



Ministry of Tourism, Malaysia

An exclusive report to be distributed with ***THE INDEPENDENT***

Transcript of the interview with:

Dato' Sri Dr Ng Yen Yen

Minister of Tourism

WORLD REPORT (WR): Tourist levels have steadily risen in Malaysia. You have had double-digit growth for the past four to five years, which is quite an achievement. Taking this into consideration could you tell us how you perceive the well being of the industry in the country?

DATO' SRI DR NG YEN YEN: First and foremost we believe in our strength as a tourism destination. If you do not have the strength, it is very difficult to promote the tourism industry. The focus on the tourism industry really began in the late 1990s. The Ministry of Tourism was established quite late as compared to other ministries. It was the late 1990s when we realised as we move into 2020 to be a fully developed nation, services will be the economy for us, and tourism is a service industry.

Secondly, we are blessed with almost everything Asia has to offer except snow. Nature has given us year-round sunshine, the world's oldest rainforest at around 30 million years old, UNESCO recognised geo-parks, caves, marine parks and much more. This in itself is a resource. Thirdly, we have diversity. People want to go to diverse countries to see the sights and sounds and experience. We have a mix of the three major cultures of Asia, which is why we

say “Malaysia, Truly Asia”, and nobody can challenge that. We are very diverse having 47 ethnicities including Chinese, Malay and Indian, in addition to another 44 minority groups. The diversity is reflected through our religion.

People do not realise that Malaysia is a very progressive country where the official religion is Islam. That does not mean that everybody must be Muslim. But multicultural religion is enshrined in our constitution. All non-Malays are free to practice their religion. On Jonker Street you can see a Chinese temple, Indian Temple, even Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist churches, all in the same street. You cannot find that in too many places. Our religion, the way we live, even the way we eat reflects our diversity. We are promoting ourselves very vigorously throughout the world to tell people to come here. In a big way, we are also supporting the building of infrastructure for tourism. For example the building of hotels comes under the Ministry of International Trade. They are entitled to double taxations and many incentives. The Prime Minister has liberalised our economy in 27 areas, including tourism. But we still have to build capacity for all Malaysians. That liberalisation will allow for more of the infrastructure needed for tourism to come in.

Additionally we are building our human resources. We already have a fundamental resource in our diversity. If Indians, English or Chinese visit, we speak all those languages. Now we are building capacity in other foreign languages such as Russian, Dutch and French. In the past it was quite narrow, but now the profiles of our tourist arrivals are from across the world. I visited a tourism office in Kelantan up north and I looked at the breakdown of the tourists coming to the office asking questions. They have got everybody from Estonians to Croatians. We have got to build more human capacity.

WORLD REPORT: Aside from natural resources, diversity and food, you have other programmes such as home stays, wellness travel, and also “Malaysia, My Second Home,” which are all quite interesting.

DATO' SRI DR NG YEN YEN: Our natural resources are traditional tourism but now we have to move forward. It is a very competitive market and people want to see new things. Europeans will have a second home in Majorca, in Spain or in Portugal, why not here? We see ourselves as very price competitive. One GBP or Euro is about five Malaysian ringgit. Regarding costs of living, one litre of petrol is 33 euro cents. In Malaysia we do not discriminate. If you are here, you will enjoy all of the subsidies that we give to Malaysians. People do not realise that we subsidise petrol, rice, flour, cooking oil. We spend billions on subsidy and we give it to all who come here.

“Malaysia, My Second Home” is very target orientated. The objective is to give you another home, where you can escape the winter and enjoy the hot summer. You can buy a property, have your own home with your own things and we will give you a ten-year visa. Our criteria are so rigid because the objective is to come here, relax and enjoy your retirement. It is not to come here and work. We are very clear on that. It is not work orientated. Nevertheless, we have liberalised it now where below 50 years of age, they can work 20 hours a week in special areas where there are special needs. As we move along, we adapt and apply what is needed. Thus far, we have had 12,000 participants in “Malaysia, My Second Home.” We have to be careful though. This year I had to withdraw one participant because he committed fraud. I want to make sure Malaysia is not contaminated in any way. It is not to come here to work; it is to come here to relax. You need sufficient money and financial backing.

I am very focused on my team that works on home stay. I am also a great believer that rural tourism is the way to go. Tourism must encompass rural people and be inclusive of the rural economy. Rural living is very exciting because many people from urban environments have never seen a live chicken. Some children actually think that chickens come from Cold Storage, a local supermarket. Now we have 3,600 homes registered as home stay. Home stay is not an accommodation and it should not be clustered with accommodation. It is a lifestyle in itself. We are now providing more support to home stays and building a lifestyle. Number one, when tourists come, they eat and live with you. We will not allow anybody to rent their home as a home stay. I tell the Malay

villagers, if you eat on the floor or on a mat, so be it. Do not adjust for them – they adjust for you. You do not need to go out and get brand new things. But there must be a clean kitchen and bathroom. Hygiene cannot be compromised and must be to an international standard. Tourists want to see how you live and take that experience home with them. I am very excited about rural tourism. I sincerely believe that tourism must empower the villagers.

WORLD REPORT: It is a great way to empower poor, rural areas.

DATO' SRI DR NG YEN YEN: Without them being polluted. They retain their own beauty, simplicity and intensity. They do not adapt for the tourists, but they show their best to the tourists. Now they are doing very well. We have a great interest with arrivals from Japan, Korea, and China. I look at this programme for the young people first and I call that building bridges. Young people who are engineers come and then say they want to help them do roads. I have instructed that everyone that comes must plant a tree. I want my villagers to help to make the world green. I am an environmentalist myself and it makes my heart sick to see trees cut down. There will be no building of hotels in villages. It does not work.

Secondly I will retain the youth in the villages by training them to be local guides. They know the forests and the locality best. That is how we are going to do home stays and I believe I will get the support of the world in a sense. Five to seven days they can come and stay. This is even an option for domestic tourism. I want my urban people to go down. Medical tourism is under the Ministry of Health. I am doing wellness tourism: spas, rejuvenation, meditation, yoga and reflexology. For the home stay, I have trained all the older citizens in reflexology. I speak with great excitement because I can see my rural peoples' eyes glitter. They laughed and had a good time. It is all about empowering villagers, to get them excited and get them to believe in themselves.

We are also very much into events such as the F1 and Monsoon Cup. Next I am going to focus on food. From October until December we are going to

launch three months of Malaysia's Fabulous Food. This is all very exciting. Tourism needs a lot of creativity. We are now in the process of developing art tourism, because Malaysia has many talented artists and art galleries. But as yet it has not been looked upon as a tourism project. Art tourism is big money. People come and see and they buy, they follow and you develop a following. We were the second largest earner, with about 50 million last year. This year I am not ambitious. I do not think we will cross 22 million visitors, what with the economic slowdown issues and H1N1. In January we first brought our figure down one million, before H1N1 and now we are adjusting it to 19 million. We are feeling the effects, especially from Asia; Japan, Korea, China, and Taiwan. These markets have dropped tremendously.

WORLD REPORT: The people who usually wear masks at the airport are usually Asians and not Westerners.

DATO' SRI DR NG YEN YEN: It is an interesting cultural difference, but I think Europeans are very used to having the flu. Everybody gets it. But in Asia, we had the SARS outbreak. Even though it's called swine flu, people think it is like SARS. Reassurance is very important. In May and June I saw my Chinese figures drop 20%. China is a huge market for me. I decided to go to China twice and speak to tour operators and the authorities. In July my figure went up 16%. It is very important to reassure and I am telling the truth, it is not a lie. Malaysia is extra careful.

WORLD REPORT: It is a very wide and targeted market. For that you have the "Malaysia, Truly Asia" marketing campaign. How would you rate the performance of this campaign and what are your expectations and your strategy for 2010?

DATO' SRI DR. NG YEN YEN: "Malaysia, Truly Asia" will stay. It is very difficult to build a brand that catches attention and that people remember. Whenever I go around on visits, even to small towns, I hear it. Other than the traditional strategy of ads and billboards, I am looking more at a targeted outreach. That is why my programmes are very focused. Sophisticated office ladies (SOL's)

come and shop, pamper themselves, go to Pavilion. Then the GTA, golden third age, is not affected by the economic slowdown, you still get the same pay, but hotels and airlines are cheaper. I focus on building bridges. I have told the tour operators to go to international schools. I have told all of my 44 overseas directors to target retirees associations. Traditional billboards are not the only way to go now. Then I have my ambassadors and I am looking for more. We are formulating new programmes for our new targets to move into the years ahead. It cannot just be business as usual.

WORLD REPORT: There is also some good news for tourism in the liberalisation of air travel with the creation of companies like Air Asia.

DATO' SRI DR NG YEN YEN: I am very happy that the Ministry of Transport is being supportive of tourism. We are seeing more accessibility and direct flights. We are trying very hard to make sure that my products are always maintained. Some issues that always arise are the service of taxi drivers. I just spoke to the Malaysian Association of Hoteliers that their service must always be on par. The Malaysian government is very sensitive to that. We have a cabinet committee on tourism chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister. Every ministry concerning home affairs, transport, local council, economic planning is involved and we look at our tourism industry challenges.

WORLD REPORT: What are the challenges that you face in the upcoming years?

DATO' SRI DR NG YEN YEN: I have to make sure that my tourism industry's service is top.

WORLD REPORT: How do you ensure quality in the system?

DATO' SRI DR NG YEN YEN: I have to monitor my tour operators and tour guides. It is the little things. People can come and enjoy seven days but just one bad taxi ride can wreck the whole experience. I have to go down to the ground

level and listen to all of the complaints. I cannot afford to have people breaking the rules. We have to really monitor the services.

Secondly, we have constant discussions with all of the private players to ensure the best for tourists. The third challenge is accessibility. I need more accessibility and more direct flights. It is not easy because airlines look at a number of factors. I have eight million transit visitors and passengers, but not many come off. To know Malaysia is to love Malaysia. If I can get them for one or two nights, I have got them. I am looking into that with various airlines but it is not easy. We will have to make it a very attractive package.

WORLD REPORT: The economy here is highly dependent on foreign direct investment. What opportunities are there and what is needed in terms of infrastructure? How can British investors and entrepreneurs come here, make good business and create a win-win situation?

DATO' SRI DR NG YEN YEN: Should any British want to invest, they should do it because of our history. Not out of loyalty but out of convenience with our common language, education, laws and parliamentary system, which are all inherited from the British. The British left us some very good stuff. Secondly, that system and political stability gives investors peace of mind. As to where to invest, they could identify boutique hotels and beautiful season resorts. If they already have clients, it is only a matter of developing for them. They could develop services for the British taking advantage of "Malaysia, My Second Home." They can have their meat pie and shepherd's pie at pubs in the area. These things need creativity. Next year I am going to launch parks and gardens of Malaysia as a tourism product. These are things that they can come here and look at. Maybe there is some interest in fashion and design, as Malaysia is becoming a top shopping centre. The pavilion has all of the facilities. Remember we have 22 million tourists and they will need all different types of experiences. If investors come here, it could also be a stepping-stone for them to move into China and the rest of Asia.

WORLD REPORT: As one of only two women in the Prime Minister's cabinet, does this mean extra responsibility for you?

DATO' SRI DR. NG YEN YEN: I do not see myself as a woman on the cabinet. I see myself as just another Malaysian. But I am more sensitised to women-related issues and there are very clear gender differences. Whenever there are issues relating to children, the women will speak up. I do not see myself as a speaker on women's issues but I see myself as a minister who is sensitive to domestic issues and women and children's issues. But that in no way dilutes my work in other non-gender issues. For example when I came here as a minister the first day in April, I issued instructions the next day that no tour operators were allowed to in any way force their women staff to share a room with male staff to save money. That is not acceptable. If I hear that report I will immediately suspend the license without an enquiry first. Maybe some say it is too strict, it does not matter, but it is not right. These are things I ask about when I go around looking at tourism projects. Is this safe for children? Have you facilities for a young couple? I am trying to develop nannies for young couples. The Prime Minister is doing his best to have more women leaders in his cabinet. He has eight deputy ministers in his cabinet. That is the biggest, it is historical and no one has spoken about it. Rome was not built in one day. You have to move towards these things slowly. Also Malaysian women's participation in politics is always less enthusiastic than men's. They see the political fragility and it is not easy for them. There is no "Ladies First"; you go in and you fight the fight. There are a lot of commitments. There are also traditional commitments. I always tell women that family comes first. If you cannot manage a family well, it is hard to tell people you can manage a country.

WORLD REPORT: What would be your message to our readers in the UK and Europe?

DATO' SRI DR NG YEN YEN: Come to Malaysia. To know Malaysia is to love Malaysia. You will never regret it.

WORLD REPORT: Thank you for your comments.

