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Getting private sector commitment in the push to boost tourism

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A PROMINENT person dropped by the office the other day. This is not the first time A. Kadir came to visit. He's been to this newspaper office before, when he was both in and outside the Cabinet. Friends said Kadir had been pushing hard to help promote tourism and he's been in and outside the country to do his job.

Kadir sounded very committed to his task. He seems to enjoy his job too. He's got his fair share of critics, but every politician has them. That aside, Kadir seems sincere about attracting as many tourists as possible.

In fact, the Cabinet has been pushing very hard to make tourism one of the big money-earners for the country. This was reflected in the annual Budget presented last October. Finance Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is also Prime Minister, outlined a neat package for the tourism industry in the belief that this would be helpful.

In fact this was what got Kadir riled up. He feels the private sector is not doing enough to promote domestic tourism. The Government may have given many incentives to push the industry, but the response didn't seem to match the offer.

In the last Budget, the Treasury extended the income tax exemption for foreign and local tourism business activities for another five years. They were given the exemption up to assessment year 2001 but this has now been extended. Surely this should encourage the private sector to be more aggressive.

But Kadir wasn't sure if the private sector would respond. He lamented that those in the hospitality business and others in the tourism industry appear to prefer the Government to do all the promotion.

"We're anxious to help the private sector. I can go round the world trying to sell Malaysian tourism, but these efforts must be backed by the industry at home. Service in the hotels must be good, the people need to be courteous, everyone in the service industry must be helpful and willing to go the extra mile," Kadir said. The private sector must be prepared to invest if it expects good returns.

Recently, the authorities reminded owners and managements of tall buildings to light up their buildings as this would lend a colourful and cheerful atmosphere. In fact, the exercise is given a boost by Tenaga Nasional via a 50 per cent discount on electricity bills for buildings which use more electricity than they normally do.

If this was not enough, Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting announced more government spending to help in creating a carnival and "feel good" atmosphere in the country. A sum of RM2 million has been allocated for the local authorities in State capitals to install lights, and another RM1 million for major towns in each State.

This is the right thing to do, since tourism is not confined to the federal capital alone.

Kadir's concerns seemed genuine enough. After 911 (the Sept 11 attacks on the World Trade Center), a lot more needs to be done to stimulate fresh interest in tourism.

Perhaps, the private sector should mount its own campaign to attract foreign tourists. I'm sure Kadir will be pleased to help organise one. This newspaper, through its weekly publication Travel Times, is also doing its part to promote domestic tourism. Like Kadir, we're also committed to help promote tourism in the country.

* TOWARDS the tail end of the Hari Raya month, many are scrambling to have open houses. I went to several the past few days. At two separate venues, guests were treated to song and dance from the hosts and guest artistes.

At Angkasapuri, Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakub, joined invited singers to sing several songs. It was a day when everyone let their hair down in a healthy way. Deputy Information Minister Datuk Khalid Yunus too took to the stage to belt out several popular numbers.

At Putrajaya, Deputy Human Resources Minister Dr Abdul Latif Ahmad's open house had a band playing ghazal songs. Old and young dancers treated guests to the zapin dance which seldom fails to keep one's feet tapping.

Dr Latif asked if I would like to join him for a dance (most Johoreans are taught the zapin which has been made more popular by Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman through schools), but I declined. I'd rather watch, for now.

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