

Hospitality is a major asset

THE national policy on tourism development is: "To make the tourism industry a positive instrument toward an accelerated national development through which more people from other lands may visit and better appreciate the Philippines and through which Filipinos may learn more about their own country—its beauty, history and culture—thus developing a greater sense of pride and commitment to their nation." This was contained in Presidential Decree No. 189 issued on May 11, 1973. The PD also expanded and integrated government efforts in tourism development through the creation of the Department of Tourism (DOT).

For so long, the Philippines had been at the tail-end of the lucrative tourist traffic in Southeast Asia. While Hongkong, Bangkok and Singapore have been quick to exploit the booming tourist trade, particularly from the Japanese, Manila continued to experience minuscule gains in tourist arrivals. The primary reason for this was the international reputation of Manila then as a city of guns and violence. The declaration of martial law has drastically improved the peace and order conditions in the country—to a point where the Philippines has become one of the safest tourist destinations in the region.

Since 1972, tourist arrivals in our country has grown at an unprecedented rate. Income from tourism has more than doubled in just three years—from US\$67.8 million in 1973 to \$155.2 million last year. Tourism, indeed, has become one of our top dollar-earning industries.

Aside from improved peace and order conditions, another factor in the rapid growth of the industry is the liberal incentives package the government, through the DOT, has offered to local and foreign investors in tourism projects. Under the Tourism Priorities Plan, the government has pinpointed the following as priority tourism areas: the Manila Bay region, including Metropolitan Manila; the northern Luzon provinces including Baguio; the Cebu-Bohol-Leyte provinces; the Zamboanga area; the Bicol region; the Lake Lanao area; the Iloilo-Negros complex; and the Davao area.

The boom in hotel construction has been accelerated by the preparations for the joint meeting of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank—the largest ministerial conference in the world today—in Manila this October. The meeting is expected to showcase the ideal setting of Manila for international conventions. The convention drive is expected not only to boost the number of "quality tourists" but also to sustain the tourism promotional campaign of our country.

Administration. The DOT has absorbed the disparate tourism agencies of the government before its creation. Its implementing arm is the Philippine Tourism Authority (PTA). PTA administers the government's incentives package to investors in the tourism industry. Two bureaus are under the DOT: the Bureau of Tourism Promotion (BTP) and the Bureau of Special Services (BSS). The BTP is the principal marketing and promotional arm of the DOT, while the BSS is charged with the task of providing hospitable reception to domestic and foreign visitors and the regulation and supervision of the operations of all tourist facilities and tourism-related services.

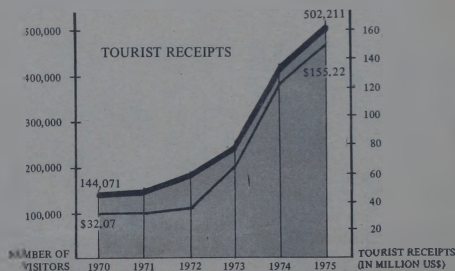
Programs. During its first three years of existence, the DOT was primarily concerned with the improvement and expansion of tourism facilities in order to cope with the increasing influx of tourists. Providing direction and leadership within the tourist industry, the DOT strove to acquire much-needed infrastructure support for the various tourism development projects, supported

the development of tourist attractions, and provided financial assistance to local investors. Still, the DOT faces several problems in promoting our country as the top tourism destination in Southeast Asia.

Problems. The most glaring problem is the lack of suitable hotel accommodations for the growing number of tourists. The completion of some 14 hotels in time for the October IMF-World Bank meeting will add 6,256 rooms to the existing 7,419 international-standard rooms. The DOT has also acquired a number of accommodation facilities from the defunct Board of Travel and Tourism, including the Mt. Data Lodge in Benguet, the Banua Hotel and Youth Hostel in Ifugao.

Another problem is the underdeveloped state of many of our country's tourist attractions. The DOT is harnessing the cooperation of local governments in developing their tourist attractions. It is encouraging cleanliness and beautification drives in the rural areas as well as initiating the restoration of historical buildings. The DOT, in cooperation with the private sector and other government agencies, has launched the following tourism development projects: the cleaning and beautification of the Pasig River, the construction of the Philippine Pavilion in Nayong Pilipino, the setting up of the Mt. Samat Guesthouse in Batayan, and the restoration and beautification of Manila's Chinatown. DOT is also encouraging the holding of local events such as the *Ahi-Athlan*, the Moriones Festival and the Christmas Lantern Festival.

Another stumbling block to the full development of tourism is the lack of good infrastructure—like roads and bridges going to the tourist attractions. The DOT is giving emphasis to tourism



development in the rural areas in order to help bridge the gap in economic progress between our urban and rural areas.

Tourism has been relegated to a lower priority compared to agriculture and industry in the infrastructure program of our government. Nevertheless, the overall results have been generally supportive of the tourism projects. Guided by the Tourism Priorities Plan, the DOT is working closely with the Department of Public Highways and the Department of Public Works, Transportation and Communications to define what tourism projects are to be given top priority in infrastructure. Primary consideration is now being given to the expansion of the Manila International Airport and the improvement of alternate international airports in Mactan and Zamboanga. Other targets include service roads linking major tourist attractions to the main highways, bridges, improved communications facilities, improved feeder airports and domestic seaports.

The DOT is also getting help from foreign financial institutions. The World Bank consultants have finished feasibility studies on the development of the Loox Tourist Estate. The Asian Development Bank, on the other hand, is undertaking a feasibility study on a road project that would link Loox with Manila.

Regulation. To protect tourists as well as the local industry from substandard accommodations and services, the DOT through the BSS is maintaining a strict guard on the operations of hotels and tourism services. Tourism-oriented enterprises may not operate without clearance from the DOT. Tourism-related establishments are inspected

and classified in accordance with set standards prior to being issued licenses to operate. The BSS also conducts on-the-spot checks to make sure tourism regulations are being followed. The initial concern of the DOT has been on hotels, travel agencies, restaurants and tour operators. The DOT is now expanding coverage to include souvenir shops, handicraft stores and entertainment presentations in hotels and restaurants.

The DOT has also organized a Tourist Assistance Unit (TAU) to ensure adequate protection and security to tourists for the duration of their stay. The TAU investigates tourists' complaints including those against tour operators and tourist guides who demand exorbitant fees as well as taxi companies with reckless drivers and fast meters. TAU also conducts regular patrol of the Tourist Belt section in Manila.

Information and Promotions. The DOT maintains three tourist service units—at the Manila International Airport, at Nayong Pilipino and at the DOT headquarters in Agrifina Circle. They provide information and tour guiding help. The BTP is undertaking a vigorous advertising and promotional campaign abroad to "sell" the Philippines. The major market targets are Japan, the United States, Australia, West Germany and the ASEAN region. The BTP lays the groundwork for our participation in international exhibits and conferences. One example was our booth in the 9th International Tourism Exchange held in Berlin, West Germany early last year. The BTP also handles the *Balikbayan* or Homecoming Program for Overseas Filipinos which has become one of the most successful projects initiated by the DOT. □



Above left: Tourism Secretary Jose D. Aspiras. Above: the Sagada rice terraces.