

Crucial for Sarawak to step-up on aviation industry, a key role to drive tourism industry, businesses

KUALA LUMPUR: Sarawak will see its economic pie doubling with a forecasted gross domestic product (GDP) of RM282 billion by 2030 from RM136 billion in 2019 following the state government's Post-Covid-19 Development Strategy (PCDS) launched last year.

Investment and economic analyst Pankaj Kumar said while the state government has put in place a strategic roadmap to achieve its plan in the next ten years, it is even more crucial for Sarawak to step up on its aviation industry, which plays a key role to not only drive the tourism industry but businesses as well.

"More than 5.95 million vaccine doses have been administered to individuals across Sarawak, with the state also recording the highest vaccination rate of children aged five to 11 years in the country.

"With the economy opening up, it is time for Sarawak to strategise and bring in more tourist arrivals," he said in a statement today.

Pankaj said unlike Sabah, which has only the Kota Kinabalu International Airport (KKIA), Sarawak has two international airports, the Kuching International Airport (KIA) and the Miri International Airport (MIA).

However, KKIA has direct flights to more international destinations, including Bandar Sri Begawan, Tokyo (seasonal), Manila, Singapore, Busan, Seoul, and Taipei.

The connection to the two South Korean cities saw Sabah attracting almost 400,000 tourists in 2019.

For KIA, the only direct flights available are those from Bandar Sri Begawan, Singapore, while for MIA, Scoot Tigerair is currently the only airline that offers two direct flights from Singapore to Miri per week, despite the city's international airport status, Pankaj pointed out.

He adds that both KKIA and KIA and MIA are well connected with the domestic touchpoints from Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Johor Bahru as they are the main entry points for Malaysians to travel to East Malaysia. However, connectivity with international cities is lacking.

"Being the largest state in Malaysia, Sarawak is well-positioned to be a tourism hub in Borneo as we have seen the data that shows it has tremendous growth potential in terms of tourist arrivals.

"Both Kuching and Miri, as international airports, is well connected within the nearest other international cities, but only if connectivity is there, especially cities from Indonesia, Philippines, and Australia and to a larger extent city from North Asia like Shenzhen and Haikou," he said.

In terms of infrastructure, Sarawak has spent substantially on airport infrastructure, especially with the new airports in Mukah (in June 2021) and other expansions in other airports.

However, Pankaj opines that the two main airports, KIA and MIA, need further investments as both have outlived their present capacity.

KIA handled some 5.96 million passengers, while MIA served 2.43 million passengers in 2019, while the design capacity of both of these airports is at five million and two million, respectively.

He said that the federal government would need to provide further allocation for expanding these two airports, especially concerning the baggage handling system, airline check-in counters, additional immigration counters, and larger departure areas, plus increasing the number of gates.

"Sarawak, which accounts for about 9.5 per cent of the nation's GDP in 2020 according to the **Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM)**, has tremendous potential, especially concerning its tourism industry.

"However, the state and federal government needs to work together to bring Sarawak to the next level with better connectivity, improved airport capabilities, and make Sarawak a true frontier Malaysian state," Pankaj said.

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