

Interview with Vicente Romano, Undersecretary Tourism Planning and Promotions, Department of Tourism (DOT)

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When we met with secretary Lim we talked about the importance of PPP as a way to further develop the sector; however, as a follow up question we would like to know in which areas the Department of Tourism would like to see more PPP? How are you planning to attract investors to come to work with you?

There is a new tourism law that has been put in place and part of the mandate is to encourage partnership with the private sector, but it also talks about incentives such as tax holidays and other business incentives. So part of the process is that the DOT identifies tourism enterprise zones and it is within these zones where we normally invite investors to come in both at the local government level as well as international investors. That is how we see it moving forward.

One of the topics that we discussed with secretary Lim is that the Philippines has much more to offer than just traditional tourism. The Philippines is also a prime destination for sports tourism, retirement, and cultural/historical tourism. In a previous interview you mentioned that one of the DOT missions is to create a "product center", so what are these product centers that you envision and how do you plan to develop them?

Medical tourism is one of the sectors we are looking at. Right now we are probably 4th or 5th in the region in terms of "preferred destination", so we would like to improve that. Part of the process is the accreditation of hospitals. Another factor for medical tourism that we are looking at are the Filipinos overseas. We have a huge Filipino community in North America, so one of the things we would like to work on is the portability of insurance; meaning that insurance companies in the US would allow their clients to use their insurance outside of the USA.

Another Medical Tourism area we would like to advance is in the field of dental. Not only is it more expensive in advanced countries, but it is difficult to get an appointment. In this area, our hope is that through the use of internet people can do initial evaluations and consultation and even set the appointment by internet and be here in a week's time.

You were mentioning before the importance of accreditation, and we read that the Philippines recently launched the NABH, which happened just after we interviewed Secretary Lim, so we did not have a chance to talk with him about it. What are your expectations of the NABH and what do you expect it to bring to the country?

If we have more accredited facilities here that will attract more medical tourists. Even within the sphere of medical tourism there is the wellness aspect where we believe we can play a major role. You know there is Thai massage, but we also have our own type of massage called Hilot and Shangri-la group is starting to offer it. We are starting to standardize the practice now, and training programs. Again, this is all being done through co-operation with the private sector.

When we interviewed the Secretary, he told us that the Philippines is attracting 2million tourists every year. This is a number MUCH lower than your neighbors, including Malaysia and Thailand who attract 23 million and 15 million respectively. Why is the Philippines attracting less tourists when it has such a competitive advantage, notably with beach and product offerings? What have been the historical factors that slowed down the tourism sector and left the Philippines last on the map? At the same time, what are you doing to attract more tourists?

I think the Secretary explained the structural problems already (ie access, flights, infrastructure) and we are working very fast on those. Today as we identify the top destinations, the other government agencies, for example the department of public works, are also prioritizing the road structures around those destinations. The department of transportation and communication are also prioritizing the airports, but the other half building all of this is of course the promotion side. We have a much smaller budget than our neighbors in Singapore, Thailand or Indonesia. Even India has been spending a lot over the last 4 years. So what I would like to do, as it is under my jurisdiction is to really try to focus the meager marketing resources that we have. We are looking at new media as one area where we can maximize promotional effort. I believe that tourism today is to a large extent an internet dependent industry. The first thing that any potential traveler he will do when planning a trip is actually google the location. So we would like to make sure that when a potential visitor from Europe googles "white beaches" we are on the first page or at worst on the second page. Otherwise you are not on the map.

We are also going to re-brand the Philippines. We are going to change the "wow Philippines" slogan soon. We have an agency who is working on it. Singapore recently re-branded, and we are trying to learn from their experience and will roll out our new brand soon.

As the first 100 days in government are the most crucial, something that we would like to ask is how would you evaluate your first days in office?

Most Secretaries, even myself, came from the private sector, so we were new to the bureaucracy and we had to learn how it works. At the same time we had to asses and fix some strategy issues. We have identified a few "100 day high impact projects". One of the things that we are looking at is improving the arrival experience at airports, at least the manila airports. We are working closely with the airport authorities to improve the queuing and the assistance. Hopefully in the next few days we will roll out a new look and feel at the airports. Here in Manila we are fixing up the Intramuros. For us it is a major showcase of our culture and heritage so at the very least we would like to spruce up the place and look at some new programs to attract not just foreign, but local tourists. We would also like to change the mindset of Filipinos to prioritize less going to the malls and more experiencing our culture.

Of course something that has infamously put the Philippines in headlines recently is the Manila bus incident. We read that you are expecting a 10% decline in tourism, so how are you going to turn the situation around? How are you working to ease international tensions and change the mindset of tourists?

There was an apology by the President who declared a day of morning, and we are actually sending a high-level delegation to Hong Kong with the purpose to express our sympathy.

We were worried about an international backlash, but so far the only country who has declared a travel advisory on the Philippines has been Hong Kong; and this is understandable. We hope that when things settle down that we can restore relationships.

On the safety side, I think that you will see a significant restructuring of security forces, and the President is conducting an investigation.

Overall, we are hoping to revive tourism quickly, especially as we are getting to the peak season.

What would be your final message to the international readers of Pharmaceutical Executive?

It is unfortunate that this incident happened, and the response was not up to par. But we are going to make major changes to the security forces, and procedures.

We would like to assure our friends, and the international community that the Philippines is as safe as it could be and that there are many attractions here that would be worth their time.

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