

Thai-Swedish Relations Expanding Even Further

Swedish Ambassador to Thailand His Excellency Lennart Linnér speaks about the achievements of the Thai Swedish Chamber of Commerce as well as broader issues affecting Swedes living in the region and relations between Sweden and Thailand.

By Andrew J. West

With bilateral trade worth a billion dollars, 400,000 Swedish tourists visiting Thailand and spending 20 billion baht last year alone, and with approximately 10,000 Swedes already owning second homes in Thailand – generating a further 25 billion baht in revenue for Thailand – relations between Thailand and Sweden have never been more important.

Yet these figures, impressive as they are, could easily pale by comparison with the years to come despite the recent economic crisis.

His Excellency Mr Linnér, who is also ambassador to Lao, Cambodia, Myanmar and Philippines, assesses the relationship between the two countries, the role of the Thai-Swedish Chamber of Commerce in this development, as well as assessing potential future possibilities and problems.

The chamber's practical role

"The chamber and the embassy have a close relationship, especially with John Svengren, concerning practical matters to do with Swedes who come to Thailand. The chamber has done an excellent job not just for its one hundred members, which includes

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some sixty Swedish companies, but has been a practical help to Swedish citizens in Thailand in general," said Mr Linnér.

"A good example of the chamber's useful activities is their recently produced *Best Practices Guide*, which is designed specifically for Swedes looking to buy a second home in Thailand as well as the ad in *Bangkok Post* and *Post Today* to celebrate or national day, which raises awareness of Swedish companies operating here. The embassy hosts a business breakfast about every six weeks, which representatives of the Chamber and Swedish companies participate in, that is useful, informal means for keeping up-to-date with each other.

"The chamber supplies the embassy with research and essential backup material for our meetings with for example Thailand's Board of Investment in our attempts to persuade them to ease their restrictions on owning property here such as the thirty year lease and other tangible issues such as relaxing visa restrictions," he said.

The role of the embassy

"The embassy has the function of promoting Swedish business at a government to government level and being involved with major projects such as Thailand's purchase of the Swedish-made Gripen jet fighters in a deal worth an approximate total of 38 billion baht. The chamber can't handle these issues, nor can bodies such as the Swedish Trade Council as we're the ones who have access at the highest level.

"An example of our role here is with regards to the planned opening of an IKEA shopping centre, where we have supported the company in talks with various ministries, giving them the permissions to open here. This is a very large investment of 3,76 billion baht."

"Every month we meet with the other European Union embassies and the European Commission, which has a delegation here, to discuss economic

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and trade matters”.

"Really, how we fit together with the chamber and the trade council is we at the embassy can contact the highest levels of government, sometimes as a group with the other EU countries; while the chamber works as a lobby group, frequently petitioning government and authorities together with the other European chambers; and the Swedish Trade Council is a consulting body that works primarily with small to medium size businesses with such tasks as market research and export information.

"The establishment of the Swedish Trade Council in Thailand in September last year is a sign of the growing interest by Swedish companies in this country, with a bilateral trade somewhere in the vicinity of USD1 billion – a figure that doesn't include spending here by the four hundred thousand Swedish tourists who visit annually," he said.

The future between Sweden and Thailand

"Right now the big issue we are addressing together with the other embassies and European Commission is the free trade negotiations between the EU and Asean. Thailand alone exports approximately EUR 17 billion

