

Thailand's tourism reopening with Phuket receives poor response

- A Monitor Desk Report

Date: 19 June, 2021



Dhaka: Thailand's planned reopening of its popular [resort island Phuket](#) to vaccinated visitors in July without quarantine requirements has met a lukewarm response, according to reports. Hotel bookings indicating expected occupancy are less than 20 percent so far.

The "Phuket Sandbox" initiative from July 1 will allow free movement on the renowned tourism-centric island for fully vaccinated tourists, with no quarantine on arrival. They will be given a green light to travel elsewhere in Thailand after 14 days.

However, due to uncertainty and constant rule changes, bookings are being deterred, said industry professionals of Thailand, according to reports. The plan will not be finalized until June late.

Thai Airways is on board, with direct flights from six European cities to Phuket from July, although it anticipates only a fraction of seats being filled, with about 100 passengers in the first week, the airline mentioned.

For an economy dependent on tourism, the new arrivals will not bring instant relief, although removal of the costly, two-week quarantine requirements that deterred tourists for more than a year shows some light of hope.

"We're seeing strong interest, particularly from the Middle East, UK, Europe and Scandinavia already, to return to Phuket gradually," Anthony Lark, President, Phuket Hotels Association said.

Thailand lost about USD 50 billion in tourism revenue last year when foreign arrivals plunged 83 percent to 6.7 million, from a record 39.9 million in 2019. The slump was a result of global travel curbs and Thailand's tough entry requirements.

The government hopes the Phuket Sandbox will draw 129,000 visitors to the country in the third quarter, compared to the average 3.3 million monthly arrivals to Thailand in 2019. Typically, a quarter of Thailand's visitors go to Phuket.

Thailand welcomed only 28,701 visitors in the first four months of this year.

The island's hotel association has projected a gradual increase in occupancy to 30 to 40 percent towards year-end, rising from 10 to 20 percent over July to October, which includes

local bookings.

Several major airlines are supporting the plan and offering direct flights, including Emirates, El Al, Air France, Qatar Airways, British Airways, and Cathay Pacific, according to the [Tourism Authority of Thailand](#) (TAT).

However, a few obstacles remain with outbound movement restrictions in some key markets, like China, Japan and Malaysia, while Thai health authorities have banned visitors from some high-risk countries, like India.

Critics also complain of onerous conditions, like mandatory swab tests, insurance coverage of a minimum of USD 100,000 for Covid-19 treatment, and the use of a tracking application.

For its part, Phuket has been racing to vaccinate 70 percent of its residents - a requirement for reopening - with 60 percent having received the first dose so far.

Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha on June 17 said Thailand was reopening to visitors within 120 days and called it a calculated but necessary risk. If the sandbox scheme goes smoothly, authorities plan to replicate it in destinations like Krabi and Koh Samui.

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