

Tsunami's Effects on Tourism

Tourism companies sell Asian nature and cultural landscapes to their customers. Asia is a land rich in different cultures, which is what makes traveling there so appealing. South and Southeast Asia sits along the Indian Ocean, a warm, inviting, and relaxing place to be. This was the case until the earthquake off the coast of Sumatra caused a tsunami along the coast on December 26, 2004.

Asian governments were urging Western tourists not to change their travel plans. Tourism plays an important economic role in these countries, and in some cases accounts for more than half of the country's income. Many tourists have been frightened about traveling to this part of the world since the tsunami hit. Over 7,000 tourists are said to have died from the disaster, and nearly 500 are missing. More than half of the death toll came from the country of Sweden, which lost 3,559 citizens to the tsunami.

Imagine sitting on the beach without a worry in the world, when suddenly the ocean's water drains outward at an incredible rate. Would you be intrigued to find out what happened, and venture into the area where fish are now flopping around, or where there are many sea shells and other sea creatures suddenly visible? That is what many tourists did, and that is how many of their lives were taken. Curiosity got the best of them, while some indigenous peoples knew better and sought refuge in the mountains.



Indian Ocean resorts had been experiencing a good tourist season. Most tourists come from European countries and Australia. The area had been avoided for sometime after the Bali bombings, Iraq invasion, and the threat of SARS. After these problems had begun to lessen, the tsunami suddenly brought more worry to the tourism industries of the region.

Indonesia

Indonesia was hit badly by the disaster, but hardest hit was northern Sumatra. This region is not a viable tourist hot spot, like other islands in the country (such as Bali and Lombok), due to an on-going civil war. The country hoped to actually increase its tourist count because most of its land was unharmed by the disaster, but tourist counts fell by 16% from the month of December to January. The previous year, tourist counts were down just 2% between the two months.

Indonesia depends on its tourism industry for about U.S. \$5 billion per year and Bali accounts for about

60% of that income. Bali's tourism had suffered from previous years mostly because of terrorist bombings and the threat of SARS. Bali was not affected physically by the tsunami, but has been affected economically.

Thailand

Hotels, restaurants, and other travel businesses claim that the tsunami and aftershock had no long term impacts on Phuket's booking and arrivals, but one source states that there was a 27% drop in tourism.

"It's 99 percent operational now," Simon J. Hand, a Phuket resident who is associate editor of Asia-Pacific Tropical Homes magazine, said in late March. "At its worst, it was 90 percent operational. Patong Beach is the main tourist trap, and the wave hit everything along the shorefront road. But 150 yards farther up, even the next day, you wouldn't have known anything happened."

The Bangkok Phuket Hospital is working to bring tourism back to the country. It claims that now is the time to visit Thailand, since there are many special deals at hotels and restaurants. Now, during the high season, the beaches are not over-crowded. The beaches are now cleaner than they have ever been due to cleanup efforts after the tsunami. Tourism websites assert that the best way to help the area recover is to simply visit it! They also try to lure some people in with saying

"We are ready for tourists that want to use our service like plastic surgery, dental treatments, or eye LASIK at TRSC at a fraction of the price in most western countries."

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka was hardest hit in the southern regions. At first, workers in the tourism industry were upset at what appeared to be a lack of sympathy from tourists. Seeing tourists laughing and enjoying themselves was tough, considering many of the workers had lost their homes, families, and possessions to the tsunami. Tourism is the fourth largest industry in Sri Lanka, so when the industry started to slide, feelings were pushed aside to and more efforts were made to bring more people to the island.

"The Tourism Ministry has begun a \$6 million marketing campaign to lure visitors back to the island, but the strategy has had only limited success. Many areas remain in such bad shape that they offend the sensibilities of visitors who come in search of poolside relaxation."



About 800,000 people depend on the tourist industry either directly or indirectly in Sri Lanka. "Hotels across the country are running an average at 20% capacity, even though 80% of them were untouched by the disaster"

India

It seems that India's tourism industry was not as badly hit as other countries. Most tourist areas are along the Arabian Sea, while the Bay of Bengal supports local fisheries. There is one large commercial destination, Chennai (formerly Madras), on the eastern coast of India that was hit hard. About 650,000 people were displaced in this area. Areas worst affected were the islands that are closest to the epicenter, which lie on the tip of India.

"Indira Point, which was India's southernmost tip and a 100-sq km island, has just disappeared into the ocean... Although there were some tourists and Andaman & Nicobar Islands were being positioned to become the next Maldives, these plans will now need to be shelved, as there has been huge loss of coral and other marine life. Loss along India's main coastline was concentrated on some regions and recovery and re-habilitation work is currently ongoing."

The tourism outlook for India remains strong as its hotspots were not severely damaged, except for the Andaman and Nicobar islands. They also hope to bring in more tourists that would have otherwise gone to Thailand and Malaysia.

Let's Bring the Tourists Back!

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is working to find a solution in bringing tourists back to the area. ASEAN is a group of 10 member countries in Southeast Asia. Members are working together to lure tourists into not only their own countries, but to Southeast Asia as a whole. They have been inviting international travel writers and sending promotional video clips to potential tourists. ASEAN is also working to create more tourism amongst its own citizens to offset the loss from foreign travelers.



Governments maintain that their countries are safe for travelers and if anyone truly wants to help, they can start by reviving their tourist economies. ASEAN is also working to make beaches safer, for example, there have been talks of setting up a tsunami early-warning system.

The countries understand that there is a psychological reason that tourists have not chosen them as destinations in recent months, but are optimistic that the effects of the tsunami will not be long-term and tourists will return soon.

(text shortened)

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By Jennifer De Vries (devriejj@uwec.edu)

<http://academic.evergreen.edu>

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