

LETTER | Cherry-picking tourists may stunt the sector's rejuvenation

LETTER | In business practices, cherry-picking means choosing the best customers and rejecting the rest. In that sense, metred taxi drivers were notorious for choosing passengers and trips

However, they no longer monopolise the service after e-hailing apps started to offer better drivers, newer vehicles and lower fares.

In the past, instead of using the metre as mandated, some cab drivers fixed exorbitant fares and passengers would have to take it or leave it. Even when metres were used, they could be programmed by technicians in taxi metre companies to clock faster and display higher fares.

Therefore, fixing fares was not always initiated by cabbies but also by smart tourists who were prepared to pay up to 50 percent more than normal fares and not use the metre that may clock several times more. Otherwise, passengers will have to cough up the fare shown on the metre or quarrel.

Recently, Sarawak Premier Abang Johari Openg said tourism players should focus on attracting premium tourists, instead of mass tourists, who would not mind spending more to get good services during their stay in the state.

He said, "For Sarawak, we go for prime (premium tourists). This is why we organise business events and we organised (the) Rainforest (World Music Festival to attract tourists). These are special tourists; they are not mass tourists".

The following day, Tourism, Creative Industry and Performing Arts Minister Abdul Karim Rahman Hamzah stated that the ministry does not want the state to be too open to tourists as this could attract irresponsible people who may damage Sarawak's treasures.

He noted that many tourists occasionally scribble on cave walls and some even take stones with them. "This can harm our treasures, which is why we want quality tourists, whether local or foreign, and this has been our policy since the beginning".

So, Sarawak will be embarking on a two-pronged approach. One is to target high-spending tourists and the other is to ensure responsible tourism, which has not been quite successful, as Abdul Karim himself had stated that this has been the policy since the beginning.

Nevertheless, all issues could be better addressed when there is a clearer understanding of what tourism and recreational activities are, and the difference between foreign tourists and local visitors. It would be unfair and even backfire if matters were painted with a broad brush.

Tourism: A multilayered industry

While attending training, most industry players would be lost for words when asked to define tourism. Those who attempted would give academic answers which they have read or studied in a tourism programme but travel personnel ought to be moving from theory to practice.

As a trainer, I would tell travel and tour operators that they must look at tourism as a big business that includes major sectors such as airlines, road and rail transport, accommodations, food and beverage, entertainment, attractions and shopping, and they overlap many other industries.

Hence, tourism expenditures are even more important than headcounts and average lengths of stay are more significant than just tourist arrival figures. Interestingly in 2019, Saudi Arabia and China were among the top five countries for both per capita and per diem expenditures in Malaysia.

According to a comprehensive survey by the **Department of Statistics**, there were 239.1 million domestic visitors making 332.4 million trips and spending RM103.2 billion in 2019.

But all these figures range from travel and tour operators as expenditures were for shopping, automotive fuel, food and beverage, visiting households, accommodation, transport and others, with 3.1 percent for entrance fees or packages that could easily be booked directly with providers.

In other words, domestic tourism has little to do with travel and tour operators as 98.5 percent of domestic visitors use land transport, with most of them travelling in their own vehicles. They spent a whopping RM15.5 billion on automotive fuel alone, the second highest expenditure.

The main purpose for making domestic trips were visiting relatives and friends (42.3 percent), shopping (35.4 percent), holiday, leisure or relaxation (9.0 percent), entertainment, attending special events or sport (4.0 percent), medical treatment or wellness (4.0 percent), and the rest combined (5.3 percent).

Nearly all domestic travellers make do-it-yourself (DIY) arrangements that may include an outing to a beach or waterfall. These are not tourism but recreational activities in public spaces that are free of charge and bring little or no benefit to tourism operators.

But if these visitors were left unsupervised or unmonitored, vandalism could occur such as leaving graffiti on a wall or taking away items as souvenirs. If it is a popular heritage site, security guards must be present or at least keep an eye on what is happening using CCTV.

If they are treasured natural sites such as prehistoric caves, visitors must be escorted by nature guides to practise responsible tourism and ensure nothing is damaged or harmed. It is up to the authorities to introduce legislation to protect our natural treasures from being desecrated.

Otherwise, it would be impossible to tell in advance who could cause damage intentionally or accidentally, and for that matter who the high-spending tourists are. Although those that came to attend business events normally stay in five-star hotels, they may not spend on shopping.

Whereas many leisure tourists staying at tourist-class hotels spent large sums of money on shopping, foreign tourists spent more on shopping than accommodation, food and beverage combined, and even more so for domestic visitors.

All tourists are good tourists

While it is good to go for the upmarket, we should not discount travellers on a budget until there is a surplus of tourists. But there is a shortage of tourists everywhere and existing facilities were in place to cope with the large volume in 2019 and for Visit Malaysia Year 2020, which was cancelled.

Tourism is a volume game. A massive ecosystem drawing synergies from a variety of facilities is needed to ensure its vibrancy and sustainability. Whether they are high-spending or on a budget, all tourists would enjoy it when they could see and be happy with their personal choices.

Likewise, we have industry players catering to different niche markets. For accommodation, some prefer to offer five-star facilities, others budget or boutique hotels. For restaurants, they could be fine dining, fast or street foods, and together offer innumerable cuisines.

Tourists travel to see different places, people, buildings and sights, hear unfamiliar sounds and languages, experience exotic foods and smells, and touch things they wish to buy. They may do similar things within their groups but would be boring if everyone else is the same as them.

So, what we need to do is offer the greatest variety and think all tourists are good tourists. We should not be doubting whether mass tourism or passengers travelling on budget flights or guests staying in budget hotels have the money to spend or would act responsibly wherever they go.

Also, we should not look down on backpackers. They do have the money to spend except they wish to stretch it longer and soak in the place. If people in a small town or village could treat them with kindness, some could return later as big-time investors to pay back the folks.

Most backpackers have just completed their studies and wish to see the world before building their careers. They travel with their eyes and hearts wide open so as to graduate from the “University of Life”, and many would emerge as top corporate leaders within a decade or two.

Tourism is long-term work and many tourists make repeat visits. Visiting friends and relatives in Malaysia was the main purpose for 21.4 percent of all foreign tourists in 2015, 18.9 percent in 2016, 24.8 percent in 2017, 19.8 percent in 2018 and 25.5 percent in the first half of 2019.

All tourists should be welcomed and all of Malaysia should be known as being tourist friendly. The first impression always forms a lasting impression and the last thing we want is to have immigration officers making visitors feel unwelcomed by being unnecessarily suspicious.

Until we have more tourists than we can handle, we should not be choosy. If a particular tourist site such as a small island is overpacked, then it is time to go upmarket to reduce the number of visitors without losing revenue. Until then, all tourists should be regarded as good tourists.

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