

## HIGH-YIELD TOURISM

# Big data plays an important role in reviving tourism industry

**UNLIKE** other retirees, Zulhisham Ayob never sat idle. Instead, he moved to Terengganu from his cosy home in Shah Alam to develop four properties into high-end tourism products — high-end accommodations for tourists.

Now close to completion, he has turned an old kampung house in Kampung Seberang Baroh into a villa, and he is renovating a two-storey house in Kuala Terengganu into a fully equipped homestay, and building two luxurious villas overlooking the Batu Buruk beach and Sg Terengganu river.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Zulhisham decided to close down his marketing communications company in Bangsar and made Kuala Terengganu his base for his new business venture in tourism.

Zulhisham is a maverick businessman, as he ventured into developing his properties when others believed that the tourism industry is collapsing or has been on life support since the pandemic struck.

He's indeed a non-conformist as he believes tourists, both domestic and foreign, need some-

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**ROHIMAN HAROON**

thing quite different from the ordinary. He believes he's providing a more than just comfortable living, a home away from home, for his would-be clients.

Not only that, he believes Terengganu is a gem, rich in culture and food, as well as ecotourism and well-endowed with lots of places of interest to visit especially the islands. For him, Terengganu has not fully explored its potential in tourism.

Under the Movement Control Order that started in March, the tourism industry was reported to have suffered losses of about RM100 billion, with 3.5 million job losses and the closure of accommodations, big and small.

Even the World Travel and

Tourism Council was not ecstatic about recovery, predicting that global tourism would gain a foothold only over the next two to four years. It's all gloom and doom for now.

Hence, when the government unveiled the National Tourism Policy (2020-2030) to revive the tourism industry, tourism players should be pleased, although it would take some time for a full recovery.

Apart from transforming the country into a top ecotourism destination, Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister Datuk Seri Nancy Shukri was reported to have said the tourism policy focuses on attracting quality or high-yield tourists to increase their spending in the sector.

While the government is focusing on sustainable tourism and boosting revenue through tourism, it's hardened by the fact that the tourism industry needs high-spender tourists who are willing to spend more when they visit the country. It is a sheer want of quality tourists versus the need for quantity of tourists in receipts.

I'm sure the government has

formulated plans to attract high spenders from the Middle East, China, Japan, Europe and the rest of Asia. These tourists are what we want. They are the ones who would purchase needful things at the high-end shopping malls, live like kings and queens in five- or six-star hotels and dine at the best restaurants the city can offer.

Nevertheless, we should also welcome backpackers and budget travellers, both foreigners and locals, who would usually find cheaper accommodation in the city (or places of interests that offer white-water rafting and ecotourism products), eat our fast food of roti canai and savour teh tarik at roadside stalls and spend their money on cheap Malaysian-made souvenirs.

These tourists will definitely help operators of *inap desa* (rural homestays) and small restaurants in places like Gopeng in Perak or Sedim in Kedah in generating a modest income. I'm sure the new tourism policy is looking into the plight of small operators, too.

On a related matter, I'm delighted to learn that the govern-

ment is venturing into digitalisation for tourism, besides deploying social media platforms in its integrated marketing campaign. If digitalisation means the use of Big Data, this will be the way forward.

What Big Data does is that Tourism Malaysia can computationally understand and analyse large data sets that could reveal patterns, trends, and associations especially relating to the tourists' needs and wants.

It would help the authorities understand and predict the sorts of niches and generic services needed by tourists when they travel to the country's places of interest. Tourism Malaysia would understand tourists' behaviour better and come up with attractive tourist packages.

Surely enough, it would benefit industry players to work better and smarter as with the right technology, they would overcome the problems besieging them in the current new normal even quicker.

The writer, a former NST journalist, is a film scriptwriter whose penchant is finding new food haunts