

Rebranding the spa profession

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KUALA LUMPUR: A job that once raised eyebrows with just a mention is now turning into a potential cash cow for the country's tourism industry.

Local masseurs and spa therapists have upgraded their businesses to not only gain a better stand in the eyes of locals but also to raise their levels to international standards by arming themselves with paper qualifications in the field.

The two-year-old Association of Malaysian Spas (Amspa) has taken it upon themselves to make sure the industry is rebranded to be able to compete in the global market.

Next week, the first batch of 31 participants will graduate with a dual-diploma in Physiological Anatomy and Body Massage conferred by the United Kingdom-based Confederation of International

Beauty Therapy and Cosmetology, an international examination board responsible for the education and training of beauty and holistic therapists worldwide.

The programme, offered by Amspa, is run using a grant awarded last year by the European Union Asia Invest Programme, which aims to promote and support business co-operation between Asia and the European Union.

Amspa president Datin Ramona Suleiman said Malaysia, along with the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, were awarded the grant of €1 million (RM5 million) to train therapists.

"We want to rebrand the profession. Spas have become an important part of travel as well as health and wellness.

"But because of some bad apples, the reputation of those who want to run a decent business has been tarnished. This is how the association helps build the reputation of this

profession."

Ramona said in the "train the trainer" programme, those who had attended the courses would teach their spa therapists.

"This accreditation is a good foundation for therapists as it improves their consultation and confidence. They would also be better prepared to get into the international market," she said at her booth in the Malaysian Domestic Tourism Fair 2009 yesterday.

Ramona, however, said erasing the negative perception of the job took time.

"Because of the negative reputation of the past, many parents do not let their children come into this programme, thinking it's an improper industry. That is not true. All over the world, wellness is such a big business and therapists are respectable professionals."

Ramona, who has been involved in the spa industry since 1994, said this could only



Datin Ramona Suleiman says the image of therapists has been tarnished

be achieved if the dubious spa operators were weeded out.

"Getting everyone certified and accredited is our association's main aim."

She said Malaysia still depended heavily on workforce from Thailand and Indonesia although they had no proper qualification.

"In these countries, massage is part of their culture and tradition, not so much here. So, in order to kick-start the wellness industry here, we have to embark on extensive training programmes and slowly do away with foreign workers."

Snorkelling park a crowd-puller

KUALA LUMPUR: Snorkelling, a recreational activity at tropical resorts and scuba-diving locations here, is gaining popularity among local and foreign tourists alike.

Cashing in on this is the country's premier inland snorkelling park located at Teluk Batik in Perak.

Originally a lake, it was converted into a snorkelling park where the fresh water was replaced with sea water.

Teluk Batik Resort project manager Mohd Azree Ismail said the snorkelling park was safe and suitable for people of all ages.

"The snorkelling park was conceived from the idea of having safe snorkelling activities. Unlike the sea, in the park, there are no underwater current, jellyfish or boat accidents to worry about."

Azree said although the park was man-made, it could help educate the public about underwater marine life and its beauty.

Besides snorkelling, the park also provides various activities, such as fishing, canoeing and boating.

Snorkelling is among the recreational activities being promoted at the Malaysian Domestic Tourism Fair 2009.

The fair has some 130 participants exhibiting their products to promote Malaysia's destinations and to encourage Malaysians to visit within the country.

Besides recreational activities, the fair is also promoting Malaysia's eco-tourism destinations. One of them is the Royal Belum forest reserve.

"For nature lovers, the Belum-Temenggor rainforest has flora and fauna that cannot be found anywhere. Most of the species are very rare," said Belum Rainforest Resort sales manager Norsyuhaini Mohamad.

Another attraction is bird-watching.

"If one is lucky, they can spot an endangered plain-pouched hornbill. It is the rarest of all species in Malaysia," Norsyuhaini said.

Holiday-makers can also indulge in other activities, such as trekking, Rafflesia sighting, visiting Orang Asli settlements and river rafting.