



A Chinese tourist imitates the pose of a statue during a visit to the Grand Palace in Bangkok on March 23. | REUTERS

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In 'Land of Smiles,' Thais grin and bear boorish Chinese tourists

REUTERS

ARTICLE HISTORY | MAR 29, 2015

BANGKOK – Drying underwear at a temple and defecating in public, kicking a bell at a sacred shrine and washing feet in a public restroom, that's a sample from a litany of complaints about the behavior of Chinese tourists in Thailand.

Public outrage forced the Thai government to issue thousands of Chinese-language etiquette manuals last month in an effort to ensure sightseers from China behave themselves.

Feathers were ruffled anew in March when a Thai model posted a video on Facebook accusing Chinese tourists of jumping the queue at an airport, prompting heated debate from Thai and Chinese bloggers.

But with Thailand struggling to revive a stagnant economy after a military coup ended months of political unrest last year, tour operators in the "Land of Smiles" say they have no choice but to grin and bear it.

Tourism accounts for nearly 10 percent of the country's economic output, and Chinese vacationers are Thailand's largest group of overseas visitors.

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Raising revenue from tourism is a government priority to compensate for weak exports, said Col. Sansern Kaewkamnerd, the country's deputy government spokesman.

Thailand, therefore, has to tolerate bad behavior by Chinese visitors for the sake of its vital tourist industry, he said. It is not just Chinese tourists that Thailand is wooing; China is a top trading partner. The government has sought to strengthen ties with Beijing since some Western countries downgraded diplomatic ties when the military seized power last year.

"We have to endure because having tourists is better than having no tourists at all," Sansern said. "Our exports are dependent on the economic situations of other countries. So we are focusing on tourism. This is something we can control."

At the Erawan shrine in the heart of downtown Bangkok, Kanlaya Yimpreeda, 29, a garland vendor, reels off a list of complaints about Chinese visitors. "I recently saw a Chinese couple take their kids' underwear off so he could pee near the shrine," she said, a look of horror on her face. "Right there in the corner next to one of Bangkok's holiest places."

Tourism took a hammering during months of protests last year that saw parts of Bangkok shut down. Many countries issued warnings against nonessential travel to Thailand.

The Chinese market was one of the first to bounce back, said Srisuda Wanapinyosak, executive director of the East Asia region at the Tourism Authority of Thailand. TAT has Chinese-language specialists manning its official account on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo around the clock to communicate with Chinese travelers, Srisuda said.

Over 560,000 Chinese tourists visited Thailand in January, accounting for over a fifth of tourist arrivals, according to the Tourism Ministry. That was up nearly 60 percent on the year.

Korn Ornprasert, a veteran tour guide, said he preferred guiding visitors from elsewhere. "They have no discipline. They throw cigarette butts and spit in public," said Korn. "I would rather give a tour to other nationalities than to mainland Chinese."

China is acutely aware of its tourists' image abroad and in January started work on a national database to help rein in some of its unruly sightseers and monitor the behavior of habitual offenders.

Sansern, the Thai deputy government spokesman, said both countries need to be flexible: "We as the housekeeper have to adapt, and our house guests have to adapt."

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