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Sustaining the tourism industry

VISITORS to the Asia Pacific region are expected to double to around 240 million by the year 2010. This means increased earnings for the region but it also means that countries will have to prepare for the visitors. In 1996 when tourist arrivals in the region amounted to almost 90 million, tourism receipts totalled over US\$82 billion (US\$1 = RM2.49). While the forecast seems promising for the industry, it is not automatic that Malaysia will receive its fair share of the market. The country and especially those involved in the tourism industry, have to work hard in marketing the country as an attractive tourist destination. It must satisfy the increasing expectations of tourists. In 1995, the country recorded approximately 7.3 million tourist arrivals who contributed RM10.2 billion in revenue, while a 10 per cent increase in both tourist influx and revenue generated were recorded last year.

Tourists themselves can be classified into several categories. There are leisure travellers who come to enjoy Malaysia's natural attractions, those who come to shop and the business travellers who are growing rapidly in number. Malaysia too, is fast gaining recognition as one of the region's leading international convention centres. Malaysia's natural attractions are numerous - ranging from cool hill stations and caves to seaside and island resorts. For the business traveller, Malaysia offers hotels and convention facilities comparable to those in many parts of the world. As a shopping destination, Kuala Lumpur is fast making a name for itself.

The challenge however, is to maintain these attractions Malaysia is surrounded by equally attractive tourist destinations that are in competition with it. Apart from infrastructure facilities to support tourism, including the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang, the Government has been active in promoting Malaysia as a favoured tourist destination. The successful Visit Malaysia Year campaigns in 1990 and 1994 have had positive spillover effects. In 1995, 7.46 million tourists visited Malaysia, representing a 3.8 per cent growth over the 7.19 million recorded in the previous year. The Government recently set a new target of some 12.5 million tourist arrivals by the turn of the century and forecast receipts of RM15.7 billion, making tourism one of the country's top foreign exchange earners. The earlier targeted figure of 8.5 million arrivals was achieved in 1994, six years ahead of schedule.

Next year should be an important year for Malaysia's tourism sector. The Commonwealth Games to be held in Kuala Lumpur has set in motion a range of activities all geared towards ensuring a comfortable stay for both foreign and domestic tourists and athletes. In keeping with the theme of the games, Malaysia's tourism promotion during the year will focus on sports and recreation.

Despite the fact that there is a lot going for the Malaysian tourism sector there are shortfalls at times and the fact that tourism is a service-oriented industry is overlooked or even taken for granted. It is important not to forget or neglect service and this should be given with a smile. In launching the Visit Terengganu Year 1997, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad reminded Malaysians not to neglect this important aspect of tourism. A bad experience in a foreign country which is spread by word of mouth can instantly undo months of promotional effort. The billions of ringgit spent on promoting the country to foreign visitors can be nullified by the bad experience related by individuals to friends,

relatives and colleagues. Malaysians are friendly by nature. The rich blend of many eastern cultures and the respect for visitors and the elderly, coupled with the winning smile will go a long way in attracting tourists to Malaysia. The warm hospitality along with the natural beauty of the country, its hills, beaches, islands, marine life, fauna and flora, the various cultures and blend of colours is a winning formula to ensure repeat visitors. This will also help attract some of the 240 million visitors that will make their way to the Asia Pacific by the year 2010.

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