

Peru lures more and more wealthy tourists



By Maria Luisa Palomino

CUZCO, Peru (Reuters Life!) - Complete with five-star hotels, world-class restaurants, luxury trains and an indoor oxygen system, Tim Jones' trip to the famous Inca ruins at Machu Picchu in Peru was anything but rough. And Peru's government could not be happier with tourists who spend more than thrifty backpackers who have long had a strong presence in the Andean country's tourism market.

"We do like backpackers ... but a lot of our campaigns are focused on luxury," Mercedes Araoz, Peru's trade and tourism minister, told Reuters.

In recent months, Cusco, some 3,000 meters (9,842 feet) above sea level, has been visited by software billionaire Bill Gates and the actress Cameron Diaz, both of whom participated in traditional indigenous ceremonies.

Gone are the days of high altitude headaches, plastic tents and pots of plain rice. Today's high-end travelers to Machu Picchu, Peru's top tourist attraction, stay in hotels, dine at restaurants and relax with massages, yoga and aromatherapy.

Jones, 48, said he shelled out thousands for the trip.

"All told, it's good quality for the price," said Jones, waiting for dinner service on a luxury train between Machu Picchu and Cuzco, a city high in the mountains, some 680 miles southwest of Peru's capital, Lima.

Last year, the ancient Incan city was named one of the new Seven Wonders of the World, raising hopes for 2008 tourism.

But the goal is not just to get people in the country, the government said. It is to increase what people spend.

"It is important to distinguish between quantity and quality. We want a balance," said Mara Seminario, director of Peru's state-run tourism group. Each year, travelers contribute some \$2 billion to Peru's economy and the government says a thriving tourism sector helps lift incomes in a country where 12 million people, some 45 percent of the population, live in poverty.

"The election of Machu Picchu as one of the new Seven Wonders of the World was a first step. The real goal is to promote tourism to help regional economic development," said Seminario.

(Reporting by Maria Luisa Palomino; Editing by Dana Ford and Patricia Reaney)

El Comercio newspaper defined luxury tourists as those that spend approximately \$500 a day, staying at the best hotels and eating at the best restaurants. Luxury tourists go to museums outside of normal working hours and demand to be attended by museum directors themselves.

They are provided personalized service; do not get in lines while on their trips and travel in private planes.

It is estimated that there are 80 million luxury tourists in the world, which make up 10 percent of the world's tourists.

200,000 luxury tourists came to Peru in 2007, said Carlos Alberto Arrarte, the president of Lima Tours, assuring that 20 percent more would come in 2008.

"Peru has enough attractions and services to attract tourists from this sector. With a growing number of quality tourists, we don't really need to increase the quantity of tourists to reach tourism and employment goals", said Arrarte during a conference organized by the Peru Hotels Society.

According to the president of Lima Tours, the best option is to make Peru a luxury tourist location instead of a massive touristic site such as Mexico and Spain.

He added that this did not mean that other tourists could not visit Peru, "France and New York are very expensive places and millions of people go there yearly".

Peru's Government Orients Tourists and Solves Their Problems

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Iperu, a service created by Prom Peru (a state-run agency) which assists tourists and provides them with information, reported it had assisted 287,492 foreign and domestic tourists in 2007.

When compared to the number of tourists helped last year (203,533), a 41 percent increase was registered by the service. The type of services provided to tourists were classified into three areas: information (92.1%), help (4.6%) and others (3.3%).

According to reports issued by Iperu, 56 percent of the tourists (157,004) that used the service were foreigners, while 43 percent were natives. It was also reported that the majority of tourists assisted, 19,176, were from the United States.

18,059 tourists from Chile were oriented while 17,004 from Argentina were helped.

These countries were followed by Spain (14,016), France (10,730), the United Kingdom (8,277), Germany (8,028), and Canada (6,531) among others.

Aside from offering information, Iperu provides visitors a place to complain if they feel they have been treated unfairly by hotels, restaurants or airlines.

Tourists can complain about anything from lost luggage to establishments that charge fees that are not mentioned beforehand.

Other complaints could be of travel agencies that do not provide offered services, an airline company that does not compensate its passengers for cancellations/delays or even if tourists feel overcharged because they are foreigners.

With respect to complaints, Iperu reported it had successfully solved 89 percent of tourists' complaints.