

LETTER | Tourist arrivals below target but more excursionists visit M'sia

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LETTER | Tourist arrival figures are based on the number of entries made by foreigners into our country and stay for at least one night, while excursionists leave the same day without staying overnight.

As such, tourists are likely to spend much more in Malaysia with their longer stay and also for accommodation. However, expenditures by excursionists on shopping, food, and beverage can be substantial such as in Johor Bahru, and cruise ship passengers in George Town, Penang.

The targeted tourist arrivals for Malaysia are 27.3 million in 2024, 31.4 million in 2025, and 35.6 million in Visit Malaysia 2026, averaging 31.4 million a year in these three years. Normally, targets are not set for excursionist arrivals but they are very important for international tourism.

Until I started using “visitor arrivals” in 2019, this term was hardly used and brought confusion internationally. For example, a Vietnamese newspaper published a report on Feb 23, 2024, with the heading “Malaysia beats Thailand to

become most-visited in Southeast Asia this year.”

The report cited my article published three days earlier. My first paragraph stated that last year, Malaysia recorded almost 29 million visitor arrivals and they comprised 20,141,846 foreign tourists and 8,822,462 foreign excursionists, or a total of 28,964,308 foreign visitors.

However, the number of tourists to Thailand last year was more than 28.15 million, far higher than the 20.1 million to Malaysia. The same report by the Vietnamese newspaper stated that Thailand came in second in the region with 28 million foreign tourists and Singapore 13.6 million.

24m target likely

Until November this year, the total number of foreign tourists to Malaysia was 22,464,611. If this pace is continued in December, then the total number will be around 24.5 million in 2024, which is closer to the 24 million I had projected in March 2023 than the official target of 27.3 million.

For the first 11 months of 2019, tourist arrivals totalled 24,109,716, higher than 22,464,611 recorded over the corresponding period for this year. However, the 11,691,568 excursionist arrivals until November this year were much higher than the 8,239,510 recorded in 2019.

As a result, total visitor (tourists and excursionists) arrivals shot up to 34,156,179 for the first 11 months of this year compared to 32,349,226 from January-November 2019, an increase of 5.6 percent.

The top six visitor arrivals were nationals from Singapore (16,843,740), Indonesia (3,712,658), China (3,430,918), Thailand (2,078,566), Brunei (1,564,499) and India (1,211,853).

The top six tourist arrivals were nationals from Singapore (8,048,898), Indonesia (3,269,113), China (3,038,314), Thailand (1,497,564), Brunei (1,014,643) and India (1,009,414). Fifty-two percent of all tourists to Malaysia came by land, 41.6 percent by air, 4.9 percent by sea, and 1.5 percent by rail.

Falling short

Last December, I projected that China, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan combined are likely to provide 3.96 million or 16.5 percent of all tourist arrivals this year, as published in “Be ready for 24m tourists in 2024.”

Nevertheless, several travel associations were hopeful of getting five million Chinese tourists this year. In April, Tourism Malaysia expressed confidence that its target of attracting five million tourists from China could be achieved. However, the number is likely to be around 3.31 million.

Note that arrival figures are based on nationality, not where visitors come from, and therefore not necessarily from their home countries. Large numbers of foreigners work in the region, and they are recorded as tourists or excursionists when travelling to another country.

As of Oct 31, there were 120,183 expatriates in Malaysia, with the highest numbers from China (27,460), India (23,131), the Philippines (9,302), Japan (8,739), and Indonesia (8,333), and the balance of 36 percent from other countries.

Lest we forget, tourists are not limited to those travelling on holidays, shopping, or visiting relatives and friends. Large numbers also travel for business, education, training, or sport.

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