

Editor's comment from *Travel Markets* No. 19 – May 2004

50 years on, PATA continues to lead the way

The Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) has long been the envy of other international and regional travel industry associations and organisations – its reputation and influence extend well beyond its geographical borders. While this is in part due to the growing interest of the rest of the world in the Asia Pacific region, it is just as much to do with the not-for-profit association's success at meeting the disparate needs of its mixed public-private sector membership.

Admittedly, PATA has been through rough times in its 53-year history. In its first 40 or so years, the prime need of all its members – whether large airlines, national tourism organisations (NTOs), or tour operators and hotels, etc – was support in promotion and marketing. And it was because of this common need that PATA was so successful in balancing the interests of both governments and commercial organisations within its membership. Over time its role expanded to include technical support for the development of tourism facilities in member countries, the local training of personnel, cultural heritage preservation, environmental protection and other activities. But marketing remained its central focus.

As awareness of the Asia Pacific region and its tourism potential grew, and as its membership became more experienced and sophisticated, so the needs of a large segment of its membership began to change. Its larger members – notably the airlines and big NTOs – increasingly questioned the need for tactical marketing support from PATA. What they wanted – and this was reflected in *Direction 2000*, the report of a presidential task force in 1990, which was asked to draw up plans for a new strategic direction for PATA – was for PATA to provide collective strength to address key issues of concern to the industry. These issues – such as airport and airways congestion, infrastructure constraints, visa formalities, etc – were all those expected to have a major impact on the industry's long-term, sustainable growth.

As a result, a new role was mapped out for PATA to become the leading authority on travel and tourism to and within Asia Pacific, as well as the spokesman on strategic issues affecting tourism in the region. Unfortunately, however, while a large share of its members fully supported the change in direction adopted by PATA, a significant number of its mainly smaller industry members felt the association had lost its way and was drifting away from its core responsibilities towards them individually. The result was a stalemate that lasted several years.

Today, those tough times are well behind PATA. Changes at the association's helm have brought an end to the infighting that so often characterises industry associations with multi-sectoral, and thus disparate, membership. PATA's voice – at times a lone voice in the wilderness – has been stronger than ever since 11 September 2001, taking governments to task on issues such as unbalanced travel advisories, which have had such a negative impact on some destinations.

In addition, the outbreak of SARS last year – which temporarily devastated the region's tourism – provided an opportunity for PATA's management to develop

a meaningful promotional campaign for the benefit of all its members, whether large or small. Project Phoenix helped to reinstate consumer confidence in the Asia Pacific region and has contributed to generating double-digit growth in demand over the first few months of 2004.

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Flush with its success, but also mindful of its role as leader and authority of Asia Pacific tourism, PATA is now broadening its role again, including outbound tourism in its remit. It opened up its membership last year to national, regional and local tourism authorities outside the PATA region, so as to allow them to gain access to the region's outbound markets. And it is now increasingly taking on responsibility for helping the world's tourism destinations to manage the enormous growth projected for some of these markets, notably China.

"To debate the extent of our involvement in inbound versus outbound flows has become increasingly academic," PATA President & CEO Peter de Jong told members at the association's recent annual conference. "In terms of operational viability, infrastructure utilisation and economic importance, our air and cruise lines, hotels and ground operators welcome all travel flows."

"Total Tourism is part of a holistic supply and demand chain," de Jong added. "As long as it is well managed, it can optimise infrastructure assets, create jobs and wealth, thereby contributing to poverty alleviation."

By adopting Total Tourism – "the sum of the effects of inbound, outbound and domestic travel" – PATA will not only increase awareness of the real size and impact of the travel and tourism industry and of the interaction between countries' and regions' domestic, inbound and outbound markets. It will also allow the association to greatly expand its sphere of influence and become a truly global player.

It will be interesting to see how other international travel and tourism bodies react to this.