

# RESTORING THAILAND'S TOURISM DESTINATION IMAGE IN THE WAKE OF THE RECENT POLITICAL CRISES: A FEW PROPOSALS

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## **Abstract**

*As is now well understood, the tourism industry is in a crisis as the result of successive political uncertainty and associated violence. Compounding that issue are external crises, such as the global economic meltdown and H1N1 virus (Swine flu) which followed earlier crises of Avian Flu, and mad cow disease. To deal with such calamities, tourism planning and crisis management methodology have been developed but less effectively applied. This is the case with Thailand that has recently been badly affected by negative and sometimes less-than-accurate reports in the popular press and international media on its political crises: crises or disasters? This is a fine delineation but as this paper shows, a distinction between disasters and crises needs to be made as these words are often used interchangeably when in-fact they are unique. This paper further argues adoption of DESTCON; a scale for classifying crises and disasters. To this end, it proposes adoption of DESTCON as a recognized ranking scale for crises. If media, embassies, and all tourism authorities adopted this scale to accurately inform tourists of the nature and severity of conditions at the site of crises, much of the spin would be removed and much less damage done by sensationalizing the news. This paper concludes with a number of suggestions to more effectively overcome the effects of the current crisis and urges interested parties to continue the discussion and debate.*

**Key words:** *Tourism Crises, Tourism Disasters, DESTCON.*

## **Introduction**

To simply state that the December 2008 and April 2009 political crises have dealt a blow on Thailand's tourism destination image would sound like an understatement given the magnitude of the post-crisis damages inflicted upon the country. How much damage has been inflicted? With only six weeks having elapsed since the most recent crisis erupted, it is too early to quantify their actual current impact. However, if history is a guide, revisiting the statistics on an earlier political crisis; that of May 1992, will help to put the few figures available on the recent crises into perspective.

Suraphol Srirakul, the President of the Thai Travel Agents recently reported that "the number of foreign visitors had fallen 31 percent in the first four months of the year," further adding: "But all major markets including Japan, China,

the United Kingdom, South Korea and Russia have seen falls between 23 and 40 percent." (Sritama, 2009,1) In May 1992, the Thai Hotels Association had estimated that the average occupancy rate among its member hotels in Bangkok, Phuket, and Chiangmai was between 30 and 35 percent, compared to the normal low season level of 50 to 55 percent (Asia Travel Trade, 1992, pp 8-9). The similarity of the figures lends credence to the latest statistics; all the more as a drop in international arrivals of 30 percent year-to-date has also been reported (Sritama, 2009). Furthermore, on a recent visit to Pattaya, this writer drove around the city at night and noticed that most night spots were deserted. The hotel where we stayed had less than 100 guests for a hotel with 870 rooms. Clearly, Thailand's tourism image has been severely impacted and the tourism sector materially damaged across the board with airlines, hotels, shopping and transportation equally affected. And, adding insult to injury, it is all taking place in the midst of a severe global economic crisis

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