

02/01/1999

## The holiday connection

FORGET Friday. From now, the first Thursday or Saturday of each month is where the action will be, as civil servants and some private-sector employees take advantage of an additional rest-day - one designed to keep the economy going through increased consumer spending.

Since the idea was tabled during the 1999 Budget speech last October, commercial banks, finance companies and Pos Malaysia Bhd have announced their participation in the scheme. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has explained, the objective is to foster familial ties while promoting domestic tourism.

Initially, Malaysians will have to readjust their time-worn habit of rushing to settle bills and personal financial matters on this particular half-day at government departments, banks and post offices. Schools will have to reschedule extra-mural activities, and weekly household chores may be reassigned.

But these are miniscule changes when compared to adjustments that will be required of all in the tourism industry. For too long accustomed to depending on the largesse of big-spending foreign tourists, operators will have to learn all over again how to value cost-conscious domestic tourists and to meet relevant needs in service.

Yet, beyond touting existing promotional packages, little has been heard as to how the industry intends to manage the expected increase in local clientele or to address valid concerns that have been repeatedly raised for years now. It will be interesting to see how hoteliers re-work their practice of adding a surcharge to weekend rates, or applying a single supplement to those unfortunate enough not to travel with a companion.

Such questions must be faced and answered without further delay or feeble excuses, especially when people are more guarded about forking out their savings on luxuries like travel. Every flexible gesture by industry will be as significant as fair competition in attracting paying guests of all budget-classes. This is no time to be turning up the nose at combinations that do not fit industry-inspired models of consumer behaviour.

Where the public is being encouraged to spend, operators should be made to consistently sell quality and value for money. This will have to be translated into better-designed and imaginative packages all round. Unlike foreign travel, domestic tourism has the distinct advantage of being able to attract repeat visitors within the same year due to familiarity, security or hospitality standards.

Hotels, retail outlets, tour and travel agencies, transportation firms, cultural troupes, food vendors and souvenir sellers have the potential to gain from the government's plan to release employees en masse for a two-day weekend. However, this will not happen unless the industry is prepared to work a lot harder.

It may be that attention was focused on the school holidays and festive season between Christmas and the New Year. And indeed, a lull can be expected from now until Hari Raya Puasa, in deference to religious priorities during Ramadan.

Operators who view their sector as a half-full glass of opportunities will use this relatively short period to review plans and co-ordinate services. If they lose out on the momentum or shortchange clientele, Malaysians may choose not to leave the comfort of home.

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