

Domestic tourism picking up pace

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia is seeing a boom in domestic tourism despite the Omicron scare as the long year-end school holidays begin.

Malaysian Inbound Tourism Association president Uzaidi Udanis said concerns about the Covid-19 Omicron variant had not disrupted the industry's recovery with no major booking cancellations recorded.

"Everyone (businesses and the public) is being cautious about the Omicron variant, but we have learnt a lot since last year and Malaysians know better on how to protect themselves.

"Malaysia is one of the most vaccinated countries against Covid-19, thanks to the government's efforts, which played a role in reviving the tourism industry as people are more willing to travel now.

"There are still a high number of bookings. Many hotels and accommodations in Selangor and premium hotels in Langkawi, for instance, have been fully booked this month," he told the New Straits Times.

An influx of tourists from Singapore, he said, was expected as there were six daily flights between Changi Airport and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport under the vaccinated travel lane scheme, from which they could travel onward to local destinations.

He said one of the challenges was that some hotels and local businesses, such as the food and beverage sector and housekeeping in hospitality, could not operate at full capacity due to manpower shortages.

"Job cuts and the 'Great Resignation' hit the industry during the pandemic, but we are prepared for this problem compared with having no business at all during the lockdown."

Uzaidi said although experts had predicted that the global tourism would recover only by 2024, Malaysia had to gear itself for the international market now as the country competed with neighbouring countries and emerging tourism markets, such as Saudi Arabia.

The Department of Statistics data showed that Malaysia's domestic tourism spending plunged 60.8 per cent last year to RM40.4 billion compared with RM103.2 billion in 2019 as domestic visitor arrivals decreased due to Covid-19 movement restrictions.

Overall, domestic visitor arrivals decreased by 44.9 per cent to record 131.7 million visitors compared with 239.1 million visitors in 2019.

Malaysian Association of Hotels chief executive officer Yap Lip Seng said there had not been significant cancellations for the domestic market and not specifically related to Omicron, but the Langkawi international travel bubble, apart from restrictive requirements, saw cancellations due to the growing list of countries recording Omicron cases.

Yap said concerns had been raised about the Omicron variant by domestic travellers, but Malaysians were still confident of travelling, particularly this year end.

"Without conclusive studies on Omicron, whether it differs from other variants of concern, the same standard operating procedures and preventive measures taken by the industry should be sufficient, as long as they are being adhered to strictly."

Yap said some hotels in certain locality or locations faced manpower shortages due to the uptick in tourists.

"Hotel operations are unique in a sense that manpower needs are driven by tourism demand.

"Most, if not all, hotels are facing challenges in balancing manpower needs on weekdays versus weekends and holiday periods.

"Without international tourists, hotels are left with gaps where occupancy rates can be too low on certain days and too high on some.

"Hotels will not be able to afford hiring full manpower on a permanent basis, but instead rely on temporary workers on peak days or contractual service providers."

Hotels, he said, would, however, take extra steps to manage expectations of guests and ensure SOP compliance, besides reducing inventory of rooms and limiting customers to ensure timely delivery of service.

"Hotels are also engaging part-timers and freelance workers, including special groups, such as single mothers, offering attractive rates and potentially work contracts to recruit more manpower on top of redeploying back office employees for the purpose."

Malaysian Association of Tour and Travel Agents (Matta) spokesman and honorary treasurer Nigel Wong said while domestic travel was expected to do well given the current border restrictions, domestic tourism was also heavily influenced by seasonal trends and tourism stakeholders would continue to struggle until there were more international tourist arrivals.

Wong said the government should provide additional financial stimulus in the form of more accessible grants and funding to help tourism stakeholders weather the situation and, more importantly, to prepare for the full opening of borders.

"Matta calls on the government to fully support The Travel Safe Alliance, an internationally recognised initiative by Matta, the Malaysian Association of Hotels, Malaysian Association of Convention and Exhibition Organisers and Suppliers, and the Malaysian Aviation Group, to provide a first-to-last-mile travel safe experience to travellers.

"This programme is geared towards the needs of foreign tourists and will be important in promoting Malaysia as a safe and attractive destination to international tourists."

<https://www.nst.com.my/news/nation/2021/12/753761/domestic-tourism-picking-pace>