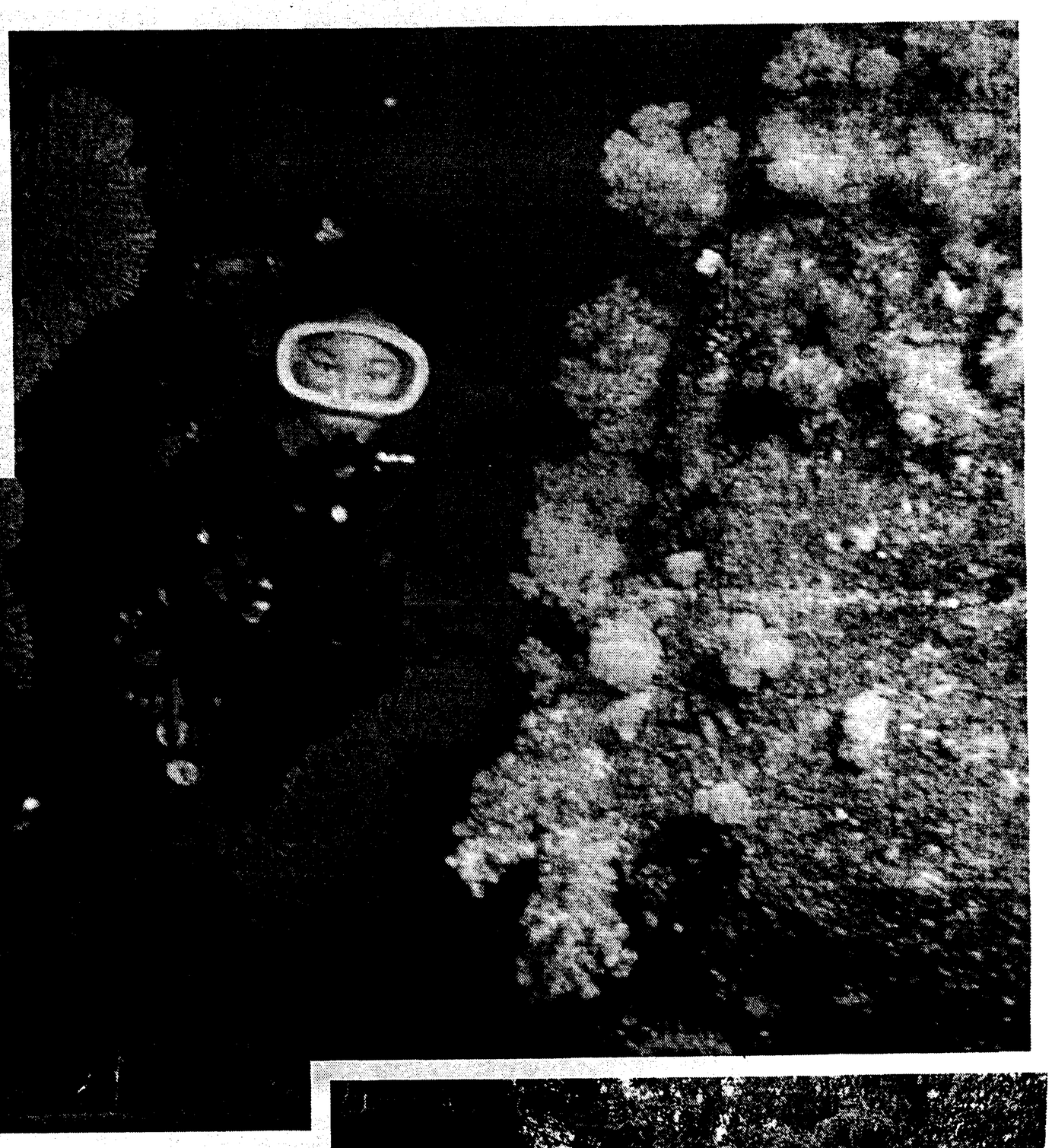




Thai of relief



UK bookings to Thailand are up 40% in the year, an impressive increase which will be greeted with joy in the Far East and with trepidation across the Atlantic.

Attractive currency exchange rates and a plentiful supply of direct services are the principal reasons for the surge in business.

An attractive exchange rate and plenty of direct services mean that Thailand is one of Britain's booming long-haul destinations. ANDREW DON reports.

British Airways, EVA Airways, Qantas and Thai International all fly non-stop from London to Bangkok and numerous other carriers offer indirect flights from Heathrow and Manchester.

The Tourism Authority of Thailand is hoping to maintain the momentum by spending £300,000 on marketing in Britain this year.

Thailand's economy has started to pick up following last year's slump but prices have not risen accordingly, c Shafique Cockar, product manager at Somak Holidays, Ha on-the-Hill, Middlesex.

"Competition in Thailand is so fierce that suppliers are with each other for business," says Cockar. "Hardly anyor put their prices up. Many have remained static and in cases, they have dropped by 7-10%."

Franco Sessini, contracts manager at Tradewinds, "Following the devaluation of 18 months ago, operato offering holidays at better prices year-on-year and the c cy benefits have been passed on to the consumer."

Thailand has been Kuoni's premier destination for tl two to three years ahead of the Maldives and Hong Linda Miles, product manager, hopes the currency situati not mean it is a short-term wonder, echoing the views ers that it has always been good value for money. "As l fares and hotels do not go up extraordinarily, it should ue to retain its appeal," she says.

Magic of the Orient is developing tailor-made fly-dı the north with pre-booked accommodation, and a new opening in November in Krabi will open up the idyllic sc coastal province further.

But Premier Holidays predicts Thai hotel price hikes of up to 25% from next year. Airwaves director Roger Craggs says in some instance hotel rates have already risen by 20% since last year with most of them quoting prices in US dollars eliminating the exchange rate benefits of 1998.

Premier holiday general manager for Asia, Paul Tilling, wants to see Thailand introduce more products to the market and open up more areas for exploration.

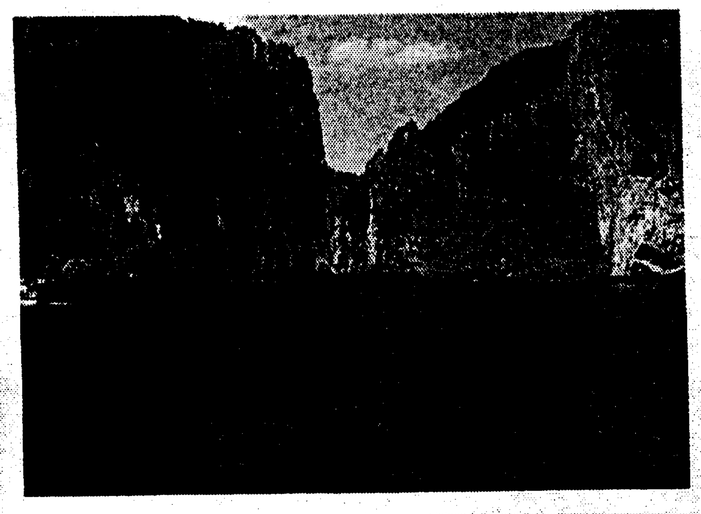
Premier is considering Rayong, south of Pattaya for next year and possibly the I-San district of north-east Thailand near the Laos border, A new itinerary from The Imaginative Traveller uses Thailand as part of a wider tour of the region, also taking in Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia for £1,350.

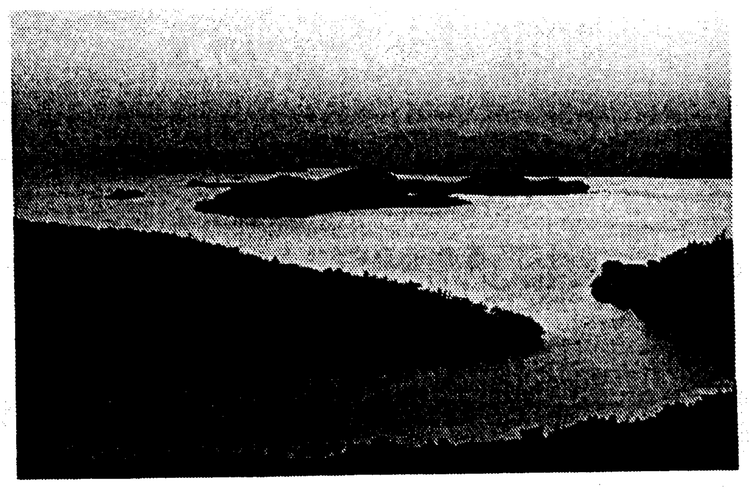
"Despite having a tremendous 1998, we've continued to see significant growth to Thailand," says Tilling. "We must now make sure we have a sufficient and diverse product to satisfy demand."

TAT is trying to get agents to sell the north-east more this year. Sumonta Naktontab, director, says most visitors try a beach resort first and then return to explore further. Some 45% of British holiday-makers return to Thailand, she claims: "The currency is one thing but also the service is good, you get value for money and Thailand has diverse attractions." She says the diversity means Thailand appeals to every age group except perhaps families with small children because of the 12-hours' flying time and the heat.

"Following the devaluation of 18 months ago, operators are offering holidays at better prices year-on-year and the currency benefits have been passed on to the consumer."

Thailand is also renowned for the sex hotspots of Bangkok and Pattaya – a factor TAT plays down. "We discourage people to seek out sex tours," says Nakontab.





Striking temples and spectacular scenery are a hit with western tourists.

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