

Kadir makes it a personal challenge

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Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir is a minister with a mission. He wants to see tourist arrivals go up. This, he says, is his biggest challenge as the Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister. And he does not believe in just giving orders to get this done, FAUZIAH ISMAIL writes.

TOURIST arrivals for this year have been targeted at 8.5 million, a wee bit ambitious perhaps, but not beyond reach, considering that the region is well on the way towards full recovery from the debilitating financial crisis of 1997.

Last year, Malaysia registered 7.93 million arrivals, surpassing the National Economic Action Council's target of 6.3 million by about 25 per cent.

Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, for one, is fully confident that the 2000 target can be achieved. In fact, he has taken it on as a personal challenge in his capacity as the Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister.

Abdul Kadir is only the second minister to hold the Culture, Arts and Tourism portfolio since the ministry was set up in 1987, having replaced Tan Sri Sabbaruddin Chik who went into retirement last year.

The tourism sector is a major foreign exchange earner for Malaysia, ranking fifth in 1984, third in 1995 and second in 1996; but dropped back to third in 1997 and 1998 because of the regionwide economic downturn. And among the first and most severely affected was inter- and intra-regional travel, both business and leisure.

Since 1994, the number of tourists visiting the country have averaged more than seven million a year. After a setback in 1997 and 1998, travellers streamed back into the country to post record arrivals of 7.93 million in 1999, topping 1995's 7.46 million.

In terms of receipts, again with the exception of 1997 and 1998, there has also been a steady increase, the peak being RM10.35 billion in 1996.

But for 1999, receipts have been estimated at RM12.3 billion, up a whopping 44.7 per cent over 1998.

Abdul Kadir, a very hands-on minister, has since early this year turned into the country's No. 1 Tourism Salesman" by personally leading tourism missions abroad. In early April, he visited seven West Asian cities in 15 days. Prior to that, he spent 10 days in

Europe and another 11 days in India.

The minister was also in Hong Kong for the 49th Pacific Asia Travel Association (Pata) conference later in the month. While there, Abdul Kadir explained the Government's strategy to restore Malaysia as the preferred holiday and convention destination in the region.

The plan includes repositioning Malaysia as the top-of-the-mind destination in all international and regional markets through a dynamic image-building campaign based on the theme "Malaysia Truly Asia".

He said Malaysia also embarked on a "friendly and highly" tactical campaign through the hosting of selected major world class sporting events. Last year, the country played host to the Petronas Malaysia Grand Prix and the World Cup Golf.

In addition, the Government has prepared a year-round programme of events to meet all tastes and preferences of visitors to the country.

"Regardless of whether you are an adventure seeker, an avid shopper, leisure traveller, sports enthusiast or convention organiser, Malaysia offers you an unrivalled experience of sights, sounds, smells and tastes.

"From the world's tallest building to the oldest rainforests, from designer golf courses to duty-free shopping and exotic cuisine, you are guaranteed a memorable and eventful holiday in Malaysia," he had told his audience in Hong Kong.

His missions abroad have produced some very encouraging results too. In India, for example, Abdul Kadir encouraged several Indian film producers to visit Malaysia to view for themselves possible locations for their films.

These producers, during their meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad later, indicated a keen interest to shoot parts of their films here.

This can be a very effective way of promoting Malaysia, albeit indirectly, to millions of people. Considering how expensive it is to advertise and publicise the country on an international scale, it is also a cost-effective one.

In addition, Abdul Kadir intends to make fuller use of Tourism Malaysia offices abroad to promote destinations in Malaysia. The Government had recently approved the setting up of 12 more offices overseas, bringing the total number to 30.

The newly approved offices are to be located in New Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai (India); Dubai, Jeddah and Cairo (West Asia); Beijing 'and Shanghai' (China); Phuket (Thailand) and Jakarta and Medan (Indonesia). The 12th office will either be in Ho Chi Minh City or Manila.