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Shot in the arm for tourism will be a wise move

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THE directive to give the tourism industry a shot in the arm is timely and appropriate, given the fact that it is by no means a small player in the Malaysian economy. In fact, tourism is the country's second largest foreign exchange earner after the manufacturing sector, and is expected to play a major part in efforts to revive the economy.

Tourists pumped RM10.5 billion into the Malaysian economy in 1997, after contributing RM11.3 billion the previous year.

On Tuesday, Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad indicated the possibility of increasing allocations for tourism promotions.

The Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry was given RM11 million for tourism promotion this year, compared to RM46.4 million in 1988, RM33.8 million in 1989 and RM28.3 million in 1990.

But a higher allocation alone does not guarantee success. There should be less talk and more action to promote tourism, especially from the private sector.

Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agencies (Matta) president Ahmad Kamil Abdullah said Matta members have been aggressively promoting the country overseas, saying new markets such as Russia, African countries and China have been identified.

"Another effort is to promote Malaysia as a shopping paradise, a place offering value for money," Ahmad Kamil said.

Shopping is a major revenue for Malaysia. In 1997, of the RM10.5 billion raked in from tourism, RM2.7 billion came from shopping. In 1996, shopping generated RM2.6 billion of RM11.3 billion income from tourism.

However, Ahmad Kamil spoke of shortcomings in efforts to promote Malaysia citing as an example insufficient follow-up after meeting potential clients.

This particular shortcoming must be addressed since overseas missions to promote Malaysia do not come cheap. A two-week promotion mission may cost anything from RM20,000 to RM30,000.

Chairman of the Malaysian Holiday Timeshare Developers' Federation (MHTDF), Mr Khor Poh Waa, suggested the promotion of timeshare holiday concepts to generate captive markets in the tourism sector.

Timeshare, as defined by the federation, is a unique type of holiday ownership in which the purchaser receives the exclusive right to the use of a holiday apartment for a certain duration every year.

Every owner will effectively have to travel at least once a year to make use of the facilities - thus the captive market.

Khor said federation members have been already promoting the concept in Singapore, Indonesia and Hong Kong.

Another concept which Malaysia can seriously look into is sports tourism.

Since Malaysia already has state-of-the-art facilities and the organisational expertise, it should consider hosting more world-class sporting events. Such events generate great spectator interest, providing a great opportunity to promote the country, especially with the wide media coverage.

In addition to sports tourism, Dr Mahathir has suggested health tourism.

Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng said in August that to promote Malaysia as a medical tourist destination, immigration requirements for

patients from other countries have been relaxed.

Malaysia is in the forefront within the region in using state-of-the-art technology in healthcare, and treatment in Malaysia is cost effective.

Chua said that since patients require a fair bit of time to be treated and recuperate, relatives and friends accompanying them are normally given a three-month social pass.

They are now given priority in the renewal of visas or social visit passes if their stay extends beyond three months.

Another means of promoting medical tourism is the introduction of retirement villages for elderly foreign patients.

State governments, meanwhile, should step up efforts to promote tourism between Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah and Sarawak. Sarawak, for instance, received only 537,357 foreign visitors from January to May this year. In 1997, it received 1,149,984 visitors and in 1990 there were only 434,393.

At the Indian Ocean Tourism Organisation meeting in New Delhi some time back, Maldives Tourism Minister Ibrahim Hussain Zaki said tourism can get back on its feet with the help of deregulation.

Coming from Maldives, a tourism haven, one cannot help but wonder if there could be some truth in that.

Ibrahim suggested that governments should play a smaller role in tourism, and technology a much larger role. He also said aviation reforms involving more privatization and less-regulated skies could increase competition and help tourism.

Deregulation of telecommunications is another critical step towards achieving efficient gains and growth, he added.

Ibrahim's comments came at a time when the World Tourism Organisation said that world tourism suffered in 1997 mainly at the hands of economic turmoil in the Asia Pacific.

In 1996, worldwide tourist arrivals, at 595 million, grew by 5.6 per cent and tourism receipts grew 8.2 per cent to US\$434 billion. Preliminary 1997 data showed arrivals rose only 2.8 per cent to 612 million and receipts 2.2 per cent to US\$443 billion.

Ibrahim was also reported to have said that the Internet is a key opportunity to reverse the trend, noting that the number of Internet users increased by 20 million to 50.5 million in 1997.

Travellers were increasingly using the Internet to research and arrange their trips, especially frequent travellers.

Malaysia can reap a bountiful harvest from tourism if it puts its heart and soul into its efforts. Only then can our objective for 12.5 million tourist arrivals by the year 2000 (generating RM15.7 billion in revenue) be met.

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