



## Are We Truly Ready For VMY 2007?

'Visit Malaysia Year 2007' is just around the corner but problems seem to be everywhere. Can we buck up and race against the clock to make it a resounding success?

IN JUST LESS THAN FOUR MONTHS, 'VISIT MALAYSIA YEAR (VMY) 2007' will be upon us.

We have not had that many VMYs. This is only the third. The last one was 14 years ago in 1994 and the first in 1990.

The preparations have started. The Tourism Ministry has gone on a RM460 million publicity blitz to bring in the targeted 20.1 million tourists for VMY 2007, which, incidentally, has been timed to coincide with our 50<sup>th</sup> *Merdeka* anniversary.

So, 2007 should bring us even more tourists than ever before, provided, of course, there are no epidemics such as bird flu or a prolonged haze episode. The estimated revenue from tourism next year could reach RM45 billion. This year alone, the government is projecting 17.5 million tourists to bring in RM37 billion.

But are we as a nation ready to handle the expected influx of tourists? More importantly, will unscrupulous and selfish Malaysians smear our reputation so badly that tourists will vow never to return?

We are not just talking about snatch thieves who prey on tourists. We are talking about our taxi drivers who continue to fleece passengers. We are talking about Malaysia Airlines (MAS) and AirAsia with their flight delays and we are talking about touts who operate with impunity at airports. Even bungling immigration officers are becoming a cause for concern.

There is, thus, a real possibility that all this might derail or nullify the hard work put in by the government, travel agents, hotels and others in marketing Malaysia.

Let's look at MAS. Despite its ongoing turnaround plan, it continues to provide shoddy service to passengers.

Recently, it came under fire for frequent flight delays. Imagine, if it cannot cope now, what more when there is a higher influx of tourists in 2007? What excuse will it give then?

MAS' definition of punctuality seems misplaced. It feels a 14-minute flight delay is acceptable as it classifies delays as those exceeding 15 minutes.

The national airline needs to be reminded of VMY 1990 when

flight delays were frequent and its aircraft were dubbed 'flying coffins'. To be sure, AirAsia too, is guilty of flight delays but at least it did not need a RM850 million bailout, and neither does it enjoy 'national airline' status.

MAS seriously needs to re-think its strategies. For example, raising its fares and fuel taxes and discontinuing flights from London to Langkawi as VMY 2007 looms is not the wisest thing to do.

Next, we come to taxis. Before we crack down hard on them for not using meters and overcharging, it would be useful to examine the root cause of the problem. Let's face it. Taxi drivers have been badly hit by higher fuel costs simply because fuel costs account for a major part of their operating expenses.

The tragedy here is that many of them want to switch to using natural gas for vehicles (NGV). But there are simply not enough outlets selling NGV, causing long queues and resulting in loss of income to drivers.

One cannot imagine why Petronas, with all its billions, is

unable to meet the huge demand for NGV. It doesn't bode well on the part of the national oil corporation to negate government effects to encourage the use of gas rather than petrol by making the fuel inaccessible.

Why not grant fuel subsidies to taxis like that given to fishermen and farmers?

The government plans to add 300 new tourist taxis in Kuala Lumpur next year. Although these Mercedes and Naza Ria vehicles will be allowed to charge a higher fare, will the drivers be able to earn a decent living?

And finally, we come to touts. Is it really that difficult to completely eradicate them from airports and other points of entry, or is it a lack of enforcement by the relevant authorities? Laws have recently been formulated to nab them but they still continue to operate, often right under the noses of the authorities.

Let's hope when VMY 2007 arrives, Malaysia lives up to its 'Malaysia Truly Asia' tagline. Anything less and the tourist will be truly disappointed. **mb**

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