

DOT upgrades tourism target for 2013

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CEBU CITY—The Department of Tourism sees the Philippines exceeding its inbound tourism target of 5 million this year as campaigns to expand foreign and domestic tourism gain momentum, a Department of Tourism official said Friday.

“We are confident of exceeding the 5 million mark at the end of the year,” Assistant Secretary Benito Bengzon Jr. said at a Cebu Business Month conference, noting that more than 1.6 million foreign tourists visited the Philippines from January to April, beating arrivals during the same four-month period in 2012 by 10 percent.

Updating its estimates, the DOT sees 5.5 million foreign tourists visiting the country this year and 35 million residents going on domestic tours.

Boracay, Cebu, Bohol, Davao, and Puerto Princesa are among their top picks but DOT is promoting new tourist destinations to ease the pressure on mainstream sites and also draw income opportunities to the countryside.

South Korea remains the largest tourism source for the Philippines, followed by Japan and China. The three are expected to account for at least a third of inbound tourists this year, Bengzon said.

However, the DOT and its industry partners are looking for other markets and segments for a wider base of tourist growth, Bengzon said. Among the promising markets, he said, are Russia, India, the Middle East, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam.

The campaign that hinges on the slogan “It’s more fun in the Philippines” is also helping create awareness of the Philippines among tourists, mainly through social media, Bengzon said. From just 5 Facebook memes in 2012, there are now about 50,000 all over the Internet and some have even been adopted by the DOT in its campaigns, Bengzon said.

The DOT has also set up a route development group to identify and work out the opening of more flights to and from the Philippines, Bengzon said.

As for controversies such as those in the West Philippine Sea and particularly the recent diplomatic tussle with Taiwan over the killing of a fishermen said to be illegally fishing in Philippine waters, Bengzon said he believed tourist arrivals from Taiwan were “normalizing.”

Taiwan is the fifth-largest source of tourists for the Philippines.