

Reduce visa fee to increase tourist arrivals in Bangladesh : PATA Chairman

- Ahmed Tanvir Shams

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Dhaka : Visa is a deterrent to tourism in this day and age. Visitors have to pay a staggering visa fee of USD 50.75 to enter Bangladesh, which is hindering the growth of tourist arrivals in the country. Therefore, reducing the visa fee is a must, if Bangladesh wishes to attract more foreign travellers.

Peter A Semone, Chairman of Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA), made the remarks as the chief guest, while addressing a seminar held at Sheraton Dhaka on October 6.

The seminar titled "Roadmap for Tourism Recovery: Present Bangladesh Context" was organised by the travel trade publication The Bangladesh Monitor.

In his speech, Semone further stressed that long-haul travellers wish to

visit multiple destinations at one go.

Therefore, Bangladesh should pair up with its neighbouring nations, like India and Thailand, to offer combined travel packages to long-haul travellers.

According to the PATA Chairman, Bangladesh should have a more specific selling point of tourism than "Beautiful Bangladesh".

He suggested to generate ideas on eco, culture and nature tourism. However, he urged the stakeholders to practice sustainable tourism.

For promotion, Semone reminded to use digital platforms more. Moreover, word of mouth, according to him, is the most effective promotional method globally.



Peter A Semone, Chairman, PATA

Hence, reducing inconvenience at airports and ensuring safety and security of visitors at tourist destinations of the country is essential.

On the other hand, media must be proactive and disseminate positive tourism news, claimed Semone.

The private sector, along with the media, can press the government for reforms in the travel sector, backing it up with proper data and insights, he added.

Tourism can be an effective catalyst to drive Bangladesh's overall development and meet the country's sustainable development goals.

Thus, the government has to be enlightened about its benefits by the private sector, stressed Semone.

For Bangladesh, there is no alternative to internal advocacy, according the PATA Chairman.

The private sector should lead the way, given that it is backed by the government with favourable policies and facilities.

Lastly, addressing the seminar, Peter A Semone assured full cooperation from PATA, given that the Bangladesh government seeks the association's support in tourism development.

Notably, PATA played a key role during Sri Lanka's tourism recovery, following a similar crisis like Bangladesh.

It may be mentioned here, the country's travel trade sector is currently reeling from the effects of the recent student-led mass uprising against the former government.

Thereby, at the seminar, tourism industry stakeholders urged the government to prepare a comprehensive crisis management plan to revive the country's travel sector.

For this purpose, the stakeholders presented a roadmap for the country's tourism industry recovery during the seminar, which included a number of measures.

The moves are: launching e-visa system, ensuring travellers' safety, undertaking public relations efforts, attending international fairs, appointing tourism officials in Bangladeshi missions a-broad and increasing the respective roles of Biman as well as NRBs in promotional activities.

Domestic driven market

At the seminar, Syed Ghulam Qadir, General Secretary of World Tourism Network Bangladesh Chapter, presented the keynote paper.

In the keynote address, Syed Ghulam Qadir noted, the country's hotel occupancy currently stands at a poor number-30-35 per cent-while many international bookings remain cancelled, since the toppling of the former government following a mass uprising in July.

Furthermore, despite immense potential, Bangladesh's tourism industry remains primarily driven by domestic travellers, expressed Qadir.

According to government data, Bangladesh welcomed 5,55,000 foreign visitors in 2023, when the tourism sector contributed 3.2 per cent to the country's GDP.

Key figures from the country's tourism, airline and hospitality sectors as well as media representatives, who attended the seminar, also spoke on the occasion.

Reform policies

"There is neither any tourism law nor any tourism budget in Bangladesh. Biman, as the flag carrier, should ensure quality service. More promotional efforts, such as organising roadshows in potential source markets, are required to place the country in the global map as an attractive destination," said Masud Hossain, Managing Director, Bengal Tours.

Reduce tour operator reg fee

"The new gazette regarding the registration of tour operators contains certain rules and conditions, which are difficult to comply with. A staggering BDT 50,000 fee, BDT 10,00,000 bank status certificate and BDT 3,00,000 security deposit are required for registration now. These are unfeasible for tour operators. These will discourage new entrepreneurs to enter the tourism industry of Bangladesh in the near future," claimed Rafeuzzaman, President of Tour Operators Association of Bangladesh.

Loans with easy terms for hotels

"To support the hotels during the ongoing crisis, the government can waive VAT and tax for hotels until they recover to their feet. It can also offer hotels duty-free access to foreign entertainment products. Moreover, to encourage new private entrepreneurs to invest in the hospitality sector and take it to further heights, the government can offer hotels loans with easy terms," noted Khabir Uddin Ahmed, President, Tourism Resort Industries Association of Bangladesh.

Press conferences to

promote

Tanzim Anwar, President of Aviation Tourism Journalist Forum of Bangladesh, stressed, "Stakeholders should communicate with the media to promote tourism during this slump period. To this effect, they can hold press conferences, as Crisis communication is key. The travel alerts imposed, following the mass uprising that ousted the former government, require diplomatic efforts to be lifted," claimed Tanzim Anwar.

Support air transport providers

"Aviation plays a key role in travel. However, policy issues are coming in

the way of ensuring affordable air travel for passengers, which in turn, is affecting tourist arrivals in the country. Jet fuel price in Bangladesh currently stands at BDT 111 a litre, with an increase of 150 per cent in the last three years, compared to the global average of BDT 90 per litre. If the government reduces the jet fuel price-which usually covers 50 per cent of the entire operational cost of an airline-the number of air travellers will definitely spike," stressed Kamrul Islam, General Manager-Public Relations, US-Bangla Airlines.

Target inbound

"The domestic market is prioritised over inbound travel in Bangladesh. However, if the government targets the inbound market and makes its approach towards tourism international, the domestic sector will also reap the benefits. Furthermore, at the potential tourist sites of the country, manpower training is crucial. Lastly, we should target the nearby countries, like India and China, as potential tourist generating source markets," according to Taufiq Rahman, CEO of Journey Plus.

Holistic approach

"A holistic approach, involving all subsectors of the travel trade, is required to take the industry far. The government must support the hospitality properties with incentives. There is no alternative to dialogue and collaboration between the private and the public sector. Officials at Bangladeshi missions abroad must carry out food diplomacy initiatives. Lastly, the tourism sector should not be allocated any less of a budget than the civil aviation industry," urged Shakawath Hossain, CEO of Unique Hotel and Resorts.

Building Bangladesh's image

"Building the country's image as an ideal destination to visit is vital to increase the number of tourist arrivals in Bangladesh. There is no alternative to it, if the country seeks development of all the subsectors of the travel trade, including aviation, tourism and hospitality. The more Bangladesh will be branded worldwide as a potential travel destination, the more tourists the country will welcome. By default, there will be an increase in passenger numbers as well as guest footfall at the hotels," explained Shahid Hamid, Chairperson of PATA Bangladesh Chapter.

Reposition BD in market

"It is a difficult time for Bangladesh, the hoteliers and stakeholders. Everyone concerned needs to work hand in hand to recover from the crisis together.

Every country has unique selling points. Bangladesh has amazing culture and nature.

Now the country requires to reposition itself in the market, whether for business travel or leisure. Only then, travel and hospitality sectors can better serve the country and the communities can reap the benefits," advised Docu Everen De Vries, Cluster General Manager, Radisson Blu Dhaka and Chattogram.

Govt willpower required

Kazi Wahidul Alam, Editor of The Bangladesh Monitor, moderated the seminar on tourism recovery.

"The primary reasons behind the fact that Bangladesh is far behind the desired tourism goals are negligence, bureaucracy and the absence of political will," he said during his address.

"For instance, if the government prioritises tourist arrivals from other countries, considers it as a foreign currency earning industry, and adopts policy accordingly, the growth of inbound tourism will receive a big push," he added.

"However, this has not happened over the years and favourable policy, proper planning and management are still missing," sighed Kazi Wahidul Alam.