

Global Economics & Market Strategy

Thailand: Tourism - The Pillar of Growth In 2024 & 2025

- We downgrade our tourism arrivals forecast from 38 million to 35.5 million persons in 2024. Thailand is still on track to return to prepandemic levels in 4Q24. We maintain our tourism arrival forecast of 41.5 million persons in 2025.
- Our quantitative analysis suggests China's GDP to be the primary driver influencing outbound tourism demand towards ASEAN-6 nations. Notably, the leading relationship between GDP and tourism with GDP preceding tourism demand by two quarters, along with its comparatively stronger coefficient in contrast to other variables.
- Our scenario analysis suggests a strong pickup in Thailand's GDP growth and real sales in 2025 & 2026 in a good case. So far, Thailand's efforts to rejuvenate its tourism sector following the pandemic reflect a strategic agenda aimed at both recovery and bolstering its global standing.

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Figure 1: Continued rebound in private consumption expected to support GDP growth in 2H24



Source: Macrobond, RHB Economics & Market Strategy

Figure 2: Headline and Core inflation may continue to pick up in the upcoming quarters



Source: Macrobond, RHB Economics & Market Strategy



Post-Pandemic Recovery – Boom in Thailand's Tourism

This thematic report attempts to discuss Thailand's tourism prognosis for 2024 and 2025, and the implications to economic growth especially on the services sector, retail sales and GDP growth. It also explores Thailand's growth drivers, primarily focused on external factors. Despite this, Thailand benefits from a substantial consumer base and a significant domestic agricultural sector, providing some level of protection against global economic challenges, although not entirely. Apart from essential growth indicators which are pivotal for economic growth, Thailand's inbound tourism demand remains a crucial factor for its economic recovery in 2024.

We downgrade our tourism arrivals forecast from 38 million to 35.5 million persons in 2024. Thailand is still on track to return to pre-pandemic levels in 4Q24. We maintain our tourism arrival forecast of 41.5 million persons in 2025. Thailand's tourism sector has registered significant milestones, welcoming 17.5 million foreign tourists, in the first half of this year substantially boosting the country's revenue by around THB825 billion (\$22.6 billion). Statistics from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports (MOTS), unveil compelling insights from 1 Jan – 2 June 2024, showcasing Chinese tourists as the dominant group with over 2.9 million visits, followed by Malaysians, Indians, Russians, South Koreans and Indians. The ministry highlighted a notable surge, with nearly 735,802 foreign visitors from 8 – 14 April, averaging 105,115 visitors daily. The country's ambitious target for the year is set at 35-36 million foreign visitors, mirroring pre-pandemic levels from 2019. A projected income of THB3.5 trillion (\$95 billion), encompassing both domestic and international tourism, underscores Thailand's commitment to revitalising its tourism industry. Thailand has recorded nearly 9.4 million foreign arrivals in 1Q24, representing a 43% increase YoY thus showing a positive sign for the rest of the year.

We had previously downgraded Thailand's GDP 2024 forecast from 4.0% made in December 2023, to 2.4% in our recent papers, thus accounting for the slower-than-expected recovery in Thailand's tourism arrivals year-to-date. We see strong positive spillover effects to Thailand's private consumption and retail sales in 2024 and 2025; private consumption was robust at 6.9% YoY (7.4% YoY in 4Q23), with its prognosis on the rosy spectrum given the firmer tourism outlook in 2H24 to 2025. From the production accounting perspective, hospitality-related sectors such as hotels and restaurant activities and transportation have expanded, potentially due to the gradual recovery of tourism arrivals. As mentioned in our previous report on Thailand's GDP, private consumption and tourism are expected to remain favourable in 2024, while the rebound in investment and public consumption will take time to recover. We still keep our optimistic view on private consumption to continue to recover in the upcoming quarters ahead, thus making it a dominant contributor to overall growth.

Our RHB-LEI¹ (Figure 3) is suggesting a slowdown in Thailand's GDP momentum into 3Q24, despite the gradual pickup in tourism activities over the same period. While this paper attempts to discuss the positive impact of tourism on Thailand's economic growth, we think it imperative to sound out our relatively neutral-bearish view on Thailand's non-tourism-related indicators, such as the persistent net outflow of funds, as well as the relative decline in the LEI indicators – agricultural production, industrial production and Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) valuation. From our discussion with policymakers², we infer that policymakers and corporates are concerned about the ongoing heightened political noise, and its potential negative impact on Thailand's private consumption, tourism, and investment prospects.

Inflation pressures will likely pick up in 2H24 – 2025 as well, on the back of the aforementioned view of a recovering tourism base. The slower-than-expected tourism activities in 1H24, coupled with policy decisions to cap diesel, cooking gas and power prices in 1H24³, have cushioned inflation pressures over the same period. We had adjusted our full-year inflation outlook to 1.0% in 2024, from a prior 2.0% outlook. Still, the prognosis has not changed; the fall in inflation pressures is due to external drivers (tourism demand) and policy parameters (price caps), rather a strong evidence of a cyclical slowdown. We view higher tourism activities in the quarters ahead, and that should lift inflation to an average of 1.0% in 2024, and 2.5% in 2025.



¹ LEI stands for Leading Economic Indicator

² RHB Economics & Market Strategy, <u>Meetings with Thailand Policy Makers & Corporates: Key Findings</u>, 21 June 2024

³ Asia News Network, <u>Caps on diesel, cooking gas, power to continue for now in Thailand</u>, 8 May 2024

Thailand

Figure 3: RHB-LEI (TH) suggesting a slight GDP deceleration in 3Q24...



Source: Macrobond, RHB Economics & Market Strategy

Figure 5: Tourism arrivals have slowed in 1H24, but is expected to recover in 2H24...



Source: Macrobond, RHB Economics & Market Strategy

Figure 7: China is seen as the key contributor to TH's tourism mainly driven by fiscal relaxation



Source: Macrobond, RHB Economics & Market Strategy





Source: Macrobond, RHB Economics & Market Strategy

Figure 6: ... while the generally higher tourism income per visitor will certainly help support overall growth



Source: Macrobond, RHB Economics & Market Strategy

Figure 8: Tourism numbers from China and Europe are greater than other regions after the pandemic



Source: Macrobond, RHB Economics & Market Strategy



Quantitative Analysis + Three Idiosyncratic Reasons

We think that Thailand's tourism upturn should get a boost from China's launch of measures to boost its economy, with more Chinese travellers expected to arrive in Thailand to drive the Thai economy to grow at least 2.4% this year. The recovery in China's economy is expected to lead to a rise in the tourism sector across ASEAN including Thailand, thereby bolstering the services sector account of the economy this year. Notwithstanding, THB strength is also determined by tourism and retail sales as per our quantitative model in our 3Q24 Pathfinder report, suggesting that higher tourism activities in 2024 will help. In 2025, we expect a rosier trade backdrop, hence underpinning our view of CA surplus at 3.5% of GDP.

We expect that China's economic stimulus initiatives are poised to have a positive impact on the economic landscape of both China and Thailand. The measures are anticipated to foster an uptick in the influx of Chinese tourists to Thailand, further bolstering economic activity in the region. The resurgence of consumption in China is anticipated to underpin economic recuperation, thereby providing a supportive backdrop for Thailand's economic revival. This trend is particularly significant given China's status as Thailand's principal trading partner, and the anticipated increase in Chinese tourists arrivals is poised to further stimulate Thailand's economy.

Figure 9: The OLS model suggests that China's tourism demand is primarily driven by its GDP growth

Regression Statistics				
Multiple R	0.699			
R Square	0.489			
Adjusted R Square	0.458			
Standard Error	0.368			
Observations	70			

Dependent Variable		Inbound Tourism i	nto ASEAN-6	(YoY)
	Coeff	Std Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	-0.386	0.123	-3.128	0.003
GDP ¹ (t+2)	20.044	0.000	2.486	0.015
China Labour Demand (YoY)	0.904	0.220	4.111	0.000
Shanghai Stock Exchange (YoY)	0.221	0.096	2.318	0.024
China Domestic Tourism (YoY)	1.617	0.256	6.318	0.000

Source: RHB Economics & Market Strategy

YoY stands for Year-On-year growth rates, (t + /- n) refers to the period of lag/lead, and resident unemployment is illustrated via a basis-point change on a YoY basis. ¹Coefficient is magnified by 1xe6

Given China's role in determining Thailand's tourism prognosis, we introduce a tourism function focusing on China's outbound tourism to ASEAN-6 countries, aiming to identify China-centric factors affecting tourism demand within the region. Our dependent variable is the inbound tourism volume from China into ASEAN-6 nations. Our analysis reveals that China's GDP, labour demand, Shanghai Stock Exchange and domestic tourism activity are statistically significant (P-value <0.05) thus influencing China's outbound tourism to ASEAN-6.

The above OLS model suggests that China's GDP emerges as the primary driver influencing its outbound tourism demand towards ASEAN-6 nations. Notably, the leading relationship between GDP and tourism with GDP preceding tourism demand by two quarters, along with its comparatively stronger coefficient in contrast to other variables, underscores its pivotal role. We continue to adopt an optimistic outlook for the global economy in 2024, whereby we expect a continuous economic recovery momentum in key markets such as the U.S., China and selected ASEAN economies, thus suggesting inbound tourism demand from China to Thailand is likely to expand in 2024. We remain positive on China, with our base case GDP growth forecast at 5.0% in 2024. We remain above consensus for its GDP growth, with market consensus moving gradually towards our full-year forecast.



Thailand

18 July 2024

Beyond the aforementioned quantitative analysis, we see three key idiosyncratic factors that will support Thailand's tourism base in 2H24 – 2025. They are specifically (1) the new visa waiver agreement, (2) China's strong showing in 1H24 as an early proxy, and (3) the relatively cheaper THB against ASEAN and the DXY.

<u>First</u>, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) cited that the new visa waiver agreement between China and Thailand has bolstered confidence among Chinese tourists, reflected in the steady increase in arrivals to approximately 27,000 to 28,000 tourists daily since 1st Feb 2024. This level of influx is nearly comparable to pre-pandemic levels, contrasting sharply with the 7,000 – 8,000 arrivals per day observed last year at the same period. We think that the Chinese tourism market appears to have shaken off reservations about travel to Thailand, mainly driven by the visa waivers and the resumption of flights between China and Thailand to 90% of pre-pandemic levels during the CNY festive holiday. We note that in 2024, although spending per visitor may be slower to recover, there is a likelihood that the resurgence in enthusiasm from visitors from the Mainland could deliver an upside surprise for Thai tourism, which accounts for 20% of GDP if indirect spill-overs are included.

Second, China's strong showing on Thailand's shores in 1H24 may be an early proxy of a stronger Chinese-centric arrival base in 2H24. According to MOTS, Thailand welcomed 1.9 million foreign tourist arrivals during the extended Songkran festival between 1 – 21 April, a surge of 38.0% YoY giving a boost to the country's vital tourism industry. It has been cited that the water festival generated THB140.3 billion in revenue over the 21-day celebration, as both local and international visitors enjoyed the festivities across the Southeast Asian nation. China came in as the leading source of inbound tourists to Thailand during the period, with an 89.2% YoY jump. Meanwhile, we anticipate upcoming international events including Summer Sonic Bangkok 2024, FIFA Congress 2024 and a few other events would continue to attract foreign travellers to Thailand.

<u>Third</u>, the relatively cheaper THB may continue to attract inbound arrivals. The THB has been one of Asia's worse performing currencies at -5% from its spot return year-to-date at the time of writing. On the flipside, the relatively better performance in the RMB (-2.3%), SGD (-1.7%) and EUR (-1.2%) may have given holidayers more spending power when donning the tourist hat in the land of smiles. We remain relatively neutral on the THB – we forecast THB to weaken towards 36.8 per USD in 3Q24, from the current 35.9 handle on the back of dollar strength for DXY to move towards 106 over the same period. We then look for THB to strengthen marginally to 36.4 per USD in 4Q24, and move towards 34.5 per USD in 2H25.

Our optimism is shared by Thai policymakers – Official forecasts are for Thailand to see 35.0 and 39.5 million tourists in 2024 and 2025, respectively, thus boosting the services sector. Policymakers sounded out that the visa-free agreements with Chinese, Kazakh, Taiwanese and Indian tourists are expected to bolster tourism activities in Thailand further. Still, some caution is heard, whereby we see three downside risks, including (1) potential lacklustre government spending, (2) a weaker external backdrop and (3) the rise of US-China trade tensions that could impede economic growth in 2H24.



Figure 10: Private consumption and investment in Thailand decline during periods of political uncertainty

Source: CEIC, RHB Economics & Market Strategy, political uncertainty periods are shaded in blue





Scenario Analysis: The Impact of Tourism

So far, our discussions on Thailand's tourism outlook have indicated that the anticipated volume of inbound tourism is in line with the official estimates of 35 million. Looking ahead beyond 2024, there is a growing concern that Thailand's tourism sector has the potential to adapt and thrive, contributing positively to the country's GDP. We have identified several factors for the increase in tourist visits, notably a significant influx of visitors during CNY festivities. This surge was fuelled by the government's supporting measures such as the facilitation of visa-free entry, targeted promotional campaigns in key source markets and the draw of concerts and special international events.

Based on our scenario analysis, we expect that if Thailand's tourism-related activities continue to thrive, they might serve as a substantial catalyst for GDP growth in the long term. The services industry, a cornerstone of Thailand's economy, is heavily intertwined with tourism accounting for 76.1% of total services from 2018-2023. This underscores the significant economic potential of the tourism sector, which not only drives growth directly but also generates positive spill-over effects on private consumption, employment and retail sales. Therefore, sustained growth in tourism has the potential to bolster Thailand's overall economic activity in the years ahead.

According to our previous <u>thematic</u> report, we found that tourism levels are essential in determining Thailand's private consumption and GDP growth. Given the pivotal role of tourism as a key economic driver, our analysis revealed that tourism-related data (proxied by retail sales) emerged as a statistically significant factor in explaining Thailand's consumption function. This underscores the intricate interplay between tourism, private consumption and broader economic growth dynamics within Thailand.

We also conducted OLS to see the correlation between tourism arrivals and private consumption, retail sales as well as GDP growth in Thailand by analysing the key factors separately. This model takes on tourism arrivals (YoY) as the independent variable across 48 quarterly observations (2007 – 2019), with a higher adjusted R-Square of 0.52 for private consumption. We also modelled the impact of tourism arrivals on Thailand's retail sales and GDP, albeit with limited goodness of fit under the R-square parameter. Nonetheless, the models suggest that (1) the dependent variables remain statistically relevant (p-value < 0.05), whilst (2) coefficients are positive, suggesting the impact of tourism on these variables.

Figure 11: GDP via the production approach suggests Thailand is outward-oriented, with the agriculture sector contributing 6.3% only...



Source: CEIC, RHB Economics & Market Strategy, GDP data is calculated throughout 2018-2023





Source: CEIC, RHB Economics & Market Strategy, GDP data is calculated throughout 2018-2023



Thailand

18 July 2024

Figure 13: Thailand's Consumption Function showing wages & tourism are chief determinants

Regression Statistics					
Multiple R	0.880				
R Square	0.775				
Adjusted R Square	0.751				
Standard Error	2.279				
Observations (Quarterly)	63				

Dependent Variable	Year-or	n-Year (Private	e Consumpt	ion GDP)
	Coeff	Std Error	t Stat	P-value
Intercept	3.234	0.690	4.688	0.000
(YoY) Retail Sales Index (RSI): at 2002 Price (t+0)	0.250	0.037	6.757	0.000
(YoY) Labour Monthly Earnings (t+2)	0.160	0.039	4.060	0.000
(YoY) Consumer Confidence Index (t-1)	0.120	0.035	3.408	0.001
(YoY) Credit Card: Credit Outstanding (t+2)	-0.221	0.091	-2.417	0.019
(YoY) Outstanding Personal Loans (t-1)	0.087	0.027	3.272	0.002
(YoY) Labour Participation Rate (t+1)	-1.302	0.454	-2.869	0.006

Source: RHB Economics & Market Strategy

YoY stands for Year-On-year growth rates, (t+/-n) refers to the period of lag/lead, resident unemployment is illustrated via a basis-point change on a YoY basis.

Figure 14: Correlation between Tourism Arrivals (YoY) and Private Consumption, Retail Sales and GDP

Regression Statistics					
R Square	0.54172				
Adjusted R Square	0.52135				
Standard Error	2.44608				
Observations (Quarterly)	48				

Dependent Variable	Private Consumption Exp GDP (YoY)					
	Coeff	Std Error t Stat P-va				
Intercept	1.98727	0.42453	4.68112	0.00003		
Tourism Arrivals (YoY)	0.17722	0.02403	7.37392	0.00000		

Regression Statistics					
R Square	0.29615				
Adjusted R Square	0.26487				
Standard Error	9.12285				
Observations (Quarterly)	48				

Dependent Variable	Retail Sales Index (YoY)					
	Coeff	Std Error	t Stat	P-value		
Intercept	1.49531	1.58332	0.94442	0.34989		
Tourism Arrivals (YoY)	0.39435	0.08964	4.39944	0.00006		

Regression Statistic	s
R Square	0.29667
Adjusted R Square	0.26541
Standard Error	2.85245
Observations (Quarterly)	48

Dependent Variable	Gross Domestic Product (YoY)					
	Coeff	P-value				
Intercept	1.93022	0.49506	3.89899	0.00031		
Tourism Arrivals (YoY)	0.12346	0.02803	4.40494	0.00006		

Source: RHB Economics & Market Strategy

YoY stands for Year-On-year growth rates, The data are taken from 2007 - 2019





Drawing from our insights into the impact of tourism on private consumption, GDP, and inflation, we present our scenario analysis in Figure 15 below, based on our projections for tourism arrivals over the next three years. As previously discussed, our base scenario anticipates tourism arrivals reaching between 35.5 to 36 million individuals, with inbound arrivals expected to reach 41.5 million and 43 million individuals in 2025 and 2026, respectively. Figures 16 - 19 illustrate the correlation between Thailand's inbound arrivals, real GDP, inflation, and retail sales growth. This positive relationship is attributed to the consumption mechanism, wherein higher tourism arrivals result in increased overall receipts, wages, and private consumption.

In our base case scenario, we also anticipate a decline in receipts per tourist, consistent with the historical trend observed from 2017 to 2019, despite our positive outlook on tourism arrivals. Visitor arrivals have already clocked 3.3 million persons in February alone, higher than the monthly average of 3.2 million persons in 2019 (pre-COVID). Should this trend persist, we expect a total of 35.5 million visitor arrivals for the whole of 2024. Nonetheless, the recovering tourism levels will lift Thailand's consumption and wages in the upcoming quarters, in line with our consumption function assumptions. We expect tourism arrivals to fully return to pre-COVID level in 2025, further contributing to demand-pull inflation. We note that tourism levels are merely 7% shy of their pre-COVID levels. The recovering tourism levels are expected to lift Thailand's consumption and wages in 2024. Despite, the expected return of arrival volumes to pre-pandemic levels by 2025, we project that receipts as a percentage of GDP may not fully recover.

Our worst-case scenario assumes a more pronounced decrease in inbound tourism arrivals that contributes to a further decline in Thailand's GDP and consumption. Consequently, this scenario foresees a continued decline in receipts per tourist, which in turn drags GDP, headline inflation and retail sales growth. Key factors contributing to this scenario include ongoing geopolitical tensions, the slowdown in China's economy and tighter financial conditions resulting in a decline in the overall tourism demand. Global geopolitical tensions affect tourism arrivals in Thailand through a variety of channels including travel restrictions, economic sanctions and safety concerns leading to a decline in the number of tourists visiting Thailand. The decline in tourism arrivals results in decreased tourism receipts, which directly affects industries such as hospitality, transportation, food and beverages, and retail decelerating overall GDP growth. Furthermore, lower tourism arrivals lead to a diminished demand for goods and services in popular tourist destinations, potentially causing lower prices in sectors like accommodation, food, and entertainment. This, in turn, reduces demand-pull inflationary pressures.

In our best-case scenario, we anticipate a rapid rebound in inbound arrivals, with numbers surpassing pre-pandemic levels by 2024–2026 and reaching around 45 million individuals by 2026. This optimistic outlook is underpinned by a strong resurgence in tourism, particularly from Chinese travellers, who are expected to contribute significantly to the upsurge. Furthermore, we project an increase in tourism receipts (% of GDP) which further bolsters this scenario. Notably, the already robust inbound arrivals from Malaysia, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Middle East will complement the influx of Chinese tourists, providing a substantial boost to Thailand's GDP and retail sales growth throughout 2024–2026.

In conclusion, we anticipate the Thai economy to rebound in 2024 propelled by these factors: (1) a continuous revival in tourism, (2) fiscal relaxation and (3) normalisation of the service sector which is expected to support the GDP growth. The government's proactive measures, including extending visas for specific groups, simplifying visa procedures for key tourist markets and promoting foreign investment are anticipated to further bolster Thailand's economic foundation. The free-visa agreement between Thailand and China is the key factor in the increasing number of Chinese tourists. Hence, such free-visa agreements with several countries potentially might upgrade the country's image on a global scale. As Thailand confronts the impacts of global events, its tourism industry, historically a cornerstone of the nation's economy, stands at a crucial juncture. With an eye toward recovery in 2024, efforts are being channelled into stimulating tourism and attracting quality travellers, reflecting on both the positives and negatives of tourism in Thailand. Overall, Thailand's GDP growth remains resilient in 2024. The outlook is positive, but there are some risks as mentioned in the previous paragraphs that could derail the recovery.

Thus, we think that Thailand's efforts to rejuvenate its tourism sector following the pandemic reflect a strategic agenda aimed at both recovery and bolstering its global standing. Prioritising economic resilience, societal well-being and environmental sustainability, Thailand is poised to redefine the future of tourism within its borders. These focused initiatives are instrumental in preserving Thailand's status, with the tourism sector at the helm steering the nation towards a brighter, more prosperous future.



Scenarios	Year	Inbound Arrivals	Tourism Receipts	Receipts Per Tourist	Tourism Receipts (% of GDP)	Inbound Arrivals	Real GDP	Headline Inflation	Real Retail Sales
	Units	Persons (Million)	THB (Million)	THB	Percent	YoY %	YoY %	YoY %	YoY %
	2017	35.6	1,831,105.0	51,447.1	17.8	9.4	4.2	0.7	6.3
Historical	2018	38.2	1,876,136.9	49,141.6	17.5	7.3	4.2	1.1	10.8
	2019	39.9	1,933,368.2	48,435.6	17.7	4.6	2.1	0.7	3.2
	2024	35.5	1,685,245.4	47,471.7	14.5	26.3	2.4	1.0	10.4
Base	2025	41.5	1,950,375.5	46,997.0	16.2	16.7	3.0	2.5	6.6
	2026	43.0	2,021,000.0	47,000.0	16.7	3.6	3.0	2.7	4.0
	2024	27.0	1,193,540.8	44,205.2	11.2	-4.3	1.4	0.8	-2.0
Worst	2025	30.0	1,270,847.0	42,361.6	11.0	11.1	1.4	0.8	1.9
	2026	32.0	1,305,570.2	40,799.1	10.8	6.7	2.0	1.8	2.6
	2024	40.0	1,936,848.0	48,421.2	16.0	41.8	2.6	1.3	11.0
Good	2025	43.0	2,061,386.7	47,936.9	16.6	7.5	3.2	2.8	4.9
	2026	45.0	2,160,000.0	48,000.0	17.0	4.7	3.2	3.0	3.4

Figure 15: Base, Good and Worts Scenarios in Tourism Arrivals and the Impact on GDP, CPI and Retail Sales

Source: CEIC, RHB Economics & Market Strategy, historical numbers 2020 – 2022 are not available

Figure 16: Higher tourism arrivals have consistently correlate with growth in real GDP...



Source: Macrobond, RHB Economics & Market Strategy

Figure 18: ...and tourism-related contribution typically lead to an uptick in retail sales...



Source: Macrobond, RHB Economics & Market Strategy

Figure 17: ... and inflation continued to pick up on the back of higher private consumption and wages...



Source: Macrobond, RHB Economics & Market Strategy

Figure 19: ...which eventually boost the private consumption



Source: Macrobond, RHB Economics & Market Strategy



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