

# TOURISM SECTOR IS MALAYSIA'S GOLD MINE: PM

By P.K. Poh

PENANG, Wed. — Tourism is Malaysia's potential "gold mine" and is expected to earn \$4 billion in foreign exchange by December, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed said today.

The Prime Minister said 4.68 million tourists visited Malaysia in the first eight months of the year. This is far more than the 4.3 million targeted under Visit Malaysia Year.

"Within these eight months, tourism has already raked in \$2.74 billion in foreign exchange alone," he said when opening Hotel Equatorial here.

"We are confident to break the \$4 billion margin by year-end.

The tourism industry is, in fact, Malaysia's gold mine."

Dr Mahathir said the tourism industry could be expanded and the figures could be increased many-fold "if we treat the visitors well and make hospitality and efficiency part of Malaysian culture."

He said it was the objective of the Government to make tourism the country's prime motivator in economic development.

The upsurging momentum of the tourism industry would be further enhanced after Visit Malaysia Year, with even better facilities and encouragement given to the private sector.

Dr Mahathir said there should be no saturation point in tourism,

adding that the hotel industry should be further expanded.

"There is a shortage of medium and low-cost accommodation, like chalets, motels and rest houses to meet the needs of budget travellers," he said.

"Most tourists, foreign and domestic, need such facilities. About 70 per cent of tourists to Malaysia are from Asean, especially Singapore.

"Such visitors go for medium and low-cost accommodation ... the industry must react wisely and not only concentrate on high-class hotels alone."

He added that the development of cheap accommodation would also complement the Government's efforts to promote "do-

mestic tourism."

"It will discourage Malaysians from going on overseas tours, thus saving foreign exchange."

Dr Mahathir said certain hotels had exploited the shortage of lower-class accommodation by increasing their rates.

Although studies had shown that hotel rates in Malaysia were among the lowest "we should not just raise prices."

He said cheaper accommodation would also make the industry more competitive and provide visitors a wider choice.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali were given a traditional welcome when they arrived at the Penang International Airport.