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Inaugural flight ceremony of Air Asia's Nanning, China to Pattaya (U-Tapao Airport)

Pattaya Mayor Itthiphol Kunplome has admitted that the city's tourist targets will fall short by around one million arrivals this year, but added he expected numbers to grow by around 12 percent in 2016. Current estimates are that around 9 million tourists, international and local, will visit the Eastern Seaboard resort this calendar year, compared with 10.2 million in 2014.

Itthiphol's optimistic prediction for 2016 was based partly on the doubling of passenger capacity at Rayong's U-Tapao airport. In particular, the no-frills carrier Air Asia is expected to extend its domestic and international routes - including Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and several Chinese cities - to facilitate the arrival of one million tourists.

Air-Asia Malaysia, which made its debut at U-Tapao last July with regular flights to and from Kuala Lumpur, has already triggered a traffic flow unseen at the U-Tapao airfield since it was handed

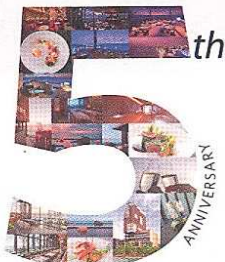
over to the Thai navy by the US in 1966. U-Tapao still retains other functions apart from civilian arrivals, especially flights for weather research and natural disaster surveillance in Asia. It also is a servicing hub for Thai Airways.

It is generally accepted that the downturn in Pattaya's international market in 2015 has been the retreat of the cash-strapped Russians with the value of their currency falling up to 40 percent as Moscow continues to admit the economic doldrums at home. Although there is no sign that the Russian market is about to pick up - Cambodia and Vietnam also report a shortage of Russian visitors - the slack in the market has been taken up by the Chinese. Their numbers arriving in Thailand have increased by over 40 percent in the last two years. Research has suggested that, although only one percent of mainland Chinese have so far visited Thailand, 50 percent would like to do so.

Meanwhile, a survey by a group of British travel agents has suggested that the Erawan Shrine bombing in Bangkok, which killed 20 people and injured 130, had little to do with the much-publicized cancellation of visits to Thailand. Asked to indicate their reservations about holidaying in Thailand, respondents mentioned Jet Ski and other scams and the pollution in some cities, but rarely mentioned the bombing plus a second explosion at Sathon pier which led to 35 countries warning their citizens to be circumspect.

Respondent Joseph Freeman said, "Actually I don't take any notice of travel advisories as they are mostly about protecting the government and the embassies and generally contain statements of the obvious." He added that he and his friends might spend less

► Continued on page 4



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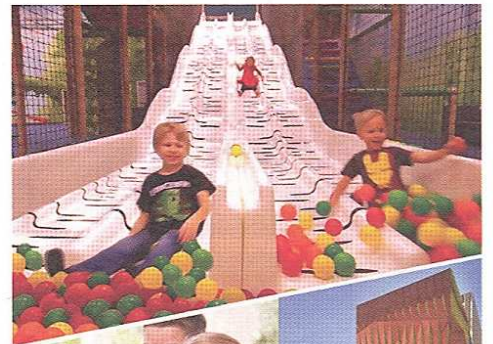
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