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## Quality standards, brand identity for RP tourism needed—expert

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The government should impose strict quality standards of tourism facilities and come up with a brand identity to boost the competitiveness the local tourism industry, an expert said. In a forum on Monday, Uwe Sturmman, German Technical Cooperation's (GTZ) Private Sector Promotion (PSP) project manager, said the Philippines has a great and underutilized potential in tourism compared to its neighboring countries" but it still remains one of the laggards in the region.

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To improve the sector's competitiveness, Sturmman said the Philippines must put strict quality standards in place to force industry players to upgrade their facilities.

He said the quality of tourism facilities should match these standards, and therefore, an independent standard body should be put up to monitor facilities and infrastructure.

In addition, the government should "communicate, market, advertise to tourists," by tapping the country's brightest branding and advertising talents to come up with effective marketing strategies.

"The Philippines has no corporate identity. Brand the product better and market it," Sturmman said.

He added that lack of government funding to intensify advertising should not hinder marketing efforts since the private sector can contribute funds. The government could also collect additional taxes that could be funneled to dedicated tourism promotions programs.

The GTZ official said the country should focus on niche markets for quality tourism that will yield potential further growth, such as ecotourism, and health and wellness.

"Philippine tourism arrivals are far below its regional neighbors, at the bottom end of international arrivals in Southeast Asia," Sturmman said.

In the 2009 World Economic Forum Travel and Tourism Competitiveness Report released early this year, the Philippines slipped five notches from last year and ranked 86th among 133 countries surveyed.

Most neighboring countries outranked the Philippines, such as Singapore, which ranked 10th; Hong Kong (12th); Malaysia (32nd); Thailand (39th); Taiwan (43rd); China (47th); Brunei Darussalam (69th); and Indonesia (81st).

Foreign tourist arrivals in the Philippines last year reached 3.14 million. In contrast, tourist arrivals in Malaysia last year reached about 22.1 million and in Thailand, about 14.9 million. Even arrivals in Vietnam were higher, which logged an average of more than four million since 2007.

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