

By GISELE SOO
lifestyle@thestar.com.my

TOUR guides in Malaysia are determined to make a comeback in the tourism industry after the pandemic halt. They have equipped themselves with more skills to provide even better experiences for visitors.

Since the pandemic, tour guides in Malaysia – and in some ways, globally – have had to rethink their career choices, with many of them reluctant to carry on their trade. Some, however, have stuck to their guns, choosing to see the brighter side of things, and constantly looking for ways to improve their skills, says Malaysian Tourist Guides Council president Jimmy Leong.

"It has certainly created a dent, causing people to lose confidence and move away (from the industry). They are hesitant because it's no longer a sustainable career for them," he says in an exclusive interview.

According to seasoned tour guide Jane Rai, guides must remember the reason why they decided to join the industry in the first place, to be able to keep pushing on.

"Besides the will to stay focused and navigate your way through your profession, your attitude and personality also determine your interest in this industry," she says.

Leong adds that there are many local tour guides who have been diligently upskilling themselves to remain relevant in the competition.

"A lot of them are still constantly finding ways to stay on top of their game, and ensure they offer tourist great experiences while visiting a destination."

"And to make sure tour guide remains an 'in-demand' profession, tourism-related education must be given priority (in hospitality schools)," Leong says.

For instance, Rai, 64, who has been in the industry for the past three decades, took the opportunity to learn new technology, so that she could continue to share her love of Malaysian heritage and history, by using digital platforms.

She started the Free Walk Kuala Lumpur Unscripted (FWKL) walking tours three years ago. FWKL has a series of walking tours, and she works with like-minded tour guides who share her passion and vision, to curate interesting trails for tourists.

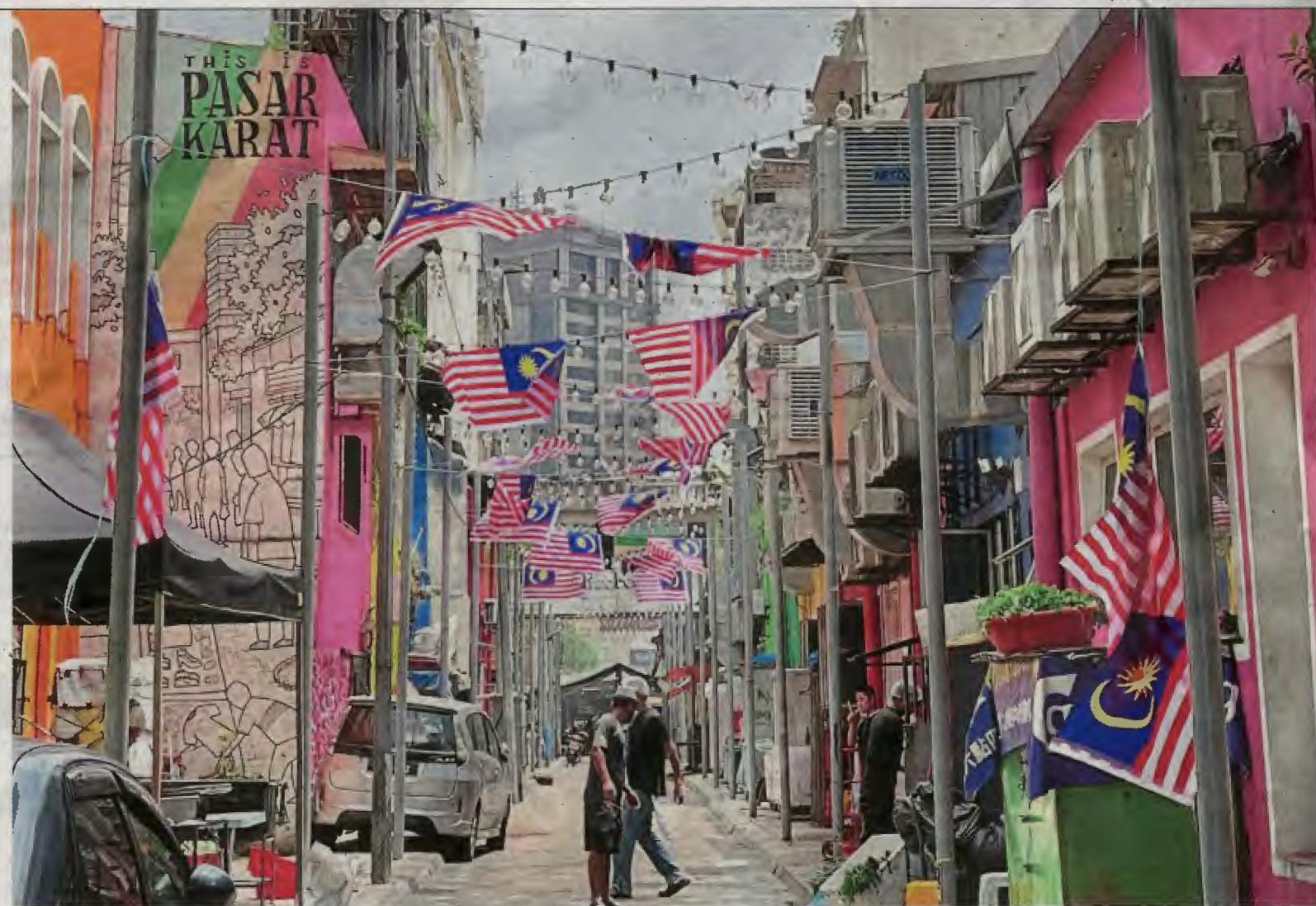
During the many movement control order phases, when travel bans were still in place, she conducted virtual tours of KL.

"I heeded the advice of people around me and digitised my walks. It was tough telling people that they can see and visit cities from home as many did not understand what it was or how it worked."

"But it was a welcome alternative as the stories allowed people to 'travel' virtually," she explains, adding that she realised very quickly during the pandemic the importance of good storytelling and the impact of digitalisation.

Adapting to changes

Things may have been bleak, but many tour guides and other workers in the tourism industry persevered. This landscape is



One of the best ways to learn about KL's past is to join a walking tour. — Photos: GISELE SOO/The Star

Staying on top of the game

While some tour guides in Malaysia have moved on from the industry since the pandemic, there are still many who are constantly improving their skills and knowledge to provide better travel experiences to tourists.



Leong has been in the tourism industry for about 50 years now. — JIMMY LEONG

rapidly changing, even more so today. The job spectrum of a tourist guide is wide, and it's often more than just telling stories. One also needs to be able to adapt to changes.

Rai says tourists today are looking for different experiences and have higher expectations.

Rai, who specialises in cultural and heritage tours, says her duty is to deliver what the people want by understanding their needs.

"While a well-curated tour makes a lot of difference, you must also always be in the know. Being sensitive to their (tourists') needs is vital too, how you articulate the story contributes to the experience," she says.

But these are the things that can be acquired only through training and experience.

Rai shares that there are people who call themselves "guides" but are not certified, accredited



Rai curates the cultural walks together with a few other experienced local guides.

or professionally trained, which means they may lack some basic skills including how to identify reliable sources.

"This can potentially create a string of problems such as misinterpretation of information. Tourists might be led to believe a false narrative of events," Rai says. "But I will continue to better myself and stay true to my values."

In order to maintain a good pool of professional tourist guides, Leong says that the government should enforce a strict baseline to regulate the quality and reputation of the sector.

The applicants have to be able to read, write and speak, as well

as pass the training course.

"Currently we have licensed guides who have poor language skills as they cannot even read or write," he reveals.

Right mindset

While tourism recovery is currently happening, it isn't at a desired pace, says Leong. In fact, it has been slower than expected.

"We haven't seen any significant increase in the demand for tour guides as well," he says.

Leong has been training, establishing modules and policies, as well as providing consultations and niche guiding

for many years.

He is also a Unesco Specialist Cultural Heritage Guides trainer.

According to him, local industry players are facing tighter competition, especially in the Asean region, which could have contributed to the slow recovery speed.

"Many countries have been aggressively promoting their tourism products to attract visitors to their shores. We too have to do the same," says Leong.

Besides that, there also isn't enough effort from the government in promoting the proper use of licensed tourist vehicles.

Tour guides have to adopt the right mindset – licensed tourist vehicles do not function the same as non-tourist vehicles.

"More often than not, many of them who operate a tourist vehicle tend to think that they are merely providing logistic services when, in truth, their role is so much more than just driving people around – they have a part to play," Leong explains.

Tour guide services in the past were mainly used by foreign visitors but this must change. "It's high time we shifted our focus, as it is impossible to fully experience the beauty of a destination without a guide," he says.

He suggests that stakeholders encourage domestic travellers to utilise guides during their holidays, especially when visiting a new place, even if it's just a weekend getaway.

"This is so that they get to enjoy and truly immerse themselves in the local culture," Leong concludes.