

Country's tourism industry on way to recovery as inbound visitor earnings grow 59pc YoY

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Dhaka : The tourism industry of Bangladesh is in effort to revive following the disastrous effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the success in the attempts is clearly reflected by the year on year growth of inbound visitor earnings. Bangladesh's tourism sector witnessed 59 per cent year-on-year growth in foreign currency earnings in 2021.

This huge growth in the contribution of inbound visitors to the country's national treasury in 2021 projects the sector will soon reach pre-pandemic levels in numbers.

According to data from Bangladesh Tourism Board, earnings from inbound visitors were BDT 2,279 crore 27 lac in 2021 (12 months), compared to BDT 1,196 crore 2 lac in 2020 (10 months).

Earlier, the inbound tourism sector's contribution to the national treasury stood at BDT 1,859 crore 75 lac in 2019 (7 months), BDT 2,949 crore 97 lac (12 months) in 2018, BDT 2,445 crore 45 lac in 2017 (12 months), BDT 865 crore 84 lac in 2016 (9 months), BDT 695 crore 76 lac in 2015 (8 months), BDT 528 crore 37 lac in 2014 (5 months) and BDT 623 crore 18 lac in 2013 (8 months).

The figures show the highest earnings from inbound tourists, in the country's history since independence, were BDT 2,949 crore 97 lac (12 months) in 2018. Fortunately, 2021's massive growth in inbound visitor earning numbers do not fall very short compared to 2018.

This means, if the upward trend continues, it will not take too long for the sector to flourish more than pre-pandemic times.

The development follows the successful roll-out of mass vaccination in Bangladesh and South Asia to contain the pandemic and remobilise travel.

Lion share business travellers

While talking to The Bangladesh Monitor, Abu Taher Md Jaber, CEO of Bangladesh Tourism Board attributed this massive growth in inbound visitor earnings to business travellers and foreigners working in Bangladesh or engaged in humanitarian activities mostly as the Covid-19 pandemic had stopped leisure tourists from coming to the country.

"In 2020 and 2021, leisure tourists rarely visited the country owing to Covid-19. Travel and flight restrictions were prevalent all over the world and even in Bangladesh. Hence, the international arrivals were mostly business travellers and foreigners working in the country," said Abu Taher Md Jaber.

Also, due to the pandemic crisis, BTB could not find data on international tourist arrivals of 2020 and 2021 from the Special Branch of Bangladesh Police. Hence,

they could not update data on international tourist arrivals after 2019, mentioned the BTB CEO.

Bangladesh welcomed 3,04,269 inbound tourists in 2019, the highest in its history since independence. The figures earlier were 2,48,292 in 2018, 2,20,294 in 2017, 1,69,670 in 2016, 1,18,683 in 2015, 1,19,347 in 2014, 91,773 in 2013, 1,39,200 in 2012, 1,36,162 in 2011 and 1,19,055 in 2010.

However, to regularly update data of tourist arrivals in the country, the tourism board is now willing to develop a software with the assistance of the Special Branch of Bangladesh police, emulating the models of countries such as India, the Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, said reports.

It is to be mentioned here that the rise in the number of tourists is not the only factor that pushes the earnings up.

"Rather, we must look at from which country more tourists come to Bangladesh. For instance, an Indian tourist does not spend money equal to what an American tourist does," said Md Mazharul Islam, Assistant Director, Bangladesh Tourism Board.

Bangladesh welcomes a huge number of Indian tourists. In 2019, the number of Indian tourists was 270,024, which was 89 per cent of the total inbound tourist numbers, according to data of Bangladesh Tourism Board.

Poor number of leisure tourists

A critical issue still lingers that is coming in the way of further prosperity of the country's much promising tourism sector.

While the numbers of both visitors and their earnings are going up, Bangladesh is yet to grab the inbound leisure tourist market. Despite its vast tourism potential, the country could not yet become a popular destination for foreign tourists compared to the neighbouring countries.

Due to poor tourism and aviation infrastructure, complex visa policies, social restrictions, and a lack of convenient transportation as well as comfortable recreation facilities, the number of leisure tourist arrival to the country is still down, claimed industry insiders.

"Those who came to the country are foreigners who work in Bangladesh on tourist visas, non-resident Bangladeshis and business travellers mostly," said Masud Hossain, an inbound tour operator and Managing Director of Bengal Tours.

"In 2021, altogether 10 people came to Bangladesh for travel purposes via my company. The number was over 500 before the pandemic hit," he added.

Taufiq Rahman, an inbound tour operator and General Secretary of Pacific Asia Travel Association Bangladesh Chapter, said, "Only 30,000-40,000 foreign tourists used to come to Bangladesh for purposes of travel in pre-Covid-19 times."

Looking ahead

On a brighter note, according to reports, Indian diplomats in Dhaka and Bangladeshi diplomats in New Delhi, Guwahati and Kolkata believe the number of Indian and Nepalese Tourists is expected to go up by 25-50 per cent in the days ahead as Padma Bridge has opened.

The government is also in efforts to make Saidpur Airport a regional one, Cox's Bazar Airport an international one, establish a foreign tourist zone in Cox's Bazar, and develop tourism parks across the country to take tourism to new heights.

"The government is even planning to connect the southern-western part of the country with the capital through improved road and railway networks in phases," said Professor Akbaruddin Ahmad, Former President of Tour Operators' Association of Bangladesh.

The government is also upgrading Mongla Port, making it an international port, with a view to easing the pressure on Chattogram Port, mentioned reports.

