

Travel and Tourism: Past, Present and Future

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In the history of world tourism, Malaysia is a relatively new kid on the block. Coming from a background in agriculture, it wasn't easy to convince the Malaysian Government of the potential of tourism in those days. But, steps were taken towards making tourism one of the nation's economic pillars.

Today, tourism is an important economic activity benefiting various business areas, such as hospitality, transportation, retail, and recreational and leisure facilities.

Malaysia's tourism industry currently ranks as the second largest foreign exchange earner after the export of manufactured goods and the sixth largest contributor to the economy, contributing a total of RM161 billion or 14.9% of our GDP in 2014.

In 2014, tourism brought in RM19.4 billion of investment and contributed a total of 1.77 million jobs (13 percent of total employment).

Its upward progress is a result of the active participation of both the public and private sector in undertaking vigorous promotion and marketing, as well as improving competitiveness of tourism products and services to sustain interest among visitors to Malaysia.

Malaysia's success story can also be tagged to one cornerstone development in the history of tourism – the branding of Malaysia Truly Asia in 1999. The popular opinion then was that Malaysia had no distinction or uniqueness because of its racial diversity. However, we came to realise that Malaysia's racial diversity was the very element that made our country unique. And we celebrated that diversity.

Today, that brand has earned Malaysia its popularity, and accolades from all across the world have poured in. Ever since the launch of "Malaysia, Truly Asia", we have increased brand awareness, tourist arrivals and receipts – from 10.2 million tourists in 2000 to 27.4 million in 2014; from RM17.3 billion in tourism revenues in 2000 to RM72 billion in 2014 when we organised the 4th Visit Malaysia Year campaign.

While those early years in tourism were about creating awareness for Malaysia, today, the ballgame is different. The tourism industry has evolved and changes are ever-present, demanding destinations like Malaysia to evolve with new strategies and action plans, as well as leverage on the opportunities available. These opportunities for tourism in Malaysia to continue to grow come in the form of the stronger presence of low-cost carriers, connectivity to secondary destinations/cities, the expansion of Middle Eastern airlines to global destinations, new growth markets in areas of special interest, and others.

The role of technology in travel decision-making and the growth of social media as a promotion platform cannot be ignored either. Tourism Malaysia has given more attention to social media marketing lately in recognition of its important role in the whole process of traveling in this digital age, i.e. providing inspiration to travel, pre-travel research, on-travel help and post-travel commentary.

Our social media marketing strategy focuses on audience engagement and encouraging conversations through various key platforms, such as the Cuti-Cuti 1Malaysia and Truly Asia Facebook pages, Twitter, Instagram, blog, and YouTube channel.

For Malaysia, the responsibility is big. Under the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), tourism has been identified as a key growth industry for the economy, with focus given to developing tourism in the areas of affordable luxury, ecotourism, family-friendly destination, business tourism, and events, entertainment and sports. Malaysia is eyeing 36 million tourist arrivals contributing to RM168 billion in tourist receipts by the year 2020.

The past few years have seen Malaysia building towards these goals. Malaysia developed its first premium outlet park in Johor, and this was quickly followed by the opening of the Mitsui Outlet Park near Kuala Lumpur International Airport, and more recently, Freeport A'Famosa Outlet Village in Melaka.

Family-friendly attractions were unveiled, among them Asia's first Legoland theme park, Kidzania and Hello Kitty Town. Meanwhile, works are underway for the Movie Animation Park Studios in Perak and 20th Century Fox theme park in Genting Highlands, which will add to Malaysia's attraction as a family holiday destination.

The shopping precinct of Bukit Bintang-Kuala Lumpur City Centre saw a facelift with better infrastructure for shoppers, while efforts were carried out to boost the vibrancy of the shopping precinct.

All these efforts have borne fruit with increasingly more tourists choosing Malaysia for their holidays. Since the ETP was first launched, arrivals have climbed from 24.58 million in 2010 to 27.44 million in 2014.

However, the year 2014 proved to be challenging with several incidents having far-reaching impacts in the industry well into 2015. A Malaysia Year of Festivals campaign was launched this year to revitalize tourism in Malaysia. More than 200 events were organized to highlight Malaysia's diverse culture and festivals to attract tourists. Despite this effort made to restore confidence in Malaysia, the first half of 2015 saw a 9.5% decline in tourist arrivals.

Setbacks are part of life, and moving forward is the key to overcome the situation. The tourism industry has time and again shown its resilience under pressure. We will continue to explore new source markets, improve on accessibility and intensify our promotions by utilising new platforms, among other things.

Focus will also be given to strengthening our position in the ASEAN market. With a market of over 600 million people and combined GDP of nearly USD3 trillion, ASEAN is one of the world's largest markets for goods and services, including tourism.

An important milestone towards developing ASEAN tourism is the GOASEAN initiative, which is Malaysia's ideation in creating the world's first ASEAN travel channel available on multiple platforms including TV, web, social media and mobile app.

With rising competition, constant threat of natural disasters, volatile currency and economic trends, and changing travel patterns and preferences, there is no denying that challenges in the tourism industry will only get tougher in the coming years.

And yet, it is in the face of these adversities that perhaps travel is ever more vital to mankind. In the words of writer Agnes Repplier, "The impulse to travel is one of the hopeful symptoms of life."

For sure, it will be a test of our endurance, spirit of innovation and flexibility to act and react in the landscape of tourism today. It is my hope that the tourism industry worldwide will continue to flourish and that people will never lose sight to making travel as the antidote to life.

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