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## **Philippine tourism: Fixing the paradox**

### **PART I**

VISITOR arrivals to the Philippines reached 3.522 million during the period January to November, up 12.66 percent from 3.126 million for the same period in 2010, and exceeding the full-year arrivals of 3.520 million for 2010.

That's the good news. But the bad news is that we're still nowhere near the other four original members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) in terms of visitor arrivals.

Tourist arrivals in Indonesia reached 6.92 million during the first 11 months of 2011, an 8.91-percent increase from 6.35 million for the same period in 2010. The Indonesian government was optimistic it would hit its tourist arrival target of 7.6 million to 7.7 million for 2011.

Thailand's number of foreign visitors fell in November because of the floods in Bangkok and other central provinces. Nevertheless, the number of visitors for the 11-month period that ended November still exceeded 17 million, up 21.17 percent from a year ago. For the whole of 2011, Thailand was expecting 18.5 million visitors, a million short of its original target.

No figures were available for tourist arrivals in Malaysia for January-November but its government had expressed confidence it would reach its 24-million target for 2011.

Singapore, the smallest country in Southeast Asia with a total land area of 710 square kilometers, is much bigger than the Philippines when it comes to tourism. Arrivals in the city-state reached 6.4 million during the first half of 2011, well on track to hitting its target of 12 million by the end of the year.

Data from the World Tourism Organization ranked our four neighbors among the top 10 destinations in 2010. Out of almost 204 million tourists to Asia and the Pacific in 2010, Malaysia was the second top destination with 24.58 million international tourist arrivals. Thailand was fourth with 15.84 million. Singapore was sixth with 9.16 million, and Indonesia ninth with 6.91 million.

Even Vietnam has overtaken us. The war-ravaged country welcomed 5.3 million visitors in the first 11 months of 2011, reflecting a 15.9-percent growth from the same period in 2010. With one month to go, arrivals already exceeded the 5.05-million total for 2010.

Tourism is a big economic driver for Vietnam, generating \$5.2 billion in the 11-month period, or 4.5 percent of the country's gross domestic product for three quarters, according to the Vietnam General Statistics Office.

We have lost the race to Vietnam; Cambodia, another war-ravaged Asean member, may overtake us in the foreseeable future unless we put our acts together.

Cambodia reported a 14-percent increase in visitor arrivals, which reached 2.58 million as of November 2011. In 2010 the number of international visitors to Cambodia totaled 2.5 million.

Nobody can argue that the Philippines is less attractive to tourists than its neighbors in Southeast Asia.

We don't lack in tourist destinations. We have Boracay, which is still recognized as one of the best beach resorts in the world; the world famous underground river in Puerto Princesa, Palawan; the rice terraces continue to inspire awe; Mount Mayon in Albay still holds itself in perfect cone, to name a few tourist attractions.

So we have a paradox: why is the Philippines not attracting as many tourists as its neighbors?

In my view, it may be because of lack of focus, wrong priorities or the lack of decisiveness in seizing opportunities.

Thailand estimates a decline of about 1 million in the number of visitors for 2011, mainly because of the floods. Where did the 1 million go?

I tend to believe that many went to Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam and other countries. The reason was that while Bangkok and other tourist hubs in Thailand were being inundated, its neighbors were aggressively courting visitors.

What about the Philippines? We were busy looking for the best slogan, not that we did not have any, but because we wanted to have a new one.

On November 15, 2010, the Department of Tourism launched the new slogan "Pilipinas Kay Ganda," spending nearly P5 million for the project.

Not long after, the department was accused of being a copycat; reports said the slogan and the logo accompanying it were similar to what Poland was using. Other reports linked the new slogan to a porn site.

So the new slogan was withdrawn shortly after launch, and a tourism official had to get out the door.

I believe we have wasted precious time in search for a slogan. I don't think we can come up with a slogan that will not be criticized because there will always be pros and cons even for the most attractive slogan.

**(To be continued...)**

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