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Case Study 2: Religious Tourism Experiences in South East Asia

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Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce religious tourism in South East Asia, examine the tourist motivations to visit religious (Buddhist) sites, and to address the role of religious tourism in regional development amongst members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). South East Asia is home to numerous religious sites, pilgrim centres and religious festivals. However, while South East Asian nations have strong geographical, cultural, historical and archaeological links and social similarities, there are strong political, ethnic and religious boundaries. The chapter concludes by exploring the strategies required to overcome barriers to develop religious tourism in the region. Such strategies include the need for transparent objectives, community consultation and integrated national and regional plans.

Religion has inspired, and continues to inspire, the construction of spectacular festivals, monuments, geographic movements, forms of art and architecture across the world. Countries and destinations from across the globe have been seeking to leverage cultural heritage to attract religious or faith-based tourists. While the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2011) estimates that 300 to 330 million tourists visit the world's key pilgrimage sites every year, religious tourism has broadened to encompass faith-based conventions, religious cruising and visits to religious tourist attractions.

From Western spiritual tourists in Varanasi to pilgrims on routes to Santiago de Compostela, religious tourism has attracted the attention of authors, consultants, destination marketing organizations, planners, movie makers and academics. While the phenomenon has manifested itself very visibly in Europe

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and the Middle East, through documentaries such as *The Way* (2010), which honours the Camino de Santiago, or *Next Year Jerusalem* (2013), religious tourism to South East Asia has received far less attention. This is despite South East Asia (SEA) being home to numerous religious attractions associated with world religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. From the Borobudur Temple Compounds in Indonesia to the Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary in Vietnam and the town of Luang Prabang in Laos, the region has numerous spectacular religious sites. It is also the home to pilgrim centres such as the San Agustin Church in the Philippines and religious festivals such as the Tamil Hindu celebration of Thaipusam in Malaysia.

As the geopolitical, cultural and economic organization called the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) prepares to become a single market in 2015, this chapter explores religious tourism in South East Asia by introducing the region and its boundaries, before exploring the recent development of religious tourism. The chapter then, by way of a case study, explores the development of religious tourism in Thailand, before investigating the opportunities and challenges for the future integration and growth of this important niche.

South East Asia

Before seeking to understand what 'religion' in South East Asia is, we must first lay out the boundaries of what we mean by South East Asia (SEA). We use SEA to describe a geographic region that includes: Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, the Philippines, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei and Vietnam.

This is notwithstanding the fact that SEA is often incorporated into other regional blocks. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), for example, include SEA in a broader 'East Asia and the Pacific' region that includes Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Fiji, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, China, Japan, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Republic of Korea, Timor-Leste, Vanuatu, China, Hong Kong and Macao.

Given the regional context of this chapter, juxtaposing the tourism experiences of SEA into a coherent whole, we argue this perspective underlies the degree of movement toward broader regional integration amongst the aforementioned countries. Although the region has long been divided by religion, language, ethnicity, political and economic systems, as well as historical rivalries, inter-regional movement through new roads, bridges and railways, the rise of inexpensive air travel, new means of communication and the emergence of transnational organizations such as ASEAN have meant it is again becoming the 'crossroads of Asia'.

ASEAN was formed in 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Brunei, and has expanded to include all South East Asian countries except Timor-Leste (see Fig. 13.1). With a population of 593 million in 2010, 99.8% of South East Asia's population lives in ASEAN countries (Jones, 2013), making it the third largest population block in the world, after China and India. A cornerstone of regional economic progress as well as political and social cohesion, ASEAN has sought to develop a common market

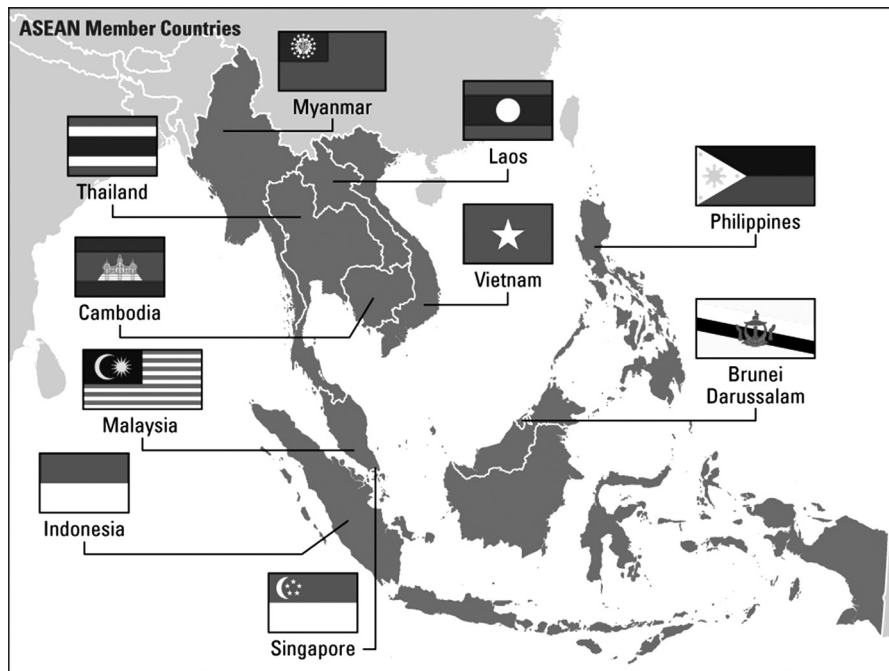


Fig. 13.1. Map of South East Asia, along with ASEAN membership.

in the region, which includes the free movement of people for the purposes of travel and tourism. Developments such as the ASEAN Single Aviation Market (ASEAN-SAM), regular meetings between ASEAN tourism ministers, and the development of a regional common visa have meant tourism has become a pillar industry across the region despite disparities in GDP, infrastructural development and visitor numbers. This success was built on the Manila Declaration of 15 December 1987, which expressed ASEAN's determination to encourage intra-ASEAN travel and strengthen ASEAN's tourism industry. The ASEAN Tourism Agreement signed on 4 November 2002 in Phnom Penh, Cambodia by the heads of state/government included objectives such as cooperating in facilitating travel into and within ASEAN and enhancing the development and promotion of ASEAN as a single tourism destination (ASEAN, 2002). This was strengthened by the introduction and current implementation of the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan (ATSP) 2011–2015. There has also been development through the ASEAN Mutual Recognition Arrangement (MRA) and the ASEAN Tourism Qualifications Equivalent Matrix to facilitate the free flow of services and skilled labour within ASEAN member countries.

Tourism in South East Asia

Greater regional economic progress as well as political and social cohesion has led to greater domestic, regional and inbound tourism. Indeed, tourism

as a sector has been used to analyse regionalism in SEA, given that it can be seen as a catalyst for regional integration and cooperation (Chheang, 2013). Work towards regional standards for green hotels, homestays, spa services and community-based tourism alongside joint promotion and marketing is enhancing tourism through increasing the quality of tourism facilities, human resources and services. Success has followed this regional approach, with ASEAN member countries benefiting from strong intra-regional and international demand. In 2013, ASEAN had 99.2 million tourists, an increase of 11.73% from 2012 (see Fig. 13.2). According to Mazumder *et al.* (2013), double-digit growth in tourist arrivals during 2001–2011 was achieved in Myanmar (26%), Thailand, Cambodia (20%) and Vietnam (19%), Singapore, Brunei Darussalam (13%) and the Philippines (11%). During the same time period, Malaysia received the highest number of visitor arrivals (203.2 million), followed by Thailand (145.5 million) and Singapore (93.8 million). Other country shares were Indonesia 62.7 million, Vietnam 35.8 million, the Philippines 29.9 million, Cambodia 16.8 million, Laos 13.5 million, Myanmar 2.5 million and Brunei Darussalam 1.7 million.

Religious Tourism in South East Asia

While tourism in general has emerged to be one of the driving forces in creating de facto regionalism in SEA, the increase in domestic, regional and inbound tourism includes cultural tourism, and more specifically religious-oriented travel and tourism. Its role in contemporary SEA will intensify as the overall demand for religious travel by people of faith increases. However, research, development and promotion of religious tourism are still at an early stage in the region. Whilst academic study has traditionally focused on religious tourism in Europe, the Middle East and South Asia, in the past half-decade SEA has been a focus

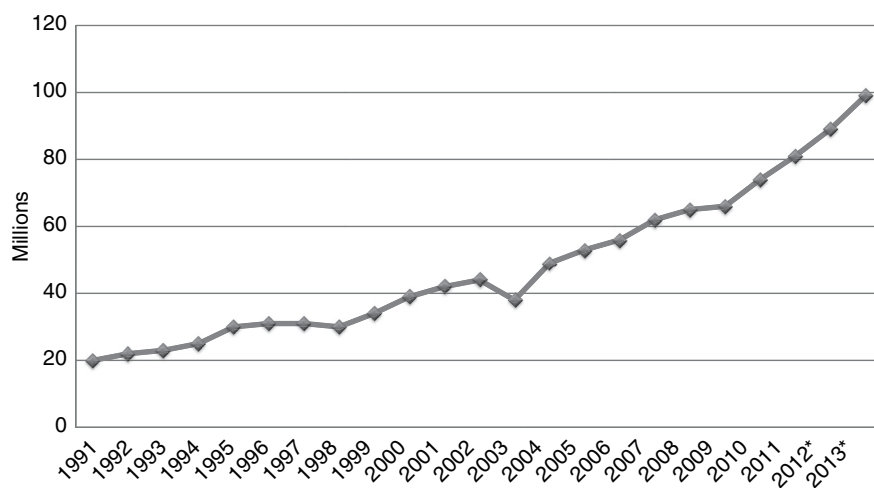


Fig. 13.2. ASEAN international visitor arrivals 1991–2013.

for conferences and investigations by academics, practitioners, policy-makers, consultants and researchers. From UNWTO's 2011 *Religious Tourism in Asia and the Pacific* document (UNWTO, 2011), which outlined a diverse religious landscape, to the 'Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia' lecture series at Humboldt University in Berlin (23 October 2013), questions regarding the challenges of linking tourism and religion in a broad regional framework have arisen. From domestic tourism to sites of sacred power and national remembrance to regional pilgrimages by international 'spiritual' tourists, religious tourism in SEA is broad, diverse and often contradictory. It is a shifting entity, its broad roots and dynamics making the use of the term 'religion' in SEA slippery to approach both empirically and conceptually. To provide an entry into this aspect of the chapter, we must first seek to understand the wide variety of beliefs, ideas, discourses and interests that underpin the term 'religion' in SEA, given it is often freely and broadly applied (and misapplied).

Talal Asad (1993, p. 29) rejects a universal anthropological definition of religion by arguing 'there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constitutive elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is in itself the historical product of discursive processes'. The argument that the anthropological definition of religion is a historical product of European (Western) Christian discursive processes has been highly influential, challenging researchers seeking a working, if only heuristic and provisional, definition that can be used as a unit of analysis and a basis for scholarship to incorporate a more holistic understanding of religion and religiosity. The study of religion in SEA cannot be separated from its history, and in particular the role of Western imperialism and colonialism (DuBois, 2009), with Western religious ideas continuing to influence our understanding of both religion and religious tourism. However, this chapter uses a transdisciplinary approach to outline the peculiar dynamics of religiosity in South East Asia, and the ways in which these dynamics mediate change and continuity in tourism experiences. We follow UNWTO (2011) in noting that the philosophies of the four major religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity) are not conflicting if we examine their spiritual aspects and bases. Therefore, this section incorporates a broader religiosity that includes spiritual tourism, and some of the minor religions in the region.

There is a perception that because of internal rivalries, territorial disputes, history and authoritarian elements, ASEAN members are not integrated in the way that the European Union (EU) is. South East Asia is indeed a diverse area fused together by Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and Christian religions, which in turn reflect Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Dutch, British, French and American cultural influences. It is a history that spawned many religious tourism sites, festivals and pilgrimages, but also created historical differences and rivalries. Recent sectarian violence between Buddhists and Muslims in Myanmar and between Christians and Muslims in the Philippines, and tension between Malay Muslims and ethnic Chinese in Malaysia, highlights how history is never far from the surface when politics and religion go hand in hand.

At first glance, religious-oriented travel and tourism in SEA would seem to be a large but segmented market, given that within the region there are

nominally Marxist countries, Laos and Vietnam, who do not expressly market religious tourism, as well as Thailand, which has successfully diversified its economy through offering everything from high-end to volunteer-oriented religious tourism, and Muslim majority countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia. Within each of these countries, various 'ethnic religions' interact with so-called 'world religions' such as Buddhism and Hinduism in various ways and places. Although ASEAN have strengthened trade links, improved infrastructure, including roads, railways, airports and ports, and encouraged cross-border cooperation, there is no pan-South East Asian religious identity. While individual countries seek greater tourism numbers and the valuable foreign exchange earnings that come with tourism, valuable tourism resources linked to religion are often not targeted. The ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan (2011–2015), for example, does not mention religion, whilst statistics on religious tourism are hidden, limited and vague. This is partly because of the close links between culture (national identity) and religion, where it is often difficult to separate distinct motivations. According to UNWTO (2011), the exception may be in the specific case of pilgrimages and religious festivals. As practically all Asian archaeological monuments have some connotation for religion, there is a need for more precise information on religious tourism as opposed to cultural tourism (UNWTO, 2011).

In 2015, the member countries of ASEAN will form a single market and production base under the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). Similar to the increased flow of citizens in the European Union, the opening of these borders will encourage religious adherents, pilgrims and travellers to cross national borders. Clearly, religious tourism and regionalism are intertwined, with dynamics of movement and place-making facilitating connectivity, intertwining circuits and similarity. UNWTO (2011) argues, for example, that the importance of Asia and the Pacific in religious tourism is seen by the fact that of an estimated 600 million religious and spiritual voyages, 40% were in Europe and around half in Asia. To highlight the opportunities for growth, we present the case of Buddhist tourism in Thailand, and the emergence of Buddhist circuits in South East Asia.

Short Introduction to Buddhism

Before discussing why Buddhist temples and meditation centres in SEA have become popular tourism destinations, we need to learn about what Buddhism is. While considering the history and principles, we can think about why Buddhism has been successful in facilitating tourism in the region. Buddhism originated in India, then spread widely in Asia (Reat, 1994). It can be broadly divided into Theravada and Mahayana traditions. Mahayana originated in India later than Theravada (Jones, 2003). Theravada Buddhism became popular in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand while the Mahayana tradition became popular in China, Korea, Vietnam, Japan, Tibet and Nepal (Reat, 1994).

While Theravada and Mahayana retain a unity in core Buddhist teachings, 'they evolved distinctive forms and philosophies' (Jones, 2003, p. 11). For example, the Theravada school only emphasizes 'self-liberation', but the Mahayana school stresses helping other sentient beings as well as one's self-liberation (Dhammananda *et al.*, 1987). Theravada means 'the doctrine of the elders'

(Gellner, 2001, p. 45). As one form of pre-Mahayana Buddhism, Theravada has been the most conservative school (Gellner, 2001). Compared to Mahayana, Theravada does not strongly emphasize intellectual meditation. Meanwhile, Mahayana means 'Great Vehicle' or 'Great Way' (Jones, 2003), and the philosophy of Mahayana is often considered as 'the intellection of advanced meditative insight, accessing a profound level of consciousness' (Jones, 2003, p. 11). It provides 'a vital foundation for a socially engaged Buddhism, in terms of both intellectual understanding and insightful action' (Jones, 2003, p. 11). However, in both traditions, a primary principle is *Karma*, which is the accumulation of good and evil that we have done in this life and previous ones, and which determines one's fate in life or rebirth (Spiro, 1966). Buddhism stands 'in its place as one of the universally acknowledged moral, intellectual and spiritual systems guiding all humanity into the third millennium of the common era' (Reat, 1994, p. 293).

Buddhism reached SEA both directly from India and indirectly from Central Asia and China. People in SEA learned Buddhism as a result of increased contact with the Indian merchants who came to the region for trading. Under their influence, the local people started to practise a mixture of Buddhism and Hinduism, while retaining at the same time many of their old beliefs and customs. From the 9th to the 13th centuries, the Mahayana Buddhist and Hindu Khmer Empire dominated much of the South East Asian region. Under the Khmer, temples were built across Cambodia and in neighbouring Thailand. Angkor was at the centre of this development, with a temple complex which had, at its height, over a million inhabitants, making it the world's biggest city at the time.

Currently, there are around 200 million Buddhists in SEA, making it the second largest religion in the area after Islam, which has 240 million adherents living across the region in Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. Therefore, around 35 to 38% of the global Buddhist population resides in SEA. Most countries (i.e. Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar) follow the Theravada tradition. Singapore and Vietnam, in comparison, follow Mahayana Buddhism, which is accompanied by Daoism and Chinese folk religion in most Chinese communities. Buddhist principles are based on reasoning and the main purpose is achieving nirvana, through intellectual meditation. In Buddhism, individuals should follow their own path. There are no entities like the Catholic pope, the Christian Bible, or baptism. Buddhism therefore gives adherents a high level of freedom and this lack of a central orthodoxy or doctrine attracts some westerners (Timothy and Olsen, 2006). Practising meditation does not require one to be Buddhist (Kabat-Zinn, 1994); thus, non-Buddhist westerners visiting temples or meditation centres in Asia may not be motivated by religious reasons but by the desire for spiritual growth, self-fulfilment, ethical value or philosophy. Unlike other religions, Buddhism and its temples are more open to non-adherents. These unique characteristic can be an attraction and motivation to many Western tourists who want to mentally relax and recharge their spirituality.

Following Vukonic's (1996) assertion that people increasingly want to satisfy their spiritual needs, Possamai (2000) notes that urban, educated and middle-class people are increasingly involved in alternative religious activities, and engage in yoga, meditation, and consultation with alternative health practitioners. Western people who feel *dislocated and rootless* often seek to find new orientation in life, and may seek the true meaning of their life through

spiritual tourism. In fact, spiritual tourism can be considered as 'the oldest and most prevalent type of travel in human history' (Kaelber, 2006, p. 49), and it has grown substantially over the last few decades (Timothy and Olsen, 2006). Destination marketing organizations (DMOs) are promoting tourism at religious sites with the goal of diversifying their tourism product offerings, rejuvenating failing economies and generating funding for preservation and conservation (Russell, 1999). DMOs have opened their doors to Buddhist culture, through campaigns aimed at Western markets promoting Buddhist tourism in Thailand, Cambodia and Myanmar (Philp and Mercer, 1999; Agrawal *et al.*, 2010; UNWTO, 2011; Ministry of Hotels and Tourism, 2013). These countries offer not only Buddhist temples but also yoga, traditional healing, spas and meditation centres to visitors with an interest in spiritual well-being. In addition, the history, iconography and art associated with Buddhism are found in numerous important archaeological sites in these countries, and are becoming major attractions for Western tourists (Rasul and Manandhar, 2009; Choe *et al.*, 2013).

Buddhist Tourism in Thailand

Some established Buddhist sites, such as Borobudur, a historic Buddhist temple complex and the largest Buddhist monument in Indonesia, have become flagship tourist attractions in the region. This site and Angkor in Cambodia are similar in their cognizance of the fact that their continued success is based somewhat on fulfilling tourists' spiritual thirst and cultural curiosity. However, Thailand has developed the most proactive winning strategy to promote religious tourism (UNWTO, 2011) by being one of the few Asian countries in the region that facilitates a range of religious tourism experiences. Information on religious attractions and festivals is relatively easy to obtain through guidebooks, websites and pamphlets. While essentially Buddhist (94.6%) and home to a number of destinations, temples, stupas, festivals and statues, it has also succeeded in including meditation and wellness tourism into the gamut of religious products (UNWTO, 2011).

Despite recent political crises, the number of international tourists visiting Buddhist temples in Thailand has shown steady growth of 10–20% annually (Chinmaneevong, 2008). Identifying the scope for regional and international tourism opportunities, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) has focused on places of importance for Buddhist sites, and has partnered in joint promotion with Thai Airways to offer Buddhist Circuit Tours. In 2014, together with Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives (India), they organized a religious tour for Buddhists to celebrate Makha Bucha Day, which fell on 14 February. However, TAT religious tourism products are not only limited to Buddhist temples, but also offer yoga centres, meditation centres and even massage places. Thai massage, for example, has attracted tourists for the quality of massage, and it is considered as a spiritual practice based on Buddhist philosophy (James, 1984; Kogiso, 2012).

Chiang Mai, Thailand's northern capital, is considered as the 'city of a hundred temples', of which 12 to 15 are included in Buddhist tourist circuits.

The range of temples includes Doi Suthep, Wat Phra Kaeo (Temple of the Emerald Buddha), Wat Phra Chetuphon (Wat Pho), Wat Arun and Wat Suthat. Thus, Chiang Mai has turned into a major religious tourism destination owing to its high number of Buddhist temples, and the opportunity it provides to approach monks, talk to them and learn about Buddhism practices (UNWTO, 2011). In 2011, Chiang Mai represented Thailand by becoming a UNESCO cultural city. Among the numerous temples, Wat Phra That Doi Suthep or 'Doi Suthep' is particularly popular because of its association with a 7th-century Lawa chieftain called King Luang Viranga, who converted to Buddhism and became a monk (see Fig. 13.3). It remains an important Buddhist monastery, and local people revere the mountain temple as a destination of spiritual significance and have seen it become an important pilgrimage site (Pholpoke, 1998). Because of its location and significance, many international tourists visit the temple as part of Buddhist circuit tours to Thailand.

In recent years, TAT has increasingly promoted 'meditation tourism', with its tourist literature drawing heavily on modern Buddhist discourses (Schedneck, 2011). Brochures in English list meditation centres such as the Young Buddhists Association of Thailand, the Dhamma Kamala Meditation Centre, the International Buddhist Meditation Centre, Wat Mahathat Yuwaratransarit and Wat Pathumawanaram in Bangkok, as well as meditation centres in Chon Buri, Kanchanaburi, Nonthaburi, Lop Buri, Ubon Ratchathani, Surat Thani and Chiang Mai (see Fig. 13.4). The TAT website also contains a list of all meditation centres



Fig. 13.3. Sacred white elephant, Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Chiang Mai.

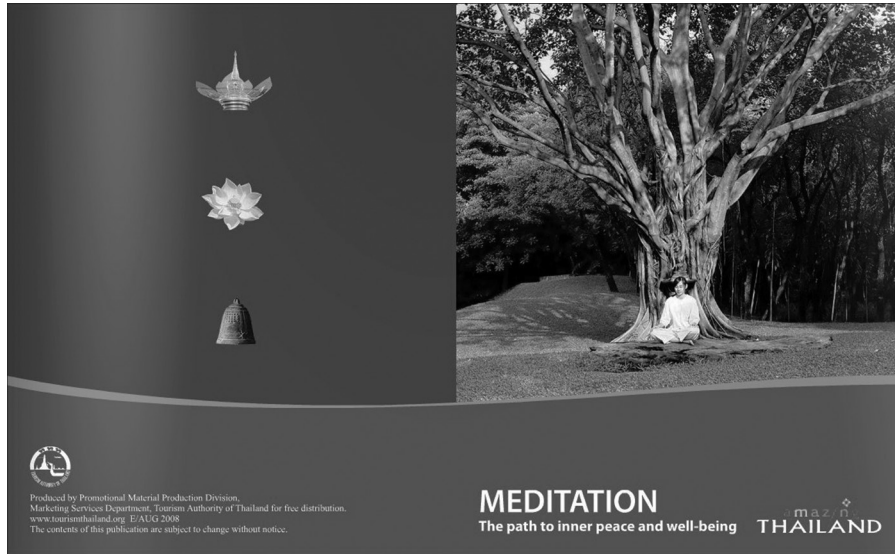


Fig. 13.4. Tourism Authority of Thailand Booklet, 2008. 'Meditation in Thailand: The Path to Inner Peace and Well-being.' Available at: <http://issuu.com/diethelmtravel/docs/meditation>.

and agencies specialized in yoga and meditation as well as attractions and temples that might interest international travellers (UNWTO, 2011).

Other countries have sought to replicate Thailand's success, with Indonesia currently leveraging Borobudur, a World Heritage Site which still retains spiritual significance for many Buddhists in the region. While Borobudur is the Buddhist temple complex, Prambanan Temple highlights its links with Hinduism, which continues to flourish in some of the Indonesian islands with Bali as the most representative example (UNWTO, 2011). However, discrimination, sectarianism, religious and ethnic hostilities have stifled efforts to develop broad-based religious tourism outside Thailand. Furthermore, links between countries remain poor, and do not seem to extend beyond the ASEAN Tourism website (<http://www.aseantourism.travel>). From distrust to poor strategic choices, the potential to develop new tourism products based on religious heritage has failed, including initiatives which have faltered like the 'Malay Kingdoms and Sultanates' promotion which would have included Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia (UNWTO, 2011).

Thailand has advantages, including its physical infrastructure, education and social services, and its international standard airports and roads, the development of new products around Buddhism and spirituality, an ambitious marketing budget and a 'scientific' approach have helped transform religion into an important tourism (economic) asset. The infrastructure, societal tolerance and relative stability of Thailand have also attracted international tour operators. Thailand has also been at the forefront of creating transnational Buddhist tourist circuits with India, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos. Given the aforementioned advantages, it has also sought to attract Muslims, and promote itself as a place

where food is prepared according to Islamic precepts, where 'halal spas' offer separate facilities for women and men and shopping malls have Muslim prayer rooms. A 2010 video, 'Muslim Friendly Thailand' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ToI7nuKmQDM>), was developed by the Thai tourism authority's Dubai office to promote travel to Thailand.

Cooperative Regional Religious Tourism Development

So successfully has spiritual and religious tourism competed in an increasingly global competitive and cluttered tourism environment that international localities, regions and nations have, after assessment of their inventory of resources, joined marketing campaigns. Examples include the Cultural Routes programme in the European Union, which promotes the cultural, religious and humanist heritage of Europe, despite its diversity. This is an approach that could diversify, differentiate and rejuvenate tourism in SEA, providing a competitive edge, and kick-start a tourism industry in ASEAN members such as Myanmar and Vietnam. By designing a product to meet the needs of religious tourists, destinations can successfully diversify their tourism industry, if a destination, attraction or event can 'fit'. As religious tourism develops across the globe, the demand to develop a more regional approach that creates connections across the territory will increase.

Regionalization can lead to the development of a regional approach and thereby facilitate intra-regional and international tourism. However, there are issues regarding overt competition and sometimes antagonism between ASEAN countries and destinations. The expansion and economic impact of religious tourism relies on countries within ASEAN cooperating rather than competing with each other. Tourism, like any other economic activity, is scale sensitive, with cooperation among geographically proximate countries potentially exploiting economies of scale in the supply of tourist goods and services. This will, in the long term, enhance competitiveness by reducing costs and enhancing efficiency (Rasul and Manandhar, 2009). Collaboration enables resource and risks to be shared, facilitates coordinated policies, improves trust, confidence and mutual understanding and exploits commonalities and complementarities. By capitalizing on 'collaborative advantages' rather than on individual 'competitive advantages' (Bramwell and Sharman, 1999; Bramwell and Lane 2000), collaboration can also help reduce adversarial conflicts. The benefits of a successful partnership approach could lead to greater cost-effective cross-border marketing and promotional programmes, tourism clusters spanning different countries and cross-border mobility of skilled tourism professionals. From the strong Theravada Buddhist traditions in Cambodia and Thailand, and celebrations like the Makha Bucha, which commemorates the ordainment of Buddha's first 1250 disciples, to Islamic feasts such as the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad and Eid Ul-Adha, the opportunities for a more regional approach to events and religious sites are apparent.

The lack of will, internal conflict and lack any form of strategic outlook for religious tourism development in some ASEAN countries clearly reflects the lack of integration. While strong infrastructural investment has made Thailand,

along with Singapore and Malaysia, favoured destinations, poor road and rail links and a lack of investment in airports have hindered tourism development in other countries such as Myanmar and Laos. At a regional level, some member countries have taken initiatives to reform the tourism sector, but must do more to promote integration and assist ASEAN nations trying to kick-start religious tourism. However, full realization of this reform needs time to mobilize resources in the face of broad resource constraints in some member countries. The structure of the tourism industry in SEA needs to be refined and linked to all the stakeholders. ASEAN, as a geopolitical player, needs to take a leading role in reducing geopolitical tensions and rivalries and formulating precise policies and implementing them in a manner similar to the European Union. Therefore, they need a cooperative and integrated approach to develop, plan, manage and promote religious tourism to reduce the economic and social imbalances that exist between different members (Pearce, 1989). In addition, governments, private sectors and other stakeholders should also work together in formulating policies and strategies to enhance the economic impacts to be felt at all levels of the economies (Wong *et al.*, 2011a; 2011b), a strategy that will help maintain and enhance their cultural and religious heritage.

Summary

The SEA region has an incredible number of religious events, pilgrim centres and religious festivals attracting domestic, regional and international tourists. Its centuries-old civilizations, rich and unique cultural diversity, splendid archaeological monuments and historic sites of religious significance make the region a very attractive place for intra-regional as well as international tourists. The purpose of this chapter was to introduce religious tourism in South East Asia, examine the international tourists' motivations and attraction to religious (Buddhist) sites, and address the role of religious tourism in regional development amongst members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The chapter also explored the strategies required to overcome barriers to develop religious tourism collectively in South East Asia. While South East Asian nations have strong geographical, cultural, historical and archaeological links and social similarities, there are strong political, ethnic and religious boundaries. Our assessment suggests ASEAN countries need to formulate transparent objectives through community consultation, integrate these objectives into national plans, and develop a bottom-up approach. As the area becomes a single market, the role of ASEAN should extend beyond an economic market, to pay attention to the interplay of different religions, ethnicities and cultures. Religious tourism could play an important role as a tool in the subsequent regionalization of this territory.

South East Asia has numerous spectacular religious sites from the Borobudur Temple Compounds in Indonesia to the Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary in Vietnam and the town of Luang Prabang in Laos. The region offers not only Buddhist temples but also yoga, traditional healing, spas and meditation centres with an interest in spiritual well-being. The history, iconography and art associated with religions are becoming major attractions for Western tourists. Non-Buddhist westerners visiting temples may not be motivated by religious reasons but by the desire for

spiritual growth, self-fulfilment, ethical value or philosophy. Unlike other religions, Buddhism and its temples are very open to non-adherents.

Thailand has developed the most proactive winning strategy to promote religious tourism by being one of the few Asian countries in the region that facilitates a range of religious tourism experiences. Its advantages include physical infrastructure, education and social services. Its international standard airports and roads, the development of new products, an ambitious marketing budget and a 'scientific' approach have helped transform religion into an important tourism (economic) asset.

ASEAN needs a cooperative and integrated approach to develop, plan, manage and promote religious tourism to reduce the economic and social imbalances that exist between different members.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the unique characteristics of Buddhism that can attract non-Buddhist westerners?
2. Why have non-Buddhist westerners increasingly visited temples in South East Asia? What are their motivations?
3. Discuss how Thailand has been more successful in religious tourism development than its neighbouring ASEAN countries.
4. Why do ASEAN members need to cooperate to develop their own religious tourism products?
5. If you planned to visit South East Asia this summer, which religious sites would you visit, and why?

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