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A Bernama Year-Ender

MALAYSIA'S TOURISM INDUSTRY CONTINUES TO GROW

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KUALA LUMPUR: The tourism industry continued to consolidate its position as one of the major contributors to the nation's economic growth last year.

Its role as a key player in the economy has been given added impetus following concerted campaigns to make Malaysia a "must" destination among foreigners.

With the public and private sector joining hands in an integrated approach to "sell" Malaysia to the world since the 1990 Visit Malaysia Year, the industry is paying dividends both by netting foreign exchange and surging physical developments in the sector.

The mushrooming of tourist-related projects, including resorts coupled with the attractions bestowed by nature has aided in attempts to make Malaysia an international tourist destination.

New landmarks like the Twin Towers of the Kuala Lumpur City Centre, KL Tower, Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang, the North-South Highway, international standard golf courses, parks and other man-made attractions have added diversity and quality to existing attractions.

These physical development efforts have also aided in making the nation a major conference and exhibition venue.

Though these man-made ventures have helped in putting Malaysia on the international tourist map, the beauty of nature remains the primary lure for visitors.

Tourists are captivated by the diverse fauna and flora of the Malaysian jungle, the bright sunshine, palm-lined white sandy beaches, rivers, waterfalls and crystal blue water with its teeming marine life and corals along its coastline.

It is all these "assets" that have made the industry successful and all indications showed that in 1996, the tourism industry remained high on the list of revenue earners, after manufacturing and palm oil.

Although the year was filled with uncertainty in the international economic front, the number of tourist arrivals and receipts from Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, United Kingdom and the United States did not change much from last year, that is, 7.48 million arrivals and RM9,900 million in receipts.

The figures are quite the same as the previous year but it could be because the main tourist-contributing country, Singapore, are no longer in the Malaysia Cup football tournament.

There was also a drop in tourist arrivals from Europe, Japan and Taiwan probably because of negative media reports like the cholera outbreak in Penang in the middle of the year.

These minor setbacks, however, did not dampen the zeal with which Tourism Malaysia and the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism worked to promote the industry.

Instead, they became a challenge for the two authorities to step up their efforts to realise the government's objective of having 12.5 million tourist arrivals and RM15.8 billion in tourist receipts in the year 2000.

The Commonwealth Games which the country is hosting in 1998 is expected to help in achieving that aim.

Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik said one positive development in the industry is the steady increase in domestic tourism.

Planned holidays within the country for rest or recreational is now part of the Malaysian culture, he added.

According to a hotel occupancy survey from January to June this year, by the Research Division of Tourism Malaysia, there were about 7.4 million night occupancies in the hotels, of which 54.1 per cent were by Malaysians.

The data also showed that of the 4.7 million people who stayed in hotels, 56.9 per cent were Malaysians.

Malaysia, however, cannot afford to be complacent over the success of the industry thus far, says Sabbaruddin, who wants the achievements to be viewed as an incentive to strive for new products for the sector to maintain itself as a front runner of economic growth.

Chairman of the Board of Tourism Malaysia Datuk Hanafi Ramli had also earlier stated that they were reviewing the locations of their overseas tourist promotion offices.

The move was to ensure that they were effective and efficient in carrying their anointed task -- to sell the country as a tourist destination.

He said if necessary the offices in countries from where there was little outflow to Malaysia might be relocated to nations with better potentials.

The World Travel Mart '96 in London last November should be an eye opener to Malaysian tourism entrepreneurs as their counterparts who attended the gathering were propagating their latest attractions to make their nations as premiere destinations.

More than 150 countries took part in the WTM which was the second largest travel business gathering after the International Travel Bureau in Berlin.

The 30 sq metre Malaysian pavilion featuring an old Malay house was an attraction among the holiday package buyers with many visitors conceding that Malaysia is now more mature in tourism development.

They were also confident that Malaysia could become a premier destination in the Far East.

This optimism could become a reality sooner if the public and private sectors and individuals concerned play their respective roles -- Bernama

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