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We should focus on our domestic tourist market

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AS a Malaysian born and domiciled in Sarawak, I can very well understand sometimes the anger of our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the travel advisories issued by several Western Governments which basically ask their citizens to be wary when travelling in Southeast Asia, including Malaysia, in the wake of Sept 11 and lately the Bali incident.

I believe this is also in anticipation of a possible attack on Iraq by the US and Britain.

The travel advisories, including that issued by the Australian Government, are advising their citizens not to visit those countries mentioned in the list.

I believe the majority of Malaysians of whatever race, creed or religion, support the Prime Minister's strong comments against Australia. Although it is clearly part of Asia, Australia sadly thinks of itself more as a European than an Asian nation but for quite an understandable reason - the majority of Australians are white and are of European origin. So naturally their feelings and sympathies are with the West.

If Australia and New Zealand have, to quote Dr Mahathir, gone a little too far in supporting the US' tactics and efforts in fighting international terrorism (which Malaysia also condemns in the strongest possible terms), it is because they cannot shed their basically European origin.

It is perhaps their right to adopt strong pro-US policies as they do.

This is unfortunate because it could cause long-term damage to relations between Australia and its neighbours, and the possibility of Australian tourists boycotting Malaysia, including States like Sarawak which has lately made a pitch for a bigger share of the Australian tourist market in this part of the world.

Malaysians, for this and other reasons, may choose also not to visit Australia. This is perhaps not a bad thing though because not only there will be savings in foreign exchange, we can also help promote domestic tourism.

Sarawak, for example, has some new and exciting culture, adventure and nature (CAN) attractions, apart from its interesting history and the tranquillity and peace of the environment and its clean and beautiful city of Kuching and towns.

Lately, according to newspaper reports, jungle adventure trekking has become increasingly popular, especially in Limbang and Mulu in northern Sarawak and in Semantan in Lundu district in western Sarawak.

Do we therefore need only foreign tourists when so many millions of our own people have not even been to their own tourist playground (national parks/Dayak longhouses/river safari/curio shopping/excellent seafood ala carte, etc)?

Let's not forget that a tourism industry can only thrive well with a strong domestic market. Let's therefore not cry if fewer Aussies, Brits or Yankees come because of global uncertainties. Let's look at our own