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Renewing a commitment to make Langkawi the tourist destination

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THE Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry's aggressive promotion of Langkawi as a holiday destination speaks a lot for the planning that has been put in to bring in the tourist ringgit.

The man at the helm - Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir - wants to turn the duty-free port into a "window", drawing visitors to the country.

Malaysians are hoping to see serious measures and a more focused approach in realising this objective.

A lot has already been done to put Langkawi on the international tourism map since the island was accorded duty-free port status in 1997. Today, Langkawi is widely known as a destination for holidays and conventions.

The Government, through the Langkawi Development Authority and the private sector, has contributed a lot towards Langkawi's development.

Several world-class events, like the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition have promoted not only the island but also Malaysia as a whole.

But the development of Malaysia's tourism industry has suffered over the past two years due to the economic slump in East Asian and Asean countries.

The industry needs to be rejuvenated.

During his first official visit to Langkawi after being made the Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister, Abdul Kadir talked about promotions along the line taken by neighbouring countries.

"It will be just like how people came to know about Indonesia through Bali and Thailand through Phuket," he had said.

We can expect positive measures in the pipeline - already there has been a proposal for those working at the Langkawi International Airport to learn Japanese.

All those in authority however, must sit down and really focus on the development and marketing approach.

While admitting that short- and long-term plans to be implemented can only succeed if service providers like hotels, transport operators and others play their part, those in the industry say there has to be clear direction on how the Government wants to develop Langkawi.

For one, the Government does not want Langkawi to become a concrete jungle.

But industry sources also want to know how the Government intends to project Langkawi.

"What do we want to promote the island as? A family-concept holiday destination, a shopping paradise, nature and eco-tourism attraction or a combination of these?"

"Or shall we stick to the 'Make It Langkawi' joint marketing strategy organised by Malaysia Airlines and the Langkawi Development Authority with the theme 'Sun, Sea, Sand and Shopping'," a tourism promoter asked.

Tourism Industry Agencies Association of Kedah president Abdul Wahab Osman said the people of Langkawi must contribute by playing the role of "the perfect host" if the island wanted to see repeat tourists.

He said there should be pro-active efforts to facilitate co-operation between the Government and the hospitality industry to fully exploit the tourism potential on the island.

The tourism industry in Malaysia has seen a decrease in foreign arrivals over the past few years and therefore, more concerted efforts must be

taken to revive it.

In 1996, foreign visitors to the country totalled 7.1 million. The figure dropped to 6.2 million and 6.8 million in 1997 and 1998 respectively.

Visits by foreigners to Langkawi also showed a similar trend, decreasing to 418,911 last year compared to 477,903 in 1997.

Among short-term measures to be considered by the ministry to exploit the potential of the tourism industry is the reduction or removal of import duties on various items.

New markets will also be tapped like China and India, and conditions for visa applications will be relaxed or reduced to make the country more "tourist friendly".

It was indeed a cue to those in tourism promotion to double their efforts when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself turned salesman to promote Malaysia and Langkawi, when he launched the "Make It Langkawi" marketing programme at the Langkawi Travel Mart.

More needs to be done especially in terms of better choice of duty-free items besides cigarettes, liquor, chocolates and household items.

Common complaints among hoteliers and restaurant operators on the island about the district office's decision to "freeze" the issuing of liquor licence should be addressed.

Tourists expect a wider range of entertainment on the island. Those unhappy with this may visit neighbouring Thailand.

All said and done, locals and tourism operators must give the tourists their money's worth and not just try to make a fast buck.

At the end of the day, it is the quality of services, competitive prices and good lasting impressions that will keep tourists coming back to Langkawi.

Lima '99 is just round the corner. Let's not repeat the mistakes of the past.

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