

Full moon party over for Thai tourism boom



Thousands of partygoers dance on the beach during the Full Moon Party on Ko Phangan island in the southern Thai province of Surat Thani, December 14, 2016. Source: AFP

After a decade of booming growth in Australians visiting Thailand, tourists are now choosing alternative destinations.

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The number of overseas trips by Australian travellers to Thailand has dropped to its lowest level in more than five years.

After the Thai king's death in October, the country's famed party scene also may not pick up again during the year-long mourning period.

Trips to Thailand by Australians dropped to 42,000 in November and are down significantly from a monthly peak of 53,000 in 2012, according to ABS figures released this week.

By comparison, visits to Indonesia grew by more than 20,000 per month to around 100,000, and trips to China, Japan and Singapore also increased over the past three years. Visits to tropical or beachside destinations such as Fiji, Vietnam and the Philippines have also grown steadily.

Dr David Beirman, senior lecturer in tourism at the University of Technology, Sydney, said competition for tourists between countries in Asia was becoming “extraordinary”, drawing visitors away from Thailand.

An increase in accommodation prices due to demand from a growing number of Chinese tourists has also made the destination less attractive for budget-conscious Australians, according to Dr Patrick L'Espoir Decosta from the Australian National University.

"It means a 'not very expensive destination' for Australians is now off the map," he said.

Professor Lindsay Turner from Victoria University believes the pricing of the local Thai Baht currency has not factored in the lower Australian dollar.

"Prices in Thailand have gone up in the last year by a third, and that's starting to make them less competitive with countries like Vietnam which is cheaper," he said.

However, economics is not the only thing causing more Australians to travel elsewhere.

The death of King Bhumibol in October - along with a one year mourning period - has also caused Australians to stay away.

“There’s a one year mourning period and the Thai government and the Thai tourism authority have been telling people to tone down their partying,” Dr Beirman said.



Vajiralongkorn becomes Thailand's new king

"A lot of that group of Aussies that go for that 'boozing party'-type holiday have decided Thailand isn't the place to go, and a lot of events which attract the 'boozy type' people, like the full moon festival, were cancelled."

The October full moon party in Koh Phangan was cancelled and the November event was marked by a sombre ceremony in homage to the late king.

Dr Decosta said the response to the king's death reflected the tension in contemporary Thailand, where the importance of tourism has to be balanced with traditional customs.

"It's the cultural clash - the country relies a lot on tourism, yet its values and the way it deals with its king's death around bereavement and grieving is very much in the face of tourists who come for the leisure and relaxation."

Dr Beirman also noted cheap airlines servicing Australia were becoming more common in rival Asian destinations, like Cebu in the Phillipines.

Australia's waning Thai taste is in contrast to growing numbers of tourists from other countries visiting Thailand. Between 2014 and 2015, international visitors grew by 20 per cent according to figures from the Thai Department of Tourism.

Dr Beirman expected tourism to Thailand to pick up again, though predicted future growth would be slower than what was experienced in the past decade prior to the downturn.

"Thailand is still going to get a lot of Australian tourists, but I think the competition now is much greater than it used to be," he said.