



Visitor arrival figures are likely to pick up with the major events coming up. **BLOOMBERG**

Slowdown in tourism sector but STB chief remains upbeat

THE tourism sector saw a slowdown in the first half of this year, according to the Singapore Tourism Board (STB).

While the 5.1 million visitors in the first six months — a record for the same period of any year — represented a 2.9-per-cent increase on-year, tourism receipts dipped 0.2 per cent.

Visitor arrival figures last month also dropped 4.1 per cent on-year, bucking a 51-month run of year-on-year growth since March 2004.

“The recent economic slowdown and

rising costs have brought about a general air of uncertainty, which has impacted consumer sentiment and discretionary spending in many tourism destinations, including Singapore,” said STB chief executive and deputy chairman Lim Neo Chian, adding that growth may be slow for the “next few months”.

Two weeks ago, Mr Lim had said he was “very concerned” about how the slow growth would affect Singapore’s target of 10.8 million tourists this year.

But he reiterated his confidence on Friday that the mid- to long-term outlook

remained positive with the slew of events and tourist attractions — such as the Formula One night race and the Integrated Resorts — coming up.

He added that STB would continue to “monitor the situation closely and where necessary, adjust our strategies or review our targets”.

In the first half, average room rates was estimated at \$248, a 29.6-per-cent hike over the same period last year. Average occupancy rate of 83 per cent was a 3.4-percentage-point drop from last year. **TEO XUAN WEI**

XTRA SPORTS SAFETY

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

How many more deaths will it take for the S'pore Sports Council to finally get their act together?

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SIX superfit sportsmen have drowned in two incidents in two sports, dragon boating and sailing. In eight months. In most developed countries, people could look at the umbrella body for these different sports in trouble — in our case, the Singapore Sports Council — and ask what is happening here?

If we take an isolated view of each incident, we are going to continue to pay a very heavy price. Put it another way, if we ran our power supply the way we look at sports safety, we would need our power stations to explode one after another before we would think to audit the whole system for safety.

If you recall, in June last year a 17-year-old triathlete was the last of three athletes to die during endurance sports over two years. With the third death, the Sports Council finally responded with better safety measures for endurance sports about this time last year.

Don't we wish that it had thought at that time to check on all the other sports it governs? It was only last week that the National Water Safety Council finally said it had discovered that “Singaporeans' knowledge of water safety is relatively low”, something the rest of us realised by reading the news.

The boss of the Water Safety Council, the Member of Parliament Dr Teo Ho Pin, added: “This is something that needs to be seriously looked into as it is less than desirable for a non-swimmer to be taking part in water sports.”

Unfortunately, the train of events after the two drowning tragedies in the past year shows that the Sports Council is still slow to connect the dots on sports safety. Our five dragon-boaters drowned in Cambodia in late November last year. Yet it took the Sports Council a full four months, a third-of-a-year, to put together the first Risk Management Course in mid-March to which the Singapore Dragon Boat Association sent 13 people.

It's not clear if the council invited any of the other water sports bodies to the course or whether it thought “dragon boaters had a tragedy, so dragon boaters attend is enough”.

Certainly that course could have benefited the Singapore Sailing Federation, whose president, Low Teo Ping, maintained even after the drowning of a young keel boat sailor this month there is still no real need for keel boat sailors to wear life jackets while training or even racing.

The council did finally call a dialogue session with all the official water sports bodies to, in its own words, “see how the different parties can come together and raise the overall water safety standards and awareness in Singapore”.

When? Last week.

Good move. But a bit late, isn't it?

Why did it take the Sports Council nine months after the dragon boat tragedy to even pull together water sports

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN CURE

NOBODY EXPECTS ZERO INCIDENTS.

SPORTS-RELATED INJURIES, EVEN TRAGEDIES, WILL OCCUR ... BUT WHAT THE PUBLIC IS ENTITLED TO KNOW IS EVERY REASONABLE PRECAUTION WAS TAKEN BY THE SPORTS BODIES TO REDUCE THE POSSIBILITY OF TRAGEDY TO PURE BAD LUCK.

bodies for a safety forum? We lost the trainee sailor Levin Angsana by then.

Nobody expects zero incidents. Sports-related injuries, even tragedies, will occur. And in most cases there'll be more than one factor contributing to the tragedy. But what the public is entitled to know is every reasonable precaution was taken by the sports bodies to reduce the possibility of tragedy to pure bad luck.

Here are more signs of trouble.

Singapore has “one of the highest rates of lightning activity in the world”, according to the National Environment Agency, which adds: “The victims were often in open areas such as sea, beaches and football fields.”

About six years ago, referee Khairudin Mohd Ali was struck during a football game but lived. The next year, a 20-year-old playing frisbee at West Coast Park, Mohammad Firdaus Abdul Latip, was struck and died.

Yet four months later, there still were S-League footballers training in light rain in Jurong Stadium, which is managed by the Singapore Sports Council. In that session, a young China national playing for Sinchi's Prime League team, was hit by

a bolt from the sky, and died. Jiang Tao was 18, and his family's only child.

That was football. You would think anyone could connect the dots to safety in other sports. Yet this is what the Sports Council said about the Jurong West Swimming Complex in a forum letter this year: “Currently, bathers are allowed to continue swimming in the sheltered pool if there is a light drizzle and no lightning.”

Compare that statement with the eyewitness account of Jiang Tao's coach when the young footballer was hit fatally by lightning four years ago: “There was a light drizzle, dark skies, but no thunder or lightning.” Exactly the same conditions that the council considers safe.

This was what the coach said next: “Suddenly, I heard the roar of thunder and then saw a lightning bolt hit the ground behind me. The next thing I knew, the boy had collapsed. There was smoke coming from the field.”

We need to ask more questions. It is extraordinary how the Sports Council has escaped notice for safety lapses under its watch over these years.

The writer is a media consultant.