

DOT readies for WHTC; eyes \$62-B wellness mart

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MANILA, Philippines - The Department of Tourism (DOT) is briskly propping up the local health and wellness industry for its major participation in the forthcoming 2009 World Health Tourism Congress (WHTC), which is seen to position the country strongly in this multibillion-dollar global market.

DOT Secretary Joseph Ace Durano said the country's hosting of the WHTC "forms part of a product diversification strategy aimed at expanding our captive global market" even in the face of the world financial crisis.

"In reality, medical and health and wellness services are not a luxury but a basic human need that people from all over the world strive to have, even if it means traveling to a foreign land where these are more affordable and/or readily available or accessible. In the case of the Philippines, we offer not just quality and affordability, but also a unique travel experience marked by the country's beyond-the-usual tourism destinations and the passionately caring character of the Filipinos. This is our key message to the global health and wellness market when its major players converge at the Sofitel Philippine Plaza Manila on March 26 to 28 for the WHTC 2009," Durano explained.

In Asia alone, the market is estimated at 1.5 million people, each spending an average of \$362 a day, or more than twice the \$144 daily average spend of a common inbound visitor. Worldwide, this market is projected to surge from the current \$40 billion to \$62 billion by 2012, with Thailand, Singapore, India, Malaysia, South Korea and the Philippines expected to emerge as Asia's top industry players.

Stressing the advantage of the Philippines in this field, Durano cited the country's milder climate than South Korea's, much greater number of English-speaking people than Thailand's, more healthcare professionals than Singapore and Malaysia, and nearer to such vast markets as the US, Canada, Japan, Russia and Australia than India.

Aura International Dubai, according to DOT Undersecretary for Sports and Wellness Tourism Cynthia L. Carrion, is bringing in 150 to 200 large corporate and institutional buyers of health and wellness services.

Citing reports from the Philippines, Aura International managing director Hadi Malaeb said the country's medical tourism alone posted some \$200 million revenues from an estimated 68,000 patients, compared to Singapore's 374,000 and Thailand's 1.28 million from 190 countries.

"But with our persistent efforts to increase our share of this huge market, the Philippines can certainly catch up and become a major global health and wellness destination. The holding of the WHTC 2009 in Manila is, in fact, a big step in that direction," Durano stressed.