

Concerted effort urged to tackle shortage of skilled tourism-sector workers

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THE HOSPITALITY industry in Southeast Asia has asked all operators to work together to tackle the skilled labour shortage to keep up with fast-growing tourism demand in the region.

At the Asean Tourism Forum, delegates from the Asean Hotel and Restaurant Association said the skilled labour shortage was the biggest challenge for regional tourism sustainability.

The problem in some emerging nations like Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos is more serious because they cannot produce enough graduates to serve the growing industry, while Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia have an easier time.

Last year, hotel occupancy in Asean ran at 60-70 per cent.

Suraphong Techaruvichit, president of the Thai Hotels Association, said yesterday that many cities in Asean were emerging as tourism destinations, which led to rapid growth, creating a labour shortage. Not

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only new graduates, skilled trainers in hotels are also in short supply.

Muang Muang Swe, vice chairman of the Myanmar Tourism Federation, pointed out that his country needs several hundred thousands of graduates to serve the decade-long tourism development plan, which focuses on promoting cities across the nation as tourism destinations and constructing more hotels.

The country has just started to produce its own graduates in this field in colleges to serve the industry, but they are not enough.

The country is working with the Thai government to ease the problem, especially via a scholarship programme allowing Myanmar students to study at places like Mae Fah Luang University.

Thailand is a shining star on the regional tourism scene, but its hotel rate is still disappointing.

At the meeting, countries presented their rate performance for last year. Singapore was on top at US\$250 per night, with occupancy of 80 per cent. The success of the island state was attributed to effective regulation

to control the balance of room demand and supply in the hospitality market.

Thailand's rate was \$103. In 2013, room demand in Bangkok rose 20 per cent, but room supply increased 30 per cent, leaving an imbalance in the market. The capital offered more than 100,000 rooms, but only 30,000-40,000 were legal.

Jakarta has a similar problem with illegal rooms, leading Indonesia's capital to receive the lowest rate in the region. Suraphong said Thailand was lucky it wasn't sitting at the lowest rank, but the political ten-

sion might prevent hotels from hiking their rates by 10-15 per cent as usual. Foreign arrivals are dropping and some MICE events are moving to neighbouring nations like Singapore.

Hotels in the protest-hit areas have started discounting their rooms, but that was only a short-term solution to survive the difficult times.

In reality, no one is bold enough to offer a discounted rate to the foreign market because they realise that if they did that, it would be even harder to get the real rate back after the political crisis ends, he added.