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Vibrant discussions on key issues

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MALAYSIA shouldn't consider having more tourism products if it is unable to sustain the existing ones, including heritage buildings.

"Sustainability seems to be a problem in Malaysia. Instead of looking after what we have by maintaining them well, we tend to move on from one project to another, thus neglecting the existing ones," said Terengganu State Tourism Council president Datuk Raja Kamarul Bahrin Shah.

"What is the point of having the biggest this or the largest that when we don't look after the products. We have to walk the extra mile for tourists by giving them what they want to see, but by having more products, it doesn't necessarily mean we are giving them what they want."

Raja Kamarul, one of the moderators at the inaugural New Straits Times Tourism Dialogue, was presenting the findings of his group on Tourism Infrastructure: Are We Meeting Future Needs?

"If a new infrastructure is being planned, make sure it has local elements in it. Tourists want to see places or buildings that represent Malaysia and our many cultures and not another building which will be 'another face' in the crowd.

"It would be pointless for us to be copycats and build hotels or tourist products that others already have. In Malaysia, our hotels should represent the many races here, including the Baba Nyonyas and Indians," said Raja Kamarul, who is also the Terengganu branch president of the Malaysian Hotels Association.

The well-known architect said another aspect which his group felt should be looked into is training for all frontliners in the tourism industry, including taxi and bus drivers, as well as Immigration and Customs officers.

"All it takes is one bad experience to spoil the whole trip for tourists. A badly maintained taxi or bus that is not roadworthy or even a rude official will be long remembered by visitors.

"Why spoil things for our visitors when some training can do a lot of good for our frontliners as it will teach them to be courteous, polite and punctual.

"Malaysians, as well as our land public transportation, are not known for their punctuality. Tourists will be fed up waiting for hours for either their buses, taxis or trains and this is one area we should seriously look into," he said.

The dialogue, attended by some 200 participants, including officials from the Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry, Tourism Promotion Board and industry players.

It was officiated by National Economic Action Council (NEAC) executive director Datuk Mustapa Mohamed and held at Mutiara Hotel Kuala Lumpur on July 16.

The other moderators were businessman and wireless broadband provider Airzed Networks Sdn Bhd executive chairman Mukhriz Mahathir, Bernama's executive editor Azman Ujang, Affin Merchant Bank president and chief executive Datin Zuraidah Atan and AirAsia chairman Datuk Pahamin A. Rajab.

Also present were New Straits Times Sdn Bhd group editor Datuk Ahmad A. Talib, who chaired the plenary session of the dialogue, National Tourism Council president Datuk Mohd Zainal Abidin Abdul Kadir, council vice-president Ariffin Jelani and general secretary Mohd Odzman Abdul Kadir.

Zuraidah, who was the moderator for Tourism: Support From Financial

Sector, said the main grouse highlighted by her group members was that funds allocated for the industry were not disbursed.

"The second main complaint is that the tourism industry players have no access to the funds and the rigid criteria to get financial assistance."

She said since 1997 when the economic crisis began, many players in the tourism industry have been hit by one problem after another, with the most recent being SARS.

"What they would like is get some refinancing of their loans to see them through the difficult times."

She said many in the tourism industry had taken loans during the good times when interest rates were high.

Now that rates have come down, they would like to refinance the loans but are unable to do so as the allocated funds cannot be used for refinancing.

Zuraidah said banks have many industries to look after and the onus was on the tourism industry itself to educate the banking sector to make them understand their needs.

At the Tourism Promotion: Are They Effective? discussion, participants agreed that the country needed to compile data on profiles of tourists as this would ensure tourism industry players were kept up-to-date on visitors to the country.

Among vital data that should be collected are spending power and the things tourists like to see and do.

Mukhriz said the data could spring a few surprises.

"Besides the data, the group also recommended that there be some sort of bulletin for industry players on a regular basis, to keep them informed of, for example, approaches taken by the various sectors to mitigate SARS or terrorism.

"The delegates also feel that it is important to promote Malaysia as a country that has a lot of tolerance in a world that has become less tolerant."

Pahamin, who presented the findings of Tourism Policies: Facilitating and Promoting a More Business Friendly Environment, said the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) should be tourist-friendly because it is the main gateway for the arrival and departure of visitors.

"My group strongly feels there must be standing operative procedures at KLIA. Now, what is happening is that the buses and vans are not allowed to drop and pick up passengers at the arrival and departure areas.

"Passengers who are leaving or arriving are supposed to carry their baggage to a particular designated area. Can you imagine the inconvenience they face?" he asked.

Pahamin said the group also felt that there should be more and better interaction between the Government and industry players to ensure shortcomings could be addressed.

"When there is a better relationship between the Government and people in the tourism industry, they can sit down and work together on matters pertaining to the implementation of new policies or guidelines."

The group also hopes there will be more guidelines instead of regulations and many of them feel that unnecessary licensing and permits should be done away with.

"For example, car rental agencies must be licensed but the authorities should not require licences for every single hired car. Just give one licence to the agency, no matter how many cars it has," he said.

Azman, who moderated Tourism: Managing Crises, said it was important to tell the truth about things that have happened in Malaysia.

"The local media must also ensure that there is balance in reporting. If you want to highlight something negative on two pages, then it is also

your duty to tell the positive side of things."