Southeast Asia (SEA) is a vast territory surrounded by warm oceans and located in the equatorial, subequatorial, and tropical climatic zones. This geographical position provides suitable conditions for beach holidays and the creation of resorts. In addition to the warm climate, beautiful landscapes, exotic nature, and sea beaches, the countries of Southeast Asia have an ancient culture, a unique folk flavor, and numerous historical monuments. All this makes Southeast Asia a desirable destination for tourists from all over the world. It is not surprising that tourism has developed actively and steadily in recent decades in the region.

Southeast Asia is of interest to vacationers from all over the world, including Russia. The most popular destinations in Southeast Asia among Russians in 2019, before the start of the coronavirus crisis and the massive closure of borders, were Thailand and Vietnam.

Thailand can be called the tourist capital of Southeast Asia. Foreign tourism began to develop in that country as early as the 1960s when civil wars raged in many other countries of the region and regimes succeeded each other that could not find a common language with wealthy states - suppliers of tourists. For a long time, internal conflicts, economic crises, and sanctions pressure from abroad prevented many Southeast Asian countries from developing tourism.

Now tourism for Thailand is one of the most important sources of income. In 2019, the tourism sector brought the country more than $62.2 billion, about 20% of Thailand’s GDP. Almost 40 million foreigners visited the country with a population of 70 million. It is noteworthy that among the states, whose citizens visited Thailand in 2019, Russia took fourth place: more than 1.4 million Russians came to Thailand.
According to forecasts made by the Thai government in 2019, tourism revenues should amount to 30% of the country's GDP by 2030. However, life made its own adjustments that cast these forecasts into doubt: at the end of 2019, an epidemic of the COVID-19 virus began, which soon turned into a pandemic, covering the entire globe. In January 2020, Thailand became the first country after China to report a case of the disease.

Due to the quarantine measures that various states began to take from the beginning of 2020, the tourist flow to Thailand started to decline. The Thai government has also restricted citizens' and visitors' movement to slow down the spread of infection. In April 2020, all commercial flights to Thailand were canceled, and soon the level of revenues from the tourism business in the country was close to zero. Thailand's tourism revenues remained at this zero level in the second and third quarters of 2020. It was not until October 2020 that the country received its first batch of foreign tourists in the fourth quarter of 2020, tourism brought about $30 million to Thailand, which, of course, cannot be compared with the revenues of previous years.

This massive decline in foreign money inflows has clearly dealt a heavy blow to the Thai economy. In 2020 and 2021, the country was racked by people's clashes who lost their earnings due to epidemic control restrictions. Realizing that it could not do without restoring the tourist flow, Thailand, however, accepted tourists with several conditions in 2021: even those vaccinated against COVID-19 were required to provide health certificates and serve in their hotels for a lengthy quarantine. Only at the end of June 2021 did the Thai leadership approve a list of countries whose citizens can visit Phuket without quarantine if they are fully vaccinated. Non-quarantine visits to other parts of Thailand by vaccinated citizens of several countries were allowed only in November 2021. So, there is still no reason to talk about restoring Thailand's pre-coronavirus income.

However, the tourist flow is gradually growing. It is known that only on January 1-4, 2022, more than 32,600 foreign tourists arrived in the country. It is noteworthy that most of them were Russian citizens, and as mentioned above, another Southeast Asian country popular among Russian tourists is Vietnam. That country does not have such a developed tourism infrastructure as Thailand. Still, it also has a warm climate, extensive sea beaches, natural and cultural attractions, and in recent decades, the tourism business in Vietnam has shown active and stable growth.

In 2016, for the first time, more than 10 million foreign tourists visited Vietnam with nearly 100 million people.

In 2018, more than 15.4 million tourists visited the country, and tourism business revenues amounted to 7.5% of Vietnamese GDP, more than $18.3 billion. It is worth noting that more than 600,000 foreign tourists who visited Vietnam in 2018 were Russian citizens. Thus, Russia ranked 6th in the list of the top countries supplying tourists to Vietnam, after China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, located very close to Vietnam and after the United States. This prompts a conclusion that Russia is one of the leading partners for Vietnam in the tourism sector among countries located far from the region. Not surprising since the two states have decades of fruitful cooperation in many other areas. At the end of 2018, when a delegation of the State Duma of the Russian Federation visited Vietnam, the parties, among other things, agreed to make efforts so that in 2020, the year when Russia and Vietnam were celebrating the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations, at least 1 million Russian tourists should visit Vietnam.

However, this plan was not destined to come true due to the pandemic.

Saving the lives of its citizens, the Vietnamese leadership made a wise and challenging decision: to close their country's borders to foreign tourists. This was done at the end of March 2020. Before the closure of the borders in 2020, only slightly over 244,000 Russian citizens managed to visit Vietnam (at the same time, Russia took 3rd place in terms of the number of tourists who visited Vietnam in the first months of 2020). The total number of foreign tourists visiting Vietnam in 2020 was less than 3.7 million, almost five times less than in 2019.

Of course, due to the closure of the borders, the country's tourism business has experienced a severe crisis. If Vietnam's tourism income exceeded $32 billion in 2019, it amounted to just over $13.4 billion in 2020. Government programs to develop domestic tourism helped save at least some income and support Vietnamese small businesses.

However, from the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, it was clear that it would be difficult for Vietnam to do without restoring the tourist flow from abroad. The primary purpose in this situation is to quickly find a cure for COVID-19. While remaining one of Vietnam's closest partners, the Russian Federation resolved this issue. In 2021, Russia and Vietnam launched the production of the Russian anti-covid vaccine Sputnik V on Vietnamese territory. The Russian Federation also pledged to supply Vietnam with another 40 million doses of Sputnik V produced in
Russia by June 2022. By the end of 2021, more than 50 million people out of more than 97.5 million Vietnamese citizens have been vaccinated with Sputnik V and other vaccines in Vietnam.

On December 26, 2021, a passenger aircraft with Russian tourists landed at Cam Ranh Airport in Vietnam for the first time in two years. All Russians had a COVID-19 vaccination certificate. Only two tourist flights a week will be operated from Russia to Vietnam in the coming months. Still, even this rather modest volume of travel suggests that the victory over the pandemic and the tourist flow restoration to Vietnam are not far off.

The tourism business has been and, apparently, will soon become one of the essential sources of income for Southeast Asia, and Russians are largely contributing to this. It can be expected that this factor will play its role in the further development of partnership between Southeast Asia and the Russian Federation.

*Dmitry Bokarev, political observer, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*