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Tourism players must co-operate if Johor's potential is to be realised

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HOME to Mother Nature's marvels and midnight shopping mania, host to sea-slicing powerboats and kites, Johor is undeniably making ripples in an ocean of tourism opportunities.

For far too long Johor has been a predominantly agricultural and manufacturing-driven State but now she has awakened to the smell of tourism and the whiff of ringgit which it brings.

Ironically, it took the devastating backlash of the 1997 economic slump to peel back the eyelids of the State's powers-that-be for a wide-angled view of the tourism goldmine which had, until then, served as more of an afterthought in Johor's development plans.

Both local and international tourism marketing then went into full gear as the post-slump economic effort in Johor was steered towards featuring this lesser sector more prominently.

Eco-tourism, agro-tourism, retail, culture, sports and leisure were some of the areas explored and given makeovers to fit the State's new profile.

Like its name which means "jewel" in Arabic, Johor sought to polish and present its long-hidden gems to the world, with State Tourism Committee chairman Datuk Dr Chua Soi Lek subsequently announcing nine areas earmarked for development as "tourist corridors".

The Johor Baru city centre, Johor River, Kota Tinggi, Desaru, Pengerang peninsula, Mersing and its islands, Endau-Rompin National Park, Ledang Valley and Tanjung Piai were identified as the select nine.

As a result, tourism has leapfrogged its way into an impressive third on the priority list of profitable sectors - directly behind agriculture and manufacturing.

Along with the metamorphosis, the Johor Government discovered its touch in organising international and regional events, namely the UIM Formula One World Powerboat Championships and the Second Link Bridge Run with the help of the private sector.

It was a job well done, in both efforts, and the accolades were heaped upon the State by appreciative quarters for a job well done, indicating that the sweat and tears poured into these projects did not go down the drain.

The tourism and promotion mileage the State and country gained from hosting these events was phenomenal, especially the powerboat race which was beamed via satellite to 500 million people across the globe.

Turning to tourism to resuscitate an ailing Johor economy is not only an option of monetary gain, but one of common sense too.

With more than 60 per cent of tourist arrivals in Malaysia literally knocking on Johor's doors for entry into the country, it is only natural for the country's "Southern Gateway" to cash in on the tourist dollar.

The Singapore factor also lends testimony to the State's tourism appeal, with day-trippers from the republic converging on Johor Baru during the weekends, much to the delight of local businesses.

In a bid to bolster southern ties and capitalise on the Singapore dollar, the State Government recently announced that a "smart card" would soon replace the passport to ease congestion and travel along the Causeway and the Second Link.

By going all-out to make Johor tourist friendly, the State Government should be commended for doing much to boost its own and the country's international image. But along with this approach comes its fair share of

problems.

The frontrunners of the local tourism industry do not seem to share the enthusiasm of the State Government in making the endeavour a success.

This is embarrassingly evident when major tourism events, such as the thrice-annual Mega Sale Carnival, are enthusiastically promoted by the authorities, but the industry's frontliners (hoteliers and retailers) choose to dismiss the efforts with an apathetic brush of the hand.

What is worse, some of these frontliners have been accused of jacking up hotel room rates without significantly contributing towards the tourism cause.

This blatant profiteering caught the attention of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who condemned the practice during the World Powerboat Championships in Johor Baru recently.

Another "victim" of the breathless pace Johor is adopting in shaping its tourism industry is the Johor Tourism Information Centre (Jotic).

Established in the late 1990s to provide information on tourism-related activities and programmes in the State, the centre has since wasted away from a tourism appendage to a lifeless hunk of concrete, no thanks to poor management.

It is hoped that the English language magazine currently in the pipelines to serve as a reference guide for foreign holidaymakers will survive several publications and not succumb to an early "death" like Jotic.

Also in startling contrast, while much is being done to develop and promote tourism, other equally important factors which complement these efforts are being left unattended, like cleanliness and maintenance of facilities and amenities.

Heavily polluted rivers and rubbish-lined roads streak Johor's otherwise attractive landscape, even though the State is gunning for billing as the next watersport haven after Dubai.

Although the occasional clean-up activity has been organised, public apathy and lack of support ensure that roadside litter remain part of the local scenery.

These blemishes may well have a negative impact on first-time visitors, much less repeat travellers.

Therefore, more time and trouble have to be taken to ensure that a well-defined and maintained tourism facade is presented for all to see.

Johor has what it takes to break into the international tourism market. But in order to carve out a sizeable chunk of that tourist market, it needs the backing of tourism frontliners, government agencies, private companies and the public at large.

Co-operation is the operative word here. Until it can get each sector to co-operate the State Government's aim to promote tourism will continue to be plagued by hiccups, which could mean an unsavoury experience for many an unwary tourist.