Tourism needs more ‘cultural immersion’

By giving visitors more authentic experience – such as that in a Japanese ryokan, the tourism industry can help preserve heritage and deepen a sense of shared humanity.

BY KOH DUCK SONG

SUSTAINABILITY is embracing tourism in important new ways. Global discussion is expanding beyond the economic and environmental strands of sustainability, to cover also the social.

Social sustainability in tourism is about ensuring that products and services respect the descent to the lowest common denominator, that what is modern and practical does not totally edge out the colour and character of local culture. It is about preserving tangible and intangible heritage.

Tourism can certainly boost the economy, especially in less developed places. But if demand and supply are not managed well, and if development does not bring inclusive benefits to resident populations, tourism can destroy the environment and devastate communities.

The state of play can be summed up in the words of Pascal Lamy, chairman of the World Committee on Tourist Ethics, a United Nations body: “In an interconnected world where the business volume of tourism equals or even surpasses that of oil exports, food products or automobiles... tourism is a power that must be harnessed for the benefit of all.”

Mr Lamy, who co-chaired a Pacific Economic Cooperation Council seminar on sustainable and responsible tourism in Tahiti (French Polynesia) last week, is leading a new international movement to promote tourism that not only does not harm Earth, but also protects local culture.

For me, the best expression of social sustainability in tourism is “cultural immersion” – tourism experiences that come closest to an authentic encounter of another culture.

The ultimate benchmark of cultural immersion must be the experience of staying in a Japanese ryokan guesthouse. The moment a guest puts his suitcases down on the tatami floor of his room and puts on a yukata robe, he literally embraces another culture. And later, after a hearty kaiseki dinner, when he takes it off to slip into an onsen hot spring, he is well and truly immersed into another world.

Outside of Japan, most other places offer only snippets of cultural immersion. In Singapore, street food like chilli crab and chicken rice, enjoyed just like the locals would, is a quintessentially Singaporean experience.

But surely this is not good enough. My dream is that tourism entrepreneurs will go the whole nine yards. How wonderful it would be if there were Peranakan inns in Singapore that would go even further than those in places such as Penang, to offer an even more complete immersion into this unique sub-culture. So, guests can relax in loose batik dress, enjoy meals of delicacies such as kolo hokkien-seared in Peranakan porcelain, and scoop water from a huge ceramic urn for a shower.

CULTURAL HAVENS

In the Japanese ryokan example, the owners of these quintet inns, steeped in centuries of tradition, never set out to attract outsiders. Instead, foreigners take pains to insert themselves into this unique cultural haven, often with the help of friends conversant in the Japanese language who make reservations on their behalf.

But just because there is no tradition of Peranakan inns does not mean one should not create something new to restore the old. Peranakan inns would not go mass market; most probably, they would remain, at best, a niche interest for the cultural aficionado. What matters is that the possibility exists for such “time travel” into a precious intangible heritage.

To have even one true Peranakan inn would make a world of difference to the cultural immersion options on offer, amid the otherwise commodified “international standard” tourist accommodation. A Peranakan inn would be like a cultural tradition version of revising lost DNA, like in the movie Jurassic Park.

And now may well be the best of times to introduce Peranakan inns. Worldwide, budget airlines are boosting tourism numbers like never before. More travellers are yearning to “live like the locals”, with their appetites whetted by trends like Airbnb. Peranakan culture in Singapore is undergoing its most impressive renaissance: restaurants such as the audaciously named National Kitchen and the Michelin-starred Cassegrain are successful.

Even if a true Peranakan inn never materialises, I hope the broader spirit of seeking cultural immersion is embraced much more in the tourism industry. Hotels, restaurants, bars, shops and other tourist offerings in Chinatown, Little India, Kampong Glam and Katong could invest in creating culturally rich experiences for international and domestic tourists alike – more ich tank along with the Tiger beer, as it were.

There is one other benefit of cultural immersion that might have far-reaching impact. In today’s increasingly divisive world – where widening tribal disputes are based on “your flag versus my flag”, in places from Cataluña to Charlottesville – cultural immersion could well be tourism’s most valuable contribution to fostering a deeper sense of common humanity and a shared future.

The writer, a member of the Singapore Tourism Board’s Marketing Advisory Panel, was a speaker in Tahiti (French Polynesia) last week at a Pacific Economic Cooperation Council seminar on sustainable and responsible tourism.