

17/07/1997

Tourism is important to Malaysia

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THE statistics speak for itself. Malaysia received a total of 7.1 million tourists and recorded RM10.4 billion in tourism receipts last year.

In contrast, the country registered a total of 3.4 million tourists and RM1.8 billion in tourism receipts in 1987.

"We were not alone," Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik said in an interview with Business Times.

"We had a lot of help. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his official visits abroad, is helping us. And I have very hardworking staff in the ministry and Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board (Tourism Malaysia)," he said.

But this was not the case some years ago. Many foreigners then had said that Malaysia was located in China while others said it was in South Africa.

Tourism, which at one time was a luxury affordable by only a select few, has now become an accepted, even expected, part of the lifestyle of a large and growing number of people.

The industry has continued to experience high growth and has become a very important foreign exchange earner in many countries. Increasing demand for services which tourists expect when visiting a place, has also spawned development of those services making them an important component of a country's economy.

This applies to Malaysia as well. Development of the tourism sector has shown that it can be a boost to the country's economic development.

As such, the industry is and will continue to be one of the most important foreign exchange earners for the country.

Under the ministry, the country launched two promotional programmes, the Visit Malaysia Year 1990 and the Visit Malaysia Year 1994.

"When we launched Visit Malaysia Year 1990, we were given RM100 million. Promotions can be very expensive but we have to do it. Television advertising rates, for example, have increased in countries such as Japan, which is an important market."

Promotions then stressed promoting Malaysia as a whole because at that time, many people outside South-East Asia did not know where Malaysia was.

"Many people know Dr Mahathir and they know Malaysia. They still did not come to Malaysia, but at least they knew where it is," he said.

The first campaign was a success. The country saw a total of 7.4 million tourists in the country while tourism receipts were recorded at RM4.5 billion for 1990.

"Still, we were very encouraged with the response. Unfortunately because of the Gulf War at the end of 1990, it affected our industry. Our tourist arrivals dipped to 5.8 million in 1991.

"So we had to do another Visit Malaysia Year for 1994. And to do that, we started the planning in 1991 and then launched it in July 1992. Because of these promotions, the number increased again," he said.

In 1994, arrivals touched 7.2 million while receipts were registered at RM8.3 billion.

And last year, the country saw 7.13 million tourists. Receipts exceeded the RM10 billion mark. "We may not have got the same number of tourists in 1990 but our income was RM10.35 billion last year.

"As you know, the number of tourists into a country is not as important as the receipts in earnings we get. We cannot increase the number of

tourists but we are looking at extending the number of days they are here in the country.

"Under the Seventh Malaysia Plan (1996-2000) we have revised our estimates. We expect to get RM15.7 billion by the year 2000 in tourism receipts, but the number of tourists will remain at 12.5 million," he said.

Next year is another theme year for Malaysia. 1998 has been named the Sports and Recreation Year, in conjunction with the 16th Commonwealth Games which will be held in the country in September next year.

The Games will become the anchor event for the year, with a host of other sports and recreational activities organised by the various states. On top of that, the ministry and Tourism Malaysia will continue to host other activities such as Malaysia Fest, Flora Fest and Shopping Carnival.

For next year, 174 events have been listed in the ministry's Calendar of Events which will soon be distributed to its overseas offices.

"We have been giving our support to many national and international events ... we are not taking the lead (in promoting the event) because it is not our project but we help out where we can.

"Please don't forget that we are not only promoting the particular event because it is not our duty to promote only that event.

"To us, the important thing is that the event can further promote Malaysia. In this case (Sports and Recreational Year), the Games will promote Kuala Lumpur."

The ministry, too, launched promotions for specific destinations in the country in 1994. These local destinations are Langkawi, Penang, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur, Pangkor, Sarawak, Mount Kinabalu and Taman Negara.

The Cabinet Committee on Tourism, chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, had identified 30 local destinations, of which six were endorsed as the country's key attractions. This was later revised, adding two more local tourist attractions to the list.

"Now, we find people talking about their specific places of travel ... London, for example, and not England. People talk like that now because it is so common.

"So, it is not enough for us to just promote Malaysia. We promote specific destinations."

He said Singaporeans still constitute the bulk of the country's total tourist share.

"There are some 2.8 million people in Singapore and we are registering some four million arrivals from Singapore. They do not have to stay five to six days in Malaysia because they come back regularly.

"What we do not encourage is day-trippers from Singapore. We have Japanese tourists staying in Singapore and going to Johor Baru for a day. They come early in the morning and go back in the evening.

"It is cheaper for them to stay in Johor Baru instead of Singapore."

Sabbaruddin also repeatedly stressed the importance of planning promotions and publicity campaigns ahead before an event.

Tour agents, he said, need to study the target market and draw up the packages in time for any particular event. "Tour operators need time ... they have to draw up packages way ahead of the event. They must know at least one year in advance because it takes two to three months to prepare the packages.

"Once, this is done, they will then sell the packages."

Sabbaruddin described what the ministry is doing today is just "scratching the surface.

"There are other things we can do. Personally, I think we have done pretty well but I must admit that there are still a lot of things to do."

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