

Revitalising South Thai Tourism through Medical and Wellness Tourism

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Before the pandemic years, tourism contributed up to 11% of the gross domestic product of Thailand. Revenue from the tourism industry was estimated at 2.5 trillion Thai-baht, with 1.6 trillion from international travelers and 870 billion from the domestic market. The Covid-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on Thailand tourism. The number of foreign tourists decreased from 40 million in the year 2019 to nearly zero in the year 2020, while the government expected to have 10 million in-bound travelers in 2021. Health and hygiene concerns will transform customers' preferences towards closer-to-home trips and travelling to lesser-known destinations, and a shift from mass to niche segments, including medical and wellness tourism, community-based tourism, and environmentally sustainable tourism.¹

South Thai tourism has long been recognised by its 'sea, sand and sun' brand. Considering post-pandemic tourist behaviours, such basic products require additional values to fulfil altered customer needs. Considering the acceptable standards of medical care in Thailand and the good hospitality of the Thai people, South Thai tourism can be re-designed by incorporating health and wellness into its new values. Geographically, South Thailand has main tourist attractions on both the Andaman and Gulf of Thailand sides, such as Phuket, Suratthani, Krabi, Phang-nga and Ranong. As international cities, Phuket and Samui Islands can be perfect destinations for high-value medical services such as advanced medical diagnosis, high-technology surgery and aesthetic surgery while Krabi and Phang-nga are on their way to becoming world leading hubs of rehabilitation centres. These core missions will pave an opportunity for other types of businesses such as spas, herbal products, alternative medicine, long-stay accommodations, elderly care, conferences and hosting international sports events. The project is being established in the project title of Andaman Wellness Corridor (AWC), as announced by Thai government in January 2022.²

Unlike other special economic areas, the AWC is expected to be a smart and eco-friendly economic area for green industries, which means things such as medical and wellness rather than goods manufacturing. To project, not only local entrepreneurs but also the central government need to lend their hands to lay infrastructure, especially transportation, human resource preparation, digital infrastructure, gastronomy, oft-power promotion and societal awareness.

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doi: 10.31584/psumj.2022258993

<https://he01.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/PSUMJ/>

PSU Med J 2022;2(3)99-101

Published online 28 September 2022

Public-private partnerships will be essential. Special laws might be advantageous to create a 'sandbox' environment. Universities must prepare the required health care workforce through upskill/reskill programs. The Phuket government is bidding to be a host of the Kata-Karon Specialized Expo in the year 2028.

The Thailand tourism industry is moving from the old-path tourist industry which emphasised quantity to emphasize high-value tourism. This period of global health recovery is opening an opportunity for South Thai to health and wellness with the natural beauty of the southern beaches and the Thai hospitality to welcome tourists, ex-pats and Digital Nomads. Although this new strategy may bring economic and environmental resiliency by generating sustainable income for local entrepreneurs, there remains a long road ahead, economic instability, acceptance from local people and political instability.

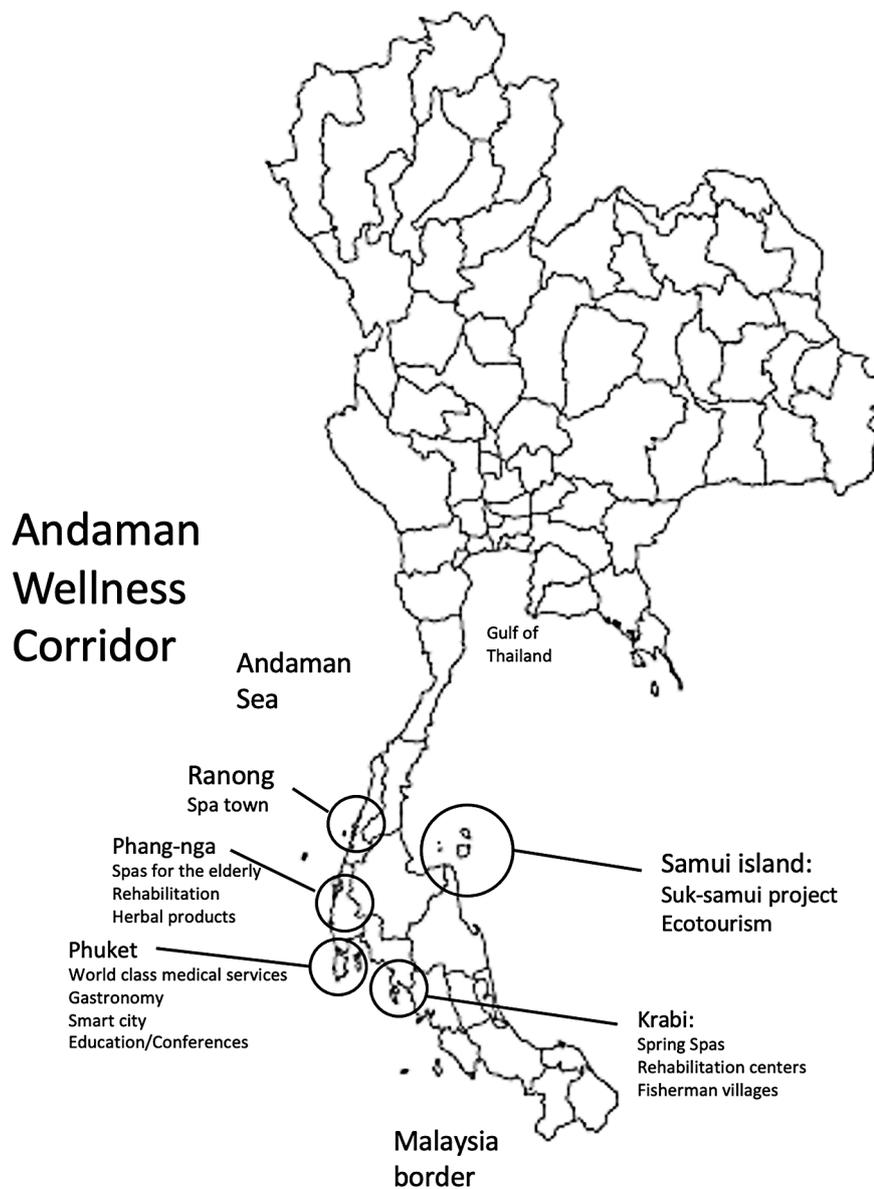


Figure 1 Andaman Wellness Corridor and its vicinity provinces

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