

A RETURN TO FORUM

After five years in limbo the Mekong Tourism Forum resurfaces with a few breaths of rejuvenating air. Joel Quenby drinks in the proceedings.

"Sharing knowledge is not about giving people something, or getting something from them. Sharing knowledge occurs when people are genuinely interested in helping one another develop new capacities for action; it is about creating learning processes," wrote Peter Michael Senge, director of the Center for Organizational Learning at the MIT Sloan School of Management and author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art And Practice Of The Learning Organization*.

Democratic responses to such far-reaching issues of knowledge transfer call for suitably qualified committees. One such committee, an influential regional travel think-tank – the Mekong Tourism Forum (MTF) – returned from a five-year hiatus on 7-8 May in Siem Reap. "The forum is once again a relevant meeting place for Mekong region tourism cooperation and innovation," said ML Nandhika Varavarn, Bangkok Airways' Vice President for Corporate Communications.

Her words should be music to the ears of Mason Florence, the executive director of the Mekong Tourism Coordinating Office (MTCO), charged with "getting the event back on track". Based in Bangkok, the intergovernmental organisation promotes sustainable development – and strives to market the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) – including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and the southern Chinese provinces of Guangxi and Yunnan – as a single destination under the 'Mekong Tourism' brand (a daunting prospect, as evidenced by ASEAN's branding saga).

The last forum, held in 2005, was organised by PATA with financing from the Asian Development Bank (ADB). This year's edition was funded with US\$10,000 from USAID's ASEAN Competitiveness Enhancement (ACE) project, according to its chief, R. J. Gurley. The American says he's wanted to resume the event since his very first week in the job, in June 2008 – after Christine Jacquemin [MTCO sustainable tourism development project coordinator] and the former MTCO head, Peter Simone, suggested



(Right) Bill Black, MD of Altiva Hospitality. (Right below) ML Nantika Worawan, VP Corporate Communications, Bangkok Airways. (Far right) Cambodian Minister of Tourism. H.E. Dr Thong Khon. Behind him are other members/staff of the MoT Cambodia.

resurrecting the MTF. "The ACE project aims to facilitate dialogue between the public and private sectors," Mr. Gurley explains. "This seemed like an excellent venue for doing that."

The overarching theme – "New Roads, New Opportunities" – paid tribute to three multi-region overland 'corridors', or road systems, developed through ADB funds and studies. Florence's desire to "localise an event dominated by old, white men" saw Web In Travel (www.webintravel.com) editor Yeoh Siew Hoon – "who moderates doing Oprah-style wandering" – assigned to interview Lim Neo Chian, former CEO of the Singapore Tourism Board, about his 2009 "ASEAN On Wheels" 4-wheel drive adventure.

The 25 event booths rapidly sold out – many to sustainable tourism operators. Even Myanmar brought tangible progress to the table, having introduced tourist visas on arrival days before the forum. In the end, a larger-than-expected audience of 213 delegates attended. High-ranking government representatives from the six GMS countries delivered updates on visa regulations, border-crossing changes, airport developments, and new tourism policies.

Florence was keen to distinguish this smaller-scale convention from "mega-events like the PATA Travel Mart and the ASEAN Tourism Forum. The MTF was designed to be [more] interactive," he says. "Unlike bigger events, the GMS has a tight-knit, family feel. This makes it easier to have a more personable, deeper, informal networking experience – plus make things more fun and interesting."

To this end, extra-curricular activities – from a nocturnal tuk-tuk jaunt to a flip-flop-flinging contest (apparently a Khmer game) were organised for delegates.

Meanwhile, the Forum's emphasis on sustainability as well as less-travelled, emerging destinations, featured speakers from primary 'responsible tourism' groups, such as the Gibbon Experience, Khiri Travel, Asian Overland Travel, Hanuman Travel and Green Discovery.

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Tim Russell, owner of Come & Go Vietnam



As a comeback, MTF 2010 was "so strong with a big and enthusiastic audience," said ML Nandhika Varavarn, who spoke at the closing session.

Fellow participants agreed. "I have to say it was absolutely superb," said first-time attendee Tim Russell, owner of Come & Go Vietnam. "It was a great networking event. I made more useful contacts in two days here than I did in five days at the massively bigger ITB Berlin."

As for less easily impressed old hands, author Joe Cummings, a speaker at two previous forums ("the first being almost a decade ago"), said this year's "was the best of the three. The programmes were definitely more cutting-edge, more genuinely intriguing, more hands-on and less theoretical than previously; kudos to Mason Florence and the organisers for that."

"I had a great time participating in the panel. The moderator made it very dynamic: standing amid the audience, walking around, challenging panel members, inviting audience participation, like a savvy TV talk show host. And my fellow panel members had lots of substance," says Joe.

As at previous forums, some discussions meandered down familiar roads. For example, Luzi Matzig, CEO of Asian Trails, told the forum that governments could boost cross-border tourism by slashing red tape: "If you want to easily boost tourism, liberate cross-border road traffic."

As if to highlight that sticking point, with cruelly ironic timing, some invited members of the media drove from Bangkok to the MTF in Siem Reap (escorted by tour company Smiling Albino). The idea was to demonstrate the efficiency of overland linkages in the GMS. Mason Florence takes up the tale: "They couldn't get out of Thailand without being held up by some freelance tout run-around. Theoretically, it should be fine to travel – but there are still headaches, snags and shenanigans at checkpoints. I was trying to showcase these 'corridors' – and the journalists themselves got hassled."

Evidently, much remains. Florence says the MTF's *raison d'être* is partly "creating dialogues about the challenges we face moving forward; not just talking about how great everything is."

A glaringly obvious example is the recent, violent spike in Thailand's political crisis. Bangkok is the region's established travel hub, so tourism industry figures from Taipei to Tokyo are wondering how prolonged – and extensive – collateral damage from the conflict will prove. Neighbouring countries naturally voiced concerns at the rejuvenated forum. Though RJ. Gurley says the "officials went out of their way to avoid causing Thailand to lose face; no one answered directly," many acknowledged the urgent need to improve links with Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore.

Veteran authority on Southeast Asia Joe Cummings knows, "Thailand has a tradition of bouncing back quickly." He reckons tourism should gain "a full recovery – if things are stable – by November 2011".

Florence thinks trade will resume faster than expected, "because people love to travel, they love the region – and there's more information now".

Indeed, there is. Much of it will pervade next May's event. Mr. Florence has already discussed MTF 2011 with the relevant National Tourism Organisation (NTO) – and says its theme will relate to "emerging destinations". Fittingly, it will be the first major international event ever held in the southern Lao town of Pakse. He admits the additional logistical complications of eschewing a capital city for a provincial backwater – but that's partly the point. "We're actually holding activities in those destinations," he says. "Not just talking about them."

