

**Sabah travel trade weathers grim statistics**  
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The statistics make for grim reading. Sabah anticipated 2.73 million tourist arrivals last year. However, according to state Tourism Minister Masidi Manjun, by October the state only managed to chalk up 1.8 million visitor arrivals, with domestic travelers totaling 68 percent while the rest were international travelers mostly from Indonesia (149,730).  
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In 2007, total visitor arrivals peaked at 2,478,443, up from 2,091,858 visitors in 2006 when the state raked in RM2.875 billion in tourism receipts.

Tourist arrivals in Sabah include 76,012 from China and Hong Kong; South Korea 73,493; the Philippines 56,270; Brunei 54,563; Japan 30,940; Taiwan 30,208; the United Kingdom and Ireland 28,959; Australia 22,253; and Singapore 12,773.

Japanese figures are troubling. Connectivity continues to dog the local industry and the Kota Kinabalu-Osaka link is cited as an example. While there is a direct flight from Osaka to Kota Kinabalu, returning Japanese visitors have to endure a grueling 12 hour journey home as there's no direct Kota Kinabalu-Osaka link. Visitors have to head for KLIA before hopping on another flight home.

Such visitors rarely make a return visit. The situation is expected to ease somewhat following a recent federal government decision to allow Sabah and Sarawak to adopt an 'open sky' policy sometime this year and engage in joint promotion programmes.

masidi manjun "I won't be honest if I say that we are not going to be affected. Our tourism industry will go through a period of migraine," admitted Masidi in reference to the statistics and the current global economic slowdown.

"However, the real impact can only be seen in the first quarter of the year. Many people may resort to cutting expenses and saving money in the face of economic uncertainty."

Nevertheless, Masidi who also holds the culture and environment portfolios, remained undaunted and vowed that the state's tourism industry would come out of the present financial crisis "stronger and healthier with proper marketing strategies".

The Sabah Tourism Board continues to implement tourism-related policies and agendas, while the newly set up Sabah Tourism Consultative Council will function as the think tank for the tourism industry.

### **A strategic location**

For starters, the state Tourism Minister believes that many people would continue to travel despite the current crisis.

"Travelling and holidays have become a culture. People would continue to travel abroad for holidays even during bad times," Masidi said, adding that the increasing number of regional airlines visiting Kota Kinabalu will play an important role in bring in the tourist business, even if at a much slower pace.

The silver lining that the state is banking on appears to be the financial burden of traveling to distant places in the current economic downturn. This makes Sabah an ideal getaway for Singaporeans, rich Indonesians and Filipinos, the 40,000 expatriates in Jakarta, Hong Kong, Guangzhou in southern China, Shanghai, Japan and the more affluent Australians and Kiwis.

"We are strategically located within a five-hour flying time radius from these countries and we should therefore focus our marketing promotions within the countries in the region," said Masidi.

"We have world class tourism products to offer and a short convenient short-haul holiday destination. Sabah will continue to market itself as the premier nature-adventure destination in the world."

sabah tourism poster turtles Masidi is also banking on Sabah's "rich natural assets and resources which provide opportunities for the development of niche products catering to a world hungry for green and eco-friendly services and products".

He cited the "lucrative and fast-growing" bird-watching sector as an example of a niche sector which should continue to be developed in view of the many species of birds found in Sabah. Already, the state government has given its blessings for the first Borneo Bird Festival to be held in October this year.

Industry players agree that Sabah's natural beauty is an asset in attracting tourists but efforts must be made to conserve and look after it.

"You cannot invite high-yield, high-paying tourists to Sabah and then have them look at polluted rivers and cleared land," said one industry expert.

"So, time needs to be spent on conserving the place. The more affluent tourists are also highly-educated and they tend to research the place and tours before they come."

Generally, the consensus of opinion in the industry is that Sabah's 40-odd ethnic groups may be one reason why people want to visit the place but "at the moment, the people are not seen as a major tourism product. Tourists would want to engage with the different communities, disperse their ringgit and get the kind of experience that only Sabah can provide," added the industry expert.

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