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## Cherishing diversity

THE proposal that more group tours for pupils be organised to enable them to appreciate Malaysia's heritage underscores a vital point in embracing cultural diversity. Cultural flexibility is not acquired without effort because it demands not just an awareness of how others approach life, but also a great respect for the depth of that variety.

If we are to treasure the cultural richness of our multi-ethnic society, we must first understand the perspectives that have shaped the cultural and belief systems of the various ethnic groups living in Malaysia. And that understanding should be developed from an early age.

Certainly, exposing young Malaysians to their own and our common heritage from small will bring about an ability to value another's worldview. By learning about cultural flexibility, young Malaysians can develop better relationships when they grow up because they will not stereotype others prior to knowing them. They do not have to deny who they are or to reject their own cultures. All they need to do is simply to understand.

One of the good things about cultural flexibility is that it can help us to look critically at some of our values that we might otherwise hold as absolute.

And at the heart of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's desire for young people to cherish their heritage and Malaysia's cultural diversity is for Malaysians to continue enjoying the peace and stability in the country.

The focus on heritage appreciation places an obligation on us to preserve our threatened landmarks for both our cultural sustenance and tourism. The new millennium is a good time to act to preserve houses, buildings, villages and towns with historic value. It is up to us to ensure their protection and preservation for future generations.

The tourism industry and the custodians of our time-honoured traditions should work together to raise the importance of history and culture for Malaysians and visitors to the country. At the same time, economic opportunities can also be created in areas based on history and tourism.

Heritage tourism is part of a larger trend known as cultural tourism, one of the hottest fads in the travel industry. Cultural tourists visit a country to savour its culture, history and environment. They clamour for activities that include visiting historic buildings and the wonders of nature, attending cultural festivals, listening to local music, sampling ethnic cuisine as well as watching local arts and crafts demonstrations. Studies abroad show that heritage tourism is an important contributor to the travel industry and that historic places are major destinations for a growing number of travellers, both domestic and foreign.

The cultural tourist is usually someone with a high level of education and in a well-paying profession. He tends to take longer trips when he vacations. He travels for personal enjoyment and to educate himself and his family.

Since the market for cultural tourism is predicted to expand in the coming years, Malaysia should take steps to attract the cultural tourists.

Cultural tourism encourages us to showcase those qualities and experiences that make us distinctly Malaysian. Properly planned and managed, cultural tourism will not only benefit young and old Malaysians, but also the culture and tourism industries and the wider Malaysian

economy.

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