

AIRLINK

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Airport MD Speaks



Dato' Iskandar Mizal Mahmood
Managing Director
Malaysia Airports Holdings Berhad

Dato' Iskandar Mizal Mahmood returns to Malaysia Airports after almost 20 years with his wealth of experience gleaned from many multinationals and government-linked companies to elevate and transform Malaysia Airports in the fast-changing aviation landscape with new travel norms and innovative technological advances.

This month, he shares how the launch of new routes and increased frequencies at its key airports, in particular KL International Airport (KLIA) and Kota Kinabalu International Airport, are bringing in more tourist arrivals into the country and helping in the sector's recovery. The passenger traffic movements have also been aided by the upcoming elections in certain states and Merdeka Day holiday break. To ensure continuous service excellence at Malaysia's flagship airport, KLIA has joined the world's first and only Airport Customer Experience Accreditation (ACEA) programme by Airports Council International (ACI) where he was recently elected to represent ACI Asia Pacific (APAC) at the ACI World Governing Board.

I am happy to see not only more scheduled flights coming and later increasing their frequencies as passenger demand grows but also new chartered services albeit they are available only for a limited period.

Two recent examples are Zhejiang Loong Air's thrice-weekly chartered flights from Xian to Kota Kinabalu from July 18 until August 31 using the Airbus A320 aircraft and Batik Air Malaysia's Chengdu-Langkawi chartered flights from July 22-31.

Coupled with Air China's inaugural flight on July 19 from Chengdu where more than 150 passengers entered KLIA Terminal 1, this will boost the number of tourist arrivals from China, one of our top five markets for the first quarter of this year, according to the statistics compiled by Tourism Malaysia with the cooperation of Immigration Department.

We have been working closely with Tourism Malaysia to promote attractions from the various states at KLIA as it is the main gateway in our country.

Having started with Sarawak through the Homestay Association since June, Tourism Malaysia's booth on level five of the MainTerminal Building KLIA was recently promoting the east coast state of Terengganu.

Other states, namely Negeri Sembilan (NS), Melaka and Perlis, will follow suit until December, which I hope will

generate more domestic travels as well.

With the state elections taking place in Selangor, Penang, NS, Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu on August 12, we expect more upcoming traffic.

MYAirline, for instance, has mounted extra flights from Kuala Lumpur (KUL) to Kota Bharu, Kelantan and for our Independence Day celebration TransNusa has launched its Madani Merdeka campaign offering low fares for its KUL-Jakarta (CGK) as well as CGK-Yogyakarta and CGK-Bali route until August 31.

On another note, honoured to be one of the three elected representatives of ACI APAC on the ACI World Governing Board during a special meeting held at the recent ACI APAC Regional Assembly in Kobe, Japan, I have made sure that KLIA is part of this global organisation's ACEA programme.

Keen to bring about major improvements to our flagship airport operations in order to ensure a seamless passenger experience, we view this as a long-term commitment.

Over the past few months, we have introduced and expedited new initiatives to meet our passengers' evolving needs as we aspire to get KLIA back into the top-tier rankings of the world's best airports. This will be our brand promise of hosting joyful connections.



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Rising Airline Capacity Worldwide Aids in Travel Recovery

As the global travel industry recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic, airline capacity is expected to reach 512 million in July compared to the 524 million of July 2019, according to OAG's latest data.

OAG, a leading provider of digital flight information, intelligence and analytics for airports, airlines and travel tech companies, showed the top 20 markets accounting for nearly 86% of July's global capacity compared to 75% in July 2019.

Among the countries in Southeast Asia (SEA) that made it to this list are Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand, which are ranked 13, 17 and 20 respectively although their seat numbers are down compared to July 2019 except for Vietnam.

The United States (US) remains the world's largest market with 103,739,830 seats followed by China (81,034,623), India (18,223,877), Japan (16,517,642) and Spain (16,408,671) in July.

Although China's domestic and international capacity have been growing since its reopening in January, the number of seats flown from its top 20 country markets in July is still significantly down from 2019 pre-pandemic levels.

Led by South Korea as its busiest international route with 576,734 seats, China's other country markets in its top 10 list are Thailand, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Macao and Vietnam.

Eighth-ranking Malaysia's seat capacity of 191,886 as at July was, however, down 45.9% compared to July 2019's 354,772 seats while Cambodia, placed 17th, saw the biggest drop of 77.8% to 52,169 seats.

OAG, however, highlighted that seat capacity to Vietnam and Malaysia rose by 34% in July when compared to June's figures.

Meanwhile, among the big three in terms of global capacity, India has overtaken Japan to be ranked third due to its rapid growth in capacity domestically and Air India's expansion of its services to the United Kingdom, North America and Australia.

Aviation market in Southeast Asia

Capacity in SEA stood at 37.2 million seats in July, with the seats calculated as departing seats (one-way) by OAG's Schedules Analyser.

The region's capacity rose by 15% from July 2022 but was still 15% below July below July 2019's figures. However, when compared to June's numbers, its capacity was up by 3%.

Of the total 37.2 million seats, OAG's data revealed that 61% of them were domestic while the rest were international, which saw growth of 90% from July 2022. Country wise, SEA's biggest capacity came from Indonesia with 10.5 million seats, representing 28% of the region's total.

Indonesia's popular resort haven Bali, which received more than two million tourists last year, reportedly has 19,000 foreign travellers passing through its I Gusti Ngurah Rai Airport daily, surpassing the average 17,000 foreign arrivals received during the pandemic.

Vietnam and Thailand followed next with seven million and 6.2 million seat capacity respectively. OAG cited that two of SEA's domestic services were among the world's top 10 busiest routes in July. They are Vietnam's Hanoi to Ho Chi Minh City with 987,000 seats, up 5% from June, and Jakarta (CGK) to Denpasar Bali with 629,877 seats.

Among the global top 10 international airline routes category, Kuala Lumpur-Singapore (SIN) dropped to second place in July with 414,224 seats while CGK-SIN with 347,944 seats and Bangkok-SIN with 299,256 seats, are ranked seventh and ninth respectively.

Singapore's national flag carrier Singapore Airlines and its low-cost offshoot Scoot have reportedly posted strong passenger traffic and load factors across all regions in June due to robust air travel demand during the mid-year school holidays and the start of the summer travel season.

The two carried a combined 2.9 million passengers, up 50.4% from June 2022. SIA flew almost 1.9 million passengers in June, an increase of 35% year-on-year, with Scoot accounting for the rest. SIA and Scoot recorded monthly load factors of 89.7% and 93.6% respectively.

In Malaysia, latest statistics released by Malaysia Airports showed the recommencement of 45 airlines and entry of new airlines such as T'way Air and TransNusa into Malaysia boosting its airlines' capacity recovery to 75% at 50.5 million seats in the first half of 2023 (1H23) compared to 1H of 2019's (1H19) 67.3 million seats.

“Our total passenger movements for 1H23 was 38.9 million passengers from the 39 local airports managed by us as international traffic gained ground supported by positive developments while the domestic sector continued to lead in the traffic recovery momentum.”

DATO' ISKANDAR MIZAL MAHMOOD

Managing Director
of Malaysia Airports

The total average load factor for 1H23 exceeded 1H19 by 1.2 percentage points to register at 76.1%. He added for June, its operations in Malaysia posted close to seven million passenger movements, up 2% from May.

Dato' Iskandar Mizal remarked, “Malaysia's performance continues to contribute to nearly 70% of Malaysia Airports Group's total global passenger movements at 10.2 million passengers in June, which is a new recovery milestone for us and the highest since the global shutdown in March 2020 due to the pandemic.”



Recent chartered flights flying into Malaysia have also been instrumental in increasing Malaysia's capacity with Batik Air Malaysia's three chartered flights plying Chengdu-Langkawi from July 22-31 using the Boeing 737 aircraft.

Meanwhile, China's Zhejiang Loong Air has commenced its three times weekly flights from Xian to Kota Kinabalu from July 18.

Operating the Airbus A320, the latter's service will end on August 31.





SalamAir to Increase Kuala Lumpur-Muscat Frequencies in September

Following the recent commencement of SalamAir's inaugural direct twice-weekly flight between Kuala Lumpur and Muscat which carried 216 passengers, Oman's low-cost carrier plans to increase them to four flights a week starting September.

"We are delighted to launch flights between Kuala Lumpur International Airport and Muscat International Airport, providing our customers with a perfect value-for-money product that allows them to be flexible, save on airfare with our competitive pricing, and add services they prefer."

CAPTAIN AHMED MOHAMED
Chief Executive Officer
of Salam Air

domestic and international destinations, including the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Europe and Asia.

It recently embarked on an economic study of 20 new tourist destinations in Europe and Eastern Europe to further enhance tourist traffic passing through both Oman's Muscat and Salalah international airports.

Currently, SalamAir operates the Airbus A320neo and Airbus A321neo aircraft, making it the first Omani carrier to deploy them for its highly rated single-aisle seat configuration.

SalamAir was awarded Oman's Most Trusted Brand 2021 and The Youngest Fleet in Asia for 2021 and 2022 by ChAviation. It has appointed ATS Network Sdn Bhd as its General Sales Agent in Malaysia.

For more information, visit www.salamair.com or call +603-6414 8915



United Airlines to Expand Hong Kong-San Francisco Service in August and October

United Airlines, which returned recently to the Hong Kong market after a pause of nearly three years, will increase its daily Hong Kong-San Francisco service to 12 flights weekly on August 3.

Continuing to be the only American airline directly connecting Hong Kong and the United States (US), it will expand the frequencies to 14 flights weekly as a twice-daily service in late October

Walter Dias, its Regional Director of Sales for Greater China, Korea and Southeast Asia said with the new late departure time at 10.30pm from Hong Kong and San Francisco departure time at 1.30pm, its 12 times-weekly service will provide its customers in Hong Kong, the southern part of mainland China and some

Southeast Asian countries with more flight options to San Francisco.

They will also offer one-stop connections to more than 70 destinations in the mainland US, Canada and Latin America via San Francisco, which is its largest hub on the US West Coast and a gateway to Asia Pacific.

Operating more than 200 daily departures to over 100 destinations globally via this hub, all its flights use the Boeing 777-300ER widebody aircraft that offers 60 seats in United Polaris business cabin, 24 seats in United Premium Plus cabin and 266 seats in United Economy cabin.

For more information, visit www.united.com

Singapore Airlines (SIA) not only won the World's Best Airline at the recent 2023 Skytrax World Airline Awards held in Paris for the fifth time but also took top spots for the Best First Class Airline, Best First Class Comfort Amenities and Best Airline in Asia.

"This award is a testament to the indomitable spirit of our people, who worked tirelessly and made many sacrifices to ensure that SIA was ready for the recovery in air travel."

GOH CHOON PHONG
Chief Executive Officer
of Singapore Airlines (SIA)

He added, "We are very grateful to our customers for their enduring loyalty to and affection for SIA. During the pandemic, their support and encouragement gave us the strength and determination to overcome unprecedented challenges."

"Today, as we recover from the pandemic, we are firmly committed to innovating and investing in industry-leading products and services, and ensuring that SIA continues to offer our customers a world-class travel experience."



Singapore Airlines Bags Four Accolades in 2023 Skytrax Awards

SIA's sister airline and wholly-owned subsidiary Scoot was also named Best Long Haul Low-Cost Airline and ranked second in the World's Best Low-Cost Airlines category.

The Skytrax awards are based on surveys of more than 20 million travellers across over 100 nationalities, who rated more than 325 airlines between September 2022 and May 2023.

For more information, visit www.singaporeair.com or flyscoot.com



Air Incheon Starts Inaugural Incheon-Kuala Lumpur Cargo Route

South Korea's sole cargo airline Air Incheon has launched its regular cargo flights from Malaysia's Kuala Lumpur (KUL) on July 12 using the Boeing 737-800 freighter aircraft. The five-weekly flights will be with on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, departing Incheon at 11pm local time to arrive at KUL at 7.40am the next day.

Time-sensitive cargo, including ecommerce, express freight, perishable goods and intermediate goods for global manufacturing companies, are loaded at Incheon International Airport during the night and delivered to KL International Airport Terminal 1 immediately after customs clearance.

Air Incheon is also able to transport special cargo such as dangerous materials and over-height cargo that are not allowed on passenger aircraft.



expected to facilitate regular truck transportation between KUL and key industrial areas such as Penang.

This will enable the interconnected transportation of electronic components, factory supplies and other goods, thus significantly expanding the industrial trade volume between the two countries.

Established since 2012, Air Incheon currently operates four B737-800Fs and serves 12 international routes, including China, Vietnam, Mongolia and Japan. Over the past decade, it has maintained a track record of accident-free operations, prioritising safety.

The airline has appointed Worldwide GSA Group as its General Sales Agent in Malaysia.

For more information, visit www.air-incheon.com or call +603-8787 1868

“The launch of the Incheon-KUL route will serve as a cornerstone to significantly expand the trade volume between Malaysia, which has been experiencing a significant increase in foreign investment among ASEAN member countries, and South Korea.

LEE SEUNGHWAN
Chief Executive Officer
of Air Incheon

Air Incheon's new cargo route will greatly contribute to the increased export of fresh and popular Korean agricultural products such as strawberries, which are in high demand in Southeast Asia. Additionally, it is



Award-Winning Qatar Airways Group Posts Record Revenues and Strong Profits

Qatar Airways Group reported yet another strong performance for the fiscal year 2022/23 with net profit of US\$1.21 billion on higher revenue of US\$21 billion, crediting it partly to its successful strategy as FIFA's Official Partner and Official Airline of the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

The other contributing factors are its premium product offerings and robust recovery in passenger demand. The airline carried 31.7 million passengers, up 71% from last year.

Its global network has grown to more than 160 destinations following the recent launch of its inaugural direct four-weekly flights to the French city of Lyon using the Boeing 787-8 aircraft.

Continuing to focus on customer experience, loyalty, digitalisation and sustainability, Qatar Airways delivered a successful showcase at the recent Paris Air Show 2023 to solidify its ranking as Skytrax's World's Best Business Class for the 10th time with its revolutionary Qsuite's unmatched luxury, privacy and comfort.

It also bagged Skytax's World's Best Business Class Airline Lounge, World's Best Business Class Lounge Dining, and Best Airline in the Middle East for the 11th time.

The airline's iconic Al Mourjan Business Lounge witnessed earlier this year an extension - The Garden - at the northern part of the award-winning Hamad International Airport. This new lounge area is filled with natural light, exotic plants and elegant furnishings to captivate its premium passengers.



“At Qatar Airways, excellence is embedded in the core of our brand. As we continue to evolve our offerings, we choose to provide our passengers with the very best experiences in aviation and hospitality.

HIS EXCELLENCY AKBAR AL BAKER
Group Chief Executive
of Qatar Airways

Qatar Airways Cargo also maintained its position as the world's leading air cargo carrier for the 2022/23 financial year despite ongoing market challenges.

For more information, visit www.qatarairways.com

China Southern Airlines has started its codeshare partnership with Malaysia Airlines on its Guangzhou (CAN)-Kuala Lumpur (KUL) service on July 6, offering travellers seamless connections and enhanced travel options.

The airline currently operates 21 flights weekly using Airbus A320 and Boeing 787-9 for this sector. Its A320 aircraft is equipped with eight business class seats and 144 economy class seats while its B787-9 offers 28 advanced business class seats and the rest are economy seats.

Zhang Dongsheng, Deputy Director General of the Commercial Steering Committee and Senior Vice President of the Marketing Department of China Southern Airlines said, "Under the framework of the Belt and Road, the airline will continue to use its network advantages to explore new opportunities and deepen new cooperation."

It will also adhere to implementing customer-centric services and develop high-quality standards, adding that both airlines will further expand their cooperation to Beijing Daxing- KUL and other China-Malaysia routes.

"We will continue to bring more products



China Southern Airlines Codeshares with Malaysia Airlines

and better services to business travellers, Chinese visiting relatives as well as tourists and leisure guests in the Chinese and Malaysian markets," Zhang remarked.

Looking forward to grow Malaysia Airlines' presence in China by expanding its codeshare partnership with China Southern Airlines and extending its signature Malaysian Hospitality, Ahmad Luqman Mohd Azmi, Chief Executive Officer of Airlines at Malaysia Aviation Group said, "Since April, we have resumed all our services to China, including Xiamen, Beijing and Shanghai."

Malaysia Airlines operates thrice-weekly flights on the CAN-KUL route using the A330-200 with 19 business class seats, 42 economy class seats with extra legroom and 226 economy class seats.

For more information, visit www.csair.com or call +603-2163 9977

Fast-growing Ethiopian Airlines Group, which is leading in the African continent, has been crowned with five accolades at the recent Skytrax 2023 World Airline Awards held during the Paris Air Show. This is up from four accolades garnered at the previous year's award.

Winning the Best Airline in Africa 2023 for six consecutive years, Ethiopian Airlines also bagged the Best Business Class Airline in Africa 2023 and Best Economy Class Airline in Africa 2023, both for five years in a row.

It also won Best Business Class Onboard Catering in Africa 2023 for two years in a row and was named the Cleanest Airline in Africa 2023.

Ethiopian Airlines has been amassing a plethora of awards this year. They include Sustainable Cargo Airline of the Year - Africa at the 2023 Freight Week Sustainability Awards; Outstanding Food Services by a Carrier at the 2023 PAX International Readership Awards; and Best Overall in Africa Award at the 2023 APEX Passenger Choice Awards.

Having achieved its strategic plan (Vision 2025) ahead of time, the airline is



Ethiopian Airlines Returns as Africa's Leading Carrier with Five Skytrax 2023 Wins

currently implementing a 15-year strategic plan Vision 2035 that will see it become one of the world's top 20 most competitive and leading aviation groups.

For more information, call +603-2022 0168 or visit www.ethiopianairlines.com



TransNusa Converts to COMAC ARJ21 with Jakarta-Kuala Lumpur Increased Frequencies

As Indonesian-based PT TransNusa Aviation Mandiri (TransNusa) raised its Jakarta (CGK)-Kuala Lumpur (KUL) frequencies from twice daily to four times daily on July 24, it also switched to using its two Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China Ltd's (COMAC) ARJ21 aircraft with a 95-seat capacity.

Since TransNusa's inaugural flight on April 14, it had deployed the Airbus A320s with 168 to 174-seat configuration. The first three months saw a premium service airline carrying 33,000 passengers with an average load factor of 78% for its first international route.

TransNusa Aviation Group Chief Executive Officer Datuk Bernard Francis believes his strategy of having more frequencies on smaller aircraft works better than using bigger capacity aircraft and expects to see a 12% increase in capacity using the ARJ21s.

With TransNusa completing 312 flights from April 23 to June 23 and achieving an average on-time performance (OTP) of 94% with June's OTP at 98%, he deemed it a "big feat" considering most airports in Indonesia are very congested and have high traffic. "Our aim is to have 100% OTP."

Defining OTP as an aircraft's arrival at the gate under 15 minutes of the scheduled arrival time, Datuk Bernard explained that anything more than 30 minutes is considered a "real delay". Citing instances of TransNusa's inability to land within the stipulated time as "consequential and unavoidable", he attributed them to bad weather, airport disruptions or heavy traffic.

"We understand that OTP is one of the most important factors for passengers in deciding their choice of airline. Respecting passengers' time is high on our list of deliverables and to showcase our commitment towards them, we have specific aircraft dedicated to fly this route."

DATUK BERNARD FRANCIS
Chief Executive Officer
of TransNusa

As the sole foreign carrier using the China-made ARJ21s from July 24, the departure times of its two new roundtrip flights from CGK are at 11.00am and 4.10pm while from KUL, they leave at 2.30pm and 7.30pm, complementing its existing flights.

Datuk Bernard quipped, "We have a firm order for 30 ARJ21," adding that he expects to receive one more unit by end-2023.

Still assessing the commercial viability of the JKT-Johor route announced earlier this year, he said the airline is now exploring CGK-Melaka flights next year in view of the state's medical tourism and its tourist attractions such as Jonker's Street.

For more information, visit www.transnusa.co.id



Air China's New Chengdu-Kuala Lumpur Service

Air China has launched a new route between Chengdu (TFU) and Kuala Lumpur (KUL) departing four times weekly on Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday using the Airbus A320neo aircraft that offers seven business class seats and 148 economy seats.

Inaugurated on July 19, its new service CA483 which arrived at KL International Airport (KLIA) Terminal 1, was given the ceremonial water cannon salute.

The flight was welcomed by Dato' Seri Tiong King Sing, Minister of Tourism, Arts and Culture and Ouyang Yujing, China's Ambassador to Malaysia. The Minister reportedly said this showed that Malaysia is receiving tremendous support from Chinese tourists.

Also present were Manoharan Periasamy, Tourism Malaysia Senior Director of International Promotion (Asia/Africa), who is also covering the Deputy Director General of Planning position, and Abdul Hasman Abdul Muhimim, General Manager, Operations KLIA.

As China's only flag-carrier aviation company with a network across six continents, Air China and its subsidiaries have a total of 898 aircraft of all types as of March 31.

They consist of mainly Boeing and Airbus with an average age of 8.9 years.

Operating 672 passenger routes to 151 cities in 25 countries and regions, its service extends to 1,300 destinations in 195 countries and regions through its cooperation with other airlines such as Star Alliance members as it is a member of the world's largest airline alliance.

Air China was the official aviation transportation partner of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and Paralympics as well as the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics and Paralympics.

It also takes the lead role among the country's domestic airlines in terms of passenger transportation and other related services.

According to World Brand Lab's assessment, Air China's brand value stood at RMB 213.659 billion, the highest among Chinese civil aviation companies in 2022.

For more information, visit www.airchina.com.my or call +603-2166 1999



Malaysia Airlines' Brand-New Boeing 737-8

Malaysia Airlines' first of its 25 Boeing 737-8 aircraft, scheduled for delivery in August, will showcase a wide range of exciting enhancements as part of the Malaysia Aviation Group's (MAG) fleet modernisation plan.

Embodying modernity and Malaysia's rich heritage via its striking livery design and inviting cabin interior, they are aimed at enhancing the passengers' experience.

Ahmad Luqman Mohd Azmi, Chief Executive Officer of Airlines from Malaysia Aviation Group (MAG), said, "The new aircraft sets a new standard in air travel, combining the best of Malaysian culture, advanced technology and sustainable practices to create an unparalleled flying experience."

Its iconic wau (crescent-shaped kite) logo, symbolising Malaysian pride, has been repositioned to reflect the airline's determination to move forward with optimism and energy.

Adorned with the songket (traditional handwoven fabric) motif in gold hues, the logo pays tribute to the country's vibrant cultural heritage.

Similar to the airline's refreshed B737-800 NG aircraft, the B737-8 will feature its wireless In-Flight Entertainment system, MHstudio, which provides access to over 500 on-demand entertainment options and personalised shopping experiences. The national carrier is expected to gradually grow its 737-8 fleet to 25 aircraft by 2026.

Meanwhile, its travel and lifestyle loyalty programme Enrich, has bagged seven awards at the recent Loyalty and Engagement Awards 2023, highlighting its commitment to excellence in rewarding its members and delivering exceptional travel and lifestyle experiences.

The win includes four Gold Awards for Best Membership Programme, Best Loyalty Strategy – Travel & Hospitality, Best Partnership in a Loyalty Programme and Best Engagement Strategy B2C.

The rest are two Silver Awards for Best Card-Based Loyalty Programme and Best Use of Rewards & Incentives while the last is a Bronze Award for Best Use of Direct Marketing.

Judged by an independent panel made up of senior, client-side marketers and loyalty experts, the Loyalty & Engagement Awards honours the best loyalty marketing strategies in South Asia, Southeast Asia, Australia and New Zealand.

Celebrating the win, Enrich members were rewarded Double Enrich Points and Double Elite Points for every purchase of flight tickets to any destinations within Malaysia Airlines' network, thus allowing them to qualify, retain or fast-track their Elite tier status before July 31.

Enrich members making purchases on Enrich Hotels, Enrich Xperience or Temptations during the promotion period also received Triple Enrich Points. The offer was for travel until November 30.

For more information, visit www.malaysiaairlines.com



UPCLOSE WITH PAUL PAW

National President of Malaysian Chinese Tourism Association (MCTA)



A founder member since MCTA's formation on September 14 1992, Paul Paw remains optimistic about the tourism industry having gone through in its ups and downs over 50 years of his experience in both the inbound and outbound segments. Paul, who hails from Seremban, Negeri Sembilan, is happy that the association, celebrating its 31st anniversary soon, is unified under one team. The 70-year-old veteran is also the Managing Director of China Express Tours & Travel Sdn Bhd, the General Sales Agent of Sichuan Airlines. Enjoying what he is doing, he believes it is too early yet for him to retire from the industry.

Looking back, what made you join the travel industry?

I found the travel line quite interesting as you can see the world. The 'world' I saw first was Malaysia as I started out as a local tourist guide instead of a tour leader. I was among the first batch of local tourist guides churned out in the country and today, I am one of the examiners for Tourism Malaysia for the tourist guide course.

What are some of the memorable highlights of your over 30 years with MCTA?

Started by a small group of seven local Chinese travel agents in 1992, the association managed to have its own building at Pandan Jaya, Kuala Lumpur on November 23 2001, thanks to contributions and support from its members.

Another significant milestone was fighting for the association's rights to be endorsed in 2009 where we were recognised as one of travel associations that can renew the license on behalf of travel agencies who are our members. That truly made MCTA so strong that our membership grew. Lastly, the unification of our members from two teams into one in 2021 further strengthened the association.

How do you view the speed of our tourism industry recovery? Is it on track and what can be done?

We are on track up to 80% as we still have airfare issues, shortage of manpower and immigration woes to tackle alongside concerns such as the prolonged Russia-Ukraine war and weak Ringgit. We need the government's assistance in recovering our tourism industry after the global Covid-19 pandemic hit us and the industry came to a standstill with cross-border travels closed and subsequent lockdown measures and travel restrictions.

How has domestic tourism helped rejuvenate the travel industry after being impacted by the pandemic?

Domestic tourism can play a very important as can be seen during the pandemic as travel restrictions within Malaysia gradually eased. We could only go to nearby places such as Hulu Selangor and Kuala Langat initially. Working with Tourism Malaysia, local familiarisation tours were organised for our members and industry players to places like Sekinchan in Selangor and other states such as Perak, Pahang and East Malaysia for product updates.

How can travel agencies work together with the airlines to sustain the tourism industry post-pandemic?

Both parties have to support each other. The airlines are our principals and partners. We hope they can give us very good airfares. Travelling from Kuala Lumpur to China on a return trip during the pandemic could easily cost RM30,000 due to lower capacity and less flights. That is daylight robbery!

Besides increasing their flights and frequencies as well as advertising more, we also require the airlines to be punctual in their scheduled flights. Only then can we fulfill the seat capacity. This is a chicken and egg situation because when we achieve, the airlines can then add more flights.

What are the highlights of your Malaysian International Travel Mart (MITM) 2023 held at the Mid Valley Exhibition Centre in Kuala Lumpur?

We had the support of eight national

tourist organisations that included Taiwan, Thailand, South Korea and the Philippines besides the participation of state tourism organisations where Sabah and Penang are our preferred destinations this year.

This year's travel fair attracted 43 exhibitors who took up 292 booths. Our official airline partner Malaysia Airlines sponsored the lucky draw prizes for the buyers contest where the first prize is an air ticket from Kuala Lumpur to Sydney.

What is MCTA's current membership and who is it open to?

We have grown from seven members in 1992 to 1,409 members today. One of the main objectives in our association is to protect our members' interests and offer them benefits. They include organising activities such as dialogues with Tourism Malaysia and MITM at state levels. We also try to solve their problems with the NTOs overseas.

Designated as one of the associations since 2011 by the Ministry of Tourism, Arts and Culture, we have been given the licensing rights to endorse members comprising Chinese firms related to the travel and hospitality industries that operate in the country.

What is MCTA doing to increase Chinese arrivals into Malaysia since China reopened in January?

The Chinese tourists are slowly returning after China's reopening but its government is still very strict on the issuance of passports. Our state chapters have been busy organising MITM in Penang (July 1-2), Johor (July 7-9), Perak (July 21-23) and Kuala Lumpur (July 28-30). We will continue with MITM Sabah (August 19-20) and Negeri Sembilan (October 21-22) to promote the destination.

With the KL International Airport being the main gateway into Malaysia, what are your suggestions to help raise its profile and improve its facilities?

Having ambassadors and translators who can speak in various languages

at the airport is a good initiative, especially when dealing with immigration matters. More helpers to assist passengers, especially senior citizens and those not so technology-savvy, at the self-check-in kiosks and the opening up of more auto-gate facilities to a broader base of foreign nationalities will not only help provide more conveniences but also project a friendly image at our flagship airport. Additionally, a strong maintenance culture of our infrastructural facilities is imperative.

How do you see the future of travel?

The prospects of this industry should be bright. It is still a good one to get into despite being beset with challenges arising from wars, weather conditions, natural disasters or acts of god such as earthquakes which cannot be controlled. People have to travel and indulging in leisure activities has become a lifestyle.

Is MCTA tapping into data driven insights to rethink about the travellers' needs?

This should apply to all of us involved in the travel industry as the travelling style has changed after the pandemic. We do not see so many people travelling in big groups unless they are company incentive trips. Organising tours for the individual traveller and smaller groups have raised our cost.

Instead of using a coach in the past for group travel, we are now using more vans to transport separate smaller groups and tailor make or customise the tour programmes to meet different needs. The younger travellers, for instance, prefer not to use the services of tour agencies and would book online and deal directly with the hotels and airlines.

What is your wishlist for MCTA?

I hope my successor will make MCTA, now armed with eight Chapters in Labuan Sabah, Sarawak, Penang, Perak, Johor, Selangor and Kuala Lumpur and 23 excos in total, better and stronger.

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