

Singapore targets 17m tourists in a decade

At the same time it wants to triple the amount they spend here to \$30 billion

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SINGAPORE wants to double the number of tourists to 17 million a year, triple their spending to \$30 billion and create 100,000 more tourism jobs here by 2015.

The Government set these bold targets yesterday when it fleshed out an earlier announcement that it will spend \$2 billion on tourism over the next 10 years.

Trade and Industry Minister Lim Hng Kiang said the targets were "within grasp, because the pie is growing".

While the figures look high, he said Singapore was merely trying to maintain its 6 per cent share of Asia Pacific tourism receipts as the industry grows in the region.

The World Tourism Organisation forecasts that tourists to this region will more than double, from 145 million in 2002 to 296 million in 2015.

Last year, Singapore attracted 8.3 million visitors who spent \$9.6 billion, both of which set new records. That kept 150,000 workers in jobs and accounted for 3 per cent of gross domestic product.

The \$2 billion fund will go to those in the private sector who have new ideas to grow four areas that the Singapore Tourism Board wants to focus on:

» Wooing long-time tourist markets such as Japan, Europe and the United States, which are now among the top 13 inbound markets for Singapore.

» Drawing visitors from China and India, fast-developing countries expected to yield 67 million and nine million tourists respectively over the next 10 years.

» Expanding the convention business, which contributed almost a quarter of tourism receipts in 2002, and growing Singapore as a health-care and education centre.

» Promoting intraregional travel in the 10-nation Association of South-east Asian Nations. Tourism in the region generated US\$27.7 billion

(S\$45.8 billion) in tourism receipts in 2002, excluding Brunei, or 4.8 per cent of Asean's gross domestic product.

Mr Lim made it clear that the \$2 billion is not "free money". The Government, he said, will only pay for projects it is confident "will generate benefits" for Singapore.

The amount is the biggest tourism investment to date. It tops the \$1 billion funding in 1985, which went mainly into developing Sentosa and the Southern Islands.

Asked if some of the grant will go into building the proposed integrated casino resort, Mr Lim noted that the proposal had yet to get the green light.

For now, the money will be used to improve tourist belts like Orchard Road, attract investors to build new attractions such as theme parks, draw mega events and train tourism operators.

After long taking a backseat to sectors such as manufacturing and finance, hospitality experts and operators are glad to have the attention of policy makers.

Phoenix Hotel's general manager Noel Hawkes said: "Tourism was never given priority because it had a high labour component."

Now, hitting the targets will mean raising the current 36,000 or so hotel rooms by 50 per cent, he estimated.

It will also probably mean importing more foreign help to take on jobs, such as waitressing, which Singaporeans reject, he added.

Even more welcomed is the financial help.

Sentosa Leisure Group chief executive Darrell Metzger, while declining to give details, said he already has in mind a multi-million dollar event that could use some funds.

Mr Francis Phun, chairman of the Association of Singapore Attractions, said: "With the Government taking a strong interest, it will boost the confidence of investors."

Dr Russell Arthur Smith, vice-dean for Cornell-Nanyang Institute of Hospitality Management, agreed.

He said: "With a good plan, and careful, focused work, there is no reason to believe that Singapore cannot achieve the targets set."