

EAGER FOR VISITORS

Tourism operators in Samui are requesting more direct flights to the island in order for the sector to fully revive. **B3**

Samui operators plead for direct flights



Passengers check in for flights at the Samui airport's passenger terminal.
WICHAN CHAROENKIATPAKUL

Reservations higher in Bo Put, Chaweng

MOLPASORN SHOOWONG

Samui tourism operators are calling for more direct flights to the island and an improvement in infrastructure and tourism distribution as the industry is on track for recovery.

Ratchaporn Poolsawadee, president of the Tourism Association of Koh Samui, said only 70% of independent hotels with a three- or four-star rating, which make up the majority of accommodation on the island, resumed operations following the pandemic as cash flow is sluggish when compared with hotels operated by an international chain.

The cost of resuming hotel operations could total as much as starting a new business in some situations, said Mr Ratchaporn.

Meanwhile, the market has been limited by seat capacity as only 30 to 44 flights per day serve routes to the island.

He said the number of flights should return to 50 per day — the level recorded before the pandemic — bringing more tourists to the island.

Samui welcomed the first Chinese

groups via chartered flights from Chengdu this month.

However, costly airfares to Samui mean the majority of current Chinese tourists are likely independent travellers, said Mr Ratchaporn.

He said Samui is battling tourism congestion in certain areas, such as Bo Put and Chaweng. Hotel bookings in these areas are much stronger than in other areas, said Mr Ratchaporn.

He said one of the biggest challenges is stimulating tourist flow to other beaches and equipping local operators with marketing skills.

“The public sector should strictly regulate safety and security measures for tourists, including preventing taxi scams and road accidents,” said Mr Ratchaporn.

“The construction of mass transport networks is also needed because it could help attract new investment in the future.”

Speaking at ITB Berlin 2023, he said Surat Thani had 27 tourism operators joining the event.

Mr Ratchaporn said Samui tourism is targeting Europe, including the Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg), Germany, France, the UK and Russia.

Hotel operators are aiming for a

50-60% occupancy rate this month, after it surged to 80-90% in the first two months of the year, mainly attributed to guests arriving from France, Germany, the UK and Russia, he said.

In terms of average room rate, the Samui rate is 10-20% lower than the level recorded before the pandemic.

Vijvut Tjinto, the governor of Surat Thani, expects tourist arrivals on the three islands of Koh Samui, Koh Phangan and Koh Tao to recover to the pre-pandemic level of 2.5 million this year, driven by pent-up demand and a gradual increase in flights to Samui and Surat Thani.

Mr Vijvut said the province is working with the Department of Employment to recruit staff who left the industry during the pandemic in an effort to resolve the labour shortages.

He said the province follows safety standards and offers security services to tourists, including at its famous Full Moon parties on Koh Phangan.