

Phuket in mass vaccination drive to reopen for quarantine-free travel from July

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Bangkok: The tourism sector in Thailand has jumped ahead of others to the head of the Covid-19 vaccination line, with the country's most popular resort island Phuket starting a mass inoculation program two months before the rest of the country.

The island of Phuket intends to deliver shots to at least 460,000 people - most of its population - as it prepares for reopening on July 1, when vaccinated overseas visitors will no longer be required to quarantine.

Phuket also has its own international airport and tourists would be able to roam the island freely without posing any coronavirus risk to the rest of Thailand's population.

"If we can build immunity for 70-80 percent of the population on the island, we can receive foreign tourists who have been vaccinated without the need for quarantine," Phuket's Vice Governor Piyapong Choowong said in a statement.



A view of Banana Beach in Phuket with tourists before the popular tourist destination was hit by the coronavirus pandemic

While medical workers, members of the cabinet and the elderly were the first to be vaccinated, Thailand's decision to prioritize Phuket over other parts of the country shows the central role of tourism in its economy.

Spending by foreign tourists amounted to 11-12 percent of GDP in pre-pandemic times and the sector has been devastated by the virus with 1.45 million jobs lost since last year.

Just 6.7 million foreign tourists visited Thailand in 2020, spending about USD 11 billion. That compares with nearly 40 million in 2019 when they spent USD 61 billion.

The government wants to see at least 100,000 tourists come to Phuket in the third quarter. It also hopes that as vaccinations worldwide progress, it will see a spike in demand in the fourth quarter and that nationwide some 6.5 million visitors will have spent THB 350 billion (USD 11 billion) by the end of the year.