



AS IT IS

Thai Tiger Park Hopes Foreign Visitors Return

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A tiger park in Phuket, Thailand is preparing to welcome back foreign visitors this week.

The re-opening is part of a plan to bring back foreign visitors with proof of COVID-19 vaccination to the island. The visitors do not have to follow lockdown restrictions. After 14 days, as long as they have no coronavirus infection, they can travel elsewhere in Thailand.

Prepared for safe reopening

Chadarat Taodaeng is the general manager of Tiger Kingdom in Phuket. He said the park had put safety measures in place before Thursday's reopening to help foreign visitors feel comfortable.

"We have vaccinated more than 90 percent of our staff and also trained them about the 'new normal' **tourism**," the manager said. The park has more than 50 tigers and a cheetah. And visitors can get close to them. Since the pandemic lockdowns, visitor numbers have dropped from nearly 1,000 a day to fewer than 20.

Thailand lost about \$50 billion in tourism money when foreign arrivals fell to 6.7 million last year. In 2019, the country had nearly 40 million visitors. And Phuket suffered from a large number of job losses and business closings.

Mental health of animals and people

"I'm happy that finally there will be people visiting the tigers, and Phuket city will be **bustling** again," said the park's assistant manager, Phonphawit Ton-od. She added that the reopening would "help with both tigers' and the staff's mental health."

There has been an increase in the popularity of parks like the Tiger Kingdom, even though **conservationists** criticize them. There are concerns over safety after some attacks by the animals. Bringing back visitors is important to Thailand's economy. But government officials also have to deal with a recent increase in coronavirus infections.

The government hopes Phuket's pilot program will bring 129,000 visitors to Thailand from July through September. That number is still far below the average 3.3 million monthly arrivals in 2019.

Abdulrahim A-waekechi cares for the animals in the park. He said, "I'm happy about the park reopening because our cheetah Gregor loves being around tourists and staff."

I'm Dan Friedel.

Jiraporn Kuhakan reported on this story for Reuters. Jill Robbins adapted it for Learning English. Hai Do was the editor.

Words in This Story

tourism – *n.* the activity of traveling to a place for pleasure

bustling – *adj.* moving or going about in busy or hurried way

conservationist – *n.* a person who works to protect animals, plants or natural resources

What do you want to see when you are able to travel? We want to hear from you. Write to us in the Comments Section.