

The rise of fastidious tourists

The Covid-19 pandemic has certainly caught all of us off guard, severely impacting work, play and learning.

The Conditional Movement Control Order (CMCO), which was lifted on June 10, saw a massive increase in domestic tourism overnight. All the main tourist points of interest in Malaysia were heaving with tourists going about eating, shopping and sightseeing. The National Security Council Malaysia (MKN) drew up standard operating procedures (SOPs), together with the relevant ministries and agencies, for many economic sectors. These SOPs were to be enforced immediately by businesses and organisations. However, the onus is on business operators. The continuity of domestic tourism — without casualties from a third wave of Covid-19 infections — depends entirely on people conforming to the new normal. Despite handfuls of apathetic tourists here and there, the majority are extremely careful, especially those with children and the elderly. Whether we are gearing up for domestic or international tourism, we must conform to the new normal.

The Spanish Flu of 1918, which infected about a third of the world's population, saw a big increase in infected cases in the second and third waves. 'No matter what is being said or predicted about future travel, the certainty is that people will still travel but the kind of insouciance tourists are being transformed into fastidious tourists.' This will be more prevalent when more international borders are opened.

There are two sides to the coin, one being people's health and safety, and the other, their wages and income. Economic activity must go on in order to complete the cycle, enabling companies and organisations to supply tourism-re-



DR DAISY GAYATHRI
School of Hospitality
Sunway University

lated products profitably by keeping costs to a minimum. Even though the CMCO has been lifted and there is a domestic tourism boom, not all business sectors have been allowed to reopen. The hardest hit are full-service airlines and hotels, which are dependent on international tourism. It has been reported that many renowned hotels in Malaysia have closed their doors. Airlines are facing major financial issues. Then there are nightlife outlets, entertainment centres, tour operators, restaurants and Airbnb operators.

International tourism is all about bringing in revenue, which directly contributes to the country's GDP. Last year, Malaysia received 26.1 million international tourists and they contributed RM86.14 billion to the economy. Tourist receipts went to shopping (33.6%), accommodation (24%), F&B (13.3%), local transportation (7.6%), organised tours (6.3%), entertainment (3.4%), medical (3.4%), domestic airfares (2.6%), fuel (0.3%), sports (0.2%) and others (0.4%). For these in-destination products and services to continue bringing in the money, the SOPs created by MKN must be adhered to. We must remember to find a balance between health and safety, and wages and income for the people, businesses and the country.

It takes one bad apple to spoil the whole barrel — be it the first case on a flight or in a hotel, restaurant, and shopping centre or even city or country. The phobia an infection generates will deter tourists from coming, or returning. It will take years for the tourism industry to recover.

So, it is better to have measures in place than have regrets. How prepared are we to welcome the new kind of tourists, who are particular about hygiene and cleanliness? How are we to

convince them that we have taken all the necessary steps and actions under the SOPs to prepare for their arrival?

For instance, the top shopping locations for international tourists are Bukit Bintang-KLCC (72.8%), Johor Baru (43.3%), Petaling Street (31.1%), Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman (27.7%), KLIA/Klia2 (26.4%) and Melaka (21.3%). What are we doing for mass tourism? Are we waiting for a vaccine that will solve everything? Are we throwing SOPs out of the window to keep costs down and stay afloat?

Shopping venues, including retail outlets, have to come up with solutions for space, convenience and safety; accommodation owners, including hotels and Airbnb proprietors, should think about hygiene standards; managers of F&B outlets must think about safe dining and clean toilets; local transportation companies have to think about having healthy drivers and sanitised vehicles; operators of organised tours have to think about safe and clean places to take tourists to, and so on.

There are certainly many high-tech equipment and gadgets on the market, but we do not have to resort to them yet. We could come up with new roles for the excess human capital (pandemic-induced layoffs) we have right now. Perhaps we could have a Covid-19 Security Officer at every establishment to enforce adherence to SOPs. Hopefully, this will give confidence to fastidious tourists as well as persuade the government to open up more businesses and economic activities.

Preparation, planning and experimenting should start now. Because once the borders open, it will be very difficult to mitigate any eventualities. **E**