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MALAYSIA is looking to expand its presence in the cruise tourism sector and if all goes according to plan, the segment may well play a pivotal role in Visit Malaysia 2026.

In late July, Transport Minister Anthony Loke highlighted that cruise ships bring thousands of passengers into the country, presenting a significant economic opportunity. Co-chairing the Malaysia Cruise Council with Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister Datuk Seri Tiong King Sing, Loke admits that establishing Malaysia as a home port can attract more tourists and yield greater economic benefits.

"If we can encourage the cruise industry, there will surely be economic benefits as travellers would use our airports and stay at our hotels," he adds.

This bodes well for cruise and tour operators. As a burgeoning tourism hub in South-East Asia, Malaysia presently serves as the homeport for two cruise lines operating from Port Klang, with plans for further expansion in the future.

### Time to set sail

The establishment of Malaysia as a homeport for cruises will no doubt see existing terminals such as Klang, Penang, Langkawi, Melaka, Kuching and Kota Kinabalu be upgraded to accommodate increased capacity.

This comes at a crucial time as Malaysia witnessed record cruise arrival figures in 2023.

Last year, Malaysian ports welcomed 1,055 cruise ships carrying 1,520,608 passengers, marking an 84.78% rise in ship arrivals and a 62.43% increase in passenger numbers compared to 2019 pre-pandemic levels.

The overwhelming demand for cruising among Malaysians prompted Kenny Cheong, managing director of Hwajing Travel and Tours Sdn Bhd, to bring back the popular Italian cruise liner Costa Serena to Malaysian waters this December.

"After our maiden voyage earlier this year, we received positive feedback and overwhelming support from our passengers, further validating our decision to return to Malaysian waters," says Cheong.

The cruise liner's return will see the vessel ferry passengers on three voyages from Port Klang. Costa Serena will sail to



Cruises are now a popular choice for families, couples, and solo travellers.

Penang and Phuket, and offer itineraries to Vietnam and Hong Kong, ranging from three to six days. It is also the only cruise ship sailing from Port Klang to Phuket in December.

According to Hwajing Travel and Tours, the cruise itineraries have been designed to maximise guests' time at each port of call.

### Increasing demand

Cheong opines that the current appetite for cruises among Malaysians is on the rise with more travellers showing interest in cruise vacations.

"They (cruises) offer the perfect blend of convenience, relaxation and adventure, while allowing passengers to explore multiple destinations with a range of amenities on board."

The managing director of

Hwajing Travel and Tours notes a significant increase in Malaysians seeking unique travel experiences.

"Cruise tourism now appeals not just to older demographics, but also to the younger generation. This shift reflects a growing trend among younger travellers who are drawn to the convenience, adventure and variety that cruises offer," he further adds.

In terms of preferences, Cheong explains that Malaysian cruise-goers often prefer shorter itineraries, such as three- to five-day cruises, that explore nearby South-East Asian destinations like Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia. Family-friendly options, featuring activities for all ages and halal dining, are also important considerations.

In contrast, international travellers tend to favour itineraries



The government needs to upgrade and expand cruise ports to increase capacity, says Cheong. — Photos: Hwajing Travel and Tours

from Malaysia's homeports due to the lower pre- and post-trip costs compared to other international homeports. "Overseas travellers may also lean towards longer cruises that span multiple countries or continents, with a preference for more exotic or far-flung destinations," he adds.

### An idea worth floating

On the government's aspirations to position Malaysia as a premier cruise destination, Cheong believes that the country certainly has the potential.

"Its strategic location in South-East Asia, coupled with diverse cultural heritage, stunning natural landscapes and vibrant cities, makes Malaysia an attractive stop for cruise itineraries."

With the government's commitment in promoting tourism as a key economic driver, he opines Malaysia can certainly establish itself as a leading destination for international cruise travellers.

"This is all possible with continued investment in infrastructure and marketing," states Cheong.

The managing director emphasises that the first step in effectively promoting Malaysia as a cruise destination should be infrastructure development through upgrading and expanding cruise ports to accommodate larger ships and increase capacity.

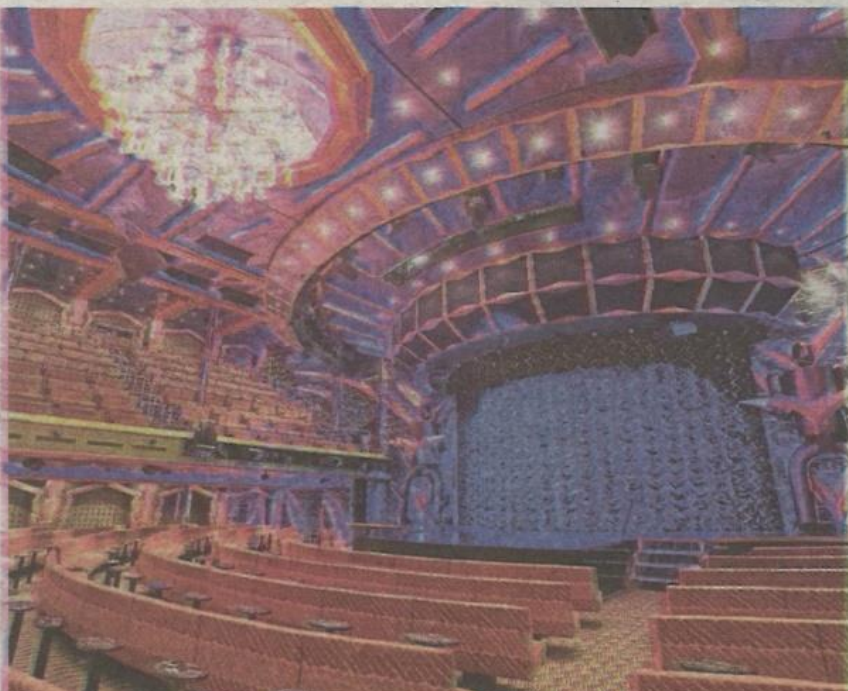
"Accessibility between ports and key tourist attractions is crucial in ensuring a seamless and enjoyable experience for travellers. This includes improving transport links, enhancing visitor facilities and developing efficient logistics to handle increased passenger traffic," he explains.

For now, Cheong is happy to be playing a role in boosting cruise tourism in Malaysia and supporting local businesses in the Port Klang area, while offering Malaysian and regional travellers an affordable, convenient and relaxing way to explore the region.

■ **Malaysian ports welcomed 1,055 cruise ships carrying over 1.5 million passengers in 2023**

■ **Local cruise-goers typically favour shorter itineraries, three- to five-day cruises, focusing on nearby South-East Asian destinations**

■ **Accessibility between ports and key tourist attractions is crucial in ensuring a seamless and enjoyable experience**



Vessels like Costa Serena offer a myriad of culinary, recreational and entertainment experiences for guests.



Passengers can enjoy a range of leisure activities on board the cruise ship.