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## MDTF 2009: Think local, plan local and go local

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Visitors to the Malaysian Domestic Tourism Fair 2009, including the TRAVEL TIMES TEAM, found lots of bargains in store as well as insightful information at the various workshops, from health and heritage to eco-tourism and food

THE halls of level four at the Putra World Trade Centre came alive with colour for the inaugural Malaysian Domestic Tourism Fair 2009 during the first weekend of July.



Ong striking the gong to mark the official opening of the fair

The fair, a brainchild of National Tourism Council Malaysia, saw not only State tourism bodies taking part but also spas, airlines, tour operators and hotels from around the country.

A walk down the main entrance of the fair saw tour operators and hotels promoting their products and services in the bright orange Tourism Malaysia pavilion which definitely caught the eyes and attention of those who passed it.

Another attention-grabber was the Tourism Perak stall that featured a replica of the State Royal Museum, Kuala Kangsar's famous Istana Kuning. Built in 1926, Istana Kuning gained fame partly for the fact that it was built without a single nail.

The booth also featured show-and-tell demonstrations of the making of the State's famous labu sayong (water pitchers shaped like a gourd) and tekak (traditional art of weaving gold thread as embellishment for furnishing and other items).

Equally interesting was the Tourism Terengganu stall, with a craftsman seated at a tenun machine to demonstrate the weaving of an intricate songket pattern. Terengganu also brought a tank of baby turtles to highlight the State as the place for turtle watching.

There was always something to capture the imagination of visitors – be it watching a bird “talk” or looking up to a man on a kangaroo machine — not to mention interesting

prizes like a Blackberry and hotel stays that were being given away every hour by the organisers.

At the launch of the fair, Tourism Ministry secretary-general Datuk Dr Ong Hong Pen said he hoped Malaysians would turn to domestic travel and explore local tourist attractions and other places of interest.

He said the fair was timely and would, hopefully, help get more revenue and create more job opportunities.

“Domestic travel is a great way to get more value for money especially if the holiday is planned in advance. Not only will holidays strengthen family ties and relationships but they will also help improve productivity at work,” he said.

He added that Malaysia is a safe destination for foreign and local tourists as the Influenza A H1N1 virus is in the containment stage.

“The Health Ministry has taken every precautionary measure to make sure Malaysia is safe for tourists. There is no need to fear going anywhere in the country,” he said.

The event also saw nine speakers from various parts of the tourism sector holding hour-long workshops on Saturday covering areas from health tourism to heritage. Here are quotes from some of the speakers.

#### **Author Dennis De Witt: The Secret Tunnels Of Malacca – Fact or Fiction?**

St Paul’s Hill in Malacca is a mountain of mysteries. Whether it is an unexplained little indented circular ground at the entrance of a fort, an unusual arch supporting the base of a pillar or a recycled tombstone bearing names of Portuguese as well as the Dutch, they hold secrets more intriguing than the Da Vinci Code. The story that there are secret tunnels below the streets of Malacca is fact and not myth.

The three beliefs that have been circulating in Malacca since the old days are that of a big hole at a certain gate (and that there was a large snake that ate people who entered the hole), a tunnel running from the Stadthuys to Malacca River and a tunnel running from St Paul’s Hill to St John’s Hill.

The tunnels are most probably catacombs used first by the Portuguese and then the Dutch. The fact that so many historians, including Munshi Abdullah, wrote about tunnels at St Paul’s Hill showed that there must be a grain of truth in the story.

Munshi Abdullah wrote in Hikayat Abdullah (1849) that one had to walk through a tunnel built into a hill to reach the elaborate residence of the Governor on St Paul’s Hill.

Four other historians — Gaspar Correa, Reverend Father Georg Schurhammer, John Cameron and Reverend Father Rene Cardon — also wrote concretely of tunnels of sorts below St Paul’s Hill.

To really carry out proper studies into the tunnels, one must be able to read the old writings and records of Portuguese and Dutch now mainly in Europe.

I hope I can get the backing from bodies such as the Malacca Museum Corporation as well as Badan Warisan Malaysia to carry out more research on these tunnels.

Tour guides in Malacca can also fire up the imagination of tourists about these tunnels. The next time we visit Malacca, perhaps we should all carry a cangkul and start digging!

#### **Badan Warisan Malaysia communications director Mark Gibson: A Surprise Around The Corner – The Living Heritage of Malaysia**

Heritage is not all about old buildings and museums but also about the people. People are the soul of heritage. It’s a living thing... it’s about yesterday and also tomorrow. Don’t just save a building. Find a way for potential uses and make the building relevant today but keep its original form.

Some of the more interesting places to visit are the wet markets, such as the Campbell Street market in Penang. It’s really special. The market is very lively and colourful and

you see a very strong community spirit. Such markets are disappearing fast. Support them or they'll just close down.

It's not just in places like Penang and Malacca that heritage is still alive. Go to any little town and you'll find something special. Towns like Muar, Kuala Lipis, Rembau and Pengkalan Kempas all have their own hidden gems.

How can you help conserve heritage? If you ever see a place of value and clearly in danger, write to local MPs and local authorities and tell them why you think that place should be saved. We need more heritage ambassadors – those who share an enthusiasm for heritage. Start telling people – families, friends and colleagues. Spread the word. I can see this happening but we must do more. Support heritage organisations like Badan Warisan and others. Engage the young and get them interested too.

**Asian Overland Services Tours and Travel Sdn Bhd group managing director Anthony Wong:** Green and Eco-tourism – The Fastest Growing Tourism Sector

It took me a journey of 35 years of loving nature. You must have it in your heart (to go into eco-tourism). Don't look at it from the money angle. Do it with your heart and the money will come.

Many people don't really know what eco-tourism is about. It's not about going into the jungle, setting up camps, making a lot of noise and leaving rubbish behind.

It's about responsible tourism to natural areas, that conserve the environment and improve the well-being of local people. Some of the principles of eco-tourism are minimising impact on natural heritage, building environmental and cultural awareness and respect, providing positive experiences for both visitors and hosts and providing direct financial benefits for conservation purposes.

I'm ashamed of what's happening to Taman Negara today. There's no respect for holding capacity of the park. There are now 700-800 rooms there compared to just 18 before. During the school holidays, there are "traffic jams" along the nature trail and so much noise. You can hardly see animals there too.

The place has exceeded its carrying capacity. The environment is destroyed. We have killed the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Before it's too late for other places, people must be aware of the impact of activities on eco-tourism and stakeholders must pursue protection of the wild flora and fauna.

NGOs try to make a change but it's difficult. Many of those who want to go into eco-tourism think that it'll be expensive but it's not actually. You can save from energy and water conservation and from recycling, reusing, repairing things and have your own farms. Most importantly, there must be a rethink of the ways we do things. There will be savings from green practices. The returns will come.

**Mahameru International Medical Centre managing director and heart specialist Dr Beh Chor Khim:** Guide to Shopping for Healthcare in Malaysia

Whether it is the best scan to seek out and treat that cancer lump or stem-cell treatment to repair cartilage on your knees or a damaged heart, you don't have to leave the country.

It is quite a surprise that locals are not well informed of the advantages we have over many other countries in the region when it comes to health treatment.

Medical treatment here is half that of Singapore. The cost is 10 times more in the United States. A bypass operation in the country would cost about RM30,000 compared to RM41,250 in Singapore, RM27,500 in Thailand, RM85,375 in South Korea and RM325,000 in the United States.

Government hospitals here are also very well equipped to treat modern illnesses. Many foreigners come to our shores for cancer treatment using the latest technology or Cyber Knife. It is the only one available in South East Asia, where radiation can be given to cancer cells in those parts of the body that other conventional methods cannot treat effectively.

Prevention is always better than cure. Those aged 40 and above must go for check-ups

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for heart ailment, the silent killer. Some 30 per cent of those who died of heart attacks did not know they had an ailing heart.

Always consult your family doctor on the range of medical facilities and treatments available to get the best benefits from what the country has to offer.

**Malaysia Budget Hotel Association deputy president Leong Pui Kun:** Malaysia on a shoestring budget

A shoestring budget has many benefits, one of which is that it allows you to see more of the destination for a lesser price, in turn enriching your travel experience.

A useful tip is to plan way ahead of time. Step One would be to look at next year's calendar right now. Lock in your travel time and the rest will come easily. Also, think of different ways to get to your holiday spot. Diversify your travel options. Read travel and guidebooks on what to do to save and which corners can be cut without drastically affecting the experience.

**International Feng Shui Consultancy principal consultant Ooi Wai Loon:** Feng Shui Holidays

Feng Shui is about living life to achieve the best results. If you want to travel more, align your kitchen, bedroom and front door to the direction of the south so it will open up more opportunities for travel. Classical feng shui recommends doing this as it is the most beneficial for travelling. This however, is only valid till the first day of Chinese New Year 2010.

**Good Food Guide author Alice Ching:** Makan-makan Travel

Besides road maps, keep one or two food guides in your car. I have a couple in mine. While road maps help us find the way to a destination, the food guides help us to quickly find a place for good food.

For instance, when we are in an unfamiliar place, these guides will help us find a makan place quickly and efficiently without having to drive around aimlessly.

It's also good to always keep a mini First Aid kit that contains medication like charcoal pills or local favourite Chinese herbs like poh chai pills for stomach problems or allergies.

It's even better if we know beforehand where the nearest doctor or clinic is especially when we are travelling with little ones or sensitive eaters.

The best way to train our stomach to avoid food poisoning is to go slow with the food and drink lots of water.

**Malaysia Tourist Guides' Council honorary secretary general Anne Molly Camoens:** Enhancing Your Tour Experience And Getting Your Ringgit Worth

A tour without a tour guide is like watching a silent film – a lot of visuals and images but without any explanation or enlightenment.

A tourist guide is a trained professional who is a Jack of all trades and a master of some. Nowadays, they come with their own specialisation which can be heritage, educational, sports and nature.

While they are the master of their own specialisation, good tourist guides should have basic knowledge like food, health, shopping bargain and value buys.

When you're promised the service of a licensed tourist guide, there are a few things you need to check to find out if the guide is a licensed tourist guide or not.

Check if that person is wearing the official tourist guide ID tag that bears his or her photo. Check the tag's validity and also the guide's language proficiency. The tag should have the guide's full name followed by his or her language proficiency and specialisation.

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