

31/05/2000

Extending the tourism mileage

WHILE its decision to open the world's tallest towers to the public does not herald a diversification by the Petroliam Nasional Bhd (Petronas) into tourism, the national oil company may want to consider the many benefits it can derive from related activities. It underscores the kind of contribution it could be making to Malaysian tourism if it decides to invest some of its huge resources into seriously promoting the industry. Its Formula One hobby, for example, is a major gain for the sector and the economy. And the Petronas Twin Towers were already a hit with tourists, local and foreign, before they were opened to the public.

In terms of the returns to Petronas, potential receipts from its tourism-related activities could be not more than a drop in the ocean. Benefits to the country, however, have proved to be quite substantial. Malaysia's involvement in the F-1, in which Petronas is a major participant, which culminated in the hosting of the race in Sepang last year, injected about half a billion ringgit into the economy, which was then still grappling with the effects of the Asian financial crisis. Foreign visitors alone spent some RM442.2 million: RM108.1 million on shopping, RM85.4 million on accommodation, and RM79.8 million on food and drinks. For a first-timer, this is should be very encouraging.

In addition, the worldwide publicity received by Malaysia as hosts for a F-1 race is immeasurable. Because grand prix has a huge following in the developed countries, the tourism authority in Malaysia has access to a captive market in its efforts to promote the country as a destination. Close cooperation between the relevant government agencies and Petronas will ensure that such efforts become even more effective. Similarly, the opening up of the Twin Towers to tourists and members of the public will help create the kind of interest and excitement that tourism is all about. The Empire State Building and the Sears Tower are great tourist attractions; there is no reason why the tallest towers in the world should not be a greater one, considering that Kuala Lumpur is one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

The larger picture here is how big the contribution of major corporations to tourism can be. The Menara Kuala Lumpur would have no added value - just another Telekom Malaysia's telecommunications tower - if the Government had decided to keep it away from the public. But today it is one of the most popular tourist destinations and should one day be to Kuala Lumpur what Eiffel Tower is to Paris. A handful of companies, including YTL Corp, Sungei Way Corp, Country Heights, Malaysia Airlines and Genting, are also doing their bit to boost tourism infrastructure in the country. Even PLUS, the concessionaire for the North-South Expressway, has chipped in to facilitate various programmes.

Largely, however, efforts by one company are still confined only to it. There would be additional mileage if the relevant authorities could bring together these and other corporations to streamline their contributions or get them to pool resources for specific endeavours. It can be as fundamental as helping the authorities to reach out to target markets overseas where the corporations have operations. For the various trade and investment missions that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his senior ministers embark on, the major corporations can combine resources to publish quality brochures, sponsor travel writers to visit the country more regularly, or help Malaysian conference/exhibition

organisers to bid for mega-events to be held in Malaysia. Local five-star hotels and resorts, which directly benefit from a higher number of tourist arrivals, have not been doing enough to support efforts aimed at wooing those visitors. It is high time those who have been enjoying the free ride from others' hard work do their share of the chores.

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