area of the Cardamom Mountains up to the Tonle Sap Lake’s flooded forests and Phnom Kulen in Siem Reap.

As well as encouraging traditional community-based eco-tourism and eco-tourism projects, it aims to engage the private sector in protecting the area and sustainable work. Eco-lodges, adventure activities and camp sites are some of the developments being mooted, with each project given a maximum of 10 hectares in the protected areas.

The ultimate aim of the project is to build back a stronger tourism sector and supplement the income of remote communities to avoid illegal activities, such as wildlife trafficking and logging.

Nick Ray, Hanuman Travel’s product director, is involved with the project. He said: “In terms of recovery, eco-tourism is a very important element and has been growing well domestically here during Covid. When foreign tourists can come back, we expect to see a lot of demand for slow travel and Cambodia has a lot of opportunities for remote activities.”

Ray added the domestic drive has also opened up new opportunities and discovered new spots. For example, camping has proved popular with locals. As part of the World Bank project, a “golden standard” camp site will be created and the model then rolled out to other areas.

He noted: “Domestic travellers have unearthed exciting places, such as fringe areas of the Cardamoms home to grasslands perfect for camping, beautiful waterfalls and trekking. We need to develop these sustainably and ethically for the international market.”

Virginie Kury, Asian Trails general manager, said responsible travel is key to product development for post-pandemic visitors, and there is a wealth to be discovered in Cambodia. She added: “Responsible adventure at Shinta Mani Wild, Koh Dach by local transportation, or cycling on the hidden path of remote temples are just a few examples of what we can offer.”

In Siem Reap, a beautification project is underway. This includes 38 roads in the centre being renovated to make the destination more cyclist- and pedestrian-friendly.

Steve Lidgey, general manager of Travel Asia a la carte, said a cycling path has been created at Angkor Wat Archaeological Park in response to a huge hike in locals cycling there. When borders open, it is hoped this will encourage visitors to explore in a greener way than the traditional tour buses, tuk tuks and cars.

Indonesia’s Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy (MoTCE) has made the development of quality and sustainable tourism its priority pre-pandemic, but the value of this quest has only become more apparent as new post-pandemic travel behaviours surface.

Travellers today expect travel to be more personalised, customised, localised and conducted in smaller groups. They also have a greater awareness of environmental conservation.

Sandiaga Uno, Indonesia minister of tourism and creative economy, said environmental social governance would be implemented across the country.

One of MoTCE’s goals is to have Bali tap into only new and renewable energy, deploy environmentally-friendly waste management, and utilise electric car and solar panels by 2030.

Along with MoTCE’s responsible tourism development, the Indonesian government is running national campaigns – Rangga Buaan Indone sia to raise awareness of local-made products, and Beli Kreatif Lokal to...
encourage the purchase of local creative products.

Sandiaga said the campaigns also serve to encourage small- and medium-scale businesses to go digital, and to develop more innovative and competitive products by leveraging local wisdom.

To help small businesses along, especially those in F&B, fashion and craft, the minister provides guidance in drafting digital promotion strategy, developing sales network, building synergy with digital marketplaces, and creating legal entity and obtaining intellectual property rights.

In addition, MoTCE is also campaigning to develop and empower tourism villages – a product that meets the post-pandemic interest in personalised, customised, localised and small-sized tours.

Sandiaga revealed that the development strategy will include adoption of new health and hygiene protocol, digital innovation, and content creation with various parties.

To ensure that village tourism truly benefits the local community, Sugeng Handoko, activist at the Nglanggeran Tourism Village, Yogyakarta, said ownership and management must remain in the hands of the villagers. Relating his story, Sugeng said: “Nglanggeran is owned and managed by 154 locals and (tourism takings) benefit more than 700 community members.”

Pahirul Azim, director of Bilebante Lombok Tourism Village, agrees. He said: “When the community here realises that their daily activities attract visitors, they will appreciate what they are doing for a living.”

For example, Bilebante residents have seen how their traditional herbs – often consumed as medicine and health supplements – have been used to develop beauty and wellness treatments, with the help of renowned Indonesian cosmetic and traditional herbs producer, Martha Tilaar. Since 2019, the village has offered visitors treatments by certified therapists and the sale of herbal products.

Over in South Sumatera, visitors can visit Musi Banyuasin to see how plant-based food packaging and plates are produced. The initiative, a collaboration between the Community Driven Innovation of Conservation Areas and the Regency Government of Musi Banyuasin, uses locally grown areca nut leaves, known as plepah among the villagers, to manufacture compostable alternatives to plastic and Styrofoam food containers.

The production benefits Musi Banyuasin residents, as each plantation plot can take in 15 labourers and provides women folk with an additional source of income, noted Thia Yufada, head of Musi Banyuasin Family Empowerment and Welfare.

THE PHILIPPINES
Playing up slow tourism and natural draws
By Rosa Ocampo

Tourism rejuvenation across the Philippines comprises mainly of delectable sites

Respecting the ocean and its inhabitants must be the top priority of every tourist who wants to connect with marine wildlife.

BERTINAZETTE
ROMULO-PUYAT
Tourism secretary
and activities best served in their natural, raw state with extra dollars of care and concern for long-term sustainability and responsibility.

This approach gives in to what travellers want. Based on a Department of Tourism (DoT) survey, travellers’ preferences are evolving, with most choosing more personalised packages, outdoor activities in well-ventilated areas like beaches, hiking, and biking, and travel with family members for safety.

These preferences have presented opportunities for new products and services with these operative words: sustainable, responsible, CSR, community, interactive, slow tourism, back-to-basics, nature and natural.

Rajah Tours president Jojo Clemente said enquiries are on the rise for interactive or immersive activities, such as farm visits to indigenous communities and culinary tours.

“These are things that we can readily offer as destinations continued to develop these products despite the pandemic,” added Clemente.

He expected Eastern Visayas, Southern Luzon and some parts of Mindanao to be growth areas and to support the spread of income from sustainable tourism.

Better yet, responsibility and sustainability have been woven into tourism rules and regulations, such as the full implementation of the Sustainable Tourism Development Project (STDP) this year. STDP is transforming tourism communities into resilient, inclusive and sustainable ones with projects that improve drainage, solid waste management and ecosystem-based tourism site management, as well as to develop enterprise and skills, according to tourism secretary Bernadette Romulo-Puyat.

As more tourists are drawn to coastal areas, the DoT will conduct awareness seminars for stakeholders on sustainable and responsible marine tourism guidelines in 2H 2021, while advocating to educate tourists on sustainable tourism.

“Respecting the ocean and its inhabitants must be the top priority of every tourist who wants to connect with marine wildlife. Learning how to properly engage with these species is a small but crucial step in protecting and sustaining our marine biodiversity,” Romulo-Puyat added.

Overland, the DOT has revised accreditation standards for hotels and resorts. Environmental indicators and sustainable practices are now included in the rating system, to encourage owners to be more environment-friendly in their daily operations.

“Our tourists are more likely to support tourism operators that care for the environment,” Romulo-Puyat said, emphasising the need to provide excellent services without compromising the country’s natural resources and the community.

Slow tourism is expected to gain ground, while community-based tourism programmes are being improved across the Philippines. These are factored in various tourism circuits that are being developed all over the country, including immersion in local and indigenous communities. Offerings include wellness and healing packages that feature various types of local massage, called hilot, and the use of indigenous herbs and virgin coconut oil; various types of cloth weaving or fabric endangered artistic practices; slippers or tinelas crafting; and cooking local delicacies.

During the last Virtual Luzon Regional Consultative Meeting, Fannieth Domingo, chief tourism operations officer of Cagayan Valley and Northern Philippine Islands Region, unveiled the New Normal Tourism Circuits that include adventure sports, culture and heritage, flora and food, and water sports.

Carolina Uy, Central Luzon tourism regional director, said that given Filipinos’ penchant for eating with family and friends, they are improving their tourism products with slow food and slow travel caravan to Pampanga and Bulacan, both known for their heirloom cuisine, combined with farm visits.

**THAILAND**

**Building destinations that support locals**

By Sachat Sritama

Thailand’s travel and tourism industry is determined to build back better post-Covid-19 through responsible tourism products and a stronger focus on distinctive sites that appeal to special interest groups.

Established in 2003 to fulfil the latter goal, the Designed Areas for Sustainable Tourism Administration (DASTA) will develop three destinations based on responsible tourism and community support over the next few years. The regions earmarked for this are Songkhla Lake in the south, which straddles three provinces Songkhla, Phatthalung and Nakhon Si Thammarat; Chiang Rai province in the north; and Bang Kachao in Samut Prakan province, near Bangkok.

DASTA director-general Athikun Kongmees also revealed that the agency has plans to promote local culture and natural geology in the Nakhon Ratchasima, Buriram, Sisaket, Surin and Ubon Ratchathani province.

DASTA has achieved success in what it set out to do. In May this year, it launched the Korat Geopark project in Nakhon Ratchasima province, in hopes of bringing the site into UNESCO’s International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme. Should the effort pay off, Nakhon Ratchasima will join Sakaerat Biosphere Reserve and World Natural Heritage Site of Dong Phayayen in donning UNESCO crowns.

Athikun believes that the Korat Geopark project will entice nature- and adventure-lovers from within and beyond Thailand, while the new elephant fossil park within will allow the destination to compete on a global scale.

Beyond destination development, DASTA shoulders another critical responsibility — to drive increased income into local communities, preserve the local environment, and nurture local entrepreneurs.

In 2020, tourism revenue flowing into communities developed by DASTA rose by 10 per cent despite the pandemic.

As Thailand shapes its tourism future on home ground, efforts are also invested in destination promotions overseas. Yuthasak Supasorn, governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT), said offices overseeing Europe, Africa and the Middle East are shining the spotlight on several regenerative responsible tourism routes that combine major and secondary cities. Each route caters to a niche interest — cultural route Kanchanaburi to Samut Songkhram; vegan route Chiang Mai to Hong Son; gem and jewel route Chantaburi to Trat; and coffee route Chumphon to Ranong.

“**When the community here realises that their daily activities attract visitors, they will appreciate what they are doing for a living.**”

PAHIRUZ AZIM

Founder, Bilebante Lombok Tourism Village

From top: Korat Geopark entices nature- and adventure-lovers; Songkhla Lake region in southern Thailand will be redeveloped sustainably for tourism.