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Phu Quoc tourism: potential and orientation for development post Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

With a favorable location and diverse natural and cultural resources, Phu Quoc city of Kien Giang province has immense potential for tourism development. Phu Quoc is one of the localities with the biggest number of tourist arrivals and the highest revenue from tourism in the Mekong Delta. However, due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, Phu Quoc tourism faces many difficulties in implementing the pre-set plans. Using a systematic review of the literature to synthesize the information dealing with tourism resources, impacts of Covid-19 pandemic on tourism performance and recovery plans of local authorities, the article analyzes the potential and current status of tourism development of Phu Quoc. Interviews with researchers and travel agencies' representatives also add some ideas to the proposals for the orientation of tourism development in the new context. Integration to regional and international market, promotion of regional interlinkage and travel demands and new trends of tourism are crucial factors recommended for the development of tourism on Phu Quoc island.

Keywords: *marine and island tourism, Phu Quoc tourism, post-Covid-19 tourism*

1. Introduction

Phu Quoc Island city is a famous tourist destination of Kien Giang province in particular and of Vietnam, in general. In recent years, with the easily accessible geographical position, diverse resources for tourism and special attention paid by the Central Government as well as the provincial authorities, Phu Quoc tourism and

especially its infrastructure and accommodation facilities continue to grow rapidly. Gradually, tourism services have been constantly developed to meet the growth planned for this island city. Regulations are continuously observed and executed to ensure the safety for visitors; new tourist products are promoted while tourist destinations have been booming with more and more efficient operations. Thereby, the number of tourists coming to Phu Quoc is growing significantly year after year.

However, the impact of Covid-19 pandemic, travel restrictions as well as the anxiety and fear of contracting the disease among tourists have resulted in a serious decrease of tourist arrivals. The year 2020 was a struggling one for the tourist industry of Kien Giang province, in general and Phu Quoc, in particular. The total tourist arrivals to Kien Giang province decreased by 38,8% over the same period in 2019, reaching only 57,6% of the yearly plan, of which international arrivals dropped sharply by 75,6%, reaching only 23,2% of the yearly plan. For Phu Quoc in particular, tourist arrivals decreased by 30,6% over the same period in 2019, among which, international tourist arrivals decreased by 76,1% (Kien Giang Department of Tourism, 2020).

In order to restore the tourist and travel activities for the late 2021 and early 2022, and after as planned by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, it is of high importance to re-evaluate the current situation, potential development and then build up a strategic tourism development for adapting to the new scene.

2. Methods

Based on the above statements, information from state administrative documents, statistics and opinions of experts are compiled in a written study to evaluate the potential and competitive advantages of Phu Quoc tourism. Thereby, the research team will make comments on the tourism development situation of the locality and propose the orientation of the 'Pearl Island tourism's development, in the new context.

3. Results

Competitive advantages of Kien Giang province for tourism development

Geographical location and tourism resources

Kien Giang is the only province in the Mekong Delta with its coastline entirely adjacent to the Gulf of Thailand and other neighboring Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore. The marine area of Kien Giang province accounts for about 63.290km², with over 200km of coastline, more than 143 islands of all sizes, including 43 inhabited ones. With such attributes, Phu Quoc has plenty of favorable conditions for the development and economic connection with other countries in the region. Phu Quoc, which is the largest island of Vietnam with 593km² in area, plays a role of a 'bridge' linking the Mekong Delta's provinces of the South Vietnam with neighboring countries.

The Gulf of Thailand is relatively shallow with most of the time very few big tidal waves and storms, which makes it possible to organize tourist activities almost all year-round. Thanks to the relatively high temperature of the tropical climate, the Gulf of Thailand is a natural and vital place for marine coral reefs which are perfectly suitable for scuba diving and snorkeling.

In addition to marine resources, Phu Quoc is also covered with forests, hills and mountains with magnificent scenery and divers cultural tourist resources, including craft villages, festivals, historical sites, religious sites, etc. In 2006, the Biosphere Reserve of Kien Giang's coastal waters and islands, with Phu Quoc city included, is recognized by UNESCO as a World Biosphere Reserve, and Phu Quoc has been identified as an eco-tourism center and an economic center of national and international importance.

Tourist brand

Despite having its extensive reputation as a tourist destination of the South Vietnam, in the past 10 years, Phu Quoc has seen an impressive growth of tourist arrivals. In 2014, Phu Quoc was officially connected to the national power grid, and this has significantly reduced the construction and operating costs of diesel power generation as well as the costs of living for inhabitants of the island. In the same year, Phu Quoc international airport welcomed the first flights carrying local and foreign tourists to Phu Quoc. Thanks to those flights, visit to the island has become easier than before (Giang Nguyen, 2021). The Pearl Island is now not only a famous tourist destination for domestic tourists, but also has its name recorded on the world's map of tourism.

Apart from Phu Quoc, the marine area of Kien Giang province by nature owns several beautiful islands and beaches, including the recently emerging tourist destinations namely the islands of Nam Du, Pirates, Ba Lua, Hon Tre, Hon Nghe, etc., which are especially attractive to the tourists preferring destinations still deserted and close to the nature.

These tourist spotlight destinations have built up a brand for Kien Giang tourism. These are valuable assets to promote the image of the province, in general and the tourist industry, in particular.

Infrastructure of transportation

Kien Giang is the only province in the Mekong Delta with two airports, of which the Phu Quoc International Airport can handle from 510.000 up to 2.650.000 passengers per year, as planned for the 2012-2020 period; by the year 2030 its capacity is expected to reach 7.000.000 passengers per year. It is also expected for the near future, besides domestic flights, Phu Quoc International Airport will be the destination of international flights arriving from Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand and Malaysia to serve international tourists visiting Phu Quoc. In the other hand, a number of air-routes will be established to connect Phu Quoc with countries that are not adjacent to any sea or with countries with lengthy winters, to serve the potential tourists in need of escaping the cold winter, relaxation,

quality treatment and post-treatment care, especially for the elderly. Those tourists, from Europe, Russia and East Asia, namely Japan, Korea, and Taiwan, can be served by charter flights, or direct flights to Phu Quoc (Airports Corporation of Vietnam, 2018).

The Southern Coastal Corridor (also known as the Trans-Asia Road), an infrastructure project under the Greater Mekong Subregion Economic Cooperation Program, with a total length of 950 km from Bangkok (Thailand) to Ca Mau (Vietnam), is aimed to establish a route connecting important economic regions of Vietnam, Cambodia and Thailand and other ASEAN countries. The Trans-Asia Road is one of the strategic cross-border routes, playing a great role in ensuring the national security and defense as well as socio-economic development in the Mekong Delta. Besides, the section of the National Highway No. 80 between Ha Tien - Kien Luong and the section of National Highway No. 61 between Rach Gia - Minh Luong have also been repaired and upgraded to facilitate the transport between seaports of Kien Giang province (Vietnam Plus, 2020). From these two seaports, two main sea routes connected with Phu Quoc have been established and upgraded to facilitate the communication between the island and other inland localities as well as abroad. This is also a fundamental advantage for developing the tourism of the island (see Fig. 1).

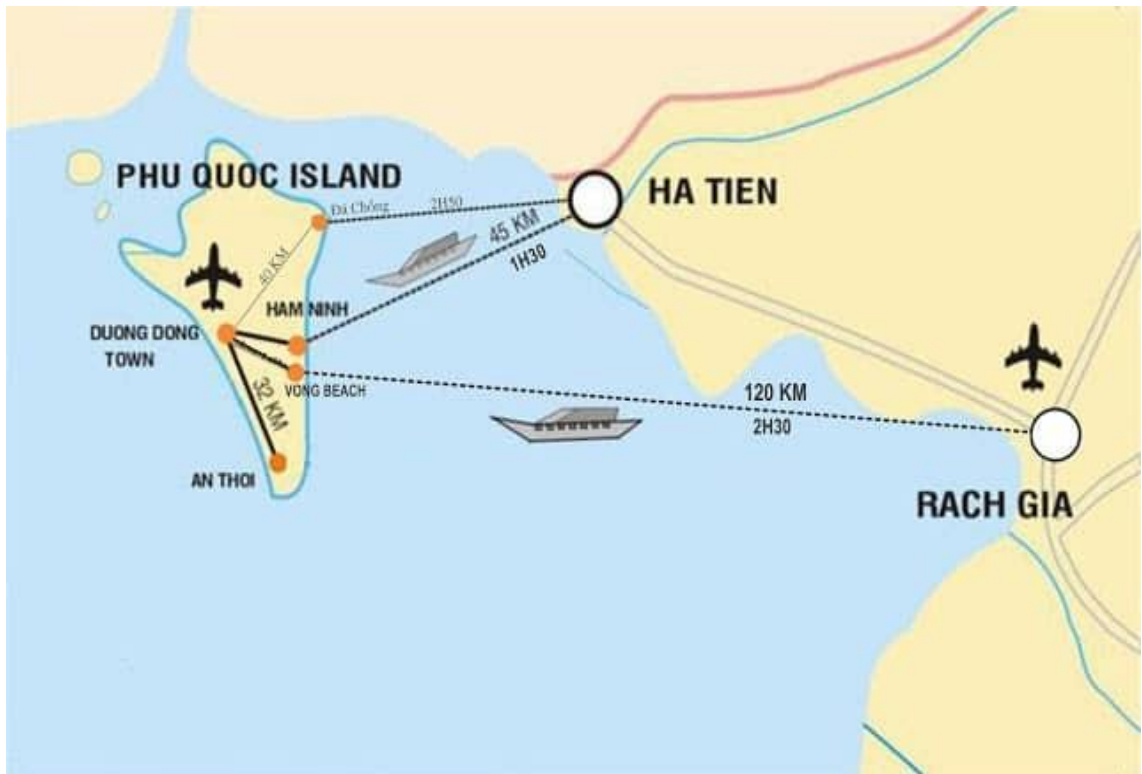


Figure 1. Phu Quoc Map

Besides, the province benefits three main traffic routes which connects the provinces in the South-Eastern part of Vietnam and the Central Highlands with the Mekong Delta consist of the 1A National Highway in the East side, N1 National Highway in the West

side and National Highway N2 in the middle the South Vietnam region. The N1 National Highway is the main traffic route connecting the system of corridors along the southwestern border of Mekong Delta provinces. N1 National Highway starts at the ending point of National Highway 14C in Hau Nghia town, Duc Hoa district, Long An province and passes through the provinces of Long An, Dong Thap, An Giang and ends at Ha Tien City (Kien Giang province). While the N2 route stretches from Chon Thanh (Binh Phuoc province) to Rach Soi (Kien Giang province) and ending at Ca Mau cape, with a length of about 440km.

Facilities for tourism

As of 2020, Kien Giang province has attracted 323 investment projects in the tourist industry, with a total investment capital of VND 355.677 billion and the use of 10.488 ha of land. Among them, 69 projects with a total investment capital of VND 14.242 billion are now in operation on 1.305ha of land; 76 other projects, with a total investment capital of about VND 165.100 billion, are under construction on a total land area of 4.177ha. In particular, Phu Quoc district and Rach Gia city have attracted 23 investment projects in the tourist industry with a total investment capital of VND 20.493 billion and the use of 386,33ha of land (Kien Giang province Portal, 2020).

Funds are also invested to create systems of websites integrated with reality videos for promoting the visual tourism images, online ticketing, mobile applications, as well as to promote the images of tourism through diverse activities.

Currently in Kien Giang province, 792 accommodation facilities are registered with 25.670 rooms. However, the capacity of receive is not equally distributed, only Phu Quoc island possesses 700 accommodation facilities with more than 20.000 rooms. In terms of licensed tour operator, currently the province records 27 international tour operators, 21 domestic tour operators, 6 branches and representative offices. Of which, by 2019 Phu Quoc island has 21 international tour operators and 15 domestic tour operators (Kien Giang Department of Tourism, 2020).

From the above figures it is seen that Phu Quoc tourism has contributed significantly to the overall socio-economic development of the province. However, the province's tourism has not brought into full play its potential and advantages. In fact, the number of international tourist arrivals is still modest; Tourist models and products are not really diverse and competitive enough. The investment in infrastructure has been so far unsatisfactory to serve the development of tourism.

In addition, due to the complicated development of the pandemic, the tourist industry of Phu Quoc island is facing many potential risks. The numbers of domestic and international tourists have all been decreased, leading to the disbandment and/or operational suspension of tour operator businesses. Key national highways passing through the province's territory and roads connecting those highways to tourist sites and destinations have been degraded day after day, due to the impact of storms and rainfalls,

and thereby hindering the development of road tours from other provinces to Kien Giang province. Besides, the climate change has led to unusual rainstorms affecting the sea transportation of tourists.

Hindrances and projection of challenges to tourism development of Phu Quoc

Phu Quoc tourism has visibly achieved effective milestones in its development progress. Still, there are a number of hindrances and challenges to be projected when formulating the orientations for development in the coming time. Below are some of the key hindrances.

Drop of number of visitors and revenue

The growth rate of tourism in Kien Giang province is pretty steady in the period from 2013 to 2017, the whole province welcomed about 2,4 million of tourist arrivals each year, of which are on average around one 1,1 million of international tourist arrivals, thus an average annual growth rate of 12,2% (Viet Tien, 2018). By 2019, the total number of tourist arrivals to the province was 8.780.484, of which around 713.291 were international tourist arrivals. The total revenue from tourism reached VND 18.595,7 billion, of which direct revenue of tourist enterprises reached VND 8.364,1 billion (Tran Linh, 2020). For Phu Quoc, in 2010, the number of tourist arrivals was only around 300.000. By 2019, this number increased to more than 4 million, of which more than 600,000 (six hundred thousand) were international tourist arrivals. The revenue from the tourist industry was over VND 5.700 billion, accounting for over 90% of the province's total tourism revenue (Kien Giang Department of Tourism, 2020).

However, these numbers are much lower than those in 2019 due to the complicated and prolonged impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. According to the 2020 Tourism Performance Report of Kien Giang province, the total number of tourist arrivals was 5,2 million, a decrease of 40,7% over the same period in the previous year, reaching only 55,8% of the planned tourist arrivals for the year. The number of international tourist arrivals decreased the most with only 184.000 tourist arrivals, equivalent to a decline of 74% of tourists over the same period in the previous year and reaching only 24,3% of the planned tourist arrivals for the year. Consequently, the total revenue from tourism reached only VND 8.000 billion, a 56,8% less over the same period in the previous year, and reaching only 40,1% of the annual plan for revenue (Viet Tien, 2020).

Human resources for tourism

Pursuant to Decision No. 3266/QĐ-UBND dated December 30, 2015 approving the Project on the development of human resources for tourism in Kien Giang province and for the 2015-2020 period, with vision to 2030, the province authority focused on the training of the state management force, trainers for tourism, labor force in tourist businesses, as well as the local communities within and outside the tourist areas and spots of the province, with the target of ensuring the quantity and quality of trainees (People's Committee of Kien Giang province, 2015).

The project's target was also set for the year 2020 in which the whole province would have in total 22.000 to 25.000 labors for tourism, among them around 11.000 to 13.750 (50-55%) receive specialized training in tourism services. By 2030, the sector is expected to have 33.000 to 35.000 labors and around 24.500 – 29.750 are professionally trained.

This is one of the greatest challenges to the educational establishments specialized in providing training for human resources, tourist enterprises and tourism administrative management agencies in Kien Giang province.

Tourism resources exploitation

Tourist resources in Phu Quoc being diverse but also scattered, therefore the organization and exploitation of these resources are still not efficient. Many tourist products and services are similar to those offered in other provinces of the Mekong Delta. The interlinkage between provincial regions for developing the tourism is still not as high as expected.

Besides, the climate change causes anomalous weather, landslides, traffic restrictions, and mostly affects marine tourism.

Others problems

Investments in infrastructure for tourism are not synchronized; infrastructures for inter-regional transport (road and air transport) are still in the first stage of development, and need more time to become comprehensive.

The impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic need to be assessed comprehensively, with updates and accuracy, to serve as the basis for making policies and plans for restoring tourist business, after the pandemic will be relatively controlled. Moreover, high competition with neighboring countries in terms of new tourist products, promotion and attraction of tourists has to be taken in account during reopening period.

Some proposed orientation for developing Phu Quoc tourism

Before the pandemic, the orientation of tourism development till 2030 goes alongside with the general socio-economic development of Kien Giang province and the Strategy of marine economy development. Phu Quoc is oriented to become a city worth living, a world-class resort and a center of tourism. Therefore, it is crucial to review and make adjustment to the previous master plan to ensure that the orientations shall be in line with the new context.

Despite the complicated development of the pandemic, Phu Quoc has still proved its attraction by welcoming more than 3,6 million tourist arrivals in 2020. Although showing a significant decrease in comparison to the year 2019, this number is still impressive for a struggling year of the global tourist industry. The revenue from Phu Quoc tourism reached VND 5.617 billion, accounting for 71,4% of the total tourism revenue in the province in 2020. (Kien Giang's Department of Tourism, 2020). For that reason, Phu Quoc is highly expected during implementation of the 1st stage of the "Pilot

program to welcome international tourists to Vietnam” launched from November 2021, by Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism.

Based on previous analyze, the following proposals are formulated:

Development of Phu Quoc into an international tourism center

The resolution of the 12th Party Congress of Phu Quoc district, 2020-2025 term, defines the goal of a comprehensive and sustainable development for Phu Quoc, building Phu Quoc into an urban area and driving force for developing the province into a sea and island city, tourism center of high-class services in Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

With favorable geographical location, infrastructure and technical facilities, Phu Quoc can attract visitors via air transport, including domestic travelers, and visitors from distant regions as well as those from Southeast Asia region. Phu Quoc has adequate conditions to develop a relatively separate tourist cluster, minimizing unnecessary travel and contact for tourists.

In the effort of attracting returning flow of tourists, the Government also issued the Resolution No. 79/NQ-CP on May 25, 2020, allowing the entry and exit with an electronic visa for citizens of 80 countries around the world from July 1, 2020. In addition, the Government issued its Resolution No. 80/NQ-CP dated May 25, 2020 on visa exemption for foreigners arriving to Phu Quoc economic zone, Kien Giang province. Accordingly, Kien Giang province has 3 international border gates allowing foreigners to enter and exit with an electronic visa, including: Ha Tien international border gate (by road), Phu Quoc international airport (by air) and Duong Dong international border gate (by sea).

With favorable location and accessibility, Phu Quoc is expected to become not only a tourist destination, but also the economic, financial, transportation center of the region and the world. Counted on its natural and cultural resources, Phu Quoc is suitable for all types of marine tourism, luxury resorts, MICE and shopping which can response to high demand of foreign tourists. In addition, tourist activities include the visits to traditional craft villages, agricultural tour, cultural and historical tour and ecotour are also the types of tours appropriate with the post-Covid-19 development trend.

Promotion of regional interlinkage

The development of Phu Quoc into a tourist center and simultaneous attraction of tourists from other neighboring countries in the region, require to settle the issues related to policies not only in Vietnam as they are also related with many other countries. Apart from policies on tariffs and immigration procedures, there should be a cooperation mechanism to benefit the relevant countries from the interlinkage for mutual development of tourism (Ngo Thanh Loan, 2019).

In the near future, the relatively close distance between Phu Quoc island and Ha Tien and Rach Gia cities will allow the Pearl Island to connect with inter-regional and

nationwide road systems to create new routes for tourism. In addition, it is necessary to study and expand the sea transport into the direction of Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia; in which, the priority is given to expand the marine transport route along the coasts of Vietnam (Kien Giang) - Cambodia - Thailand.

To speed up the regional interlinkage also requires the investments in a synchronous and compatible infrastructure so that means of transport can travel easily between countries.

Apart from the international connections, the connections within the Mekong Delta and with the provinces of the Eastern part of South Vietnam, especially with Ho Chi Minh City specifically, also need specific solutions. When the N1 and N2 routes will be completed, it will be more convenient for tourists to visit Kien Giang province. Then, promotional activities hand-in-hand with newly developed and appropriate tourist products will create a competitive edge for Kien Giang against other provinces in the Mekong Delta, and even against the neighboring countries. There are many opportunities for developing spiritual tourism, in addition to sea and island tourism, ecotourism and rural tourism.

Travel demands and new trends of tourism

As a result of serious impacts caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, travel trends are predicted to grow with many changes. The following trends have been recorded (Wein, 2020):

- (1) Selection of safe destinations close to nature. Attention is paid to health issues during the trip.
- (2) Domestic tours will be developed. Travel restrictions in other countries as well as concerns about safety at airports made travelers more inclined to choose domestic trips.
- (3) Short stays will be prioritized over long vacations.
- (4) Personalized trip. Instead of touring in a large group, travelers tend to go in smaller groups or with their own family, as well as planning the trip of their own, instead of buying tour packages from tour operators.
- (5) Travel with the spirit of higher responsibility towards the community and environment.
- (6) Habit of using technology to select, prepare and make plan for the trips. Higher need of using technological means for the trip.

Studies on these trends help tourist organizers to make appropriate orientations for investment and design of tourist products. In the post-Covid period, if tourists can pay much attention to the first three trends in the short term, the last three (3) ones are expected to last longer. Thereby, it is necessary to re-evaluate the tools suitable for ensuring the safety and good health to tourists, capturing new demands of visitors and at

the same time preparing suitable human resources to adapt with the new forms of tourism. In particular, the trend of digitizing the tourist activities requires high quality IT infrastructure and faster digital transformation in tourism.

4. Conclusion

Through the above studies, Phu Quoc island city can be seen as to have many potentials and advantages for developing its tourism into a spearhead industry, that will make important contribution to the economic growth of the whole province. Besides the advantages, there are significant challenges to such development, including the negative impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the tourism. According to the orientation for development, Phu Quoc obtains preferential investments to become a center of world-class tourist destination and a city worth for living. With an international airport and seaport, Phu Quoc has the advantage of being a place to host and serve conferences, seminars and transit of visitors to other tourist destinations in the province and other provinces in the region as well as other countries in the world.

The exploitation of natural resources for tourism activities must also be carefully considered. Phu Quoc island, in particular and Kien Giang province, in general need to well control and protect the marine, coastal and island ecosystems, maintain the coastal forest coverage ratio, prevent, avoid, stop and restrict the impacts from strong tides, saltwater intrusion, coastal erosion; at the same time, authorities of the island and province also need to create favorable conditions for businesses to participate in the conservation, restoration and rational use of natural resources for tourism development, as well as the scientific researches and monitoring of the marine environment.

Regarding the orientation to recover and develop Phu Quoc tourism in the near future, in addition to developing new products and stimulating the tourist demand, it is necessary to build key tourist centers, identify the market segment of tourists for each tourist cluster with the aim to effectively promote the potential of the Pearl Island. With specific advantages of each tourist cluster, the local businesses and state management authority need to promote the interlinkage and cooperation for developing the tourism in the region and the whole country, thereby creating tourist products of international standards, enhancing the quality of services and human resources to boost the competitiveness of Phu Quoc tourism. Furthermore, research and investment in technical facilities to meet the demand of tourists in the new context, including the construction of information technology infrastructure and digital transformation of tourist operations, are extremely needed for the modernization and smart transformation of Kien Giang's tourism.

Note

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