

Regional delegates boost ASEAN tourism, biggest destination market for Bangladeshi travelers

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Dhaka : One of the world's most dynamic tourism markets- ASEAN-is positively recovering from the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization, global tourist arrivals grew by 2 per cent in 2024 compared to 2019, thanks to strong demand, better air connectivity, and the rebound of major ASEAN markets.

As per projections, the ASEAN tourism market will continue its upward trajectory. While revenue reached USD 30.14 billion by 2024, the market is anticipated to grow at an annual rate of 5.81 per cent, with an estimated market volume of USD 39.96 billion by 2029.

According to forecast, Asia will be accounting for 35 per cent of global leisure travel spending, with rapid growth projected in the next 15 years.

On top of it, the recently concluded ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF) 2025 has laid the foundation for enhancing the region's position as a leading global tourism destination.

The ASEAN Tourism Forum (ATF) 2025 took place at Persada Johor International Convention Center in Johor Bahru, Malaysia from January 15 to 20.

The event brought together over 1,000 delegates, including tourism ministers, industry leaders, and stakeholders-all focused on shaping the future of tourism in the ASEAN region.

ATF 2025 stressed the role of sustainability, innovation, and collaboration in fostering a reigning tourism ecosystem.

The official opening ceremony on January 18 was held at Persada Johor International Convention Center.

The event was officiated by Datuk Seri Haji Fadillah bin Haji Yusof, Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, along with Datuk Seri Tiong King Sing, Malaysian Minister of Tourism, Arts, and Culture, and Onn Hafiz bin Ghazi, Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of Johor.

In his opening remarks, Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia Fadillah emphasized that this year's theme embodies the very essence of the ASEAN spirit, a shared commitment to harmony and pro-gress amid profound changes.

"It speaks to our collective resolve to confront the pressing challenges of our time and build a forward-thinking tourism industry, united by shared purpose and coordinated action," he said.

"It is imperative that tourism in post-pandemic Asia must focus not only on recovery, but also on transitioning to a sustainable, quality-driven business model," Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia Fadillah claimed.



Tourism delegates of ASEAN Member States launching ASEAN Travel Exchange (TRAVEX) at Persada Johor International Convention Center in Johor Bahru, Malaysia on January 15

"The region has the potential to lead global efforts by championing decarbonization in aviation, integrating renewable energy, and advancing innovative tourism approaches such as community-based tourism, ecotourism, and regenerative tourism. These initiatives aim to ensure equitable benefits for local communities while preserving cultural authenticity and protecting the environment," he stressed.

While tourism investments are recovering, with Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the sector increasing from USD 1.2 billion in 2022 to USD 2.8 billion in 2023, it is still far below the pre-pandemic level of USD 24.5 billion in 2019.

"To address this gap, ASEAN must prioritize quality investments that

diversify destinations, redistribute tourist loads, and leverage technology to reduce pressure on existing hotspots," expressed Deputy Prime Minister Fadillah.

To further position ASEAN as a single destination of choice and innovation hub, bridging digital infrastructure gaps among Member States is crucial.

The Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA) represents a game-changer toward regional integration in areas like cross-border payments, cybersecurity, digital skills, cabinet mobility, and emerging technologies such as AI.

With the ASEAN Digital Economy projected to triple from approximately USD 300 billion to almost USD 1 trillion by 2030, the greater adoption of digital technologies and a harmonized regulatory framework are expected to double this value contribution, unlocking more than USD 2 trillion in the ASEAN Digital Economy and benefiting all major sectors, including travel and tourism.

In his address, Datuk Seri Tiong King Sing, Malaysian Minister of Tourism, Arts, and Culture, said that this year's ATF is especially significant as Malaysia assumes the role of ASEAN Chairman.

He also urged ASEAN members to adopt the spirit of unity, emphasizing the importance of working together to build a sustainable, inclusive, and strong future for tourism.

TRAVEX

As part of the pre-ATF activities, the ASEAN Travel Exchange (TRAVEX) sessions were held from January 15 to 17 at Persada Johor International Convention Center.



Buyers and sellers from the region engaged in business interactions in an effort to boost ASEAN tourism at TRAVEX

TRAVEX served as a key platform for facilitating business interactions between buyers and sellers in the ASEAN tourism sector, contributing to the region's growing tourism network. It has been recognized as the most successful in its history.

It witnessed participation from over 320 international buyers representing 41 countries, including Bangladesh and other key source markets in Asia, Europe, and the Americas.

More than 220 sellers showcased tourism products and services from all ASEAN Member States, highlighting the region's diverse offerings.

A total of 10,000 business appointments were conducted during the event, facilitating partnerships and fostering intra-ASEAN and global

collaborations.

Bangladeshi delegates' takeaways

Invited by Tourism Malaysia Dhaka, a team of Bangladeshi delegates, comprising travel agents and media representatives, visited ASEAN Tourism Forum 2025 from January 15 to 20 in Johor Bahru, Malaysia.

Bangladeshi travel agents, who were registered as buyers, participated in fruitful business interactions with the sellers at ATF 2025, while media representatives also took part in the media briefings organized by ASEAN member states' respective National Tourism Organizations (NTO) on the sidelines of the event.

Speaking to The Bangladesh Monitor, Md Zahirul Alam Bhuiyan, CEO and Founder of Discovery Tours and Logistic, a buyer from Bangladesh, noted, ASEAN is one of the biggest destination travel markets for Bangladeshis-especially Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore-as direct flight connectivity is available between Bangladesh and these three ASEAN Member States.

According to the country's tourism stakeholders, the National Tourism Organizations of Bangladesh do not have any specific annual record of the exact number of Bangladeshi travelers visiting these destinations.

Nevertheless, they claimed the number in total would be quite significant, as all the travel agents respectively facilitate plenty of outbound trips for Bangladeshis to the aforementioned ASEAN Member States.

After attending ATF 2025, the travel agents of Bangladesh found even more exciting tourism products and markets that they perceive to be promising for Bangladeshi travelers in the coming days.

For instance, Zahirul Alam Bhuiyan expressed, Laos and Cambodia are beautiful destinations that Bangladeshis would love. These destinations are promising to sell in the Bangladesh market.

However, late and growing visa restrictions for Bangladeshis by ASEAN Member States including Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, over allegations of overstays, are making it difficult to promote these attractive destinations in the Bangladesh Market.

Even, the e-visa system that Thailand launched in January has complicated Thai visa applications, reducing ap-provals, while Indonesia currently requires interviews, local guarantors, and high visa fees.

Bhuiyan urged the Bangladesh government and the authorities of the country's tourism industry to see to the visa hurdles that are hugely impacting travel of leisure, business, and medical travelers as well as migrant workers alike.

On the other hand, Ashrafuz Zaman Uzzal from Delta Outdoors, another buyer from the country, while talking to The Bangladesh Monitor on the sidelines of ATF 2025, urged the tourism authorities and National Tourism Organizations of Bangladesh to follow the footsteps of ASEAN Member States in developing the tourism sector.

According to him, more promotions are required to promote Bangladesh as an attractive destination to visit, and so is advance planning to take appropriate initiatives on time.