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YEARENDER-TOURISM

TOURISM MINISTRY TO PROMOTE DOMESTIC TRAVEL AGGRESSIVELY IN 2004

By: Ahmad Tamimi Omar

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 1 (Bernama) -- The government is to make another concerted push to promote domestic tourism in a big way in 2004, said Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir.

"Currently we are talking to our advertisers and tourism agencies so that domestic tourism can really help all the industries involved in tourism," he told Bernama in an interview.

The promotion, he said, would help counter the possible negative effects emanating from instability such as conflicts and health concerns in certain regions, and aid in driving up revenue earnings from tourism.

"Hotel operators couldn't care less if their customer is a local or foreign. As long as their rooms are occupied, they are happy," he said when explaining the importance of domestic tourism.

Abdul Kadir said he would also strive to strengthen the tourism industry within ASEAN countries.

"This would help us as a region to withstand any problem happening elsewhere that could affect our tourism industry," he said.

His ministry would also continue its promotions abroad, especially in Asean and East Asia (Japan, China and South Korea) and West Asia, he said.

It is in the process of opening up new markets in West Asia, namely Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

"These are countries with very large Muslim populations. Naturally it would take a little bit of time to build up this market, maybe in to three years but we have made a very serious start," he said.

Abdul Kadir said his ministry would continue promoting Malaysia in Europe eventhough the cost of promotion there was very expensive.

He said although it would take a bit of time to woo European tourists, there was strong potential in Europe because their people tend to stay longer in a country that they visit.

"Our major frustration in promoting in Europe is that our

national
airline is not moving as fast as it should," he lamented and claimed
that
this was due to problems left behind by the previous management.

Abdul Kadir said Malaysia Airlines has to given room to grow and
complement his ministry to boost tourism in Malaysia.

Citing Thailand as an example, the minister said the Thai
national
airline was "going everywhere and working closely with the Tourism
Authority of Thailand as a team by sharing costs."

"As a result, Thai Airways acts as the agent of the government
to
promote tourism. If our national airline could be as active as Thai
Airways
or SIA (Singapore Airlines), then our tourism figures would grow
very much
beyond 15 million but that's a long shot. This is our handicap
(now)," he
said.

For 2003, Abdul Kadir said Malaysia recorded a steady recovery
of
tourist arrivals despite setbacks earlier this year with 8.112
million
arrivals recorded between January and October 2003.

Although it was a 26.1 percent fall when compared with the
previous
year's 10-month figure of 10.976 million arrivals, it still
indicated a
steady recovery, he said.

Aggressive promotions by industry players managed to reverse the
sharp
downtrend from the third quarter of 2003.

"If not for the war in Iraq and the outbreak of the Severe Acute
Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) during the first half of 2003, Malaysia
would
have registered a much higher arrivals figure," said Abdul Kadir who
described 2003 as a horrible year for the Malaysian tourism
industry.

Tourism Malaysia said the highest number of arrivals was
recorded in
January with 1.070 million while the lowest was in April with
459,374. May
saw a pick up to 541,267 arrivals and by end-October the number was
995,858.

When asked about targets, Abdul Kadir said "I really hate to
talk about
targets. Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad placed a
target of
15 million for 2003, it was reasonable at that time to set that
target and
I thought we might have achieved it," he said.

In 2002, Malaysia had 13.3 million tourists visiting its shores.

"If weren't for the Bali bombing, would've easily reached 14.5 million tourists (in 2002)," he said.

As far as hotel occupancy was concerned, it averaged 55 percent in 2003 and this is expected to climb to 60 percent in 2004. Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) vice president Ivo R. Nekvapil said occupancy should improve in tandem with the expected increase in tourist arrivals in 2004 to overtake the 13.9 million figure achieved in 2002.

As for AirAsia Sdn Bhd, one of the key players in domestic tourism, 2003 was a good year for the no-frills airline as all their flights averaged about 80 percent occupancy each month, said its chief executive officer, Tony Fernandes.

He said AirAsia's high occupancy rate was not only fuelled by domestic tourism, it was also due to people wanting to return to their home states.

AirAsia, he said, enjoyed a fantastic growth rate in 2003, especially during `Hari Raya' Aidilfitri, and its most popular routes were the Kuala Lumpur-Kota Kinabalu and Kuala Lumpur-Langkawi sectors.

Fernandes said the number of passengers on AirAsia would increase next year as the airline planned to double its aircraft fleet to 20 by June 2004. This will increase its capacity to 128 flights a day from 64 at present. -- BERNAMA

TMM SHY