

# Selling the country through golf



Dato' Mirza Mohammad Taiyab, the Director General of Tourism Malaysia

**A**ccording to Tourism Malaysia's statistics, golf accounts for only 2.4% of tourist arrivals in 2007. Translated into real figure, there were only a little over half a million foreign golfers from the close to 21 million tourists who made it to our shore last year.

In an effort to gauge golf's contribution to the nation's tourism industry, Tee Times catches up with Dato' Mirza Mohammad Taiyab, the Director General of Tourism Malaysia and poses a few questions.

**TT:** Could you reveal the statistics on tourist arrivals in Malaysia in 2007?

**DM:** Total tourist arrival last year was 20,972,822 and out of this, 2.4% or approximately 503,348 engaged in golfing (Tourism Malaysia classifies anybody who plays even one round of golf in the country as a golfer).

Most of them are from the ASEAN nations (475,057) followed by Australia (14,417), South Korea (11,469), United Kingdom (9,115), Hong Kong (8,127), Japan (4,044) and India (3,380).

In comparison to 2006, the number of arrival has increased by over 150,000. Although the number is small, golfers are premium tourists as they generally spend three times higher than the leisure tourists.

**TT:** Would you agree that golf is one of the major attractions for tourists to Malaysia?

**DM:** Yes, it was ranked 11th of the 12 major

activities engaged in 2007. If we only look at 2.4%, yes, it's no big deal but we believe the prospect is better. If we look at our golf courses, they are not running at full capacity. At the current rate, I would say they are only half utilised.

If we can fill up this capacity gap with golfing tourists then it will be extra revenue for them that can be used for their course beautification and renovation or for their marketing budget. These are the things that are lacking and holding back our industry from blooming.

**TT:** There is a perception that golf clubs in the country are not working together. What's your view on this?

**DM:** It's a good point. Not only golf clubs even hoteliers seem to be operating independently. They like to compete with each other rather than against another region. I hope that trend will subside. I think that trend started when business is bad and people don't care about the rest of the world and instead look at each other and try to stand out.

But when they reach a certain stage, they got to be together. If not, they cannot go higher. I think we have already reached a stage where the hoteliers are working together and you will also see the golf clubs coming together.

Once the club owners and managers have a standing in income and life, they can socialize. Before that they are worried about their business.

That stress level is holding them back but once they have overcome that, they can start smiling and telling jokes. I think it's coming to that point already.

I think the golf clubs business will soon follow. If we look at the business for the last five years, it is improving year after year.

**TT:** What are Tourism Malaysia's strategies to increase the marketability of golf as a major selling point for tourism in the country?

**DM:** Tourism Malaysia organizes the World Amateur Inter Team Golf Championship

(WAITGC). This golf programme is not only to increase the number of rounds in the country but we make sure the foreign participants are people who can expand the interest in golfing in Malaysia.

Foreign golf journalists are also invited to cover the event. WAITGC is also a publicity tool.

Tourism Malaysia is also a sponsor for major golf events such as the Maybank Malaysian Open. We also participate in golf shows overseas like the Orlando Merchandise Golf Show (USA), PGA Golf Show (Australia), Japan Golf Fair and Asia Golf Show in Shanghai. We also participate in the International Golf Travel Mart organized by the International Association of Golf Tour Operators (IAGTO).

Our expansion in golf is something new where before we promote golf as part of general tourism. Now, we are getting more specialised. We have established a golf development unit to anchor golf promotion activities and we also have plans to work with the Malaysian Golf Association and other industry players to categorize the local golf clubs with star rating, like the one used by hotels.

**TT:** An estimate puts the number of golf clubs in the country at around 200 golf clubs. Are our clubs comparable to other world class golf clubs in the region?

**DM:** Yes. We have courses designed by renowned designers such as Jack Nicklaus, Robert Trent Jones Jr. and Graham Marsh. Apart from that, our courses have the strength in terms of their locations. Some are by the sea, in the islands, on the highlands, in the city and in the jungle.

In the region, Thailand and Indonesia are our competitors as the three countries are geared for tourism. I think it makes a lot of sense if we work together to promote golf and tourism.

Under ASEAN we have an agreement signed by the ASEAN Tourism ministers where the ASEAN countries are to work together in developing the whole of ASEAN as a tourism destination.