

Monday, April 20, 2009

Thailand moves to restore confidence

LEON Els, marketing representative for the Tourism Authority of Thailand in South Africa has issued the following statement after the recent protests that plagued the country:

“I have been in Bangkok and other parts of Thailand in the last seven days and although the happenings of the past few days have certainly had a negative effect on the image of Thailand, I can assure you that the normal tourist attractions and facilities have not been affected.”

Els said the Thai government had announced a “major” plan to restore confidence in the tourist industry.

On April 16 in a televised address, Thailand prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva:

- said he had closely monitored the political situation as well as the implementation of measures to rehabilitate affected areas and safeguard public safety and order with a view to ensuring that the work proceeded expeditiously. At the same time, he noted that there had been issues related to news, information and protest movements that had to be addressed.
- assured the public that the overall situation in Bangkok and its vicinities had returned to normal.
- noted that regarding the remaining protest movements in Bangkok, its vicinities and other provinces, officials and the government had been engaged in dialogue to establish an understanding that the declared emergency situation was temporary.

Following his address, the minister responded to questions:

- Regarding the revocation of the emergency situation he said he would review the situation to see what powers under the Emergency Decree were used and when these would cease to be necessary. He reiterated that after the emergency situation was revoked, political gatherings could be organised as well as peaceful expression of views. But people could not incite others to commit illegal acts.
- Asked if he had informed the diplomatic corps when the situation would return to normal, and also about investment, he said he did not discuss much about the economy but touched upon tourism. He informed them that much progress had been made to restore peace and order and that the government intended to maintain law and order, with or without the Emergency Decree.
- Asked when the ASEAN+3 Summit and the East Asia Summit would be held, the minister said consultations were on-going and the outcome should be known in a few days. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was working on co-ordinating with the countries concerned and the ASEAN Secretary-General would meet him in the next day or two.

Monday, April 20, 2009

Airlines introduce cost-saving measures to fight downturn

IN an effort to cope with the global economic crisis and business downturn, airlines have started to implement new cost-saving measures.

Cathay Pacific has announced a series of measures including reducing capacity by 8% from May.

The airline will reduce capacity on flights to London, Paris, Frankfurt, Sydney, Singapore, Bangkok, Seoul and Taipei. For flights to Tokyo, Taipei, Mumbai and Dubai the airline will now operate A330s instead of B747s.

Its flights to the Middle East and Africa will remain unchanged.

The airline will also introduce a four-tier, top down Special Leave Scheme under which staff globally will be asked to take unpaid leave ranging from one to four weeks.

Cathay Pacific is also negotiating the sale of five aircraft and will mothball two more of its B747-400BCF freighters.

Air France has released a statement saying it expects to have reduced staff numbers by between 2 500 and 3 000 by 2011 in response to the global economic crisis.

The airline said it would achieve this without redundancies by suspending hiring, not replacing staff taking retirement and by not renewing temporary contracts.

Employees wishing to make a career move outside the company will receive individual assistance. Air France will also encourage early retirement and will encourage staff to take time off for training or sabbatical leave. Internal mobility and tele-working will also be encouraged.

Monday, April 20, 2009

Free Vilanculos flights with Mozambique GSA

MOZAMBIQUE GSA is offering free flights to Vilanculos for the first 10 guests (five couples) booking the Bazaruto package.

The five-night Bazaruto package is available from R10 480pps, including return transfers from Vilanculos to Bazaruto Island by light aircraft, accommodation in a superior chalet at Bazaruto Lodge, three meals per day, free daily snorkelling at Coral Gardens, free daily drop and collect at Dolphin Bay, free daily use of windsurfers, canoes and hobie cats, one free 30-minute water-skiing lesson per stay, one free bodysurfing trip to Three Trees Beach per stay, with a qualified instructor, and non-motorised water sports. The package also includes government and tourism taxes. The package is valid for travel until June 30.

The package excludes visas; Mozambique arrivals tax (US\$3pp); national parks levy (US\$10pp); beverages; fishing; diving; and other activities or excursions.

The free flights will be offered to the first 10 people or five couples to book and confirm. The offer is subject to availability of flights and accommodation, and excludes airport departure taxes of R816pp.

Monday, April 20, 2009

QR expands Nigerian operations

QATAR Airways has expanded its operations in Nigeria by increasing its flights from five a week to daily and upgrading aircraft on the Doha-Lagos route to A340-600s.

The A340-600 offers eight first class seats in a 1-2-1 configuration, 42 business-class seats in a 2-2-2 configuration and 216 economy class seats in a 2-4-2 configuration.

The changes are part of Qatar Airways' ongoing growth strategy, which will see the launch of six new routes this year, including Melbourne and Sydney in Australia; Goa and Amritsar in India; and two further additions to its extensive European network. Frequency and capacity increases on selected routes are also scheduled.

Monday, April 20, 2009

Talking point: Besieged in Ladysmith

If there is anything that best illustrates our pick-and-mix historical culture here in South Africa, it was the recent Siege Weekend in the KZN town of Ladysmith.

This Siege Weekend, occurring every year around the beginning of April, celebrates the lifting of the Ladysmith siege during the Anglo-Boer War in 1900, when a combined force of British troops cannonaded the Boer emplacements that had cut off the town for 118 days (reducing the hotel menu to horse-meat and boiled grass). The Boers had pretty much realised by this time that Ladysmith was a lost cause for them and moved off, and this retreat – or defeat, depending on whose history you refer to – is widely regarded as the turning point in the war.

The bombardment that finally extinguished the Boer enthusiasm for Ladysmith is largely credited to sailors from the Royal Navy who manoeuvred heavy cannons up to the top of hills too steep for trek-oxen.

The role that Ladysmith played in the Anglo-Boer War made it as much a household name at the time as Kimberley and Mafikeng. The battles of Spionkop and Wagon Hill, the siege and the relief were world famous in their day, and are of enormous interest to visitors even now because of their

stories of valour and despair and the profound influence they had on international military history.

In 1999, during the centenary commemorations of the war, the South African Navy was given the Freedom of Ladysmith because of the decisive role played by the Royal Navy (from which the SA Navy derives). This was also the first of the annual Swartkops Challenges, where squads of men pull the heavy naval cannon uphill in record time, to emulate the incredible feat of teamwork first performed by sailors over a hundred years ago.

The Freedom of a town or city, incidentally, is a European medieval custom dating back to the days when towns were built around castles. Circling the settlement would be a large wall with fortified gates – barbicans – which would be closed and locked at night. In those uncertain days, no one was allowed to carry weapons within the city walls.

Occasionally some person or group of people would perform a service of great benefit to the town. The inhabitants would show their gratitude by bestowing the Freedom of Entry to this group or individual. They would be presented with a key to the gate and a certificate or seal that indicated that they could leave and enter freely and – most importantly – they could bear arms within the city walls. This was a sacred position of trust. It indicated that the townsfolk could fear nothing from this individual or group.

On Saturday morning, the South African Navy exercised its Freedom of Entry in Ladysmith. On the dot of eleven, a large phalanx of white-clad sailors, resplendent with gold braid, gleaming swords and polished buttons, carried out manoeuvres to the sound of a jaunty naval band. They were very prettily welcomed by Ladysmith's mayor, Councillor Dudu Mazibuko, who referred to the role played by their predecessors, the Royal Navy, 110 years before.

The awesome part of this ceremony was its exquisite precision. As the first order rang out, the town hall clock began to strike eleven, almost exactly in time. And as the last footfall echoed down the street at the end of the parade, the clock chimed the half hour. No wonder the navy is regarded as the *crème de la crème* of the South African National Defence Force.

I watched this display of gleaming white and gold with a peculiar feeling. Here was a ceremony, re-enacting an obscure medieval custom, commemorating a colonial war 110 years before, carried out by people to whom European customs mean nothing, and to whom the outcome of the war meant very little. Additionally – not to put too fine a point on it – I am a proud Afrikaner, which means that I was watching a commemoration of a war in which my ancestors got thumped. And this all took place under a hot African sun with a brass band playing a lively version of Mamma Tembu's Wedding.

But, you know, none of that mattered. What did matter was the pride of the young faces under those white navy caps as they performed their impeccable drill. And the joy and wonder of the hundreds of local people who crowded the pavement, clapping to the music and watching the parade.

This was not a celebration of a triumph, or an anniversary of a defeat. It was not a display of one nation's might over another. It was, rather, a throat-aching celebration of courage and bravery, of fortitude and devotion to duty, of humanity to one's comrade and graciousness to one's enemy. And it was a reminder that the virtues that people display during times of war and privation are not confined to any one racial or national group. They cut across the boundaries of all nationalities and show that we all share the same ideals.

