

International tourist arrivals in Thailand projected to reach 34.1 million in 2026, up 4% ; adjustments towards a new balance needed, with a focus on boosting per-trip spending through unique tourism products, MICE, and medical & wellness

Thailand's tourism has reached a turning point, making it more challenging for the number of international tourist arrivals to return to pre-COVID levels. If no action is taken, its role as an economic driver may weaken amid intense competition in the international tourism market. The number of international tourist arrivals in Thailand is projected to reach 34.1 million in 2026, an increase of 4 percent, but per-trip spending may remain low. Thai tourism may need to adjust towards a new balance, focusing on boosting per-trip spending through unique tourism products, including Meeting, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE), as well as medical and wellness.

Ms. Kevalin Wangpichayasuk, KResearch Deputy Managing Director, highlighted four observations regarding the outlook for Thai tourism: 1) the gap between revenue from foreign tourists visiting Thailand and spending by Thai tourists abroad has tended to decrease by nearly half; 2) signs that Thailand has lost its competitiveness are becoming increasingly evident; 3) the number of tourist arrivals from Europe and India has not yet fully compensated for the decline in arrivals from China and ASEAN; 4) and the dispersion of tourist density from major tourist cities to secondary ones still requires significant effort.

Ms. Varithorn Sirisattayawong, Head - Research at KResearch, said that in 2026 Thailand's inbound tourism market is expected to recover, driven by the return of Chinese tourists. The number of foreign visitors is forecast to reach 34.1 million, or a 4-percent increase after a projected 7-percent decline in 2025. Although the figure is rising, it remains below potential, which continues to weigh on tourism revenue and average spending per trip, both still lower than pre-pandemic levels. With further growth in tourist numbers becoming more difficult, boosting revenue will likely require new tourism products that generate higher per-trip spending. These include tapping into the entertainment and MICE segment — such as organizing concerts by world-class artists — hosting major international sporting events, attracting global theme parks to invest in Thailand, and expanding medical and wellness tourism. Although challenging, successful development of these markets could help bring back higher tourist arrivals in the years ahead.

Ms. Wanwisa Sriratana, Head — Research at KResearch, stated that although medical & wellness is helping to boost tourism revenue, there are still challenges to be addressed. These include a decline in the core patient market, increasingly intense competition, and existing structural problems. Consequently, in 2026, the number of foreign patients and related revenue are projected to grow at a slower pace of 0.4 percent and 3.7 percent, respectively. She added that if Thailand aims to increase tourism revenue, it must focus on specialized medical services that require longer treatment and recovery periods. It should also expand services into preventive care and wellness that align with global trends, such as longevity and the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs).

In conclusion, KResearch has four proposals to sustain Thai tourism: 1) restoring confidence, as the short-haul market remains significant, particularly Chinese tourists, whose proportion has halved from pre-COVID levels to around just 14 percent; 2) focusing on increasing per-trip spending Thailand's distinctive tourism products by setting clear targets and enhancing the ecosystem; 3) encouraging domestic tourism among Thai residents; and 4) promoting secondary cities by leveraging local identities, such as geographical indications.