

Inbound tourism will suffer more if borders remain shut

Wednesday, February 9th, 2022

by ANIS HAZIM

THE year 2022 could be another year of despair if Malaysia continues to close its borders for **international tourism**.

Last year ended on a promising note after the government was expected to allow international tourists by January this year, however, the surge of the Omicron variant shattered that plan.

Malaysian Inbound Tourism Association (MITA) president Uzaidi Udanis said there is no doubt that the travel agencies in the country rely heavily on inbound tourism.

"We are depending so much on the international market — we have about 60 million international tourists every year before the Covid-19 pandemic hit," Uzaidi told *The Malaysian Reserve*.

Yesterday, National Recovery Council chairman Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said **the council is proposing to fully reopen the country's borders as early as March 1**, without the need for mandatory quarantine.

However, Muhyiddin said travellers must take the Covid-19 test immediately before their departure and upon arrival in the country, as per the recommendations by the Health Ministry.

Uzaidi said the local travel agencies cannot depend solely on domestic tourism, which happens to be seasonal.

"We need an international market because we can't depend so much on the domestic market. As you know, domestic tourism is a seasonal market for us.

"So, we require some consistent tourists from the international market, especially from Asian countries."

He noted that top tourist spots like Cameron Highlands are witnessing a downtrend in the number of local tourists compared to last year when the Movement Control Order was lifted.

"Domestic tourism is good for the country like we saw from last year — for example, Langkawi and Cameron Highlands were visited by many locals.

"But again we cannot depend so much on domestic and we really need to expand it to the international market," he added.

According to Uzaidi, travellers from Asean countries are looking forward to visiting Malaysia once it opens for international tourism.

"We are hoping that the international borders will open soon, not just Langkawi. The Asean countries are looking forward to coming to our country. So, we hope that Malaysia will start reopening its borders soon."

He also hopes that the government will come out with more initiatives like the "Langkawi travel bubble" for other parts of states, as well as the vaccinated travel lanes with neighbouring countries.

The MITA president said apart from reopening borders, the government needs to formulate flexible SOPs as opposed to "strict" travel requirements and procedures upon arrival in Malaysia.

"Tourists who want to come to Malaysia may feel hassled by all the procedures. The twice PCR test and one week of quarantine are costly and time-consuming. We hope there will be more flexibility on this."

He noted that continuous closed borders will affect other businesses, such as tourist attractions like the zoo and theme parks.

While the inbound tourism remains closed, Uzaidi said the travel agencies are actively promoting outbound tourism for Malaysians, which he deems a "loss" for Malaysia.

"Currently, the travel agencies are mostly depending on outbound tourism with the most popular countries now are Turkey and Dubai.

"In fact, we (Malaysia) are one of the top outbound tourism providers and we are actually worried about this because we want to bring more tourists to Malaysia and not otherwise."

He opined that the government need to implement a balanced action in order to bring international tourists to Malaysia, while constraining the Covid-19 viruses.

"We need the international tourists to generate income for our country, so that we can maintain our national assets and the investment that we have already made," he further said.

Australia has also announced the reopening of its borders to international tourists from Feb 21, especially for those who have completed their vaccination.