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Industry playing vital function for economy

THE tourism industry seems to be more focused now and this augurs well for the industry which is becoming an important component of the national economy.

Fresh and interesting ideas are being injected to stimulate as well and propel the industry to the forefront in the new millennium.

Advancement in the communication technology such as the Internet, improved infrastructures and revolutionary marketing techniques have also made it necessary for us to invent new ways - and compete with others - to sell and package our tourism products, natural and otherwise.

For example, the introduction of "Colours of Malaysia" to replace the 12-year-old Malaysia Fest, standardisation of all tourism activities throughout the country and programmes to stimulate domestic tourism are some of the new strategies worth noting.

To ensure that the new strategies are properly implemented and carried out, Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir has been relentlessly driving home the message to State Governments and the key players in the industry on the need for co-ordinated support from them.

In fact as soon as he took over the ministry last year he declared that the Government was taking the "businessman approach" and was cutting down all the bureaucratic procedures to ensure for quick action.

In this context it is worth noting the two-year celebration, called "Malaysia's Centennial Towards A New Millennium", which was put into motion by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the National Stadium in Bukit Jalil, Kuala Lumpur, on Aug 30 last year.

The celebration, showcasing the country's achievements in the past 100 years, also aims to boost the tourism industry. It comprises events which are tailored to attract foreigners as well as encourage citizens to holiday in the country.

The celebration which began in September last year will last until Aug 31, 2001 and during the period calendar events such as 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 will be promoted as part of the centennial celebration.

For this year, more events were introduced and they include Expo Malaysia, Malaysian Heritage and Cultural Festival, National Water Festival, Seasonal Shopping Carnival and Fruit Fest.

According to the minister, the month-long on-going "Malaysia on Sale" which was launched on Aug 5 is the "test bed" to turn Malaysia into one of the top shopping destinations in Asia by the year 2003. Currently Dubai, Tokyo and Singapore are holding the positions, raking in millions of tourist dollar annually.

Apart from the continuous efforts to attract foreign tourists, the Government is aggressively promoting domestic tourism. It launched the Domestic Tourism Campaign in September last year, having recognised the sector's potential and importance to the economy.

According to market research the domestic tourist spends an average of RM85.37 per day while holidaying and the per capita spending is RM247.50 for an average stay of 2.9 nights per trip.

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.

Among the Government's new measures to promote domestic tourism include the move to provide domestic tour packages involving at least 1,200 local tourists annually to be exempted from tax in the year of assessment 2000. The Government has also declared the first and third Saturdays of the month a public holiday for the public sector.

"This move also emulated by commercial banks, finance companies, Pos Malaysia Bhd and many other private companies has pushed the number of domestic tourists, especially civil servants visiting local destinations, by more than 10 to 15 per cent.

Abdul Kadir is confident that the ministry would be able to change Malaysians' mind-set from placing their priority on travelling abroad rather than touring their own country. He is determined to make Malaysians adopt the culture of taking a planned vacation and realise that there is so much to see and do if people go for a vacation in the country.

The mindset of key players in the tourism-related industry, such as travel agents, hoteliers and retailers must also change from one being over-dependent on the Government to do everything for them to one who can complement efforts to make the tourism industry grow.

The Government has provided the ingredients for the recipe and it is for the beneficiaries of the industry to whip up the cake.

Malaysia already has the products, infrastructure, services and all to make it a tourist haven.

The setting up of the Economic Affairs Committee by the ministry to promote Malaysia abroad, such as in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia is another novel move.

The committee would have representatives from the Government and private sector and would be headed by the Malaysian ambassadors to these countries.

This way we need not bring cultural delegations from here. We will not only save money but also can hold performances throughout that country.

Speaking of the committee, Abdul Kadir said it was drawing up a list of key people in the tourism industry who would be invited to Malaysia as guests for a first-hand look at its holiday destinations.

"We are changing our strategy a bit. Rather than going to their countries in big groups, we now want to bring them to our country instead.

"From here we will send them to various places throughout the country to show them that Malaysia has attractive destinations."

There is no doubt that new ideas will continue to be injected to make the industry grow stronger and financially rewarding for those in the business.

But tourism is not one business but involves many industries and a whole range of complex processes which must work in unison.

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