

Experts urge caution in implementing travel bubble

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THE go-ahead for Malaysia to establish a travel bubble with Indonesia will facilitate the recovery of the tourism sector and subsequently revive the economies of both countries, say experts.



However, they caution that this needs to be strictly executed according to the standard operating procedures (SOP) and free from inconsistencies. They also stress it is imperative that both nations take into account the probability of the prevailing rate of Covid-19 infection following the implementation of such a measure.

It was announced on Saturday that Malaysia had been given the green light by Indonesia to proceed with the Reciprocal Green Lane/Travel Corridor Arrangement (RGL/TCA).

Associate Professor Aimi Zulhazmi Abdul Rashid said the news would bring some joy to tourism players although it was nowhere near the pre-pandemic level due to the movement restrictions to stem the spread of Covid-19.

The economic analyst with the Business School of Universiti Kuala Lumpur said tourists from Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand formed 69 per cent of foreign visitors to the country annually.

“Malaysian tourists visiting Indonesia also form among the biggest groups over the years.

“Tourists mostly spend on shopping, accommodation and food, which will have a good impact on the retail industry that has been dealt a blow by the pandemic. Hence, the initiative to open up a travel bubble should be applauded and supported fully.”

In Malaysia, he said, the tourism industry contributed 15 per cent to the country’s gross domestic product in 2019, 45 per cent of which was attributed to foreign tourists.

He said like in other countries, the pandemic had wreaked havoc on Malaysia’s tourism industry with January’s losses alone totalling RM3 billion.

“International travel is projected to return to normalcy only in 2023, which is a severe blow to the tourism industry. Immediate short-term solutions such as travel bubbles are highly welcome.”

Aimi Zulhazmi said apart from the tourism sector, the Malaysia-Indonesia travel bubble could spur business travel such as in the Singapore-Johor-Riau Growth Triangle and the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thai Growth Triangle.

“Small- and medium-sized enterprises hit hard due to declining activities locally will need support to network with their counterparts in other countries.

“It may not start with Singapore and Thailand respectively but it will spur Malaysian and Indonesian business activities.”

Aimi Zulhazmi, nevertheless, stressed the importance of establishing a standardised SOP in relation to the travel bubble, which must be agreed to and implemented clearly to give full confidence to tourists.

“Any inconsistency could be a disaster to the industry players as it could become a negative catalyst to the health sector.”

Bank Islam chief economist Dr Mohd Afzanizam Abdul Rashid concurred, saying it is a step in the right direction amid ongoing efforts to implement vaccination.

“The governments of both countries, however, would need to be extremely mindful of the prevailing rate of infection, which has remained on the high side. It is a delicate balance between flattening the curve, the commitment to ensure the economy remains almost fully functional and the return to normalcy the soonest possible once the country has reached herd immunity.”

Sunway University Business School economics Professor Dr Yeah Kim Leng, however, feels it is prudent to delay the travel bubble until health experts deem it is safe to proceed, citing the high infection rates in both countries to justify his concerns.

“An early start-up could be restricted to those who have been vaccinated, and accompanied by appropriate public health protocols.

“To revive tourism as a complementary strategy to strengthen economic recovery, it is good to prepare early not just with Indonesia but with other countries that have sizeable business and tourist flows with Malaysia.”

Medical expert Associate Professor Dr Malina Osman agrees with Yeah that Malaysia is not ready for a travel bubble.

She said the authorities must take into consideration the heavy workload shouldered by the frontliners.