

Headline **Strong demand for Malaysia among Arab holidaymakers**
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Strong demand for Malaysia among Arab holidaymakers

DUBAI: Tour operators and airlines here and elsewhere in the Gulf region are reporting brisk business as Arab holidaymakers head abroad to escape the baking summer heat, with Malaysia being one of the favourite destinations.

Many people mothballed their vacation plans last year as the effects of the global economic and financial crisis took hold. The H1N1 scare also prompted a lot of cancellations in 2009.

But this year the travelling crowd is back, according to Tourism Malaysia Dubai director Tuan Razali Tuan Omar.

"We've noted that demand for Malaysia is very strong this summer based on feedback from the market, travel agents and airlines," he told Bernama.

Most online carriers to Malaysia had indicated good growth on their Kuala Lumpur route, with some like Emirates Airline having increased capacity to the Southeast Asian

country, he said.

Tuan Razali said Emirates Holidays, the tour operating arm of Emirates and the largest wholesale tour operator in the Gulf and Middle East, registered a 43 percent increase in the number of travellers to Malaysia during April-June this year over the same period last year. "Feedback from tour operators in Qatar is that hotel rooms in Malaysian destinations are fully booked this summer.

"And many of the travel agents here are saying that it's a bit tough finding suitable apartments for customers who want to spend their holiday in Malaysia," he said, adding that three-bedroom apartments were much in demand.

Middle Easterners prefer to travel with their families and often opt to bring their maids along.

With this in mind, the Malaysian government has eased entry regulations for maids travelling with their employers to Malaysia. The new

rules went into effect on May 21.

Narouz Sarkies, general manager of Belhasa Tourism & Travel Co. LLC, one of the leading tour operators in the United Arab Emirates, said Malaysia should continue promoting "newer" destinations such as Sabah and Sarawak.

He said: "I've been to Malaysia and there're really a lot of nice new places to visit like Kuching, Kota Kinabalu and others, beyond favourites like Kuala Lumpur, Langkawi, Penang, Redang.

"In fact, we're also recommending these new destinations in Malaysia for people from this part of the world to visit," he added.

Some Dubai-based travel agents have voiced frustration over the difficulty in securing airline seats and suitable accommodation for customers.

The problem is that Arab holidaymakers are travelling at the same time this holiday season, and many prefer to be back home in time for Ramadan which is to start

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next month.

"The travelling period is shorter because of the fasting month. And everybody wants to go to Malaysia at the same time," Edward Soliman, sales manager at Al Fajer Travel & Tourism, explained.

He said Middle Eastern families continued to favour Malaysia over other destinations in Asia for their summer holiday.

Soliman, however, claimed that accommodation rates, especially in sought-after locations like Bukit Bintang in Kuala Lumpur and other areas, would go up at this time of the year.

"Perhaps the relevant authorities in Malaysia need to have a little bit of control over hotel and accommodation prices because it appears that they (operators) are raising prices to very high levels," Soliman said.

He also said Malaysia Airlines should have increased the capacity to Kuala Lumpur at least for

the month of July to cope with the hike in demand for seats. Al Fajer's outbound manager, Ahmed Bader, concurred, saying that some Arab vacationers may skip Malaysia during the high season in the future if challenges in getting competitively-priced seats and accommodation were not addressed.

He said if this materialised, it would be a loss to Malaysia as Arab travellers were big spenders compared to tourists from some other parts of the world.

Tourism Malaysia's Tuan Razali said indications were that airline fares would still be on the higher side even until the middle of August.

"It means that there's still demand for travel to Malaysia during Ramadan. This is a good thing because we're promoting Ramadan as well as Aidilfitri holiday among Arab travellers," he said.

The tourism official expressed

hope that the trend would continue for the next few years when Ramadan also falls during the summer months.

Industry observers said that Malaysia should step up its game as other destinations like Turkey had come into the picture.

"Over the past years, Malaysia and Australia had always been among the top destinations for our business. But this year there has been a slight change.

"This year it's Europe, Turkey, then the Far East - mainly Malaysia followed by Australia - and Middle East destinations. That's the trend now," said Belhasa's Sarkies.

He also felt that there had somewhat been a decline in the level of advertising and publicity campaigns promoting Malaysia in this region.

"It was like a brainwashing exercise before. Everywhere you turned you were bombarded with the 'Malaysia Truly Asia' slogan. But I feel that this is no longer the case," Sarkies said.

"Maybe it's due to budgetary constraints or other factors, I'm not sure," he added.

Despite 2009 being a challenging year for the tourism industry, Malaysia managed to attract 284,890 visitors from this region with a growth of 7.8 percent over 2008, at 264,338. The target for 2010 is 300,000.

Meanwhile, Tuan Razali reminded Malaysian tourism industry players to maintain high standards and offer only the highest level of service to customers, including Middle Eastern tourists.

"And we do hope to provide more three-bedroom apartments to cater to tourists who come with big families. We do have them but not in sufficient numbers," he added.

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TOURISTS from the US listening to tour guide Angie Ng (left) from the The Heritage Travel&Tours Sdn Bhd, explaining local fruits at a stall in Pudu market recently. PHOTO: BERNAMA