

# Diversity then gambling

Cambodia intends its casinos to be just one among an array of attractions

BY LUCIANA LEITÃO

**C**ambodia has no intention of making gaming a principal tourist attraction, Tourism Minister Thong Khon says, even though its largest casino operator, Hong Kong-listed NagaCorp Ltd, is building a massive second property in Phnom Penh.

The Cambodian government is hoping to attract 1.3 million Chinese tourists a year to the country by 2018 and 2 million by 2030. Mr Thong says the government's hopes are based not on gaming, but on other attractions such as the kingdom's cultural heritage.

Mr Thong was in Macau last month for the Global Tourism Economy Forum. He acknowledges that casinos attract many Chinese, Koreans and Vietnamese. But the official says gaming is only part of what Cambodia has to offer.

"More than 50 percent of tourists coming to Cambodia come for the Angkor Wat temple, not gaming. Some of them will go to the capital to enjoy gaming, some of them. But the majority come to visit Angkor Wat," he says.

Cambodia is expecting 4 million tourists this year, 12 percent more than last year. Mr Thong says the government hopes Chinese tourists will come for more than just gaming.

Cambodia had more than 330,000 Chinese visitors last year. In the first five months of this year the number increased by 53 percent from a year earlier.

Mr Tong says the number will keep rising, mainly because the country is be-



NagaWorld

coming easier to get to. "We have more direct flights from mainland China to Cambodia, also from Hong Kong."

He is hopeful that direct flights will arrive from Macau. The government is also making entry formalities easier for tourists.

Estimates say Cambodia has about 40 casinos, most on its borders with Vietnam and Thailand. Cambodians are forbidden to gamble in them.

The government favours new casino developments on the coast, in the mountains around Bokor and around Phnom Penh. Mr Thong says it will prohibit gaming in areas with a strong cultural heritage.

## Expansion plans

NagaCorp holds the exclusive licence to operate casinos within 200km of Phnom Penh. It operates Cambodia's largest casino property, NagaWorld, with 178 gaming tables and 1,450 slot machines.

The company is spending US\$369 million (MOP2.95 billion) on building Naga2, its second casino-hotel complex, just a stone's throw away from NagaWorld. Naga2 will have space for up to 300 gaming tables and 500 slot machines, more than 1,000 hotel rooms, 50 VIP suites, over 18,700 square metres of shop space and a theatre that will seat 4,000. It is due to be completed in late 2015.



Other companies envisage more gaming facilities on the borders with Vietnam and Thailand.

Entertainment Gaming Asia Inc, a Nasdaq-listed subsidiary of Lawrence Ho Yau Lung's Melco International Development Ltd, has put casinos in Poipet and Pailin, near the Thai border. Entertainment Gaming Asia also has plans for a casino in Kampot, near Bokor.

Cambodian tycoon Sok Kong is spending an estimated US\$1 billion on three other casino-hotels in Kampot.

Cambodia is just one among several Asian countries that intend to set up gaming industries or enlarge what they already have, to attract more visitors and increase tax revenue.

Taiwan and Japan are going through the process of legalising casinos. Sri Lanka and the Philippines are hoping high-end casinos will attract high-rollers. And Russia is allowing casinos in its far eastern city of Vladivostok. ■



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