

29/09/1999

Americans feel not enough being done to sell Malaysia in the US

Zainul Arifin in New York

SEVERAL American tourism-related industry officials think that not enough is being done to promote Malaysia as a leisure destination in the United States, and as such it has not been able to tap into the lucrative market there.

This was the message they conveyed to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in a meeting here on Monday.

They said while Americans were better off financially and were getting more sophisticated in their vacation plans, the numbers visiting Malaysia were still not high simply because they were not well informed about the country.

More funds should be spent on public relations and advertising, US Tour Operators Association president Robert Whitley told reporters after the meeting.

Several unfavourable perceptions of the country from the tourism point of view, such as that it was too far or too dangerous, could be overcome by educating the consumers and drawing them in with attractive packages.

Towards this end, Whitley said, Dr Mahathir had indicated in the meeting that Malaysia would be willing to support, even financially, programmes formulated by the American tourism industry to promote Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir, who was here for the United Nations General Assembly, had requested the meeting to find ways to attract more American tourists to the country.

Last year, about 80,000 Americans visited Malaysia, equal to the number visiting Singapore, but much less than the 350,000 visiting Australia.

About 10 million Americans travelled abroad last year under USTA member programmes, with about nine million visiting Europe.

Whitley said the staging of major international events, such as the golf World Cup, would also be welcomed as they were useful in creating awareness of the country.

He said while Malaysia suffered negative publicity, be it as a result of developments in the country or ties with its neighbours, there were always ways to overcome that.

Low air fares and hotel rates were some of them, he added.

Brice Bay, the chief executive of 10Best.com, an Internet-based publication specialising in tourism-related activities, said Malaysia should provide assistance to the media in promoting the country.

The country's main strengths - its people and its natural resources - should be promoted widely. Adventure tourism was an area which Malaysia could concentrate on, he added.

Bay said he emerged from the meeting with a greater understanding of Malaysia's desire to promote tourism, and was impressed by the tourism infrastructure available.

He also found it refreshing that a head of government was taking so much interest in promoting the tourism industry, which he considered to be a rarity among national leaders.

Northwest Airlines senior vice-president Douglas Birdsall said the company would work closely with Malaysia Airlines, with which it signed a co-operation agreement recently, to promote the country as a tourist destination.

The airline began flying to Kuala Lumpur in February and had signed a code-sharing agreement with the Malaysian carrier.

(END)