

Sunflower season is here

The northern province of Mae Hong Son hopes to tap the Salween and promote river tours

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Mae Hong Son province is looking to introduce new tourist attractions next year to give travellers more variety, says its deputy governor Sittichai Prasertsee. Apart from promoting Mae Hong Son's seasonal festivals and tourist spots, efforts are being made to promote ecotours tours on the Salween River which separates Thailand and Burma.

"Mae Hong Son has a variety of natural attractions that have great tourist-drawing potential," said Mr Sittichai. "Last year we tried to promote river tours on the Salween, but it still hasn't caught on. Travellers can get the best scenic views found in both Thailand and Burma. There are also a number of caves and mountainous terrain that we are looking to develop as part of the Unseen Thailand campaign."

Apart from promoting new destinations, Mr Sittichai notes that it is equally important to preserve the local culture and the natural flora and fauna. Mae Hong Son, he asserted has the best road and air safety record.



Wild sunflower festival draws tourists.
(inset) Deputy governor Sittichai Prasertsee.

Next year, Mr Sittichai said, road signs telling diehard adventure fans how many road curves they have negotiated on their way to completing the 1,864 curves between Chiang Mai and Mae Hong Son, will be erected.

One particular destination that over the past five years that has earned a name for itself among international budget travellers is the district of Pai. Hot springs, natural parks and white water rafting are just a few of the facilities it has to offer tourists and nature lovers.

However, rapid development over the past years has made the younger generation forget about grassroots values, and Mr Sittichai has joined hands with provincial agencies and community leaders to educate youngsters about the province's cultural heritage. Pai's burgeoning hospitality business has also seen the number of resorts grow from a handful a few years ago to over 40 now.

The deputy governor has drawn a set rules that new resorts will have to comply with in order to regulate their business and keep them in check. Provincial authorities have also started cracking down on resorts operating without proper permits.

One of the most encouraging aspects about Mae Hong Son is its safety record of foreign tourists. "We get a lot of foreign tourists. Mae Hong Son is popular amongst international visitors for ecotours and related activities. Even trekking in the remotest areas of the province, visitors can be rest assured that no one will harm them in anyway, at least not the locals. He said there may have been cases of trouble but quickly pointed out that the culprits in all those cases were not locals but people from outside.

Mae Hong Son, sheltered by high mountains, enjoys cool climate almost all year round. It is quite satisfied with the low number of visitors it attracts compared to Chiang Mai. This, says Mr Sittichai, works in their favour as the province is lesser developed to accommodate large number of tourists. What is most appealing to overseas travellers is the culture and traditions of the local people.

Mr Sittichai said that he would like the central government to help improve roads so that Mae Hong Son can attract more tourists. Widening the roads and blunting the sharp curves along the way will encourage more motorists to drive there.

Currently, the bulk of tourists visiting Mae Hong Son arrive on Thai Airways International's 72-seater aircraft because the airport can't take bigger planes.

"We are looking to adding another 200 meters to the landing strip which would make it convenient for Boeing 747s to land there in the future. The only sticking point is the land we plan to use has a community residing there. We are hoping to relocate them, of course with their consent, and after that it shouldn't take too long to extend the runway."



Wat Chong Khum lighted up to kick off Unseen Mae Hong Son tourist season.