

06/10/1999

The minister says...

Ainon Mohd

SIXTEEN-hour work days are not alien to those working under the Minister of Culture, Arts and Tourism Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir since he took over the Ministry in May. He averages two functions or meetings a day.

Not a man lacking in ideas, Abdul Kadir speaks passionately about the industry and his plans and mission concerning the tourism industry. His mission is clear - convince 22 million Malaysians to holiday at home and see their own country as a tourist haven.

He is excited for the industry. "There is money - a lot of it - to be made, especially in domestic tourism, which has a vast potential for growth. This will also help hasten the economic recovery," he says.

Recognising the sector's obvious potential and its importance to the economy, the Government has embarked on a promotion campaign to draw domestic visitors.

"Market research tells us a domestic tourist spends an average of RM85.37 per day while holidaying and that the per capita spending is RM247.50 for an average stay of 2.9 nights per trip," Kadir says.

A total of 5.2 million Malaysians checked into hotels at local tourist destinations and spent RM1.287 billion to enjoy themselves in the first half of this year.

Realising this, Kadir says the Government has outlined new measures to promote domestic tourism.

One measure is that income from domestic tour packages involving at least 1,200 local tourists annually will be exempted from tax in the years of assessment 1999 and 2000.

Additionally, one Saturday per month has been declared a public holiday for the public sector. This idea has been picked up by commercial banks, finance companies and Pos Malaysia Bhd since.

The number of domestic tourists, especially civil servants visiting local destinations, has increased by between five and 10 per cent following the first Saturday as a holiday move.

As a persuasive reminder to Malaysians that they do not have to look too far for interesting holiday, the Ministry through Tourism Malaysia has launched the Domestic Tourism Campaign up to 2001.

The two-year celebration to showcase the country's achievements in the past 100 years was launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Aug 30 at Stadium Nasional in Bukit Jalil.

Also in the pipeline is the launch of Colours of Malaysia on Oct 16, the eve of the Formula One race in Sepang. Events on the 1999, 2000 and 2001 calendars will be "co-opted" and promoted as part of the centennial celebration, including the National Day parade, the National Language and Arts Month, Malaysia Fest, shopping carnivals, the Formula One race, the Golf World Cup, the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition and Le Tour de Langkawi.

Kadir says new events will also be introduced over the next two years like Expo Malaysia, Malaysian Heritage and Cultural Festival, National Water Festival, Seasonal Shopping Carnival and Fruit Fest.

"We must try and attract locals. I believed this goes beyond delivering courtesy, warmth and affordable services. It mean being visible, being creative and being able to sustain a high quality of packages offered," he says.

In short, Kadir says the campaign is targeted at those who think a day

trip is a holiday, that balik kampung is already a holiday... He sees the necessity of changing the people's mind-set and that is achievable.

Unlike, for instance the Swiss, the culture of taking a planned vacation is not yet prevalent among Malaysians but Abdul Kadir is determined "to keep on persuading".

On top of that, Malaysians with the means place their priority on travelling abroad rather than touring their own country. He says Malaysians do not travel locally and when they do, they usually put up with friends or relatives or go balik kampung. "They must be made to realise there is much to see and do even if you go for a vacation in the country. We have so much to offer - mountains and hills, beaches, rainforests and caves, ecotourism, cultural heritage and so on."

In addition, he says, Malaysia has the full range of hotel facilities, from low-budget to international five-star chains.

Abdul Kadir points out that the Government can only do so much in making Malaysia a premier tourism destination, through initiatives like abolition of import duty on retail merchandise, providing infrastructive and holding promotion campaigns.

Unlike foreign travel, the domestic sector has the distinct advantage of being able to attract repeat visitors 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 decision to release employees en masse for the two-day weekend.

But the industry must be prepared to work a lot harder.

"Everyone, from tour guide to souvenir seller, must accept they are inter-dependent cogs that turn the wheels of tourism," Kadir says. "What we need to do is to systematically promote the destination.

"Those who benefit directly from operating travel and tour services should be more responsive in creating value-added products at reasonable prices."

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