

Flu factor

A global bird flu pandemic could send tourist arrivals plunging across the South-east Asian region, say observers



► Krist Boo

IF PAST experience is any guide, the recent bomb blasts in Bali are unlikely to keep tourists away from South-east Asia for long.

Instead, what might wipe out tourism here could come in a sneeze — the bird flu scare.

Despite the haze, dengue and fear of terrorist attacks, up to August, the regional tourism industry has grown by 7 per cent to 20.4 million visitors over the same period last year.

But a prolonged health scare such as a global bird flu pandemic could send visitor figures plunging, say tourism officials and experts.

"The signs of a flu pandemic are not good and everywhere, we are bracing for an outbreak," said Pacific Asia Travel Association (Pata) director for strategic intelligence John Koldowski.

Two recent developments have raised concern. When the H5N1 influenza virus surfaced in Asia in 2003, it spread across China, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia.

Deaths have so far been contained — 44 in Vietnam, 12 in Thailand, five in Indonesia and four in Cambodia.

But this week, it was confirmed that the H5N1 virus has been found in dead birds in Turkey and Romania — the first cases in continental Europe. This means the bug has expanded its geographical reach.

More chillingly, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has warned that the virus may mutate so it can pass easily from one human to another.

The H5N1 virus is now mainly transmitted to people when they eat infected birds or have close contact with them. But human-to-human transmission of some strains of the virus has been reported in West Java and Europe. If the H5N1 virus morphs into a form that can be transmitted easily from human to human, tens of millions of people could die, the WHO said. Humans have no immunity to the bird flu virus.

The estimated death toll is no exaggeration when you consider that the 1918 Spanish flu outbreak, in the days before air travel, killed up to 50 million people via rapid human-to-human transmission.

A quick replay of what happened in 2003 during Sars illustrates the gravity of the situation.

The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome bug is thought to have first appeared in the civet cat, jumped to humans and mutated further so it was carried from one human to another.

Sars hit 26 countries and killed 774 people. As for the economic cost, Asia alone lost US\$60 billion (US\$102 billion) in tourism revenue. Officials and experts think a bird flu pandemic could do as much damage, if not more.

Mr Sean Tipton, spokesman for the Association of British Travel Agents, pointed out: "The only time people were avoiding travel to a whole region was during the Sars outbreak, as they were worried they could catch a fatal disease. Terrorism — they can take it in their stride."

United Overseas Bank head of treasury research Jimmy Koh agreed. "A health scare is more frightening because it is not one-off... and people know it is not self-contained."

The scare, he said, begins when the virus starts to be passed human-to-human.

Figures from the World Tourism Organisation support his argument. In a report released on Oct 3, two days after the Bali bomb blasts, it noted that the Dec 26 tsunami last year and July terrorist bombings of the London Underground, and similar attacks in Turkey and Egypt, have had "negligible" impact.

Britain received 3.25 million tourists in August,

up from the 3.16 million in the same month last year. Similarly, Turkey had a 27 per cent jump in the 8.5 million visitors it saw to June, compared to the same months last year.

Egypt is expecting its 8.8 million visitors to climb to nine million this year, despite recent bombings in Cairo and Sharm el-Sheikh.

The Oct 1 bomb blasts in Bali, which killed 23 people, are thus not expected to deal a severe blow to tourism.

What worries the WHO is that many countries are poorly prepared for a flu pandemic. Last week, it announced that only 30 countries — a figure it said was "clearly not enough" — have crisis plans to tackle a pandemic.

Singapore is one of them. It is stockpiling the medication Tamiflu for 430,000 people, and is prepared with a \$25 million infectious disease containment wing in the Communicable Disease Centre. Its public hospitals have created isolation rooms and amassed face masks to protect health workers.

Tourism offices in the region are eager to put out a reassuring message.

Miss Eumporn Jiragalwisul, director of the Tourism Authority of Thailand here, took pains to point out that cases in Thailand have so far been limited to poultry farms.

Thailand — praised by the WHO for one of the earliest bird flu crisis plans — has also primed its tourism players. Travel agents, as well as officials in the countryside, have been briefed on the infected areas. Instructions have been sent out to report sick tourists, especially those from infected countries, to the health authorities.

In response to queries, the Singapore Tourism Board's communications director, Mr Muhamad Rostam Umar, said if the pandemic hits the region, tourists' perception of travel here will "invariably" be tainted. But so far, the board has not received feedback on concerns over travelling to Singapore due to the threat of bird flu in the region, he said.

It is still early days yet. It is now known that migratory birds are spreading the virus, which means bird flu will almost certainly surface in more countries in coming months.

Dr Judy Siguaw, dean of Cornell-Nanyang Institute of Hospitality Management, said: "Right now, the deaths from bird flu are still relatively low. When they begin to reach the hundreds, we will see a tourism crisis."