



A *ryokan* retreat in Beniya Mukayu, a small hotel on Japan's Honshu island, about three hours from Tokyo by bullet train. *Ryokans* in Japan offer an immersion in Japanese culture.

PHOTO: BENIYA MUKAYU

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 BUCK 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 resist 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 Tourism 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 mo-

ment 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 *buah keluak* served 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 quaint 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 never 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 reviving 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 cuisine in Singapore is undergoing its most impressive renaissance; restaurants such as the audaciously-named National Kitchen and the Michelin-starred Candlenut 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 richer experiences for international and domestic tourists alike – more *teh tarik* 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 Catalonia 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.