

Promote Asean tourism jointly, says Dr Mahathir

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LANGKAWI, Wed. — The Asean region can become an unbeatable single tourist destination if member countries work together.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that the time had come for Asean nations to work together to reap benefits from the tourist trade.

"Now is the time to focus on tourism because tourism is a major revenue earner for us," he said when opening the Asean Tourism Conference at the Mahsuri International Exhibition Centre here.

He said Asean countries had the most appealing selling point that could not be found elsewhere — the intrinsic assets found in their people climate location and

culture.

"We basically all look alike. But we dress differently. We are culturally different. This is something we can promote together."

Dr Mahathir noted that people of Southeast Asia were partial to bright colours and their traditional fashion was incomparable.

"We should promote our colours, let's have a grand fashion parade together."

Dr Mahathir drew laughter when he said the humidity in the region should be made an attraction.

"Humidity is good for your skin because it is a natural moisturiser. Unlike the dry cold climate, humidity keeps your skin moist and therefore, young. So, instead of saying our climate is hot and humid, tell the tourists:

come to Southeast Asia to stay young forever," he said.

Dr Mahathir said to attract people to the region, travel should be made easier by having more airlines offering low fares, a common visa for Asean countries as well as a common identification card for people in these countries.

"Tourism is a cash business so let us make it easy for people to travel to our countries. We suffer together. We prosper together," he said.

Dr Mahathir's views went down well with the delegates.

MATTA president Tunku Iskandar Tunku Abdullah said he could see Malaysia taking the lead in promoting Asean as the single most attractive tourist destination in the world.



IMPRESSED: Dr Mahathir (right) watches as Halimatun Jaafar puts the finishing touches to her painting at the Mahsuri International Exhibition Centre. — NST picture by Rizal Braim

"There is no better time than now to start moving in this direction," he said.

On a common visa, he said this was not impossible despite the political and economic diversity of the region.

"Perhaps, we should start with a few member countries. And if it works well, the rest can see the benefits."

A delegate, Gilbert Roels who is the Belgium-Malaysia

Association chairman agreed, saying that having a common visa "is not a dream" and was workable.

A regular traveller to Southeast Asia, Roels also praised Dr Mahathir's idea for Asean countries to jointly promote the region.

"Yes, indeed it is very nice to have an Asean village at travel fairs. Saves money!"

Another delegate, hotelier Datuk Eric Lim said, Dr Ma-

hathir's ideas were indeed viable as long as Asean countries could work in unison.

"It is an avenue for us to look at," he said

More than 1,000 delegates from Asean countries are on the island for the conference which is part of the Asean Tourism Forum (ATF).

ATF, a Malaysian initiative, was first held in 1981. This is the fifth time Malaysia is hosting the event.