Tourism needs a giant leap forward

FROM Nov 1, Indian and Chinese tourists were allowed to apply for visa on arrival (VOA) at the immigration checkpoint of the Second Link in Tuas, Johor.

Tourism and Culture Minister Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz said he would propose for waiver of visa fees for Chinese tourists visiting Malaysia under group tours.

While these measures are progressive, they are baby steps compared to what other countries had done to attract more tourists.

The VOA may take only 10 minutes to process and cost RM330. It attracts foreigners eager to enter Malaysia but not those with options to visit other countries.

In Singapore alone, there are 87,000 expatriates from India. Granting visa exemption to Indian tourists would see a large number of these expatriates and their families visiting Malaysia instead of Thailand and Indonesia.

Last year, visitors from Singapore, Indonesia, China and India made up 50.6%, 9.7%, 7.7% and 2.7% respectively of total arrivals, or about 70% combined.

Half of our visitors had always been Singaporeans but given their small population, they would not be able to generate 18 million arrivals to make up the 36 million tourists we have targeted for 2020. But we can achieve the target by granting visa exemptions for Chinese and Indian nationals.

If so, our 2020 arrivals are likely to be 10.8 million from Singapore, 5.4 million each from Indonesia and China, and 3.6 million from India.

Percentage-wise, Singapore’s share would decrease to 30%, Indonesia and China would increase to 15% each, and India 10%.

Waiving visa fees for tour groups is not good enough when other countries in the region have granted visa exemptions, such as Japan, Thailand and from next year Indonesia.

Apart from the fact that many people are travelling as free independent travellers (FITs), airlines could immediately add more flights and routes to countries with huge population upon being granted visa exemption.

They could then fill up their aircraft with promotional fares when necessary and draw many people to travel at short notice, without the hassle to apply for visas.

While other countries are seen as more tourist-friendly with open invitations by granting visa exemptions, our VOA facility is like a closed door, opening only when visitors come knocking, with no guarantee of being allowed in.

We can impose such conditions on those who had to enter our country, but for millions of tourists, they would rather visit countries that are more welcoming.

Malaysia used to be looked upon as the success story in attracting tourists. But some countries have raced past and left us behind.

We are no longer the leader, nor a good follower when we cannot match the measures rolled out by our neighbours.

For example, Indonesia has not only thrown visa requirements out of the window for five countries including China, it will also accept third-country visas from next year.

Travellers who have gained entry to Singapore and Malaysia will be granted visa-free access to Indonesia.

But Malaysia is in a strong position to take a giant leap forward as we are empowered by a tourism cabinet committee.

With the looming introduction of the GST in April next year and its initial negative impact, any measure taken by the government to raise economic activities would bring much cheer to the rakyat, such as visa exemptions that will give our inbound tourism a much needed shot in the arm.

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