

Malaysia: Standing out among the Crowd

Westerners have always been enthralled by the exoticism of Asia, and fantastic tales and adventures involving Asia have been told by many, some growing to legendary proportions. Asian countries know this, and have used it to their advantage to attract tourists to their countries.

Countries with a strong identifiable image like Egypt, China, and Japan, have no problems attracting visitors, nor do world class destinations like the Himalayas, Angkor Wat, or Bali. The sheer diversity of attractions that Asia offers can result in less famous countries in being relegated into obscurity. One country eager to avoid that fate is Malaysia.



One from Many

The country Malaysia is a young entity, coming into existence less than half a century ago. Made up of former British colonies in the Malay Peninsula and part of Borneo, the fledgling nation was more concerned with internal development and modernization in its early years. Promotion of tourism, although important, was not aggressively pursued.

It can be argued that it was during this period of rapid development, spurred in part by youthful nationalistic spirit, that the rich and colourful colonial heritage was stripped away and replaced with the dull humdrum of modern life. High rise buildings replaced quaint colonial structures, names of places and roads were changed to honour local personalities while many other important landmarks fell into disrepair.

To Know Malaysia Is to Love Malaysia

The year was 1990 when Malaysia geared up for its first serious attempt at promoting tourism with the launch of its “Visit Malaysia Year” campaign. This marked a departure from previous attempts to market Malaysia as a tropical paradise destination, which did not achieve great success as tourists were more interested in visiting better-known destinations such as Phuket and Bali in neighbouring Thailand and Indonesia. Tourists often deemed those destinations more “fun” as regulations were looser compared to Malaysia's stricter laws, especially regarding prostitution and drugs. Malaysia's attempts at marketing itself as a family-oriented destination prior to 1990 went largely unnoticed.



The first campaign in 1990 showcased an array of attractions, and focused on Malaysia's natural beauty. Eco-tourism and adventure tours highlighting the country's national parks and natural attractions like the Niah Caves and the Orang Utan rose to prominence. It was a rousing success for Malaysia as the country registered over seven million visitors that year alone.

Jack of All Trades

Following the initial success in 1990, Malaysia grew ambitious and began to diversify, targeting various niche markets in an effort to reduce dependence of a narrow range of tourist attractions. Shopping, culture, beaches, conventions - you name it, Malaysia had it!

Needless to say, the diversification came at a cost, as the different and often conflicting images projected by Malaysia caused confusion among potential visitors and the country lost ground to well-designed and focused tourism campaigns organised by other neighbouring countries. One particular campaign that affected Malaysia greatly was the Amazing Thailand! campaign as it not only pulled in visitors from faraway but also revitalized Thailand as a tourist destination for local Malaysians.

Malaysia Truly Asia

Facing mounting competition from neighbouring South East Asian countries, Malaysia re-packaged its image, weaving the different images into a seamless tapestry that mirrored the multi ethnicity of its people. Comparing the large number of races in the country with the diversity of the Asian continent, Malaysia trumpeted that it truly is a microcosmic representation of Asia. This is reflected in its current tagline of Malaysia Truly Asia.

This repackaging along with several mega-projects, most notably the Petronas Twin Towers, have managed to reverse Malaysia's slide into obscurity and helped it establish some global recognition. In recent years, there has been an emphasis on the development of world class events, including the Sepang Formula One Grand Prix, the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition, as well as the bicycling world's Tour de Langkawi, to further burnish Malaysia's image as an international tourist destination.

So What Lies ahead for Malaysia?

Although the tourism industry is booming and is taken seriously by the government, the country will always have to stay on its toes to ensure that it is not eclipsed by competing campaigns. The country is now quicker to respond to new trends, as seen by its organised approach towards the fledgling medical and sports tourism sectors. Malaysia is also more open to leaning on some of its famous citizens, like the world-renowned shoe designer Jimmy Choo, and designing regional events around them. Malaysia has a long road ahead, but the journey promises to be an interesting adventure.



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