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Divertissement for tourists

MALAYSIA is a blessed country. Among its blessings are the verdant hills. Islands encircled by pristine waters of various shades, from azure to turquoise. The country is also blessed with diverse peoples, diverse cultures and diverse festivities. All these are attractions to other peoples from other climes who desire divertissement. In a word, tourists. And over the years tourism has channelled many a ringgit to the country's economy. For instance in 1996, tourism revenue was RM11.2 billion. This amount is not small. Neither should it be sneezed at. It keeps hotels, restaurants and retail shops alive. It creates jobs, thousands of jobs. It contributes to the development of more hotels, restaurants and retail outlets. Clearly then tourism is no small contributor to the country's economy. But in the past year, revenue contribution from this sector registered a decrease. It dropped from the 1996 figure of RM11.2 billion to RM10.5 billion. Among the contributing factors for the decrease in the tourism ringgit were the spread of the Cocksackie virus, the haze that cast a pall of gloom over many parts of the country and in the second half of the year, the economic slowdown. More significantly, as the latest official statistics reveal, tourist arrivals have declined this year. Partly due to malign reports of the foreign media on the political developments in the country.

Surely the decline in tourist arrivals which by extension means a decline in the tourist ringgit must be arrested. It is a service sector that warrants more attention, now more than ever, from the industry and the Government. Perhaps it is for this reason the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad issued the directive on Tuesday to the Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry, the private sector, hoteliers and tour operators to intensify tourism promotion. As explained by the Minister, Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik, Dr Mahathir also wanted the tourism industry to look for new markets and redefine existing markets.

We agree that the industry has to look for new markets. We agree too that the industry has to look at novel advertising campaigns. The industry has to launch more promotions such as organising familiarisation tours for foreign travel operators. All these require money, especially government funds which over the past decade have shrivelled. From RM45.4 million in 1988 to the RM11 million allocation for the current year. The Government has a role, true. But it cannot always take the lead. That must come from the industry which includes hoteliers, restaurant operators and tour promoters.

All must realise that the industry has redefined itself over the years. Visitors to our shores do not just want sun, sea, sand, sights, exotic food and cheap shopping. Our neighbours offer all these and more at a cheaper price. If we desire to be competitive we must offer these and more. Tourists, both from the West and the East want divertissement. Many want entertainment, cabaret style. Which is why dozens of 747s land on the airports of Phuket and Bali everyday. Besides the sea, the sand and the sun, we can offer them a cultural feast. We have a diversity of cultures, of dances and songs. But above all we can offer them something that we have been encouraging and developing all this while - eco-tourism. More and more discerning tourists want to trek into the tropical forests and explore the natural caves. These and our Malaysian ways, if properly promoted, might just do the trick to attract more tourists to our shores.

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