

Tourism players must help Mayor

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Dato' Sri Dr Sabin Samitah

SABIN is transforming KK into a tourism city for Borneo. Tourism is KK’s core industry. Yes. Sabin’s major initiatives will transform Kota Kinabalu into a smart, inclusive, and globally recognised city, to be “The Best City in Borneo”.

Here are some of his significant initiatives which will enhance life style for KK residents and improve tourism value.

[1] Cultural & tourism development

KK Culture on Stage 2026: A series of monthly themed cultural performances launched to showcase Sabah’s diverse heritage [over 30 ethnic groups] to tourists. The initiative supports Visit Malaysia 2026 and builds momentum for Visit Sabah Year 2027, while providing a platform for local artists and creative entrepreneurs.

[2] Premium seafood tourism hub:

Positioning KK as a globally-recognised “seafood city” to attract both international and domestic tourists.

[3] Economic diversification:

Moving beyond tourism, Sabin’s initiatives include developing a structured night-time economy, revitalising coastal and port areas, and strengthening the fisheries sector through projects like the Blue Ocean Tuna Project to build long-term economic resilience.

[4] Smart & inclusive urban planning:

Child and Age-Friendly City: KK is the first city in Sabah to implement the Child-Friendly Cities Initiative [with UNICEF]. It is also taking steps toward becoming an age-Friendly City [as defined by the WHO, planning to develop a “Kota Kinabalu Age-Friendly Action Plan” to create safe and accessible environments for all ages.

[5] Smart city agenda:

Modernising city systems through digital solutions, including the Sabah Smart Parking app, expanded online payments, and digital booking systems. A master plan with Universiti Malaysia Sabah [UMS] aims to use data-driven decision-making for public services.

Strategic Role / Focus Area	Core Blueprint Objective	Key Assets & Initiatives	Economic / Strategic Value
1. Primary Gateway & Aviation Hub	Expand long-haul and high-yield direct international flight connections.	• Kota Kinabalu International Airport [KKIA]• Strategic airline partnerships [e.g., direct route expansions with regional/international carriers]	Drives high-spending international arrivals for Visit Malaysia 2026 & Visit Sabah 2027.
2. Premium Accommodation & Investment Hub	Elevate average daily rates [ADR] and visitor stay duration via high-tier inventory.	• Brand pipeline [Sheraton, Hilton Garden Inn, InterContinental, Club Med, Avani, Wyndham]• Luxury coastal and urban resort zones	Boosts private sector capital investment, generates skilled jobs, and maximizes yield per tourist.
3. MICE & Business Events Capital	Diversify revenue away from purely seasonal leisure travel into high-margin corporate events.	• Sabah International Convention Centre [SICC]• Sabah Convention Bureau [SCB]	Captures business delegates who spend significantly more per trip than standard leisure tourists.
4. Digital Transformation & Innovation	Modernize tourist touchpoints and optimize destination marketing.	• Smart city payment/service integration• Sabah Tourism Board [STB] data-driven global marketing campaigns	Improves seamless urban navigation and target-markets high-value traveller demographics.
5. Supply Chain Engine for Community Tourism	Connect urban tourism spend with rural community enterprises.	• Direct procurement from rural craftsmen and agricultural producers• Urban hub for West Coast & Crocker Range eco-routes	Ensures equitable wealth distribution across rural districts [e.g., Tuaran, Kiulu, Ranau].

[6] Liveable city focus:

Emphasising a people-centered approach that prioritises cleanliness, safety, functional public facilities, and social equity, including better access to amenities for low- and middle-income groups.

[7] Alignment with State and eco-tourism goals:

Sabin is closely collaborating with the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment and Sabah Tourism Promotion Board, to ensure city policies support broader state initiatives. This includes supporting urban eco-tourism models, such as the community-driven initiatives at the Darau Wetland, which balance livelihood improvement with environmental conservation KK city.

[8] Reinvesting in urban infrastructure and beautification:

Sabin has drawn a direct line between the city’s municipal funding to build up the success of its tourism industry. DBKK has made considerable progress in urban beautification, which includes upgrading pavements, improving street lighting, and undertaking a major cleanup of the KK waterfront.

A cleaner, well-maintained city is a prerequisite for attracting premium and high-yield international tourists.

All of Sabin’s initiatives will prepare KK to receive high value tourists.

2. Most opportune time for tourism private stakeholders to collaborate with Mayor Sabin to heighten tourism value for KK.

Sabin is a very proactive mayor whose initiatives, despite many long-entrenched financial problems in DBKK and old, poorly maintained facilities in KK, are showing visible improvements. The city ambience is increasingly more attractive and vibrant. Tourist arrivals are positive, especially from China.

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Opportune time for KK tourism stakeholders to tape into Sabin’s transformation and collaborate with him and his DG Lifred to heighten KK’s tourism value.

3. Why is KK key to heightening tourism value for Sabah?

KK is already the most developed tourism city with the largest number of international flights and international tourist arrivals in Borneo. KK has potential to be much better. (Please refer to Chart 1.)

4. Private tourism stakeholders should play a proactive and major role in heightening tourism value which is a shared responsibility.

With Sabin is a great supporter of tourism, the private stakeholders can quite easily make significant contributions in all aspects of tourism in KK.

Ultimately, the success of tourism industry, like those in Singapore, Bali and Maldives which enjoy four to five times higher tourism value on per tourist arrival than Sabah, is the responsibility of the private stakeholders, especially investors in hotels and their senior management. (Please refer to Chart 2.)

5. Private stakeholder sectorial key roles in heightening high tourism value in Sabah

At the micro level, the stakeholders in the major tourism sectors have a responsible role to play, first for their own benefits and secondly, for KK as a destination. (Please see Chart 3.)

6. Here is my message for the investors/ owners of five star and four staff existing hotels, those under construction and on the drawing board.

*** You are the largest individual investors in tourism, each hotel costing between RM200mil to RM400mil.

*** You are the largest investors in combined monetary value in Sabah’s tourism with investments of RM 8bil [estimated].

***The global economy is undergoing turbulent times.

***You have the most to lose or gain

***Sabin is the best Mayor you can work with to enhance tourism value and return your investments.

Here are some reasons why you should beat a path to Sabin’s office ASAP.

[1] Some existing four stars and five stars are doing “so so” only. Their maintenance is falling behind. Their standards have fallen below their star ratings. Room rates and yields are much lower than international standards.

[2] A number of similar star ratings hotels will come on stream soon. Some DPs are in process and more in the pipeline.

Private Stakeholder Category	Core Strategic Mandate	Key Private Initiatives & Actions	Economic & Strategic Impact
1. Hotel Developers & Investors	Expand premium, high-yield inventory to boost Average Daily Rates [ADR].	• Capital deployment in 4/5-star international hotel developments [e.g., Hilton Garden Inn Tuaran, InterContinental, Club Med, Avani]• Eco-luxury resort developments & green building certifications.	Shifts dependence away from low-margin budget travel, extends tourist length of stay, and generates high-skilled hospitality jobs.
2. Airlines & Charter Operators	Drive direct air connectivity from target high-spending source markets.	• Opening new direct point-to-point international routes into KKIA. • Partnering with STB on targeted charter flights and travel packages.	Solves the critical connectivity bottleneck to bring high-yield international travellers directly to Sabah.
3. Tour Operators & Destination Management Companies [DMCs]	Lead commercial product innovation and destination marketing.	• Developing experiential, high-margin itineraries [e.g., eco-trekking, deep-sea diving, cultural festivals]. • Participating in trade expos as the main drivers of bookings.	Drives commercial sales for Visit Malaysia 2026 & Visit Sabah 2027 without relying solely on state funding.
4. Event Organizers & MICE Operators	Position Sabah as a year-round corporate & high-value conference hub.	• Co-bidding with the Sabah Convention Bureau [SCB] for international events at SICC. • Hosting corporate summits, exhibitions, and specialized expos.	Attracts business delegates who spend significantly higher per trip than average leisure tourists.
5. Tech Platforms & Eco-Technology Vendors	Co-finance digital adoption and green infrastructure.	• Implementing smart booking engines and digital payment ecosystems. • Installing renewable energy [e.g., solar] and advanced waste management in off-grid resorts.	Enhances seamless urban tourist navigation and aligns operations with global ESG/sustainability standards.
6. Resort Operators & Rural Supply Chains	Integrate Community-Based Tourism [CoBT] into high-end hospitality chains.	• Direct procurement of local produce, handicrafts, and cultural showcases from rural SMEs. • Supporting local guiding, upskilling, and community enterprise partnerships.	Disperses tourism wealth from urban entry points directly into rural local economies.

[3] Within the next few years, several thousand new rooms will be in the market competing for business.

[4] Room revenue, unless there is a sizeable increase in number of high value tourists coming and more full serviced airlines landing in KKIA, will be squeezed down to below financial viability.

[5] Given the prevailing higher construction cost, these new hotels will face difficulties to achieve profitability and deliver a decent return on your investments.

[6] I would recommend for all the hotel owners to offer ideas and collaboration with Sabin to transform KK into a high tourism value capital city URGENTLY.

So far, the five star and four star owners have not responded to the Sabah Tourism Blueprint and Sabin’s drive to transform KK into a high tourism value city. I stand corrected if they have done so privately.

7. Ultimately, the private tourism stakeholders, especially four star and five star hotel owners, should collaborate with Sabin in his transformation for KK to improve, prospects of better returns on their investments.

They will stand to benefit first and most when Sabah’s tourism value goes up.

Direct point to the hotel owners: You help Sabin to enhance KK as a high value tourism destination = You helping yourselves.

The views expressed here are the views of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of the Daily Express. If you have something to share, write to us at: Forum@dailyexpress.com.my