



Najmi Thys Abdullah

Asian Tourism Institute, Director of Studies

When Dutchman Najmi Thys Abdullah first stepped onto Sabah soil in 1989, little did he know how his infatuation with the Land below the Wind would grow into a full-blown love affair. A backpacking trip in Peninsular Malaysia led him to a chance meeting with a Sabahan lady with whom he now has 2 lovely children with, a son aged 5 and a 20-month old daughter.

Today, Najmi is the Director of Studies for the Asian Tourism Institute, better known as ATI, in Kota Kinabalu. The school offers training in the areas of hospitality, tourism and culinary arts. Having been with ATI for six and a half years, Najmi speaks with passion when it comes to shaping the future of Sabah's tourism industry. "We offer various qualifications to students interested in pursuing a career in the tourism industry. But it goes beyond that as anyone with a diploma can find a job. Here at ATI, we aim to groom and train our students to work at managerial levels and tap into their full potential," he explains. Najmi further explained that the skills learned in ATI are just 40 percent of what makes an individual successful in the tourism and hospitality industry. "Apart from instilling in them the theoretical background, it is important that the students build confidence and have the right attitude to be in the service industry. Management skills are also an important aspect, which is something we stress upon here," he explains. Najmi points out that Sabah is particularly known for its charming people, a highly valuable asset in the tourism industry. "Sabahans are known for their friendliness and warmth. In fact, this is why hotels and resorts in Peninsular Malaysia prefer Sabahan staff as they are known for their excellent people skills," he says.

With its warm people and eco-treasures from mountain high to ocean deep, Najmi is confident that Sabah's tourism industry can look forward to a bright future. "Compared to many other destinations, Sabah has so much to offer. The culture, the food, the sun, the sea – these are the great things about Sabah but once again, I do believe the charm lies in its people," he says. "Also, Sabah – and all of Malaysia for that matter – is a hassle-free destination. For example, you can choose to lie on the beach or stroll in town without worrying about being hassled by vendors and the like. This makes Sabah such a pleasant holiday destination," he adds, stressing that Sabah should not compete to be another mass tourism destination and pace its development process. "We don't need to be another Bali or Bangkok. We are, after all, a nature resort city and it is very important to maintain the nature that surrounds it," he says. Sabah's growing popularity also cannot be denied. "At the Youth Tourism Conference in Putrajaya last year, they conducted a survey to see which State in Malaysia was a preferred destination and Sabah came out as the number one choice of the participants (a majority of whom were from Peninsular Malaysia). I think this is testament that Sabah has indeed made its mark as one of the best places to visit, particularly among domestic travellers," Najmi says.

As for his hopes for ATI, Najmi said that he hopes the institute will continue to do well and produce individuals who can contribute greatly to the tourism industry. "As for the State's tourism industry, I hope that we continue to focus on preserving and conserving our existing attractions and not strive to be another Bali or Phuket. Our real charm lies in the friendly people and as long as we do not lose sight of that, Sabah will continue to prosper as a preferred travel destination," he concluded.