Japanese love ‘long stays’ in Malaysia

PRIME DESTINATION: Malaysia My Second Home programme a hit

A GOOD number of visitors made an incessant flow to a dozen Malaysian booths at a one-day event last month in Tokyo's Big Site centre, asking questions and gathering information about visa, local life and cost of living in Malaysia. It was the venue of the Long Stay Fair 2014, which housed more than 100 booths by 95 exhibitors from 27 countries and areas, and pulled in 10,542 visitors during the day.

Year after year, the Japanese are increasingly interested in a new style of overseas travel, called “long stay”, where visitors stay for weeks, months or years. Malaysia has been a popular pick as a prospective destination. Today, more than 18 million Japanese travel overseas every year. Most of them are repeat travellers, who are pretty much done with sightseeing and guided shopping in group tours. They are increasingly interested in experiencing direct exchanges with local people, or living the latter’s lifestyle and learning the culture or language. One estimate says nearly 1.5 million Japanese enjoy “long stay” abroad, following the European style of vacationing or lifestyle of pensioners.

Malaysia has been ranked on top for eight consecutive years since 2006 among the popular “long-stay” destinations, according to annual surveys with prospective Japanese “long-stay” visitors over 40 that were conducted by the Long Stay Foundation in Tokyo. The foundation has promoted such tours since 1992 and observed a steady increase in travellers.

According to its officials, Malaysia is popular not only because it is close to Japan — a seven-hour flight — or because it offers a nice tropical climate and lower costs. Many Japanese are also attracted to the country’s safety and Malaysians’ fluency in English.

The country is free of natural disasters and offers contemporary urban conveniences. Some of these are not available in other Asian destinations. Several books about “long stay” and opportunities in Malaysia — including investment opportunities, education levels and medical services — are popular. Now, major travel agencies, language school, investment counselling firms and hospitals in Malaysia, as well as Japan, are joining the market and pushing the trend.

“The Malaysian government’s Malaysia My Second Home (MM2H) programme has worked out well,” says Ryuji Funayama, chairman of the foundation. Launched in 2002, MM2H offers 10-year multiple-entry visas, coupled with special privileges. The visa holders can bring their spouses and children, purchase homes, open bank accounts, bring their maids, import their cars, make investments or start businesses. All these provide a sense of ease and freedom to “long-stay” planners in Japan.

To obtain it, applicants need to fulfil challenging financial requirements, such as presenting a financial statement of RM350,000 or more and a minimum monthly income of RM10,000 if applicants are over 50. (Younger applicants need to present a financial statement of RM500,000 or more.)

Many retirees in Japan today have relatively large pensions, typically 200,000 yen to 300,000 yen (RM5,722 to RM8,583) a month, thanks to Japan’s glorious economic years. According to the Japan Institute of Life Insurance, a senior couple in Japan, who already own a house or flat, still need 354,000 yen a month to live in reasonable comfort. It is no wonder that they seek a new life outside Japan, where their yen stretches in value. They like the idea of an exotic, but safe, comfortable and less costly life abroad.

From 2002 to September this year, 3,491 Japanese had participated in the programme, according to the Malaysian Tourism and Culture Ministry. Other participants include those from China, the United Kingdom, Singapore and Australia. On a yearly basis, there are 500 Japanese among the 3,000 MM2H participants.

“We can offer cultural diversity, in addition to affinity and familiarity to Japanese people,” said Tan Sri Dr Ng Yen Yen, chairman of Tourism Malaysia. A friendly and “strong” relationship with Japan since the early 1980s had fostered a mutually comfortable understanding between the countries and their peoples, she noted.

She attended the fair after visiting several Japanese cities to promote tourism to Malaysia, and saw hundreds of Japanese showing up to promotional events in each city.

A new challenge for her and her team will be to increase the number of younger “long-stay” visitors from Japan. The charms and advantages of Malaysia are attracting not only retirees, but also young families and couples already exposed to life and culture abroad. They are looking at opportunities for English lessons or investments, and schools for their children.