

everyone's talking about... the tsunami

The tsunami in Asia spread a swathe of destruction on 26 December last year. But after the aid work is finished, what will be the lasting effects on tourism and the spa industry? We ask key operators and organisations for their views

It ripped across the Indian Ocean with an apocalyptic fury, and the lives and livelihoods destroyed in its wake are still being counted. With the death toll nearing 300,000, has the Asian tsunami also dealt a death blow to tourism?

Countries from Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar and Malaysia to Sri Lanka, the Maldives, India, Bangladesh and even east Africa were affected. Most seriously hit were the Indonesian province of Aceh on the island of Sumatra, the Sri Lankan coast, and the Maldives, lying just a few metres above sea level.

Indonesia's main tourist regions were unaffected but the government estimates that reconstruction will cost US\$4.5bn (€3.4bn or £2.4bn) over the next three years. Malaysia was mostly protected by Sumatra, to its west; there was some damage and nearly 70 fatalities in the northwest of the peninsula, but the effects were relatively light, said the Malaysian Hotels Association.

Thailand, however, did suffer more than 5,000 deaths, many of which were foreign. Affected areas included Phuket, Phi Phi,

Krabi, Khao Lak and Koh Lanta.

Reconstruction has been swift and the Tourism Authority of Thailand is engaged in a proactive marketing campaign to revitalise tourism in the south.

After Indonesia, Sri Lanka suffered the worst devastation. Southern and eastern coastlines have been ravaged. Homes, crops

“We’re focusing on the human element in tourism – saving jobs, relaunching small businesses and recovering the visitor flow that makes these economies work”

and fishing boats have been destroyed. The International Labour Organisation estimates that at least 400,000 people have lost their jobs. President Chandrika Kumaratunga has launched a US\$3.5bn (€2.7bn or £1.8bn) reconstruction drive, including a Bounce Back Sri Lanka tourism campaign. The Ministry of Tourism is proposing to offer low-interest loans to help uninsured hoteliers rebuild and, with the Sri Lanka Tourist Board, has developed recovery plans for 15 coastal resort towns.

Meanwhile, 20 of the Maldives' 199 inhabited islands have been described as 'totally destroyed'. The shallowness of the water limited the wave's destructive power, but flooding was extensive. Many luxury resorts will be closed for months.

Tourism accounts for around 20 per cent of the Maldives' gross domestic product

(GDP), so a drop in visitor numbers would hurt the island nation's economy. The Maldives Tourism Promotion Board, however, is optimistic and issued a statement saying the 87 island resorts had fared considerably better than many situated on the coastlines of neighbouring countries.

India, too, was hit on its southeastern coastlines and in the Andaman and Nicobar islands, but the effect on tourism has been relatively limited. Repairing the damage is expected to cost about US\$1.2bn (€900m or

COUNTING THE COST: SPAS AND RESORTS IN THE INDIAN OCEAN TAKE STOCK

Unsurprisingly, resorts and spas throughout the Indian Ocean coastal regions were among those worst hit. A number were completely destroyed, while others were forced to temporarily shut down after resorts were left without power or clean water.

Le Méridien was forced to close its beach spa resort in Khao Lak, where seven guests and 12 staff died. The Aspara spa at the Holiday Inn Resort in Phuket was badly damaged and InterContinental Hotels, which owns the resort, announced the hotel and spa would be closed until further notice.

According to the Malaysian Association of Hotels, most of its members reported no casualties or major damage to facilities, except minor wreckage in beachfront areas, although Pelangi Beach Langkawi Resort reported damage to pools and rooms.

In Sri Lanka, the coastal city of Galle was badly damaged and the Lighthouse Hotel and Spa was forced to close after the

tsunami completely destroyed the lower levels of the building, including the spa.

Taj Hotels and Resorts reported no casualties among guests or staff at its properties in Sri Lanka, India or the Maldives. However, its Taj Exotica resort in the Maldives did sustain severe structural damage and has closed for restoration until later this year.

Also in the Maldives, the tsunami destroyed many rooms at the Full Moon Resort, and Four Seasons closed its Kuda Huraa resort after it was badly damaged. In South Male guests were evacuated from the Fun Island resort. Most of the resort, which is operated by Villa Hotels, was destroyed.

The Huvafen Fushi and Dhoni Mighili resorts, operated by Per Aquum, reported minor damage but remained open – Huvafen Fushi's underwater treatment rooms were not affected. The Hilton Maldives Resort & Spa also escaped damage.