

'Selamat Datang!'

With Malaysia celebrating 50 years of Independence and hosting Visit Malaysia Year next year, how are the hotels gearing up for the expected influx of visitors to our shores? ■ By Heikal Abdul Mutadir

AS 2007 has been declared Visit Malaysia Year (VMY) to commemorate the nation's 50th year of Independence, can Malaysia cope with the expected influx of tourists into the country?

According to government estimates, some 20 million foreign tourists will flock to the country next year. What comes to mind is, will the hotel industry manage?

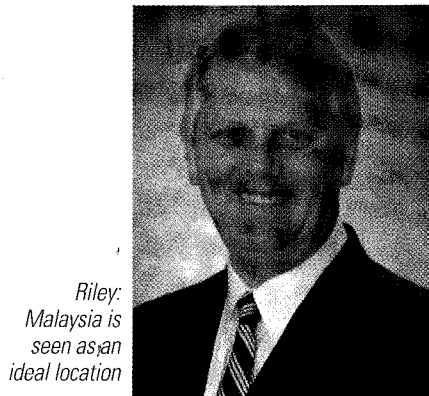
Malaysian Association of Hotels (MAH) executive director Sarjit Singh is confident it will. He says the hotels have more than enough rooms. And more are coming onstream with the impending completion of 10 more hotels.

Crowne Plaza Mutiara Kuala Lumpur's regional manager Philip Riley says he believes 2007 is going to be an important year for Malaysia's hotel and tourism industry.

For the hotel industry, the emphasis will be on the MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences and events) programme to attract business associations to organise their events in Malaysia. 'Malaysia is seen as an ideal location, peaceful and safe, and with a stable government,' he says.

According to MAH, Malaysia has 2,224 hotels, including resorts, chalets and others, as at August 2006, offering a total of 151,135 rooms.

Of that figure, 429 hotels are registered with MAH, which in July reported an occupancy rate of 74% for them. Average



Riley: Malaysia is seen as an ideal location

room rate was RM183, generating revenue of RM198 million.

MAH's statistics show that tourists from the Middle East and West Asia make up the majority of those visiting Malaysia.

The previous two VMYs in 1990 and 1994 attracted 7.43 million and 7.2 million visitors respectively. Revenue generated was RM4.5 billion and RM8.3 billion.

Seeing the success of the first event, for which the government had allocated only a nominal amount, it increased its allocation for the subsequent VMY to RM276 million.

Today, tourism is the second most profitable sector in the country, after manufacturing.

In the 2007 Budget, the government has allocated RM1.2 billion for the tourism



Sarjit: Taking a serious view of visitors' safety

industry. The Tourism Ministry has requested a further RM6 billion to be spent on tourism-based infrastructure such as theme and recreation parks, marinas, airstrips and others. The tourism industry is expected to generate revenue of RM44.5 billion next year.

According to Riley, the government has found that its tourist arrival forecast in each year has always been surpassed by actual figures. 'There is a momentum for Kuala Lumpur and Malaysia,' he says.

Riley also points out that Malaysia is one of the cheapest cities for five-star accommodation. 'I foresee an increase in rates in a couple of years as rates here are cheaper than in other Asean countries. Hotels in cities like Singapore, Hong Kong and even Hanoi and Jakarta are charging higher than in Malaysia.'

■ Number of Hotels in Malaysia

5-Star	4-Star	3-Star	2-Star	1-Star	Unrated	Budget	Total
86	87	149	161	88	1,524	305	2,224

Sarjit says in preparing for Visit Malaysia Year 2007, the hotel industry has emphasised three key areas: cleanliness, services and security.

He says every hotel has at least one trainer on hand to ensure new staff members are properly trained. 'We want to portray an image of service with a smile to give tourists a favourable impression of the country,' he says.

However, both Sarjit and Riley agree that among the various divisions in the hotel industry, service remains a problematic area.

'It is hard to get skilled staff,' says Riley. 'Locals don't want to work in the housekeeping, laundry and bell-boy sections.'

Sarjit says the younger staff members, who tend to make the bulk of the service division, are prone to high turnovers. As

such, experienced housekeepers are in high demand.

'We also try to improve the skills of our workforce,' says Sarjit. In line with this, the industry operates a training centre called MAHTEC (Malaysian Association of Hotels Training Education Centre), which offers the Diploma in Hospitality Industry.

Riley says his hotel provides training to all staff regardless of their experience. He views such training as important as guests prefer consistency in service.

Sarjit says the government is also helping the hotel industry by facilitating the recruitment of foreign workers.

All said and done, how the hotel industry performs would depend a lot on the tourism situation, the country's image in the eyes of foreigners, and external developments. In 2003, the

SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) and avian flu outbreaks and the American invasion of Iraq resulted in a decline in the number of foreign visitors to Malaysia.

A worrying trend is that some Western tourists may already have their own perception of Malaysia as an Islamic country, despite encouragement by Tourism Minister Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor for tourists to visit such countries to know them better.

To show that Malaysia is committed to the welfare of visitors, much thought has been given to visitors' safety. 'We advise our hotels to implement the use of CCTV in public areas within and outside the hotels to ensure that guests are safe,' says Sarjit. 'We also hold seminars on security management and other meetings regularly, during which security managers meet and exchange ideas.'

He says satisfied visitors are an asset as they may not only want to return, but may also encourage others. 'Tourists are money-spenders. When they visit Malaysia, everyone benefits.' **mb**