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Kadir makes it a personal challenge

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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' 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.

At present, Tourism Malaysia has five offices in Europe (France, Germany, Italy, Sweden and Britain), two in the US (Los Angeles and New York), two in Australia (Perth and Sydney), two in Japan (Osaka and Tokyo) and one each in Canada, Hong Kong, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand.

The opening of the new offices does not mean that Tourism Malaysia will be neglecting the traditional markets.

"Before we proposed to the Cabinet. We did a little study where we found that one of the biggest cost components of travel is transport. If we look at Europe, for example, we find that the people there tend to travel within the continent.

"It is therefore strategic for us that we too look to our neighbours such as Indonesia and Thailand. China, India and West Asia are also relatively near to us," he said.

Furthermore, Malaysia has a lot of things to offer to make them "feel at home." For example, the Arabs will not face any problem finding "halal" food or mosques. Similarly, the Chinese and Indian travellers will not have problems with food and cultural preferences.

And, while it augurs well for the industry to have a "representation" in major markets, success in actually getting the travellers to come here will not depend on the policies or where the office is located, but on the attitude of the ground officers.

Abdul Kadir believes that Tourism Malaysia's overseas directors should "go out and service the travel operators.

"They should no longer depend on walk-ins. Their main work is to go out and solicit business... disseminate information about Malaysia, educate them on what the country has to offer.

"The travel operators are the ones making this (arrivals) happen," he said.

For this reason, the Ministry has introduced a well-coordinated series of familiarisation tours for foreign agents, media and corporate personnel. These tours will provide them with a chance to explore and experience first hand the wide range of tourism products and services in Malaysia.

It also serves as a platform for the foreign travel agents to sample and identify suitable tourism products which they can package for their clients. And feedback from them on how Malaysia can be made more attractive will be welcomed.

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