

22/08/2002

Langkawi too can match others in tourism

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LANGKAWI has been aggressively promoted by the Government as a shopping and pleasure destination since the island was selected as a retreat for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting during the 1989 CHOGM.

Since then, Langkawi has witnessed many other high-profile events like international conferences (Langkawi Dialogue), sporting events (Tour de Langkawi), rendezvous meetings (Mahathir-Chirac mini-summit), on-location shoots (Jodie Foster and Chow Yun Fatt) and the biennial Air and Maritime Exposition (Lima), to name a few.

To complement its status as an island getaway, hotels were built to cater for all segments of travellers, from the budget-conscious to the discerning connoisseurs.

However, Langkawi still lags behind Bali and Phuket in attracting the bulk of tourists who would bring the much-needed crowd and the foreign exchange. Perhaps, we need to look at a different strategy to woo these tourists from crowding the beaches of Patong and Kuta. What makes Bali and Phuket such crowd-pullers? Their fame and attraction made headlines in such prestigious travel journals as Conde Nast Traveler and Travel + Leisure and the top resorts of both islands have been consistently voted the best in the world.

How does Langkawi compete with these established islands? Well, in order to compete, we have to look at the competition.

First, let us capitalise on the concept of eco-tourism. It is a well-known fact that Western travellers, in particular, come to Malaysia for her natural beauty, more than anything else.

Studies conducted by the Geological Heritage Group of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) has revealed that almost half of Langkawi's geological landscape was formed at least 210 million years ago, with the Machinchang formation dating back to the Cambrian era, which is as old as 550 million years!

Langkawi might not have a strong artistic culture like that of the Balinese, but trekking on the Machinchang rocks is an experience into the ancient birth of the island itself. Much as we have Sipadan as an oceanic island with precious marine life, could we also promote Langkawi from this angle, taking advantage of the Triassic rocks of Gunung Raya?

The Pulau Payar Marine Park can be a complementary attraction, an amazing reef formation that most Malaysians have not even heard of. This marine park is something that Phuket or Bali does not have, so let us market it seriously.

Bali has a strong discipline in limiting the development of tourism buildings to be in harmony with the environment and natural landscape. While commercial development in Denpasar and the Kuta tourist strip is chaotic and sporadic, the beach and hill resorts are immaculate in design and planning.

With very little (if any) bureaucratic regulations that may stifle the harmonious blend of architecture and environment, most hotel resorts in Bali are small, involves almost no interference with the natural setting and do not go higher than the highest coconut tree. This sympathy with the environment ensures that the Balinese landscape is not transformed in the name of development, yet fulfils all requirements to cater for the thousands of tourists either looking for budget accommodation or world-class comfort.

Perhaps, we could take a similar approach in the planning and construction of hotels in Langkawi.

After all, it is the natural environment of Langkawi that tourists come for and it is only natural that the low-rise development complements the setting rather than transforming it drastically with potentially disastrous consequences. In Bali, almost all resorts are built of locally-sourced materials and expressed in their natural state.

We could do the same for Langkawi, taking advantage of the rich natural resources like Langkawi timber and granite. Like Kuta and Patong, the thrust of shopping in Langkawi should be on local handicraft and fabrics. The "Made-in-Langkawi" products must be exclusive and sought-after merchandise, as much as we yearn for Balinese artifacts that can be found only in Bali. This is where the local folk could develop the cottage industry and capitalise on the opportunities that the tourism industry brings.

Where tourists in Bali visit quaint villages to witness the Barong Dance and other cultural performances as part of their tour itinerary, Langkawi villagers ought to present their unique culture in their respective villages rather than in gleaming hotel lobbies. Culture would be able to be experienced as it happens, in real time, in these "living museums".

Honestly, Western tourists are eager to meander through the padi fields and calm village compounds, as much as we like to roam the narrow alleys of mediaeval Venice or the bustling souks of Marrakesh.

Of course, we also have to make it easier for tourists to find their way to Langkawi. This can be done by having direct flights into Langkawi from Phuket and Bali.

Perhaps, we should lure the Western travellers who originate from Bali and Phuket so that they may make Langkawi as their destination for their next vacation.

The natural beauty of Langkawi must be preserved at all costs and development must be regulated if Langkawi is to maintain its staying power as a major island destination in Southeast Asia. Otherwise, it will always play second fiddle to Bali and Phuket.

Unless we beat the competition at its own game and give them a run for their money, Langkawi will remain what it is now: an excellent host and venue for events, but sadly chugging slowly to catch up with other regional island destinations in other aspects.