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Bringing in the tourist dollar

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WHETHER you are an adventure seeker, leisure traveller, sports enthusiast or avid shopper, Malaysia offers a host of unrivalled attractions and experience to captivate your senses, say the tourist brochures.

The Government is leaving no stone unturned in supporting the tourism industry, spending on infrastructure and marketing campaigns to put the country on the world tourist map, especially at a time when exports may be hurt by the slowdown in the world economy.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recent call to all parties, especially industry players, to do their best to market Malaysia as a preferred tourist destination serves as a wake-up call to the industry.

The industry rakes in the tourist dollar, for travel is a necessity and not an extravagance as it used to be. It hopped up from third placing previously to the second best foreign exchange earner after manufacturing.

Tourism contributed about RM20 billion to Malaysia's earnings last year from some 10.2 million tourist arrivals. The bulk of this was from foreign exchange and the rest from corporate and service tax.

However, selling the country's tourist draws is easier said than done. Promoters have to convince the target audience, especially first-time visitors, that Malaysia is all that is depicted in promotional material, and more.

Foreign tourists who do not know enough about Malaysia tend to lump the country together with the rest of Asia. Tourism Malaysia's dynamic image-building campaign based on the theme "Malaysia, Truly Asia" will hopefully put that perspective right.

The idea is to sell Malaysia as a cultural melting pot of all that is Asia, and that all that is Asia can be found here. The slogan promotes Malaysia's unique blend of cultures that lend the country its distinctive identity.

Both the Government and travel industry folk aspire to market the country as the preferred holiday and convention destination. But their aspirations do not seem to match.

"There is a need for co-ordinated efforts between the public and private sectors to establish a common platform to meet these aspirations," says Michael Heah, managing director of Reliance College.

The desire of tourists for a memorable holiday is priority business on the tourism calendar. Naturally, holiday-makers who have had an enjoyable, or miserable, time will pass the word to friends and family.

The making, or breaking, of a traveller's itinerary depends to a large extent on the efforts of the host country. For the private sector, it is no sweat planning a good holiday for customers as long as there are financial gains.

However, more often than not, it is hiccups in implementation that get in the way of good plans. Amenities which are part of public services often leave much to be desired. Clear signage at appropriate locations and good access roads to a tourist site add value to a travel product.

Reliance's Heah believes that if the locals living near a tourist spot are involved in developing the area for tourism, it will go a long way in enhancing the country's attractions.

Even in the midst of relative jungle in some countries, the local people manage to construct a tourist draw. At the same time, such efforts will

build up a camaraderie of sorts and instil further unity and leadership qualities among the community.

Heah's concern reflects his professionalism in ensuring the country taps the sector's optimum potential. An avid traveller himself, he has tried to do as many local tourism spots as possible too, to ensure he is in touch with the trade and to keep his ear to the ground as well.

Reliance, which is among the pioneers in the travel trade, trains tourist guides and other industry professionals. The college has 700 students currently. Some 250 graduates leave for the employment market yearly.

Clearly, the tourism trade can be a highly satisfying and profitable venture if it is implemented efficiently. Malaysia has no dearth of attractions. The Government is emphasising specialised holiday promotions including health tourism in which patients get to enjoy tourist spots while receiving the best medical care.

The Eighth Malaysia Plan has also earmarked eco-tourism, agro-tourism and rural tourism as having the potential to regenerate the rural economy. The Government has been supporting the industry yearly. Under the Eighth Plan, RM1 billion has been allocated to develop and promote the domestic tourist business.

The private sector's role and responsibilities have to continue to ensure better industry growth. As environmental pollution still poses a problem, the sector will have to adhere to regulations in containing this health risk.

Efforts to instil cleanliness and hospitality are vital in giving the country a good image. If locals cannot even pass this litmus test of civic-consciousness in public places, how can we expect tourists to come back?

Interaction and communication with people are hallmarks of the hospitality trade. The human touch makes or mars a holiday. Service with a smile must be the order of the day. Industry players should instil this as the first lesson in training for their employees.

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