

THAILAND TOURIST DESTINATION: SEX TOURISM, DICTATORSHIP AND PERSECUTION



Incredible beaches, crystal clear waters, massage stations, food on the beach, white sand ... These are the usual responses of tourists when asked about Thailand. Military dictatorship, persecution of civilians, sex tourism, and natural disasters rarely top the list, although it is the reality of a tourist destination that attracts more than 30 million visitors every year.

After “The Beach”, a famous movie of the year 2000, starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Thailand became one of the most popular destinations for its beaches and national parks, locations that boast thousand-year old buildings and traditional temples, in an earthly paradise that calls itself the “land of smiles”, for the kindness of its almost 65.9 million inhabitants, mostly Buddhist-oriented.

But many travelers are unaware of the harsh reality in which the Thai population lives, which, **ruled by a military dictatorship starting four years ago, suffers political persecution, has no freedom of the press, coexists with human trafficking and prostitution networks, and faces the threat of an imminent natural disaster.**

In addition, the increase in tourism, an industry that accounts for 12% of the country’s GDP, has brought fatal consequences for some of its most visited travel destinations, such as the famous turquoise beach Maya Bay, on Phi Phi Islands, located in the southwest region of the country and the place where DiCaprio’s movie was filmed. Last year, the beach was closed due to the damages caused to the coral reefs and coastal areas by the more than 5,000 daily tourists who visited the place.

Human Trafficking and Child Prostitution

Thailand has its own corrupt and much less organized version of the famous Amsterdam Red-Light District. The so-called “Walking Street” in the city of Pattaya is the epicenter of the industry, leaving the country as one of the travel destinations popular for “sex tourism”, which, while illegal, is allowed by the national government.

Some experts point out, that sex tourism in Thailand contributes between 2% and 3% of the GDP, and that encourages human trafficking and corruption networks.

The costs of these “services” for tourists, ranging between 3 and 100 euros, force many women to engage in these activities and to submit themselves to the multiple trafficking rings spread throughout the destination, in a country where hierarchical tradition and sexism are still part of its culture.

Last year, the news around the globe focused on this dark side of Thailand’s tourism, exposing the unfortunate Thai tradition of ‘girls as a dessert’: government officials visiting the country are ‘honored’ with the ‘visit’ of underage girls, victims of these teen prostitution rings. The Chulalongkorn University in Thailand estimates that over 300,000 women are part of these human trafficking networks.

Economy on the Rise, Human Rights on Decline

After a boom in the 1990s, Thailand's economy has been growing in recent years, partly as a result of China's trade liberalization: it registered a 3.9% growth in 2017 and peaked at 4.1% in 2018, according to a World Bank report.

Nonetheless, the political and social reality of Thailand does not advance at the same speed as its economy. Since 2006, a series of civilian and military governments have succeeded, ending in the coup d'etat of 2014. The National Army took power under the idea of "bringing back happiness" to the so-called "land of smiles", followed by promises to call for free and fair elections. The elections would take place next March, although uncertainty surrounds that announcement.

However, even if the group abandoned power, the military junta pushed forward with reforms that perpetuate its de facto power. They reformed the Constitution in 2016, expanded the influence of their institution, and self-granted the power to participate in the decision for the future prime minister.

The current government is also distinguished by its contempt and lack of transparency with the media. An example of this took place in January 2018, when the head of the military junta, General Prayut Chan-o-cha, placed a cardboard cutout to avoid questions from the press. "Ask this guy," he said before leaving the conference.

In addition, Amnesty International denounced torture and forced disappearances by the National Council for Peace and Order (NPCO), the official name of the military junta, and also the "detention, imprisonment and prosecution of activists, journalists, political figures, lawyers and human rights defenders for having peacefully expressed their views on government and monarchy".

According to the NGO Human Rights Watch, more than 1,800 civilians were prosecuted for going against the Army or the monarchy, both having strong ties to each other. For example, in June of 2017, the Military Court sentenced a man to 35 years in prison for posting criticism of the monarchy on Facebook. And a student activist was sentenced to 2 and a half years in prison for sharing on the same social media a BBC article of the king of Thailand.

Unpredictable Nature

In 2004, a magnitude 9.1 earthquake shook the shores of Sumatra, an Indonesian island, generating waves of never-before-seen size in the rest of the Asian countries. Over 230,000 people were killed and entire cities collapsed. Some tourists who spent their holidays in the east died on the coastal areas of southern Thailand, when the tsunami reached Phuket.

At the heart of the Pacific Ring of Fire, Thailand is, along with Indonesia, one of the two places with the most natural disasters on the planet. The Ring includes the coasts in the Pacific where seismic tension accumulates due to the speed (several centimeters a year) of the earth's crust movement.

The rainy seasons (or monsoon season) can also cause tragedies in Thailand. In fact, the Tham Luang cave, where members of a junior soccer team were trapped last July, had been affected by the floods.

The cave rescue also put one of the poorest regions of Southeast Asia under the microscope. Many of the rescued boys were not Thai citizens, but stateless. In the porous borders with Laos, Myanmar and China, migrants seek refuge in Thailand, the least poor country of the region, but end up on the streets with their families or becoming part of the informal sector of the

economy, such as prostitution.

In 2011, a similar rain hit the country during the monsoon season, and affected 27 of the country's 77 provinces. The flood, one of the largest in the last 50 years, resulted in more than 270 deaths and left 2.3 million people living in poor conditions.

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