

Malaysia in top 10 of UN tourist arrivals list

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Despite 2009 being a challenging year for the tourism industry, Malaysia entered the top 10 list of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) in terms of tourist arrivals for the year, at ninth place.

NONETourism Minister Datuk Seri Ng Yen Yen said Malaysia, a melting pot of cultures blessed with year round sunshine and natural beauty, moved up two notches from 11th position in the 2008 rankings.

"We're very happy with this development," she told Malaysian media covering the Arabian Travel Market (ATM) 2010 which opened in Dubai today.

And with a strike of the gong, the minister also opened the Malay traditional house-inspired Malaysia pavilion in one of the cavernous halls of the Dubai International Convention and Exhibition Centre, the venue of the May 4-7 event.

This is Malaysia's 17th participation in the ATM, billed as the Middle East's premier tourism and travel show, aimed at increasing the number of West Asian visitors to the Southeast Asian nation.

According to the UNWTO website, France continued to lead the ranking of the world's major tourism destinations in terms of arrivals and ranked third in receipts.

The United States ranked first in receipts and second in arrivals while Spain maintained its position as the second biggest earner worldwide and the first in Europe, and ranked third in arrivals.

In 2009, both Turkey and Germany climbed one position in the ranking of arrivals to seventh and eighth places, respectively.

In arrivals, Malaysia entered the top 10 in 2009 at ninth place, UNWTO mentioned.

Tourism brought in about RM52 billion to the nation's coffers last year from a total of 23.65 million tourist arrivals. For 2010, the target is RM54 billion in receipts from 24 million visitor arrivals.

Ng said Malaysia should not rest on its laurels as the country's hospitality industry should come up with innovative tourism products to further woo tourists, including those from West Asia, to the country.

According to her, Malaysians should understand that tourism was a very competitive industry and the country was fortunate to have come up very fast in developing the sector in the 1990s.

"We didn't have many competitors then, we didn't have Vietnam, Cambodia, for example. Now everybody is talking tourism and tourists expect nothing but the best. If you don't give them the best, they won't come back," she observed.

Ng's message to tourism players in Malaysia was this: "We all must be sharp and alert on developments pertaining to the services and hospitality industry. It's a very fragile (sector). Any negative issue, perceived or real, will have an impact on our tourism."

Malaysians, she said, should well remember that tourism was the second largest income generator for the country.

"And that money goes to our government's development efforts. So please don't think that it's all 'syok sendiri', that the hotels are making money, not the country.

"(If this is so) why is the whole world capitalising on tourism?," Ng said, adding that tourism had helped in developing Malaysia's infrastructure.

"In promoting the homestay programme, for example, we have to build roads in the villages. So tourism helps develop infrastructure and the country," she explained.

The target audience for the West Asian market included honeymooners, families, young adults, members of royal families and high-end market, special interest groups, corporate groups, business travellers and students, she told Bernama ahead of the event.

Ng is leading a 120-member delegation to the ATM 2010.

In between a string of interviews with local and international media outlets, the minister held talks with a number of key regional tourism players, including airline and tourism authority bosses.

A Tourism Malaysia roadshow to Kuwait and Qatar, also headed by Ng, follows the ATM 2010.

- Bernama

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