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Pata annual conference ends on high note despite minor glitches

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SPECTACULAR. That was the word most used by delegates to describe the golden jubilee of the Pacific Asia Travel Association annual conference which ended on Wednesday.

Malaysia did a good job hosting the 50th Pata conference before handing over the baton to India for next year's conference.

"Malaysia was a great host. It was good to see how every government agency, from transportation to the police, could work together, they have been tremendous. We look forward to working with Malaysia again in the future," said Pata chief executive officer, Joseph A. McInerney.

The conference started with a mix of the traditional and modern, when delegates were hosted to dinner at the KLCC Esplanade - hawker food, fireworks, cultural shows and a perfect view of the Petronas Twin Towers.

The opening ceremony by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad the next day was a cultural extravaganza, showcasing Malaysia's many cultures.

"The cultural show that night took their breath away and the cultural extravaganza continued up to the official opening by the Prime Minister," said Mohd Rosly Selamat, general manager of Pempena Sdn Bhd, a subsidiary of organiser Tourism Malaysia.

Winner of the Pata 2001 Travel Journalism Award, J.P. Sho, said the cultural show at the opening was unlike anything he had experienced before.

"My wife was so moved that she was close to tears. The music, dancing, costumes ... it was all too much for her to handle," he said.

The conference had lined up 23 speakers.

Of course for a conference of this scale, there would always be glitches.

Mohd Rosly said the host and organisers of the post-conference tours (Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents) were faced with unclaimed air tickets and saddled with extra accommodation.

"A number of people who had booked post-conference tours to Sabah and Sarawak had cancelled at the last minute. "Maybe, in future we should ask for deposits," he said.

This is the third time Malaysia has hosted a Pata conference, the first in 1972 and the second in 1986.

For each conference, the objectives were different - to put Malaysia on the tourism map and then, to promote its tourist attractions.

Malaysia's participation this time was to showcase her ability to tap the high yield market of MICE (meetings, international conventions and exhibitions).

For 2002, Tourism Malaysia is focusing its campaigns on quality tourism as the country has the infrastructure, facilities and resources to organise international class events.

Many Pata delegates said Malaysia has improved its infrastructure, cleanliness and the people are friendlier.

However, the problem of language barrier and the attitude of taxi drivers still need to be addressed.

One of the keynote speakers at the conference was former Foreign Minister Tan Sri Ghazali Shafie who highlighted the problem with local taxi drivers who lacked tourism knowledge.

"Public transport drivers should be able to converse politely in English

since it is presumed that most tourists speak English. Such a matter should also be attended to by those in other service sectors," he said.

Pata delegates did have a few major concerns which were raised at the conference, among them environmental issues like global warming and ozone depletion.

Malaysia, a growing tourism market, could take the lead from the delegates' concern by paying more attention to these issues.

It is true that modern infrastructure like hotels, transport systems, shopping complexes and tourist information centres are important.

However, the Government must make a concerted effort towards preserving natural resources such as forest reserves, coral reefs, and other national heritage as these comprise the country's tourism products. Without tourism products, there will be no attraction for the tourists.

When it comes to preservation, Thailand should be made an example.

To put it simply, most tourists do not look for modern facilities which can be found anywhere. They want the authentic lifestyle and to experience our way of life.

The Rolls Royce Enthusiast Club, for example, will be organising a road tour of Malaysia in October and November and they are using our coastal roads.

Their reasoning was simple: "We can find modern highways where we come from but the feel and scenes we find on coastal and kampung roads are unique and make the journey more memorable."

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