

THAI INTERNATIONAL TOURISM DECREASES AS DOMESTIC TOURISM GROWS IN IMPORTANCE



It started relatively quiet for Thailand in early September as international tourism winds down to a lower pace after a busy summer. Foreign visitors to Thailand have reduced in the past few weeks, putting the country slightly behind last year's 2025 figures, depending on the market: China has cooled in recent months, whereas Europeans are staying pretty consistent.

As of 12 September, Thailand has seen a total of 21.72 Mn foreign visits since the beginning of the year, representing a 3.38% deficit compared to the same period in 2025, according to the country's Ministry of Tourism and Sports. In the week of 6-12 September, **a total of 439,069 international tourists visited Thailand, representing a 7.2% decrease versus the previous week**, which had already recorded a 3.8% drop. This downward spiral has been in place since mid-August, when daily numbers stood above the 630,000 threshold, to reach the most recent figure.

China's Recent Cooldown after Strong Gains

The Chinese market has contributed to the recent moderation in international tourism in Thailand. In the week of 6-12 September, a total of 65,380 Chinese citizens visited Thailand, representing a 10.4% decrease versus the previous week. However, it is important to put this figure into perspective as the long-term trend for the January-August period this year shows approximately 3.54 Mn Chinese visitors, up 16% year-on-year. Hence, despite the recent cooldown, the Chinese market remains a growth engine for Thailand's tourism sector in 2026.

European Source Markets Resilience

European tourists have proven to be more consistent than most in early September, with 85,440 Europeans visitors recorded between 6 and 12 September, representing a 0.7% increase week-over-week. Looking at the whole first eight month of the year, Thailand has seen around 5.3Mn Europeans, a figure almost identical to that of 2025 (+0.6%). On a quarterly basis, arrivals varied significantly: they were up 3.9% in Q1, down 8.8% in Q2, then up 5.6% in July and +0.7% in August. As the high season approaches, it will be interesting to see how the European share of visitors evolves, as it tends to be more important in this period of the year.

Looking at the bigger picture, it is important to understand that Thailand's tourism sector is in its low season right now and the more interesting part of the year is yet to come. Authorities anticipated a rebound in visitor numbers in September, partly due to the Malaysian public holiday and Japan's Silver Week. With 21.72 Mn tourists and a 3.38% deficit, the question is whether the high season will allow Thailand to catch up with last year's numbers by year-end.

Thai Government Readies a Large Domestic Tourism Stimulus

In order to counterbalance the reduction in international visitors and offset rising energy prices, Thai authorities are preparing to roll out a significant stimulus to domestic tourism, under a state-backed initiative to be officially discussed on 22 September. The Tourism and Sports minister,

Surasak Phancharoenworakul, announced a 4Bn baht (over €100Mn) budget for subsidies to boost domestic demand by an additional 20Bn baht (\$602Mn).

The proposed 1Mn-euro stimulus will provide individuals with one million travel subsidies, including hotel vouchers up to 2000 baht (€54), and matching restaurant meal, retail and wellness vouchers worth up to 2000 baht. The money will also be used to promote lesser-known tourist attractions and destinations. In addition, each person will be eligible for a maximum of 5 grants, for a total of approximately €270. The scheme is set to launch on 1 November, pause during the New Year public holiday, and run until the end of February.

Mixed Reaction from the Industry and Experts

Thai government's push for domestic tourism comes at a time when the sector is a key growth engine for both employment and foreign exchange. Latest available data confirms this hypothesis, with 3.4% reduction in foreign visitors through to mid-September and 1.9% reduction in their spending. Domestic tourism has been more resilient so far in 2026, with both the number of trips and domestic spending rising.

Industry representatives have expressed concerns over the proposed stimulus, arguing that it launches at an inconvenient time. "Next month (November) marks the beginning of the peak season. I believe the money would have been better spent during the next low season," noted Thienprasit Chaiyapatranun, secretary general of the Thai Hotel Association. The former executive of The Thai Hotels Association, Prakrit Chinamourphong, has also pointed out an oversupply of hotel rooms built in anticipation of post-pandemic demand, while visitor numbers remain below historic levels.

Economists question the impact of the stimulus on the overall economy, pointing out that the 4Bn baht stimulus will probably not have a significant impact on GDP. Nattaporn Triratanasirikul, senior economist at Kasikorn Research Center, believes the measure will have a positive impact on sentiment, but it will not be enough to significantly boost the economy. Pipat Luengnaruemitchai, senior analyst at Kiatnakin Phatra Securities, questioned the logic of boosting public spending if it fails to create additional tourism demand.

Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul has announced additional financial support to households in order to mitigate the impact of rising living costs through to the end of 2026. In relation to the tourism sector, it will be interesting to see how the upcoming high season and the additional domestic demand stimulus will contribute to offsetting the recent moderation.

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