

Regional tourism way forward for Bangladesh in post pandemic

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Dhaka : In these post pandemic times, long-haul travel to and from North America, Europe and Oceania is a far cry from the new normal reality. And the recent resurgence of the African Omicron variant might only make things even worse in this regard. Hence, for Bangladesh, regional or cross-border short haul tourism seems to be the only way forward right now and the most promising one.

The Pacific Asia Travel Association Bangladesh Chapter took it upon them to grab the opportunity in the right time to visit the regional countries for promoting Bangladesh's tourism potentials.

For this purpose, the association has targeted Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, China and Japan as the key source markets right now for running tourism promotion activities, said Shahid Hamid, Chairman of PATA Bangladesh Chapter while speaking to The Bangladesh Monitor.

In this expedition to brand Bangladesh in the regional market as an ideal and unique destination to visit, PATA Bangladesh started with the popular mountainous neighbour of ours Nepal, by arranging tourism promotion and B2B view exchange networking activities between the tourism stakeholders of the two countries.

Hosted by PATA Nepal Chapter, Nepal Tourism Board, and Himalaya Airlines, from November 16-21, a PATA Bangladesh Delegation of 17 members including Md Saiful Hassan, Deputy Director of Bangladesh Tourism Board; Shahid Hamid, Chairman and Taufiq Rahman, Secretary-General of PATA Bangladesh; and 10 tour operators visited Nepal's capital Kathmandu and popular tourist destination Pokhara to sit with their Nepalese counterparts for B2B tourism promotion purposes.

The joint collaboration between PATA Chapters of Nepal and Bangladesh was organised as a post-pandemic tourism recovery initiative to help in promoting each other's destinations through mutual tie-ups and collaboration for both inbound and outbound tourism between the two neighbouring nations.

The formal function and B2B session held on November 20 at Park Village Resort in Kathmandu included a presentation on Bangladesh's tourism products and services by Taufiq Rahman, Secretary General of PATA Bangladesh Chapter.

Later, business meetings between 12 Bangladeshi tour operators and 14 Nepali counterparts took place.

Then, the formal function kicked off with the welcome remarks from PATA Nepal Chairman, Bibhuti Chand Thakur, who emphasised the immediate focus to embrace the promotion of "regional travel", as an action plan, for reviving tourism which would be the most appropriate and convenient for travellers and destination management organisations or service providers.

He added, "Nepal-Bangladesh being so close to each other with one-hour flight, we, through this collaboration, expect unveiling a new way forward to strengthen our mutual inbound and outbound tourism business potentials."

At the formal event, Dr Dhananjay Regmi, CEO, Nepal Tourism Board and Mohammad Saiful Hasan, Deputy Director of Bangladesh Tourism Board, shared their destination insights and thoughts on the prospects of tourism exchange between Nepal and Bangladesh.

In his speech, Dhananjay Regmi, CEO of NTB, said, Bangladesh and Nepal should identify their respective unique products and promote those to each other. For instance, Buddhism is a common thread Bangladesh and Nepal can walk on. For this, Bangladesh can promote their Buddhism sites through tour packages to Nepalese tourists.

Since Bangladesh has sea and beaches, those and water sports activities can be a huge attraction to Nepalese people. Bangladesh can capitalise on that, CEO of NTB stressed.

He further noted that tourism not only includes holiday staycations. Urging to focus on the bigger picture, the NTB CEO said, skill exchange programmes between Bangladesh and Nepal can be another driver of travel. Since Bangladesh has a world-class garments industry, they can train Nepalese to better make their handicrafts that they are famous for.

At the event, Ujjwala Dali, the Head of Department (Brand and Service

Improvement)-Himalaya Airlines, also presented the operational plans of Himalaya Airlines to Bangladesh as well as other sectors in the region and beyond.

Addressing the formal function, Shahi Hamid, Chairman of PATA Bangladesh, said, in the new normal, Bangladesh has immense potential to be a "new" destination for Nepalese to explore and love, due to its unique attractions, from beaches in Cox's Bazar to hills in Bandarbans to mangrove forest in Sundarbans. The number of travellers between the two neighbours can be easily penetrated double with effective promotion and marketing initiatives, he claimed.

 The Chief Guest of the formal function, Nepal's Secretary of Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation, Yadav Koirala, in his speech, recommended that Nepal and Bangladesh both need to enhance its collaborative marketing and promotional events, organise FAM Trips, improve infrastructure, and develop extended tour packages for the tourists to flourish tourism in both countries.

He further assured that the Ministry of Tourism shall facilitate the necessary cooperation and support at the government level to increase the tourism engagements between Nepal and Bangladesh.

About the extended tour packages, Suresh Singh Budal, CEO of PATA Nepal Chapter explained, "If a tourist wishes to visit Nepal, we can offer an extended tour package of three nights four days or five nights six days which will include visits to Nepal and Bangladesh. Similarly, Bangladesh can offer such extended tour packages which will include visits to Nepal along with Bangladesh to their tourists."

Suresh also prioritised further business investment by Nepal in Bangladesh and vice-versa, be that for entertainment facilities or hotels. This will allow tourists to get the flavour of both countries in each other while it develops employment and foreign currency in both markets.

To-dos for regional tourism

Asked about the 'to-dos' to drive regional tourism growth in post pandemic, Shahid Hamid, Chairman of PATA Bangladesh Chapter, said, "The government must be proactive. Unlike the rest of the world, we have not announced any travel clearance yet. Key players such as Bangladesh Tourism Board and the Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism must be aggressive with goal-oriented actions to reopen tourism and develop it."

Taufiq Rahman, Secretary-General of PATA Bangladesh, claimed the country needs to form a tourism restarting plan for the entire year of 2022. He further mentioned that the Bangladesh government must consider on arrival tourist visa and e-visa facility to drive inbound tourism growth. Not to mention, on behalf of the private sector, tour operators must offer attractive tour packages to grow inbound arrivals to Bangladesh.

Syed Mahbubul Islam Bulu, President of Tourist Guide Association of Bangladesh, noted, the Bangladesh Tourism Board must have more freedom to take individual decision without the involvement of bureaucracy. For this purpose, Mahbubul Islam stressed that BTB must be free from the secretariat and a private sector CEO

should be appointed.

Another PATA Bangladesh member, Hafizur Rahman Khan, Proprietor of Holidaysdotcom, in his visit to Nepal, noticed a difference of hospitality and tour operating skills between them and Bangladesh. For this, he urged, Bangladesh Tourism Board to arrange trainings for the hospitality and tourism industry officials so that we can reach the regional benchmark.

High difference of airfare

Another key hindrance to tourism growth in Bangladesh as all tour operators stressed is the airfare difference between our flag carrier Biman Bangladesh Airlines and any other foreign carrier on a certain route. For instance, only two carriers - Biman Bangladesh Airlines and Himalaya Airlines - are currently operating flights on Dhaka-Kathmandu route. Now, Himalaya Airlines only charge around BDT 18 thousand per person while Biman charges double on the same route.

It is the same with hotel accommodation. The hotels you get at USD 30-40 in Nepal, the same standard of hotels cost USD 70-80 dollar in Bangladesh.

"These must be balanced in order to grow inbound tourists," demanded all the PATA Bangladesh Delegates.

The tourism industry involves airlines, hotels, travel agencies, tour operators and many other sectors. The development of this billion-dollar industry will generate plenty of revenues and employment. Hence, coordinated efforts by all concerned to revive it are a must now.