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# Thai Outbound Tourism to Austria: Trends and Issues\*\*

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## Abstract

Compared to forms of international inbound tourism or the development and marketing of various forms of travel inside the country, Thai outbound tourism constitutes a rather neglected phenomenon. Though a promising start was King Chulalongkorn's iconic trip to Europe in the late 19th century, Thai outbound travel remained restricted to a small elite of royal and other wealthy travelers until the 1980s when economic prosperity and rising household incomes fueled increasing demand for leisure and business travel. Based on a literature review and data from a survey with Thai tourists in Austria, this research outlines dimensions of contemporary Thai tourists in Europe in relation to their travel trends, profiles and destination image perception.

**Keywords:** Asian outbound tourism, Thai tourism, Destination image, Austria, Thailand

## Introduction

### The Importance of Thai Outbound Tourism

Research on Thai tourism is mainly related to international inbound tourism, the development and marketing of various forms of tourism inside the country (see for example Meyer, 1988; [Kontogeorgopoulos, 1998](#); Cohen, 2001; Cohen, 2014), and more recently to domestic tourism (Kaosa-ard, Bezic and White, 2001; [Evrard and Leepreecha, 2009](#)). Thai outbound tourism in contrast is a rather under-researched topic, despite its growing

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importance and relevance. The number of Thai tourists travelling abroad has almost doubled in the last seven years from 3.4 million trips in 2006 (ETC Markets Insights, 2007) to nearly 6 million in 2013 (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2014). Besides the ASEAN and East Asian market, Europe constitutes the most important Thai outbound travel destination with 522.229 trips in 2013 and an average length of stay of 7.94 days (Ministry of Tourism and Sports, 2014). According to the data of the Thai Ministry of Tourism and Sports (2014) the most important destinations in Europe are the United Kingdom, Germany, Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, and France. However, these statistics refer to the first point of entry and thus cannot provide a thorough picture. Based on a variety of factors including departures from Thailand by first call, airline hubs, and other indicators, the European Travel Commission (ETC, 2007) additionally lists Italy, Russia, and Sweden as important destinations.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we will outline the development of Thai outbound tourism to Europe from a historical perspective which is strongly connected to the first trip to Europe by King Rama V in the late century 19th century that displayed many elements of the “Grand Tour” tourism. Thenceforward, however, Thai travel to Europe was only accessible to a very small number of the elite society which just changed in the 1980s in the context of Thailand’s socioeconomic development. Therefore, the second purpose of this paper is the investigation of more contemporary Thai travel by introducing an ongoing research which is aimed at analyzing Thai Tourism to Austria and Europe by exploring Thai tourists in relation to their travel behavior, preference, and perception.

### **The Beginnings: The Grand Tour of King Chulalongkorn**

One of the first Siamese visitors to Europe was Kosa Pan, the Thai Ambassador to France in June/July 1686 (Cruyssen and Smithies, 2002) but tourism literature refers to King Chulalongkorn’s iconic trip in 1897 as the beginning of Thai outbound travel to Europe (Leiper, 2008; Cohen, 2014, p. 253). This trip also featured a visit to Austria’s capital city Vienna and to the former summer residence of the Austrian Emperor in Bad Ischl. His Majesty travelled to Europe on his ship being accompanied by his advisors, companions, servants, and the boat crew (Leiper 2008, p. 172). His journey started in Switzerland and further brought him and his group to Italy (3 weeks), Austria-Hungary (2 weeks), Russia (2 weeks), England (6 weeks), Germany (2 weeks), and France (2 weeks). In addition to these main destinations the king visited Belgium, Holland, Spain, and Portugal as well as Denmark, Sweden, and Norway for a few days (Fine Arts Department, 1998; Leiper, 2008).

In Austria, the King of Siam was invited by Emperor Franz Joseph with whom he discussed the administration of judicial courts, and he was brought to the countryside in order to see local farming methods (Leiper, 2008, p. 172). His Majesty also visited Bad Ischl, the upcountry residence of the emperor in the highlands of Upper Austria. In chronicles, the visit

of the “Lord of the White Elephant” was described as “highly exotic” (Official Kaiservilla Homepage, n.d.). Furthermore, in order to honour the famous visitor, Johann Strauss’s operetta “Die Fledermaus” was performed, with the popular composer himself conducting. The King’s visit to Europe had leisure-oriented, educational, and political purposes and thus reflects a range of elements characteristic of the “Grand Tour” of Europe (Towner, 1985; Leiper, 2004, pp. 10-12). The Grand Tour in its classical European version flourished from the late 17th to the early 19th century and involved tourists from the noble and upper classes of society who were mostly young males on a several months trip leading to important European destinations such as Paris, Naples, Rome, and Vienna. “Grand Tourists” traveled independently but were accompanied by servants and tutors. These trips served a kind of rite of passage aimed at educating and training the young nobility by first-hand experiences at classical cultural and religious sites, and by mingling socially with other members of upper-class society throughout Europe. Leiper (2008) argues that the main features of the classical Grand Tour are present in the structure and purposes of the King’s journey (pp. 173-174):

First, the King, like the “Grand Tourists” visited multiple countries and cities where he also planned to meet the ruling elite. In this context, his Majesty worked in diplomacy, discussed economic and administrative issues but also engaged in leisure-oriented activities such as site seeing and visiting performances. Third, the main destinations of interest for both groups were capital cities such as Rome, Vienna or Paris which symbolized the sources and main locations of ‘civilized cultures’. Moreover, the tours were not rushed. The king spent five months in Europe and also the Grand Tourism lasted several months up to one year. Finally, these tours were extremely expensive but those tourists were hardly restricted by economic constraints.

The King’s trip to Europe had selective economic impacts in the visited cities and ports as the King and his team, consisting of several dozens of people, purchased fuel and spent money on rail travel, hotels, dinners, entertainment as well as various products including marble statues, paintings, clothes etc. (Leiper, 2008, p. 175). King Chulalongkorn was not the only Asian traveler in Europe during the early 19th century as visitors from Japan, China, the Dutch Indies, and India were registered too. Nevertheless, such visits during that time were very rare and Thailand (Siam) and its King Rama V became broadly known and celebrated in Europe (Leiper, 2008, p. 175).

For the upcoming decades, however, such travel was restricted to a small elite of royal and other wealthy and privileged travelers (Cohen, 2014, p. 253) but since the 1980s economic prosperity and rising household incomes have fueled increasing demand for leisure and business travel.

## The Rise of Thai (and Asian) Outbound Travel

Asian tourism in general and Thai Tourism in particular to Europe is on the rise. It is forecasted that in 2020, one of every three visitors to Europe will be Asian (WTTC, 2011). Affluence and rising household incomes represent one of the most central factors of increasing demand for leisure and business travel (Bui and Trupp, 2014). According to the Airbus Industries forecast, the middle class population in the Asia Pacific region is expected to grow from 2011 to 2031 by almost 400 percent (UNWTO, 2013, p. 6). Thailand's middle class is a product of a rather long period of economic development. The country experienced fast economic growth (8-9 percent per year) during the mid 1980s and 1990s which was interrupted by the "Asian Crisis" of 1997-1998 (Pasuk and Baker 1998). After that, economic growth rates have been moderate due to various ecological (tsunami 2004, floods 2011), economic (financial crisis 2008-2009), and manifold political crises (e.g. PAD airport closure in Bangkok and Phuket 2008, UDD protests at Ratchaprasong intersection in 2010, PRDC protests 2013-14, current military government). Despite these developments, Thailand has become an upper-middle income economy in July 2011 (World Bank, 2011). Moreover, on 1 January 2013, Thailand officially adopted a new nationwide minimum wage policy forcing employers to pay at least 300 Baht per day.

In addition to increasing household incomes, the currency of the Thai Baht remains strong against the devaluation of the Euro, making traveling in Austria and Europe more affordable than ever. In this context, the potential of the Thai tourism market with a population of 65 million and currently 6 million outbound travelers is big and has not reached its peak yet. The growth prospects for Thai outbound tourism are evaluated as "good, and Europe reportedly remains high up the list in terms of aspirational destinations" (ETC Markets Insights 2007, p. 1). Also, from a European perspective, Asian tourists constitute a diverse market with an increasing importance (Bui and Trupp, 2014). In the case of Austria, Global Blue reports that the biggest spenders per purchase are tourists from Thailand (€676/purchase) and China (€606). In contrast, tourists from Switzerland spend €223 per purchase (ORF, 2012). Also, the Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) reports that Thai outbound travelers to Europe have a higher per day expenditure than international tourists coming to Thailand (Chaipinit and Phetvaroon, 2011, p. 99). The Association of Thai Travel Agents (ATTA) criticized that the TAT focuses only on domestic and inbound tourism (The Nation Online, n.d.). Another identified drawback for Thai Tourism, especially to the Schengen countries, is the long and often difficult process of obtaining a visa (Cohen, 2014, p. 254).

Yet, the economic and social development of Thailand and other parts of Asia in the recent decades have challenged the conventional portrayal of Asian countries derived from classical works (Bui and Trupp, 2014; Cohen and Cohen, 2015). The on-going growth and complexity of Asian tourism in general and Thai travel in particular demands a reappraisal of how tourism is analysed and conceptualised (Winter, Teo and Chang, 2009; Chang, 2015) due

to differences between Western and Asian cultures and societies (Nisbett, 2009). In this context, Evrard and Leepreecha (2009, p. 250) argue that Western tourists are searching for authenticity (MacCannell, 1973) in the highlands of Northern Thailand while Thai tourists favor “sanuk” (fun) over a perceived authentic experience. The fast growing non-Western, especially Asian, tourism market has been driven by other motives than a quest for authenticity. “Those motives remain a little explored topic in the study of contemporary tourism” (Cohen and Cohen, 2012, p. 2179) and need further research.

Compared to Thai inbound tourism, the literature on Thai outbound travel is rather marginal. Available studies on Thai outbound tourism mainly focus on ASEAN or East Asian destinations. Van Long’s study (2008) investigates how Vietnam can gain a larger share of Thai outbound tourism while Chang, Khamkaew and McAleer (2008) analyze responsiveness of Thai outbound tourism to East Asian destinations. For example, the number of Thai tourists to Japan has increased sharply by 45.3%, reaching 675,570 visitors in 2014 (Japan National Tourist Organization, 2014). This research, however, focuses on Thai outbound travel to Europe in relation to travel behavior, preference, perception, and satisfaction. One of the few studies investigating Thai outbound tourism behavior in Europe was conducted by Chaipinit and Phetvaroon (2011). Based on a survey conducted with 400 Thai tourists at Suvarnabhumi airport in Bangkok, push factors such as “discovering a new place”, “discovering different cultures & lifestyles” as well as “enriching oneself intellectually” were identified as the most important travel motivations. Cohen (2014, p. 254) points to the difficulty of identifying the main purpose of Thai outbound travel as the boundaries between leisure, visiting friends and relatives, business travel, and labor migration can be blurry. Research conducted by March (1999, p. 235) compared outbound travel industries in Indonesia, Thailand, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan, and discovered three main similarities: First, an inclination towards group rather than individual travel; second, a desire for luxury and brand-name shopping; and third, a reluctance to give feedback to service providers about service quality.

Another motivating factor for international travel can be prestige, the notion of enhancing one’s own social status by demonstrating international travel experience. Pierre Bourdieu refers to the concept of symbolic capital which is defined as a resource based on prestige, honour recognition or misrecognition which under certain conditions can guarantee economic or social profits (Bourdieu, 1986; 1997). Preliminary results show that Asian tourists in Europe try to reach as many countries within a short period of time and that some countries are perceived as more important (and of higher value) than others (cf. Arlt, 2006). Crompton (1979) notes that prestige-related travel disappears with frequency of tourism experiences but one has to keep in mind that an emerging middle and upper class from China, Korea and parts of Southeast Asia has just started to travel overseas in greater numbers (Bui and Trupp, 2014).

In the light of the growing importance of Asian and Thai outbound tourism to Europe and the existing limitation of a European centric approach in contemporary tourism research, the ongoing project is aimed at analyzing contemporary forms of Asian outbound tourism to Europe. This paper particularly discusses the Thai case and presents preliminary results.

## Objectives

This research seeks to provide a better understanding of the notion of the destination image promoted by Thai travel agents and how the destination, Austria, is perceived and experienced by Thai outbound travelers. It aims to achieve an in-depth analysis of Thai tourists in Austria and Europe in relation to their travel behavior, preference, perception, and satisfaction, to provide a demographic and socioeconomic profile of Thai tourists travelling to Austria and Europe and to analyze and assess the Europe-focused tourist promotional material provided by Thai travel agencies.

Based on the literature review explicated above, the research team tests a number of arguments and hypotheses. However, as the project team employs a mixed methods approach, including qualitative methodologies, new and unexpected motivational and behavioral dimensions can be discovered. Specifically researchers examine the assumptions:

1. Thai outbound tourism to Europe is oriented and organized towards group rather than individual travel.
2. Thai outbound tourism to Europe entails visiting more than one country as Thai travelers aim to ‘collect’ European destinations in accordance with prestige- or status-related travel.
3. The destination image Thai tourists hold about Austria is strongly related to classical and ‘high culture’ products.

The main unit of analysis is Thai outbound tourists traveling to Austria and Thailand based travel agents. Data collection including questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation were conducted in Vienna, the capital city of Austria. Vienna is Austria’s top tourist destination featuring many tangible and intangible attractions. In the last decade, the city promoted the “five Viennas” as unique selling proposition as the core of its marketing strategy (Schlögl, 2011, p.159). These five pillars are structured as (1) world city of music and art, (2) imperial city, (3) city of gourmets, (4) green and sporty Vienna, and finally (5) conference city. Important considerations concerning a tourist destination are physical and psychological elements and the image and promotion of the destination (Holloway, 2009). The viability of a destination depends on both tourists and stakeholders of the destination (Leiper, 1990). It has been reported that Chinese travel in Europe consist of coach tours which often include intra-European flights in order to be able to visit several

European countries and cities ([Arlt, 2006](#)). This type of holiday packaging has already been embodied by “Grand Tour Tourism” and is also expected for other Asian tourist markets. Vienna is often part of these European package tours.

## Research Methodology

Data collection took place in Vienna, Austria employing both qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative part uses a self-administered questionnaire to survey Thai tourists in Vienna and is based on the literature review on Thai and Asian outbound tourism explicated above as well as on interviews with Vienna-based tour guides working with Asian groups. The following topics are covered in the questionnaire survey: organization and structure of the trip, the reason and motivation for visiting, the perception of the image of the destination, tourist satisfaction, preference of places and consumption, spending patterns, recommendations, and the tourist’s socio-demographic profile. The questionnaire was refined in English, then translated to Thai and pre-tested. Translation is necessary because language barriers are identified as a major difficulty of Asian tourists (Taka-Tokunaga, 2007). The study collected 82 questionnaires from Thai tourists during winter 2014 and summer 2015. As hardly any information of the overall population is available, we pursued a non-probability sample and selected “individuals because they are available, convenient, and represent some characteristic the investigator seeks to study” (Creswell, 2012, p. 145). The data collection in Vienna was spread across popular tourism attractions such as the Schönbrunn Palace, the most visited site in the city of Vienna, the historical city center, shopping streets, and popular restaurants. Moreover, data was collected at train stations and inside public transportation. In spreading places of data collection, we collected a balanced sample of different types of tourists. The data analysis involved descriptive analysis of visitor profile, travel arrangement, and destination image association using SPSS for analysis. In addition to the quantitative survey, the research team carries out semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007) with official Vienna-based tour guides who are working with groups from Thailand, the accompanying Thai tour guides, and managers/supervisors of major tourist attractions in Vienna. These persons are regarded as experts in the field of Asian tourism in Vienna as they usually have years of experience in guiding and observing tourists from Asia and Thailand and can thus provide further information on spending patterns, travel, and consumption preferences as well as on differences within Asian groups and possible changes over time. Moreover, the project team will carry out participant observation among Thai tourists at prominent tourist sites in Vienna. The interviews are carried out during the writing of this paper and are thus not integrated in this paper.

## Results

The respondents were predominantly female (59.8%). The mean age for international visitors was 37.8 years and the majority of the respondents have university/college qualification (86.7%). In terms of occupation, the largest group of visitors are self-employed (21.8%), students (18.3%), professionals (16.7%), and government officers (9%). Groups of middle income level accounts for 78.5% and the high income group for 20.3%. Corresponding to the level of income and education, 75.6% of the respondents live in urban areas. Table 1 shows the visitor profiles.

**Table 1.** Visitor Profiles

Profile	Sample (N=82)
<i>Gender</i>	
Male	40.2% (33)
Female	59.8% (49)
<i>Average Age</i>	37.8
<i>Highest level of education</i>	
Basic education	6.2% (5)
High school	7.4% (6)
College/university	86.5 (70)
<i>Occupation</i>	
Professional	16.7% (13)
Government officer	9% (8)
Self-employed	21.8% (17)
Student	18.3% (15)
Skilled occupation	6.4% (5)
Household	2.6% (2)
Between jobs	1.3% (1)
Retired	3.8% (3)
Other	17.9% (14)
<i>Income level</i>	
High	20.3% (16)
Middle	78.5% (62)
Low	1.3% (1)
<i>Living area</i>	
Urban	75.6% (62)
Suburban	18.3% (15)
Rural	2.5% (2)

Most tourists were first-time visitors to Austria (70.7%). The majority of visitors (67.1%) travel for holiday, while visiting friends and relatives accounts for 12.2% of the respondents. Interestingly, 82.9% of Thai tourists traveled with a group and bookings of package tours made through travel agents account for 48.8%, which is a smaller proportion compared to those who arranged travel by themselves (51.2%). This indicates a trend of self-arranged group travel. Table 2 presents the travel purpose, and arrangements.

**Table 2.** Travel Arrangement, and Purposes

Profile	Sample (N=82)
<i>Travel arrangement</i>	
Packaged tour	48.8% (40)
Self-organised	51.2% (41)
<i>Travel companion</i>	
Alone	15.9% (13)
With a group	82.9% (68)
<i>Visitation</i>	
First time to Austria	70.7% (58)
Repeat visitation to Vienna	29.3% (24)
<i>Travel Purpose</i>	
Holiday	67.1% (55)
Business	4.9% (4)
Visiting family, friends	12.2% (10)
Other	26.8% (22)

The image of Austria has strongly been influenced by music-related factors, in which 84.8% of respondents associated the country with the famous composer – Mozart. Other music-related themes are the Blue Danube (35.1%), Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra (36%) and the Salzburg Music Festival (32.9%). The movie “The Sound of Music” also strongly presents the country (65%). Furthermore Swarovski Jewelry and the Alps mountains are relatively well-recognized by visitors. Table 3 shows the visitors’ image association of Austria.

**Table 3.** Image Association

Profile	Sample (N=82)
The Sound of Music	65% (52)
Queen Sissi	39% (30)
Before Sunrise	13.7% (10)
The New Year Concert	17.8% (13)
Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra	36% (27)
Blue Danube	35.1% (26)
Mozart	84.8% (67)
Klimt	17.1% (14)
Sigmund Freud	21.6% (16)
Salzburg Music Festival	32.9% (25)
Swarovski Jewelry	42.1% (32)
The Alps	46.1% (35)

## Conclusion and Discussion

In this paper, we outlined the historical development of Thai outbound travel by discussing King Chulalongkorn's trip to Europe as an example of Grand Tourism. After decades of stagnation where European tourism was limited to a very small number of elite and upper class travelers, Thai tourism to Europe has began rising since the country's socioeconomic development in the 1980s. In the context of the ongoing research on Thai Outbound Tourism to Austria and Europe, which is based on a quantitative survey with Thai tourists, participant observation at tourist hot spots, and semi-structured interviews with Thai tour guides in Vienna, we aim to understand new patterns of Thai outbound travel and test the hypotheses of collective- and status-oriented tourism.

We discuss the findings of Thai outbound tourists to Vienna in relation to the three points probed earlier. First, the assumption that Thai outbound tourists are oriented towards group travel is partly confirmed. The findings on travel arrangement reveal that the majority of travelers chose to travel with groups, but more than half of the surveyed visitors arranged the trip by themselves. The preference for package tours probably has declined. Second, travel to Europe in general and to Austria in particular remains relatively luxury travel, as almost all travelers who were surveyed belong to middle and high income groups, who have high levels of education and live in urban areas. Therefore, travel to Europe can be understood as a way to present 'status'. Third, the destination image Thai tourists hold about

Austria does not only relate to “high-culture” products, even though the country is associated with classical music. Evidences from our study show that natural attractions and brand-name products are also strongly associated with the image of Austria.

The new generation of Thai outbound tourists to Austria to some extent recapitulates the “Grand Tourist” in the literature (Leiper, 2008). The visitation pertains to destinations of ‘developed countries’, mainly conducted by elite groups of contemporary Thai society. In addition, the motivation to spend money might be obvious as the brand name products are well-recognized. A high percentage of independently arranged travel, however, denotes a new trend of travel among Thai visitors in particular and Asians tourists in general. Pursuing freedom out of confined package tours, constitutes a new trend that challenges the traditional norm of Asian organized group travel presented in Europe in the 1990s.

Limitations of this study suggest some directions for future investigation. Further research might compare and contrast Thai travelers to other groups from Asia such as the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese visitors. In addition, results of the quantitative study can be further elaborated via qualitative interviews that potentially offers a deeper analysis of travel motivation in relation to social status enhancement.

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