

TTNQ Talk

Rob Giason's column in The Cairns Post Wednesday 16 December 2009

Survey results released last week show the number of international visitors holidaying in the Cairns & Great Barrier Reef region fell again for year ended September 2009, led down by a 41% decrease in holiday visitors from Japan.

The silver lining in the September results is that two of the top ten international markets (Germany and France) recorded increased holiday visitor numbers, and five of the top ten recorded increased number of nights for holidays in the region. The sector that represents one third of all international arrivals (backpackers) didn't fall, and nights stayed by backpackers increased 21%. Three emerging markets (Korea, Taiwan and Singapore) showed significant growth in holiday visitor numbers, albeit from a small base.

Although the UK market lost ground, Europe held up, and local tourism operators just returned from a sales and marketing mission to Europe and the UK, are confident that Cairns is still a highly desired holiday destination. What that means is that as the grip of the Global Financial Crisis eases, we can expect those core markets to recover.

Diversification of the visitor market for long term growth and sustainability, is largely dependant on access. The travel time and expense incurred in adding domestic sector flights to international flights is a barrier to growth of holiday travel markets. For years the local tourism industry has lobbied the Federal Government to change aviation policy to make regional airports like Cairns more attractive to international carriers. The reported incentives to international carriers in the Federal Government's Aviation White Paper would be a critical breakthrough for local tourism. Targets to open new international markets for our region are the airline hubs of Singapore and Bangkok to provide one stop flights from markets such as China, Russia and India.

Another level of diversification is the development of events that will attract visitors to our region and we have assistance from Cairns Regional Council and Tourism Queensland in that development. I am working with an Events Review Committee to develop sporting and cultural events that are compatible with our natural environment to add to the appeal of our destination to visitors from other parts of Australia and from around the world. This development includes exposing existing events to wider audiences as well as creating new events.

There are two more survey periods for international visitor numbers before the commencement of the Jetstar flights from Osaka that will increase inbound capacity by 63,000 seats, so although there is light at the end of the tunnel we have a little way to go yet. There are promising indications for improvements in a range of areas, easing of the GFC, better prospects for international aviation access, increased domestic aviation capacity, growth of emerging markets and more events attracting visitors. Bring on 2010.