

**Ministers' travel costs up, promotional costs down**  
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PARLIAMENT In two years, the Tourism Ministry has spent 40 percent more for its ministers' travels, while the cost of activities to promote tourism had dropped 70 percent.

This was revealed in a written answer from the ministry yesterday to a question posed by PKR's Batu MP Tian Chua.

Chua had asked for detailed information on the ministers' and their officers' work excursions locally and abroad, as well as the cost of promoting Malaysia locally and overseas.

According to the ministry's reply, the official travel expenses of Tourism Minister Ng Yen Yen and her predecessor Azalina Othman from 2008 to this year rose almost 40 percent.

In 2008, the ministry, then headed by Azalina, spent RM1,193,640 for the minister and her entourage's official visits to eight countries.

In 2009, the cost was RM1,590,248 for visits to 19 countries.

Ng replaced Azalina in April, 2009.

According to the schedule of official journeys provided in the ministry's written reply, up to November this year, Ng will have spent RM1,665,338 for her official trips.

Despite notching up frequent flyer miles for the minister, the Tourism Ministry's promotional activities for tourism to and in Malaysia saw a reduction of nearly 70 percent in terms of expenditures - from RM320 million in 2008 to less than RM100 million up to July, 2010.

According to the written reply, the ministry had embarked on many activities to attract tourists, travel operators, airline agencies and foreign media.

Among these was a "sales mission" to add "personal touch" in promoting Malaysia as a tourists destination.

Three-day trip to Moscow = RM793,000

Seeing red over the escalated expenses, Chua noted that Azalina had gone on six official trips in 2008, whereas Ng made 15 such visits in 2010.

"Is Ng performing her duty in promoting travel to Malaysia or promoting overseas travels? Shouldn't she be given the title Travel Minister (instead of Tourism Minister)?," he mocked.

"In 2008, (there was) a working visit to Bangkok and Chiang Mai in Thailand - it was not accompanied by anyone from the private sector or government agencies - and yet RM73,000 was spent for two people, including the minister for three days," said an incensed Chua.

In the same year, a three-day official visit to Moscow, Russia, cost RM793,000 for five ministry representatives - an average of RM158,000 for each person.

Similarly, said Chua, Ng's working visit to Singapore in 2009 for three-days-and-two-nights cost RM90,000.

This, said Chua (*right*), "did not make sense".

"Even if the minister travelled business class on MAS (Malaysia Airlines), the return ticket is not more than RM2,000 and even if she stayed at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel's presidential suite which cost about S\$5,500 (about RM13,000) a night.

"This means the (then) total costs for two persons should be RM29,960, but there is an excess of RM60,000 in their expenditure," he said.

Last week, another parliamentary written answer revealed that RM244,720 was spent by Ng and her aides during a ten-day "promotional visit" to Australia and New Zealand last month.

Chua said that the exposure was not to tarnish the country's image "but necessary to remind the minister to be more prudent in future".

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