

KOTA KINABALU: The Sabah State Government is steadfast to restore and develop the tourism sector through various programmes next year, as evident from the RM134.59 million allocation to the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment in next year's budget.

Chief Minister Datuk Seri Panglima Haji Hajiji Haji Noo said the allocation will include upgrading tourism facilities and human capital development for Community Based Tourism (CoBT).

"I have also announced that the Sabah Convention Bureau (SCB) will be set up and operational by next year.

"The SCB will accelerate the growth of the tourism industry through tourism-based Business Events to make Sabah a preferred destination for Meeting, Incentive, Conference and Exhibition/Events that will generate economic activities for the benefit of the hospitality, logistics, aviation and other related sectors," he said at the opening of the World Tourism Conference (WTC) 2022 at the Sabah International Convention Centre (SICC).

His speech was delivered by Local Government and Housing Minister/Minister of Finance II, Datuk Seri Panglima Masidi Manjun.

Hajiji said the Conference theme "Tourism Futures Reimagined" was timely and apt.

"Since opening our borders on 1st April 2022, Malaysia and Sabah for that matter have been relentless in our pursuit of speeding up our growth and development, particularly in progressing tourism.

"I am happy to know that in-person participation at this conference will put many heads together to address tourism futures and strategies driving tourism's recovery and resilience post-pandemic," he said.

The Chief Minister said that although Sabah's tourism was the worst affected sector this past two years, the State Government did not let up in its efforts to manage the challenges.

"The State Government dispensed a good budget to cushion the impact and to ensure the healthy development of our tourism industry seeing that tourism generated the biggest revenue for Sabah pre-pandemic.

"I am happy to say that our efforts to empower local communities through the Community based Rural Tourism Programme have borne fruits. It is a thriving sector as we continue to see its steady growth throughout Sabah.

"Rural-based Tourism provides the opportunity for us to grow and improve our community-based tourism products through upskilling and product enhancement.

"This initiative has not only increased the State's tourism product offerings but also improved the economic livelihood of the communities," he said.

Hajiji hoped the participants would take time off to experience the ongoing Community Based Tourism Roadshow showcasing the rich cultural diversity of the state's 27 districts and 11 sub-districts being held at the sidelines of this Conference.

More than 100 operators have established their businesses since the inception of two successful Community Based Tourism pilot projects in Sabah, namely in the district of Kadamaian, Kota Belud and the sub-district of Kiulu, Tuaran in 2014.

"We are also proud that the Batu Puteh Community Ecotourism Cooperative and Miso Walai Homestay in Sandakan, in Sabah's east coast was recently selected as one of the winners of UNWTO's inaugural Best Tourism Villages award (2021)," he said.

According to him, all these developments meant that Sabah is on the road to recovery.

“We have embarked on various recovery initiatives including putting the state on international impactful high visibility, joint promotional destination campaigns with industry and airlines as well as media familiarisation programmes, amongst others.

“Special Airlines Incentives to airlines were also introduced to encourage airlines to resume international routes into Sabah and as of this month, six airlines have resume their international routes to Kota Kinabalu,” he said.

The fact that Sabah has managed to register 1.2 million domestic and international visitor arrivals from January to September this year with an estimated tourism receipt of RM2.1 billion was also a good sign indeed, he said.

Hajji disclosed that from Dec 5, 2022, until Jan 1, 2023, Sabah will have additional 24 international flights per week from Taipei, Narita, Busan and Hong Kong which will add 52 per cent to the current international seat capacity.

Sabah also continues to explore as many initiatives to enhance its tourism, recognising its importance as an economic catalyst, he said, adding that it was also taking steps to ensure that Sabah remains one of Malaysia’s favourite tourism destinations.