

# Interview with Alberto Lim, Secretary, Department of Tourism (DOT)

---

29.08.2010

Tags: [Department of Tourism \(DOT\)](#)

---

Hon. Secretary Lim, you have been appointed Secretary of the Department of Tourism (DOT) on June 30th 2010, as part of the new Aquino cabinet. What are the priorities that you have set for the DOT?

What has held back tourism in the Philippines is the lack of infrastructure – airports, roads, sanitation facilities – and so this is one of the first things we need to address. We are working closely with the Department heads of the Department of Public Works and Highways, the Department of Transportation and Communication and even with the Department of Energy to build the airports, the roads and the sanitation facilities so the tourism is sustainable.

The other issue is to open access: we need to have more flights coming in, which is important also for the medical tourism. In fact some CEOs of big hospitals are saying we need to have direct flights to our market sources because otherwise if for example they have a stopover in Bangkok or Singapore, they might just stay there. Hence it is important for us to have more direct flights: more flights generate competition, lower prices, and would allow us to become more attractive as a destination for medical travelers. Of course the products also need to be improved. If we are talking about medical tourism, we need to have more hospitals but the foundation is here; we have got excellent doctors and compassionate caregivers, which we actually export to the rest of the world! We should be a natural destination for medical travelers, but we have to develop our infrastructure and have more accredited hospitals. There will come a time when not only the

tourists will be looking for a place to live and enjoy, but the insurance companies themselves will be looking to cheaper ways to deliver services.

A last aspect on which we are focusing is long term stay. In the world there is a graying population. One of the statistics that stuck with me is that the number of people over sixty will grow from approximately 630 million in 2002 to about 2 billion in 2050 - a fourth of the world's population at that time will be over sixty and that means they will need medical care. Generally, if you come from the northern temperate zones, you like warmer places when you are old. The Philippines is an ideal location for the graying population because we have a warm climate, we have trained doctors who speak English and we have natural caregivers. Filipinos are very warm, hospitable and caring by nature.

The Philippines is known for its 7,107 islands and is occupying a niche for tourists looking for more exclusive destination compared to other "mass market" South East Asian countries. What is the importance of the tourism for the Philippines economy?

Right now tourism accounts for about 6% of our economy, and it employs 10% of our workforce, which corresponds to about 3.5 million people so it is a very important industry, in spite of the fact that the number of visitors is still very low, 3 million a year compared to our neighbors (Indonesia gets 6 millions, Singapore 10 millions, Thailand 15 million and Malaysia 23 millions). We are really far back compared to other South East Asian countries; even Vietnam gets more visitors than us and they have started later.

Given that the tourism in the Philippines is attracting less visitors compared to other South East Asian countries, does the Philippines have a competitive advantage compared to its neighbors?

We have natural endowments that are better than our South East Asian neighbors. Of course they also have the sun and the sand but if you go to Boracay you will see that the quality of the sand is higher, and the sea here is much clearer than the sea in Thailand because we are in the by the middle of the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, while they are right by the continental shelf, so the run off from the mountains does not leave the water very clear.

The Philippines has so many different destinations. Right now it is the central Philippines that has been put in the spotlight (including Boracay) but there are so many other nice destinations, one of them being El Nido in Palawan which is famous for its cliffs, that are similar to the ones in Vietnam in Halong Bay, but El Nido is more compact and the water is much clearer than in Vietnam. There are also good destinations in the north, like the rice terraces, and equally nice beaches in the far north (Batanes, for example, which is a very windy destination, similar to the cliffs of Dover). In

that area there are also some interesting indigenous people who are still living isolated in the mountains, many Europeans go there to see how they live, since they are primitive tribes.

We have also many indigenous people in Mindanao region, which is a rich destination because of the culture, the rich marine life as well as for sightseeing, with the tallest mountain in the country. Some parts of the Mindanao are safe but we are trying to come up with a peace agreement in the region because people still have the image of the war going on. It could open a whole new destination spot in the Philippines.

Besides the traditional beach tourism, what other products would you like to further promote?

In terms of products, in addition to the sun, the sea and the sand, we have other forms of nature tourism. We already have a number of tourists that come for nature tourism, which includes bird watching (we have got 200 species of endemic birds that can only be found here), as well as diving, which is a big attraction since we have got 250 species of corals (you have maybe 50 species in the Caribbean).

We also have other products that we need to develop further. One of them is the cultural, historical and heritage tourism. In Europe you always have old churches, and the monuments drive the tourism in certain areas. We have old churches too but they have been neglected over the years. We should take the example of a country like Italy where the government steps in, fix up the places and the people can come in and visit them. Cultural tourism is one new area that we could further develop.

We are also working to develop medical tourism. Actually we should not call it medical tourism but more long term stay, retirement tourism.

We are also thinking to further develop sports tourism as we have some world class sportsmen in boxing and in billiards, for example. The Philippines has also become well known for hosting survivor events, the ironman, as well as for extreme sports like wakeboarding in Camarines. So sports tourism is another area that we can develop.

The Philippines is aiming at doubling its revenues from tourism in the six-year term of the President Aquino cabinet. Do you think this objective is achievable and what role can the medical tourism play in boosting the revenues from tourism?

I think we can double the revenues from the ordinary tourism only, even if it has taken almost thirty years to go from one million visitors to three, and three is nothing comparable to what our neighbors get. I think the Philippines time has come, with President Aquino giving a new shine to

the country. We will fix the products and we will fix the promotion.

Our projection also estimates that the increased tourism will have an effect on the job market, as we expect to create three million new jobs over the next six years. The improvement in the sector will bring another additional nine billion dollars to the economy, and the revenues that we will earn from tourism are expected to rise from ten to nineteen billion dollars.

These figures do not include the medical tourism, as it considers people that will come for an operation as belonging to the medical industry revenues. The figures I have been talking about consider tourists that will come for what the “normal” type of tourists would come for, meaning the rest and the recreation activities, the sports activities, as well as attending a convention or an exhibit. If you add the revenues from medical tourism, that would maybe represent an additional three billion dollars revenues.

So the potential of tourism is quite high and beneficial for the country and it will go a long way towards reducing poverty, which is the main goal of our President.

Looking specifically at the medical tourism, it has been growing in the years, from 60,000 foreign patients in 2007 to 100,000 in 2008, and it is expected to increase to 200,000 medical tourists by 2015, generating revenues of three billion dollars. What makes the Philippines the ideal destination for medical tourism in Asia, compared to other more established countries like Thailand and India?

Like I said the main aspect is the care giving. We export the caregivers in other countries, including South East Asian ones, but we also have quality caregivers here. The Filipino doctors have an advantage with the fact that they speak English, and since English is more easy to understand than Thai, then we have an advantage. And then of course if you are recuperating after an operation, there is nothing better than recuperating from our beaches!

To promote the medical tourism, the Philippines will host in October the International Summit on Medical Travel, Wellness and Retirement (IMWell Summit), and the DOT is the main host. What kind of exposure do you expect to gain from the event?

Health and wellness is one of the new segments of the market that we have not exploited much, so these conventions, meetings or summits are important because they put us in the map. Visitors can start considering our country more, they can take a look at our new hospitals, many of which have been built in the last five years so we were not on the map before. Now that these hospitals have been built we can compete with the best, and I think it is important for visitors to see for themselves what they are like. I think the software side, the human resources side, is much better

known, now it is the hardware side, the infrastructure, that people have to see.

During the State of the Nation Address, President Aquino mentioned the desire to further promote the use of public-private-partnerships (PPPs) to develop the economy of the country. Secretary Ona confirmed that this is a path that they will follow in the medical and healthcare sector as well.

Looking at the tourism and particularly at the medical tourism, do you see the potential to increase the use of PPPs to further develop the sector?

Definitely! It starts with the infrastructure – airport terminals can be built, owned and operated by the private sector, and they can earn the revenues from the terminal fees.

We also intend to give incentives to investors to invest in underdeveloped areas, especially where there is a lot of poverty.

The first 100 days in office are the most important and challenging. How would you evaluate your performance so far?

We are in the 43rd day, so it is almost halfway. We started off late, because unlike many other administrations in other countries that have a month or two to prepare, we were announced the day before we took office, so we did not really have a transition period. We are just finishing the transition period, I have done most of the appointments, but there are still some that I have to do.

We had a number of objectives of the first hundred days, one of which is to work with the international airport to improve the arrivals and departures. We are also going to put up a new website, since the old one needs a lot of improvements. We have also seen the new media as being important for our marketing programs because a lot of people get information and book their trips through internet.

However the appointments are the most important aspect, we need to get the good people in, we need to reenergize the bureaucracy, set out the directions, get them to think of themselves as part of a team. We also want to integrate people that work locally in the regions, because we want to combine destinations – people will not go only to one and then go back home, but they will combine destinations and they stay longer. That is important for our objective of creating jobs, because the more a tourist leaves behind, the more jobs are created.

We know that you have just started, but if you look at the end of the spectrum, how would you like the tourism and the medical tourism to look when you are finished with your term?

One of our objectives is to double the numbers both in terms of visitors and revenues. I think the medical tourism will grow and we are hoping that the retirement sector will explode because we have the natural endowment, the good weather, and the caregivers - we just have to motivate the private sector so that they will invest in retirement. We are attracting regular tourists, we are creating another market for retirement and also another market for the hospitals because when they come they realize the facilities here are up to world class standards.

I would like people to consider coming to the Philippines because it is a warm and hospitable country and we have natural endowments that are worth seeing, vistas that people really express wonders at. We are trying to make it easier for visitors to come over and I hope by the end of the term it will be much easier to arrive in the country, the air fares will be more competitive and of course the level of service will be improved.

[See more interviews](#)