

GEARING UP FOR A BUSY TOURISM YEAR

2007 promises to be an exciting year for the tourism industry. In an effort to further promote Malaysia's image as a popular international tourist destination, the government has declared 2007 as Visit Malaysia Year (VMY). This is the third time that authorities have embarked on this campaign, following two previous successful efforts in the early 1990s. The first VMY campaign, started back in 1990, managed to draw in a total of 7.4 million visitors, a considerable increase from 4.8 million in the previous year. The campaign was an unexpected success, especially given the modest amount allocated by the government for the campaign. The subsequent VMY campaign, held in 1994, brought in 7.2 million visitors, boosting earnings by RM8.3 billion.

Tourism authorities have embarked on a series of promotional activities to drum up the publicity for the VMY campaign. This included international road shows and sales missions to several ASEAN countries, our largest tourist market, as well to upcoming segments like India, China, Russia and the Middle East. Even the hotel industry is making preparations for the expected influx of visitors, placing high focus on key areas like cleanliness, services and security. All this attention on tourism is hardly surprising. Tourism remains one of the important industries for the country. Last year, the industry recorded 16.43 million of arrivals and receipts amounting close to RM32 billion. This makes tourism the second largest foreign exchange earning industry. The target for 2006 is set at 17.6 million tourists, which will bring in RM35.2 billion in revenue. With the Visit Year campaign next year, the Tourism Ministry hopes to push this number higher to some 20 million visitors. This will mean a potential earning of a hefty RM44.5 billion.

Visit Year campaigning is one of the most effective ways of increasing tourist numbers, allowing countries to showcase their unique attractions. The Visit Thailand Year in 1987, which was the first in Southeast Asia, saw an increase in

arrivals by an impressive 23 per cent (3.5 million) over the previous year. Encouraged by Thailand's success, other Asian countries decided to jump on the bandwagon. The Visit Indonesia Year campaign in 1991 was able to increase arrivals by over 19 per cent to around 3.1 million. To encourage an even larger number of visitors, the government declared the rest of 1990s 'Visit Indonesia Decade'. Despite negative media coverage and calls for boycott, the Myanmar's Visit Year campaign, which ran from late 1996 till end of 1997, saw arrivals rise from around 164,000 in 1996 to nearly 189,000 the following year.

The Malaysian government is optimistic that the third edition of the VMY campaign will replicate the success of its previous two VMY campaigns. Providing full backing, the government provided an allocation of RM149 million in the Budget solely for the purpose for promoting the VMY 2007. Tour operators operating inbound tours were also given tax exemption for the next five years till 2011. Given the extra publicity, there is much at stake for the tourism industry. The last thing the industry needs is negative publicity that will tarnish the country's image and discourage tourists from visiting the country. One area that requires extra attention is security and safety. A high crime image can be detrimental to a destination. The latest national crime index showed an overall increase of 12.6 per cent over the first nine months of this year with a total of 170,481 crimes reported. Petty crimes including purse snatching and pick pocketing have become increasingly rampant in the country. With this in mind, authorities are beefing up security and safety measures to ensure that the country is a safe place for all tourists. The country's police force has been allocated an additional budget of RM260 million to acquire more police personnel and patrol vehicles to improve security, particularly in popular public places.

Other areas that need looking into include the availability of more public amenities and the maintenance of tourist spots. But most importantly, there is an urgent need to work on improving our hospitality skills from the frontliners right

down to the man in the street. This was one of the objectives of the preparatory programme 'Malaysia Welcomes the World', which was conceived to further make Malaysia a tourist-friendly country. Tourism is a people-pleasing business. The country's alluring tropical islands, golden sandy beaches, charming hill resorts, magnificent rainforests and unique cultural heritage are of little value if our service quality are not up to par.

In just a matter of weeks, all eyes will be on the tourism industry as the country prepares to welcome tourists from all over the world. The VMY 2007, which coincide the nation's Golden Independence Anniversary, has scheduled an all-year-long festivals, celebrations and events. If all goes well, the campaign will create spin-offs in the years to come, ensuring that the Malaysian tourism industry stays on track to achieve its 24.6 million target by 2010.

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