

Vietnam's 'last paradise' intends to challenge Phuket and Bali

Vingroup carves a modern-day Venice into the island of Phu Quoc

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HANOI -- Developers on Phu Quoc -- an idyllic island in the Gulf of Thailand, off the coast of Cambodia and known as "the last paradise of Vietnam" -- have designs on developing the jewel into a major tourist resort.

Expectations are growing that the island, long a leading producer of *nuoc mam* fish sauce, will attract large numbers of tourists. But first it will have to overcome various obstacles, some that are being erected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the steep climb ahead, Le Khac Hiep, vice chairman of Vingroup, Vietnam's biggest conglomerate, in April said the island is on its way to becoming a prominent regional resort destination. He was speaking at the christening of Grand World, a "sleepless city" offering a variety of pleasures day and night, 365 days a year.

Within the park, more than 1,000 restaurants, various boutiques and shophouses line each side of a canal. A water show is held every night.

Grand World is full of "extraordinary spaces that make me feel as if I were not in my country," an excited tourist from Hanoi said.

Things began to change for the sleepy island famous for fish sauce in 2013, when the Vietnamese government of then Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung designated the island as a special economic zone.

Vingroup has since invested \$2.8 billion in the island. A theme park, casino and golf course are already operating, and the number of hotel rooms has reached 12,000.

Developers on the island of Phu Quoc have their work cut out for them if they want to compete with Southeast Asia's established party and resort islands. © Reuters

Sun Group, a leading Vietnamese real estate company, has completed an over-the-sea aerial tramway that is one of the world's longest, a theme park and other facilities.

Other projects are moving forward.

To date, \$16 billion worth of tourism-related corporate investments have been made on Phu Quoc, part of Kien Giang Province.

Unlike its neighbors Thailand and Indonesia, Vietnam has never been known for its resort islands. But Doan Van Tien, vice chairman of the Phu Quoc People's Committee, intends for the island to compete with Thailand's Phuket and Indonesia's Bali.

A major challenge will be generating buzz, not an easy chore considering Phu Quoc's position as the new kid in a pond of popular destinations that also include the Philippines' Cebu and Boracay.

In 2019, before the coronavirus broke out in the Chinese city of Wuhan, the number of visitors to Phu Quoc increased 27% from the previous year, to 5.1 million. This year the island expects to welcome 3 million holidaymakers, almost all domestic.

The island is working to attract Vietnamese visitors to overcome its COVID-triggered difficulties. As the virus continues to spread and mutate, however, it may fall short of its estimate.

As Phu Quoc struggles to make a name for itself alongside its more established Southeast Asian peers, travel experts say the island's movers and shakers will need to rely on down-to-earth promotional efforts in cooperation with airlines, travel agencies and other leisure concerns.