

## Clean facilities shape visitor perceptions

**PETALING JAYA:** Tourists may not remember every museum or monument they visit, but public toilets often leave a lasting impression and in Malaysia, that experience could influence perceptions ahead of Visit Malaysia 2026.

Public toilet standards directly affect visitor comfort, health and mobility, particularly for families, elderly travellers and persons with disabilities, according to Universiti Utara Malaysia School of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management senior lecturer Dr Mohamad Zaki Ahmad.

"Their quality directly shapes the overall visitor experience," he said.

Despite improvements at premium locations, many public toilets nationwide continue to be viewed as unclean, outdated and poorly maintained.

Hygiene standards vary widely at airports, transport hubs, shopping centres, national parks, highways, cultural attractions and rural tourism sites, he added.

"A negative toilet experience could quickly overshadow positive memories of a destination, reducing visitor spending, shortening time spent at attractions and even generating damaging social media reviews," he said.

Mohamad Zaki pointed to countries such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore as examples of how toilet cleanliness has been incorporated into national branding.

Japan's approach, often described as toilet tourism, integrates aesthetic design, advanced technology and disciplined maintenance to turn facilities into attractions.

South Korea enforces strict standards through its Public Toilet Act, while Singapore applies a star-rating system, conducts regular audits, trains staff and penalises non-compliance.

"These international examples highlight four pillars of success – smart technology, a consistent maintenance culture, strong public-private governance and clear operating standards," he added.

"Malaysia faces gaps in all four areas, but with strategic planning, these solutions can be adapted."

To raise standards, Mohamad Zaki recommended measures, including standardised cleaning schedules and professional training for staff across councils, airports, rail stations and tourism sites, as well as the introduction of a national toilet rating system graded from A to C for transparency.

He also proposed prioritising no-touch fixtures such as automatic taps, flushers and soap dispensers in high-traffic areas, installing multilingual signage in Bahasa Malaysia, English, Mandarin and Arabic, introducing QR-code feedback systems and providing incentives for councils that meet cleanliness benchmarks alongside stricter penalties for non-compliance.

Mandatory accessible toilets in all new buildings were also among his recommendations.

Beyond infrastructure, he also highlighted the role of behavioural nudges to improve user conduct.

These include automated audio or visual reminders, floor markings, social-norm messaging, sensor-based prompts and gender-sensitive cues.

"Such measures encourage proper toilet etiquette and reinforce cleanliness standards without constant human supervision," he said.

He added that public education campaigns in schools, travel hubs and the media could further embed a culture of hygiene and responsibility.

According to Mohamad Zaki, upgrading public toilets would require modest capital investment, professional training, stricter vendor contracts, inter-ministry coordination and consistent enforcement nationwide, alongside updates to building by-laws and long-term monitoring through annual audits.

"Clean toilets represent more than hygiene. They reflect professionalism, service quality and hospitality. For Visit Malaysia 2026, they are a subtle yet powerful signal of the country's readiness to welcome global visitors. In the era of experiential tourism, the condition of public toilets mirrors a nation's overall standard of service and care."

– by **Kirtinee Ramesh**

COMMENT by Assoc Prof Dr Nor Azlida Mohd Nor and Dr Anis Nadhia Roslan

## Have healthcare ads gone too far?

**H**EALTHCARE advertising has evolved dramatically in recent years. Once limited to brochures, billboards and clinic signboards, it has now expanded to fast-moving social media ads, influencer endorsements and even AI-generated promotional content.

While accessible health information can empower the public, there is growing concern that many of these new advertising strategies blur the line between education and persuasion, putting consumers at risk of misunderstanding, misinformation and unnecessary treatments.

One of the most debatable tactics is the use of patient testimonials. Nowadays, it has become common practice for the public to search for reviews and online experiences before choosing a clinic or treatment. Reviews posted on clinic websites or social media can be compelling because they reflect "real-life" experiences from other patients.

However, testimonials or reviews are difficult to verify and can be fabricated. Some clinics display only positive feedback, raising questions about authenticity and even incentivising patients to post favourable content. When the full picture is hidden, the public may form unrealistic expectations about certain treatments.

Healthcare professional endorsements raise similar concerns. When a doctor, dentist or pharmacist appears in an advertisement supporting a product, the public often assumes the recommendation is based on clinical or concrete

evidence. However, commercial partnerships can influence messages delivered to the public.

Countries such as the UK and New Zealand allow endorsements of commercial products by healthcare professionals but under strict conditions, including requirements for evidence-based claims, actual first-hand use and the inclusion of appropriate disclaimers.

Another growing issue is the rise of social media influencers in promoting healthcare products or services. Selected influencers with large followings often promote supplements, whitening products, orthodontic aligners or aesthetic services. Their informal, relatable content can appear trustworthy, especially to younger audiences.

However, many influencers offering advice or promoting health products or services have no formal training in the field. This raises concerns about misinformation, exaggerated claims and the normalisation of unnecessary procedures.

Recently, China introduced strict rules requiring influencers to hold verified qualifications when discussing specialised topics such as medicine, finance and law. This move aims to tackle growing misinformation and protect the public. The policy has sparked global discussion about whether other countries should adopt similar measures.

Adding to the complexity is the increasing use of AI-generated images and videos in healthcare advertising



Clinics and product companies can use AI tools to create perfect-looking smiles, unrealistically smooth skin or digitally enhanced treatment results. These images may appear authentic but can significantly distort expectations.

For example, AI-created "before-and-after" visuals can make whitening treatments look more effective than they truly are. Without clear disclosure, the public may unknowingly compare themselves to digitally fabricated results that are impossible to achieve in real life.

Livestream promotions have also entered the healthcare space. On platforms like TikTok, Instagram and livestream shopping apps, influencers - and in some cases practitioners - host real-time sessions to promote products or services. These livestreams often include time-limited offers, emotional storytelling or high-pressure sales tactics, all of which can influence impulsive decisions.

The immediacy of livestreaming makes it even harder for viewers to pause, verify claims or seek professional advice before making a purchase.

In this rapidly evolving environment, the public must stay alert. Whether the information comes from a professional, a clinic, an influencer or a livestream host, it is essential to seek credible, evidence-based sources. Verify the

qualifications of anyone providing advice and be cautious of visuals or promises that seem "too good to be true".

As digital marketing continues to transform healthcare communication, public awareness is our best defence. By understanding how modern advertising works, individuals can make informed choices that protect their health, well-being and financial safety.

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Although accessible health information can empower the public, there is growing concern that many of these new advertising strategies blur the line between education and persuasion, putting consumers at risk of misunderstanding, misinformation and unnecessary treatments.

— REUTERS PIC

## Hygiene standards seen as benchmark for national readiness

**PETALING JAYA:** With Visit Malaysia 2026 (VM2026) approaching, experts are drawing attention to a seemingly modest but critical element of tourism readiness – public toilets.

Cleanliness, modern facilities and proper maintenance are no longer optional, but a key measure of Malaysia's preparedness to welcome global visitors, according to Universiti Utara Malaysia School of Tourism, Hospitality and Event Management senior lecturer Dr Mohamad Zaki Ahmad.

"Clean toilets represent more than hygiene. They reflect professionalism, service quality and hospitality. For VM2026, they act as a subtle yet powerful indicator of the country's readiness to welcome the world," he said.

He added that well-maintained facilities also reflect societal values, governance capacity and cultural attitudes towards hygiene.

Mohamad Zaki pointed to Singapore's public toilet grading scheme as an example of how structured compliance and transparency could drive higher standards.

"By combining operational benchmarks, routine inspections, visible ratings and incentives, the system ensures accountability among operators," he said.

He recommended a similar framework for Malaysia, adapted to local governance structures and involving municipal councils, the Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry and the Health Ministry.

Under such a national compliance rating system, public toilets would:

- ② establish clear and standardised expectations for cleanliness, accessibility and maintenance;
- ② improve transparency through publicly displayed grades that allow visitors to assess quality at a glance;
- ② shift enforcement from reactive complaint-based action to proactive monitoring;
- ② encourage pride and healthy competition in maintaining cleanliness;
- ② strengthen tourism branding by signalling safety, hygiene and respect for visitors; and
- ② support public health by reducing the risk of disease transmission.

Mohamad Zaki also highlighted smart toilet technology as another avenue for modernisation. Features such as automated cleaning, occupancy sensors, touchless fixtures and real-time monitoring are well suited for large shopping centres, highway rest stops, high-traffic attractions, airports and transport hubs.

"The benefits include improved hygiene, enhanced user comfort, operational efficiency through water and energy savings and better accessibility for families, elderly visitors and persons with disabilities. While initial costs can be high, the long-term gains in safety, sustainability and visitor satisfaction make smart toilets a worthwhile investment," he said.

To ensure consistent standards nationwide, he proposed a hybrid framework that combines government oversight with operator-led maintenance.

"A hybrid model balances accountability with

practicality. It ensures high standards are maintained across all locations, from urban centres to rural tourist sites, without overburdening operators or government agencies," he said.

Under this approach, the government would set minimum standards, inspection schedules and grading criteria.

Mohamad Zaki stressed that Malaysia should prioritise:

- ② establishing a national public toilet excellence framework;
- ② deploying smart toilets in high-traffic locations;
- ② expanding Malaysia Standard 2015 into a comprehensive inspection and certification regime;
- ② creating a dedicated maintenance fund for rural and nature-based attractions;
- ② enacting legislation that empowers local councils to enforce sanitation standards;
- ② strengthening coordination among tourism, health and local government authorities;
- ② conducting annual audits by accredited organisations; and
- ② promoting proper toilet etiquette through schools, media and travel hubs.

"The condition of public toilets is often underestimated, yet it directly affects visitor satisfaction, destination image and public health," he said.

"Prioritising toilet sanitation is essential to delivering safe, high-quality and memorable experiences for visitors." – by **Kirtinee Ramesh**



# Public toilets play key role in tourism image

Hygiene, accessibility and sustainability central to first impression of country and global competitiveness, says expert

BY KIRTINEE RAMESH  
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**PETALING JAYA:** When tourists think of Malaysia, landmarks, cuisine and culture often come to mind.

However, Universiti Teknologi Mara Selangor deputy rector Prof Dr Mohd Hafiz Hanafiah noted that first impressions frequently begin in an unexpected place – public toilets.

As the country prepares to welcome visitors for Visit Malaysia 2026, the hotel and tourism management expert emphasised that clean, accessible and well-maintained public toilets are no longer a minor detail but a key factor in Malaysia's tourism competitiveness.

Mohd Hafiz highlighted that simple yet practical measures could significantly enhance the experiences of visitors.

"Local authorities are upgrading public toilets, ensuring businesses comply with hygiene regulations, improving signage and walkways, maintaining cleanliness in public areas and using apps such as MyWC to resolve issues quickly," he said.

"These efforts collectively help visitors enjoy smoother and more reliable travel experiences across the country."

Sustainability also remains a priority.

Proper wastewater management, upgraded facilities and initiatives such as the Tourism Outstanding Toilet and Hygiene Awards



Mohd Hafiz emphasised that clean and well-maintained public toilets are no longer a minor detail but a key factor in tourism appeal. – ADAM AMIR HAMZAH/THESUN

encourage responsible behaviour among tourists, businesses and local communities.

"Better toilets mean cleaner destinations, happier visitors and more sustainable tourism nationwide," he said.

He added that Malaysia could further distinguish itself globally by combining cleanliness with accessibility and innovation.

"Family-friendly and barrier-free facilities, smart tools such as real-time monitoring and digital rating systems help build trust with visitors while promoting sustainable practices.

"This approach strengthens Malaysia's image as a green and responsible travel destination," he added.

Despite progress at shopping centres and highway rest stops, challenges persist.

Some public toilets continue to have unpleasant odours, wet floors and a lack of basic necessities such as soap and tissue paper.

"Public toilets matter more than many realise. A single bad experience could make tourists feel unsafe or uncomfortable, affecting their overall perception of the country," he explained.

Looking ahead to VM2026, Mohd Hafiz urged both locals and visitors to play a role in enhancing the travel experience.

"Malaysians contribute by keeping public spaces clean and extending warm hospitality. Visitors can look forward to upgraded facilities, improved hygiene standards and enhanced tourism sites. Together, we can create responsible, meaningful and memorable experiences," he said.

He added that Visit Malaysia 2026 represents a journey towards a cleaner, more sustainable and welcoming country, where hosts and guests alike contribute to a world-class tourism experience.

## TOUGHEST MISSION

# SAVING LIVES AGAINST ALL ODDS IN SUDAN

Doctor shares experience working in austere conditions in war-torn country

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**I**n a small operating theatre in Tawila, Sudan, one of the few hospitals still functioning in a region battered by more than 18 months of siege, starvation and bombardment, a woman's heart stopped during her Caesarean section.

With no X-ray, CT scan or electrolyte tests, Dr Annie Lin fought to save her.

"We started CPR and she regained her heartbeat, but we lost her the next day."

"She had 10 children. That day, her children lost their mother." Dr Lin, a Taiwanese anaesthetist with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), said in a recent interview.

#### A SUDDEN DETOUR INTO A WAR ZONE

Dr Lin never planned to be in Sudan.

"I wanted to go to South Sudan. But this mission urgently needed an anaesthetist."

She spent two months in the country, which felt like entering "the most austere environment" she had ever worked in.

"This is my third mission. My first was in Afghanistan last summer, then Sierra Leone.

"Among all the countries, Sudan is the most austere."

"The main transportation there is donkeys and camels," she said.

#### THREE DAYS THROUGH SAND AND BLISTERING HEAT

Reaching Tawila from Chad took nearly three days by road. "When I arrived, my luggage was covered in sand. Our guest-house was also full of insects, flies and lizards," she said.

The hospital offered even less.

"We didn't have an X-ray. In the lab, we could only check haemoglobin and blood sugar... no electrolytes, no thyroid function, no cardiac enzymes. In other missions, we could at least do basic tests."

Outside, she said, desperation was everywhere, with beds placed directly on the roadside by families who had nowhere to go. Others slept on blankets on bare ground.

"It's winter after November. At night and early morning, it can be cold as cold as 15 to 18°."

#### TREATING EVERYONE, WITH ALMOST NOTHING

The hospital treated patients of all ages.

Before October, she said, the team handled six to eight surgeries daily.

When the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) seized El Fasher on Oct 26, tens of thousands fled across the desert to Tawila.

"Most of the trauma cases were caused by gunshots, bombing and fragments.

"Surgeries increased to 24 a day," she said.

With only two theatres, the team worked from morning to night, often without eating.

They later erected a tent housing two additional theatres, hired more staff, including a surgeon

who fled El Fasher, and received support from an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) surgeon and an operating theatre nurse.

Electricity and Internet access were unreliable.

Dr Lin recalled the power cutting out during a laparotomy, an open abdominal surgery.

"We had to urgently switch the ventilator to manual mode," she said, adding that the medical team also had to perform procedures far outside their specialities.

Their Swedish general surgeon, she said, handled everything from bone fractures to eye surgeries, often consulting colleagues remotely or referring to textbooks.

With no ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist, Dr Lin had to take on ENT cases herself, with remote guidance.

One involved a 9-month-old boy who had a piece of okra lodged in his oesophagus.

#### CHILDREN WHO LOOK HALF THEIR AGE

Under the RSF siege, food and medical supplies had been blocked for more than a year.

"Many of the children... I guessed they were 1 or 2 years old, but they were actually 3 or 4."

Most of them, she said, were also anaemic, with low haemoglobin levels.



Dr Annie Lin says her mission in Sudan was the harshest she had ever faced. PIC COURTESY OF MSF

#### LANGUAGE BARRIERS AND IMPROVISED COMMUNICATION

Communication was another challenge, as many patients and even some staff did not understand English.

A single translator rotated between two operating theatres.

"He helped with the language barrier.

"But because he was not a doctor or from a medical background, I wasn't sure if he translated everything correctly."

"Sometimes I had to rely on body language, and I even downloaded the Google Translate app," she said.

#### STOP THE WAR. STOP THE GENOCIDE'

Asked what the world could do, her answer was immediate: "Stop the war. Stop the genocide."

She added that international funding cuts, particularly from the United States, were worsening the crisis.

"I hope we can help them through donations. They need financial support even more than before."

#### 'I WOULD BE WILLING TO GO BACK, THEY NEED US THE MOST'

Despite the exhaustion and trauma of her mission, Dr Lin said she would return to Tawila without hesitation.

"Among the three projects I've worked on, this is the one that needs help the most."

Her earlier missions in Afghanistan and Sierra Leone were long-established operations with more than a decade of systems, training and experienced local staff.



MSF set up a healthcare post in Tawila Umda to stabilise newly arrived people and refer the most serious cases, such as the wounded or those requiring surgery, by ambulance to Tawila Hospital. PIC COURTESY OF MSF

PRAYER TIMES						
	SUBUH [am]	SYURUK	ZUHUR	ASAR [pm]	MAGHRIB	ISYAK
<b>Melaka</b>	5:53	7:07	1:09	4:32	7:07	8:22
<b>Penang</b>	6:06	7:18	1:16	4:38	7:10	8:24
<b>K. Lumpur</b>	5:58	7:09	1:11	4:34	7:08	8:23
<b>Johor Baru</b>	5:46	7:00	1:03	4:26	7:02	8:17
<b>Kuantan</b>	5:51	7:05	1:06	4:29	7:03	8:18
<b>Ipoh</b>	6:02	7:13	1:14	4:36	7:09	8:24

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## Disconnect to reconnect: Why phone-free parks matter

**MALAYSIA** is often cited as having one of the highest rates of smartphone addiction globally, frequently ranking third after China and Saudi Arabia.

Studies reveal problematic usage, particularly among youths, with growing concerns about mental health, family dynamics and safety. High dependence on devices is linked to sedentary behaviour and other negative health outcomes, prompting calls for greater awareness and intervention from parents and policymakers.

While Malaysians can take pride in embracing digital technology – vital for efficient communication – there are drawbacks, especially in community and family life.

In a smartphone-driven culture, physical presence is often undervalued. People lack engagement with family, colleagues and the community, including those who are poor or marginalised.

Many confine themselves to their rooms, consuming news and commentaries through screens, which can narrow perspectives and reinforce individualistic or narcissistic tendencies.

Human dignity, empathy and broader worldviews are nurtured through participation in community life. To address this, the Association for Welfare, Community and Dialogue (Acid) recommends creating designated phone-free public parks. Such spaces can encourage interaction, learning and community-driven initiatives. Students can also be involved, visiting these parks as part of social assignments.

Countries like the Netherlands have successfully implemented phone-free initiatives in public spaces to encourage digital detox.

If adopted in Malaysia, particularly with youth leadership, similar initiatives can strengthen multiethnic and interfaith engagement.

Phone-free parks are more than a novelty; they offer a practical step towards reducing smartphone addiction while fostering a physically, psychologically and socially conscious society.

**Ronald Benjamin**  
**Secretary**  
**Acid**



## NEWS & VIEWS

Compiled by KHOO JIAN

### Selfless act of donating her liver to her little sister

A SISTER'S selfless decision to donate part of her liver to save her younger sibling has become a powerful testament to familial love and sacrifice.

 Nur Batrisya Edriana Muhammad Ridzuan, 21, donated her liver to her sister, Nur Aisyah Medina, eight, who suffered from a rare liver disease since infancy.

The procedure was carried out on Thursday at Universiti Malaya Medical Centre (UMMC) in Kuala Lumpur, *Sinar Harian* reported.

Both sisters are now in stable condition at the intensive care

unit (ICU).

Their mother, Nur Diana Awang, 44, said doctors expect the recovery period to take between one and two weeks.

"Doctors informed us that Aisyah will need to stay in ICU for at least one to two weeks. Her condition is critical but stable.

"Batrisya is stable and conscious. For now, all we can do is wait and pray for a smooth recovery."

> "What kind of face is that? An 'orang minyak' (mystical oily man) or a robber?"

That was the reaction of a woman after sharing a recording of an entity with large, protruding eyes and a frightening appearance, seen lurking among the leaves of a plant in Petaling Jaya, according to *Kosmo!*

In a post on social media, she said the figure appeared to maintain an unbroken stare.

Many commenters said they were frightened and tried to identify what it could be, questioning whether it was human, an animal or something else entirely.

> For the past three years, Che

Sarimah Che Soh, 60, has carried the weight of being both mother and caregiver while tending to her husband, Abdullah Ahmad, 70, who has been bedridden and is semi-conscious since suffering a stroke in Kelantan, *Berita Harian* reported.

"He had to be placed in a coma because his blood pressure was dangerously high and oxygen was not reaching his brain," she said.

"No matter how difficult it is, I will remain faithful and care for my husband until the end of my life."