

## **LETTER | We should make S'pore tourists feel more welcomed**

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LETTER | Tourism Malaysia has released the figures for foreign visitor arrivals for the first half of 2022. The total number of foreigners that entered our country from January to June this year was 3,016,113, comprising 2,132,160 tourists and 883,953 excursionists.

During the same period last year, the total number of foreign visitors was 188,922 which consisted of just 50,613 tourists and 138,309 excursionists. In contrast, there were 5,965,137 foreign visitors to Malaysia in H1 2020, with 4,252,997 being tourists and 1,712,140 excursionists.

It would take many years for foreign visitor arrivals to return to 2019 levels. As many as 18,137,162 entered Malaysia in the first half of that year, with 13,354,575 tourists spending an average of 7.4 nights and 4,782,587 excursionists departing on the same day of arrival.

For the first half of this year, 60 percent of all foreign tourists and 75 percent of

all excursionists were Singaporeans. In the four years from 2012 to 2015, more than half of all foreign tourists to Malaysia were Singaporeans, averaging 12.9 million per year.

But after that, their percentage dropped to 49.6 percent in 2016, 47.9 percent in 2017, 41.1 percent in 2018 and 38.9 percent in 2019, averaging 11.6 million per year. One of the main reasons was acute congestion at entry points by road that affected not only excursionists but also tourists.

We ought to bear in mind that expenditures by Singaporean tourists travelling to all over peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak were among the top three on a per diem basis, just below nationalities from Saudi Arabia and Brunei, and above those from Australia and China.

Together, the 5,381,566 Singaporean tourists contributed RM11.56 billion to our economy in the first half of 2019. We ought to make Singaporean tourists feel more welcomed, starting with our immigration officers, as they exert a huge impact on the first impression of our country.

Recently, my Singaporean relatives drove to the Klang Valley and related to me that immigration officers on duty habitually make sarcastic remarks about their frequent entry into Malaysia. Instead of welcoming, they appeared bothered by

foreigners entering our country.

Lest we forget, over 25 percent of foreign tourists cited visiting friends and relatives as the main purpose for visiting Malaysia in the first half of 2019. But unlike 71 percent of domestic tourists that stayed at free accommodation provided by friends and relatives, foreign tourists prefer to stay in licensed hotels or private residences booked online.

Recently, my Singaporean cousins wanted to stay close to my apartment for their last night in the Klang Valley and chose a nearby accommodation. The budget hotel was clean on the ground floor but there were no windows in the guest rooms and one of them stank to high heaven.

Something must have been decaying or rotting inside the room. If there was a window that could be opened and a ceiling fan, the air in the room and along with the foul odour could be blown away. But there was just a room air-conditioner that keeps recirculating the same smelly air.

Although they could not obtain a refund, my cousins decided not to stay in this hotel. As it was getting late, all of them came over to my place. They were more comfortable sleeping on makeshift beds, sofas, and the floor rather than having to bear the overpowering stench of the hotel room.

Licensing authorities that issue approval for hotels to operate should ensure that there is adequate ventilation in guest rooms. For example, there must be a ventilator fan in the toilet to suck out stale air so that fresh air could flow into guest rooms, with or without windows.

For the first quarter of this year, we received 98,053 foreign tourists, averaging 32,684 per month. But after borders were fully reopened in April, the number shot up to 670,474. When entry conditions were further relaxed in May, the number went up to 971,574.

To surpass the target of 10 million foreign tourists by the end of this year would require an average of 1.33 million arrivals per month or eight million over six months, as 2,132,160 tourists came in the first half of this year.

This is certainly achievable if there are no major upheavals that could throw a spanner in the works and cooperation by many relevant agencies involved in tourism, from the Immigration Department to local authorities such as city halls and municipal councils.

Under the National Tourism Policy 2020–2030, there are 22 strategic action plans in place with four on governance capacity. They are for strengthening high-level coordination to monitor the implementation of policy; enhancing tourism

core skills of related government agencies; increasing the capacity and tourism know-how of local authorities, and embracing innovative governance models to facilitate participatory processes and public-private sector partnerships.

The work has been cut out for the Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry and it will be a work in progress until 2030. Meanwhile, public and private sector organisations and individuals should not take foreign visitors for granted, as they are also wooed by neighbouring countries.

To be more competitive, the ministry could reinvigorate the Mesra Malaysia programme, which has been kept on the backburner with the suspension of Visit Malaysia Year 2020. It is the most effective training for public and private sector frontliners to become warm and friendly hosts.

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