

Not resting On Its Laurels

Britain gears up to attract even more visitors.

IN 1989, reminiscence of Atlas, the British Tourist Authority (BTA) rose to shoulder a heavy burden. Hardly satisfied with a record of 16.4 million foreign visitors to Britain in 1988, the BTA geared itself to scale new heights – a target of 17.1 million visitors to Britain in the new year, a rise of approximately four per cent from 1988. A formidable undertaking? Perhaps. An impossible task? Not quite.

According to Tom Buncle of the BTA, the 1989 world-wide total of foreign visitors to Britain not only met the target, but exceeded the forecast figure by 100,000 people. The total expenditure by visitors to Britain summed up to £6.88 billion (close to 34.4 billion rgt). BTA's target for 1990 (with only a month left in the year) has been set at 18.44 million visits. The total expenditure by visitors is expected to increase by 11 per cent from 1989 to approximately £7.64 billion.

Despite the more than encouraging 'returns', BTA still reckons that there's no time to take a break. It is in the process of beefing up its marketing strategies to grab a larger piece of the global tourism pie. Efforts are currently being channelled to develop an 'off-season' traffic to Britain, and also to spread this traffic throughout the whole country.

BTA believes the critical point for success in the very competitive tourism industry is the maintenance of a diverse business base by operating in a broad spread of markets. Britain's traditional markets include North America, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

'For several years now, we have been nurturing developing markets such as Asia, the Middle East and Latin America to broaden our business base,' Buncle says. 'This has paid off in times of crisis, be it financial or political in our more traditional markets. For example, the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and the Libyan bombings caused a drop in American visitors, but the Asian markets held up.'

Promotion of the 'off -peak traffic' to Britain has been particularly successful in the more traditional markets than in Southeast Asia due to existing travel trends and climate. Nevertheless, Buncle says BTA ran a very successful 'off-peak traffic' promotion in Singapore a couple of years ago over the October-March period with British Airways, whose off-peak sales over the target period to London increased by 40 per cent as a result of the promotion.

Buncle also admits that tempting foreign visitors from traditional and more mature markets to the 'unexplored regions' in Britain is again easier when compared to foreign visitors from Southeast Asia. But he feels that as Southeast Asians travel more widely, and as the market matures, more will be willing to venture further afield and travel more independently. He says this is particularly true of Malaysians and Singaporeans.

The average first timer to Europe, according to BTA's Buncl, will usually travel on a European tour and insist on visiting London, Paris and everything else in between. After the initial 'fling', Buncl says the tourist becomes a monodestinational traveller preferring to spend more time in fewer countries. 'We started introducing new unexplored destinations to Southeast Asia very gradually in order to compete with other emerging fashionable destination such as Australia and New Zealand,' Buncl adds.

Also in the effort to combat seasonal troughs and spread tourism traffic throughout Britain, special emphasis has been given to promoting regions with high unemployment rate such as Wales, Scotland, northern England, East Midlands, Heart of England, and the West Country. With a strong image – tartan, kilt, whisky, bagpipes, haggis, highland games and breathtaking sceneries – Scotland has always been the most popular British destination after London for foreign visitors, Buncl says.

Other BTA promotions to introduce the unexplored destinations to Asians include the Lake District with its romantic image and England's West Country (Devon and Cornwall) with its sceneries, attractions that are spiced with romantic flavour.

Buncl recommends May/June and September/October slots as the best times to visit Britain. He terms them as 'shoulder seasons' because these slots are generally attractive months in terms of plants/trees in bloom and climate. They are also not so busy months in terms of tourist traffic. London still remains as Britain's premier tourist attraction. London's appeals include its cosmopolitan atmosphere, superb and varied shopping opportunities, variety and quality of restaurants – from Asian to African to Western – and its hit shows. 'London has something for everyone,' Buncl says.

The BTA advises travellers to make reservation plans and travel arrangements with their local travel agents before they go. Travel agents in Southeast Asia have London hotel packages that offer discount rates at 30 to 50 per cent of what they would pay if they make their reservations direct. However, student hostels and smaller guest houses can be reserved through the tourist information centres upon arrival.