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Tourism's modest beginnings

Shukor Rahman

TOURISM in Malaysia is relatively new as compared to many other countries, and a study of its early beginnings will clearly show the giant strides the country has taken in this field as well as in national development.

The country only had a department of tourism which was created in January 1959 under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, and tourism promotion was on a far modest scale.

The department identified the main centres of tourism as Penang, Taiping, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, the East Coast, Taman Negara, Langkawi, Pangkor Island, Fraser's Hill and Cameron Highlands.

In those days, the authorities as well as those connected to the fledgling industry were "still groping in the dark".

Nothing much had been done for Langkawi although it had been identified since the late 1950s.

It was only in the late 1980s that Langkawi became a proper tourist destination at the prompting of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

In the early 1960s, very few locals travelled extensively even in their own country. A Penang resident, for instance, would never bother to travel to Kota Baru unless he had relatives or business there.

Other factors responsible for this state of affairs included the lack of communication and transport among the various states, suitable hotel rooms, promotion of genuine attractions, and supporting facilities and other infrastructure.

For example, if one were to travel by road in Terengganu, one would have to depend on six or seven ferries (such as at Dungun and Losong) to cross the major rivers as there were no bridges then.

There was also a glaring lack of information on the East Coast states of Kelantan and Terengganu, which were often cut off from the rest of the peninsula during major floods of the monsoon season.

As for hotels, there were very few of international standing in those days. A good indication can be seen from the fact that even Kuala Lumpur had only the Majestic, Station, Federal and Merlin.

Penang, the "Pearl of the Orient" had the Eastern & Oriental (E & O), Mount Pleasure, Park and Picadilly (the last three no longer exist). Even the famed North Coast (which went on to become a "tourist playground") had only the Lone Pine and Golden Sands (a bungalow-type hotel not to be confused with today's resort of the same name).

Ipoh already had the Station Hotel while Cameron Highlands had the Smoke House Inn and Port Dickson had the Si Rusa Inn.

Other towns such as Alor Star, Malacca, Johor Baru, Kota Baru, Kuala Terengganu, Kuantan and Kangar were dependent on government rest houses and Chinese-type hotels.

Rest houses also existed in smaller towns such as Baling, Batu Gajah, Batu Pahat, Bentong, Bukit Mertajam, Gerik, Gua Musang, Kemaman, Klang, Kluang, Keroh, Kuala Krai, Kuala Kubu Baru, Kuala Lipis, Kuala Pilah, Kulim, Langkawi, Lumut, Mersing, Muar, Pangkor, Parit Buntar, Raub, Sungai Petani, Taiping, Tanjung Malim, Tapah, Teluk Intan and Tumpat.

Transport facilities were not as reliable then. For example, a bus journey from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore would take about nine hours, while a journey from Kuala Lumpur to Kuantan would take about seven hours.

As buses were not air-conditioned, one would certainly be guaranteed to

arrive dishevelled and unkempt.

Journeys often took longer as there were of course no highways like the North-South Highway, Karak Highway or East-West Highway then.

Tourist information was also far from satisfactory. There were fewer publications and brochures then and the country was not well-known internationally and many were confused over the new 'Malaysia' and its former name, Malaya.

Some of the ignorant ones even asked our location on the map, and also whether we lived on trees!

On hindsight, some of the events and features that were highlighted seemed questionable. For instance, how much interest would tin mining generate among tourists?

Would tourists also be interested in watching the inter-state women's football competition, or the police band beating the retreat?

Initially, not much effort was made to promote local food and delicacies among foreign tourists especially those from the West. Many were not adventurous enough to try local dishes as they feared that our hot and spicy food would lead to upset stomachs.

Today, however, things are different. Shangri La's communications director Suleiman Tunku Abdul Rahman said many of their 'returnees' would now enquire beforehand whether such local dishes as nasi lemak, nasi goreng, satay, roti canai, murtabak, mee goreng and Hokkien mee would still be available when they come again.

"Of course, the local dishes we prepare for our foreign guests are not so hot or spicy as they would be for the locals or other Asians," he said.

Today, an increasing number of Caucasian tourists are also beginning to like the durian as compared to their predecessors who, to a man, reviled the fruit for its obnoxious smell.

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