

Phuket's tourism boom stretches airport

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With tourist numbers soaring, passenger traffic through Phuket Airport is expected to reach nearly 8 million this year, surpassing its designed capacity by 22%.

Congestion at the airport was already visible as arrivals to one of Asia's top resort destinations rose 20% in the first half of the year to 2.08 million, the Phuket-based hospitality consulting firm C9 Hotelworks said in a report released yesterday.

Total passengers through Thailand's second-busiest airport reached 4.27 million in the first half, a 19.6% year-on-year rise.

Scheduled and charter flights at Phuket have continued to increase since 2009, with inbound flights for the first half of 2011 rising 19% to 28,389, according to Airports of Thailand Plc (AoT).

C9 Hotelworks' managing director Bill Barnett said the surging arrival numbers were straining the capacity of the airport and tourism operators are increasingly concerned over delays for travellers.

A US\$164-million expansion plan to double the airport's handling to 12.5 million by the end of 2014 will begin construction next year. The expansion is under an architectural design expected to be finalised by October this year.

The majority state-owned AoT has



Source: Phuket International Airport and C9 Hotelworks Market Research

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adopted short-term measures to ease congestion by improving current terminal buildings and renovating the baggage claim areas.

The C9 Hotelworks report said charter passengers at Phuket, notably from Russia and Europe, peaked last year with a 153% jump from the previous year.

The Thai island's top five tourism source markets to date for 2011 are (in order)

China, Russia, Australia, South Korea and Sweden.

The number of mainland Chinese tourists to Phuket jumped 103% in the first half of this year, taking over from Australians, who had held the top position since 2005.

South Korea returned as a key market contributor with a 30% rise in the first six months of 2011.