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High time unscrupulous businessmen were weeded out in Langkawi

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MISCONCEPTIONS about duty-free status compounded by a few black sheep among the business community who tend to cash in during peak tourist periods have led to a general belief that prices of certain goods, especially services and cooked food, are expensive in Langkawi.

And the occasional news reports of overcharging by certain non-hotel food outlets, for instance roti canai being sold at RM5, have aggravated the image that eating out even in stalls is costlier on the island resort than in other parts of the country.

Even Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is a regular working visitor to the island has taken to task these unscrupulous businessmen.

His concern and that of the Government is understandable. To make Langkawi a popular tourist destination, among both Malaysians and foreigners, the island was accorded duty-free status in 1987, which means the Government is sacrificing on revenue it would have otherwise earned.

This sacrifice has paid dividends as the island is now regarded as one of the most popular tourist destinations, besides being home to international exhibitions and conferences. But the Government does not want this loss in revenue to be at the expense of the profiteers.

This concern has led the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry to keep a close watch on the situation.

The ministry's enforcement division submits a monthly report on the price situation vis a vis other major towns to the Prime Minister's Office.

A committee on stabilisation of prices of goods and services, spearheaded by the ministry meets regularly to review the situation. It comprises officials from the State Government, government agencies, business and tourism associations including petty traders, taxi associations and the media.

Thus far, the monthly findings reveal that prices of perishable goods like fish and vegetables have been stable and compare favourably with Kuala Lumpur, Penang and Alor Star.

Last month, for instance, the prices of most varieties of fish were lower than in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Baru but higher than in Alor Star and Penang.

The prices of most vegetables were much lower than in Kuala Lumpur, Johor Baru and Penang by between RM1 and 50 sen but higher by between 10 sen and 70 sen than in Alor Star. Most of the supply of greens comes from the mainland and Thailand.

For non-perishable goods, the price differences are not that marked but reflect the high transportation costs incurred in bringing them by sea.

Many people tend to forget that prices of most of these essentials have nothing to do with the duty-free status.

According to the July report, items which are dutiable on the mainland are definitely cheaper on the island. These include electrical goods, crockery, imported textile, vehicles, cigarettes and liquor.

With this scenario, there is no reason why eateries, whether by the roadside or in shopping complexes, should charge higher prices than in other towns.

Generally, most businessmen on the island, whether dealing in goods or services, tend to charge reasonable prices. But it cannot be denied there

are greedy ones who exploit the situation particularly during peak holiday periods.

Where the enforcement division can come in, as far as non-controlled items are concerned, is only to ensure that the price tag ruling is adhered to.

The visitor has to play his role in weeding out the profiteers by staying away from places where the prices displayed seem exorbitant.

If the visitor patronises a luxury hotel, then he willingly pays the price though some outlets in these resorts tend to charge the same prices as in Kuala Lumpur for even duty-free beer and liquor.

The committee meetings are not just confined to prices of goods. As services play an important role in tourism, other issues tackled include hotel room rates, taxi fares and car rentals.

Just before popular events like the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibitions, the meetings also deliberate on the availability of hotel accommodation at published peak period rates, car rentals at reasonable prices and cab fares.

Though not presenting the true situation, the grumbles by visitors who had been fleeced followed by warnings by Dr Mahathir, have helped in better enforcement by certain government agencies, thereby contributing to the stabilising effect.

Other agencies should also play their part. As officials from the petty traders and hawkers association pointed out at the latest meeting held earlier this week, many foreigners from Thailand operate food stalls and outlets in markets.

The officials conceded that some of the foreigners who even operate stalls in designated areas under the supervision of the District Council tend to exploit the situation as they are not bothered about the future of Langkawi.

The culprits are, of course, locals who rent the stalls out to the foreigners. Better enforcement by the council can eliminate this problem.

Another area of discontent among locals is the regular increase in prices of cars which enjoy duty-free status.

Car dealers tend to increase the prices of vehicles frequently though the declared values to the Customs Department on arrival of each shipment, have not changed much.

This could be an indication that the dealers are making more than they should while it is the Government that is forgoing revenue.

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