

Absence of competence: The DOT's culture and scenery delusions

By J. Manuel González (The Philippine Star) -

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The Department of Tourism – the same DOT that crashed and burned with “Love the Philippines” – has appointed itself the National Expert on what constitutes 5-star, as well as what constitutes Philippine culture.

We need to be brutally frank with ourselves. The DOT is simply WRONG in thinking that “Philippine culture” and “Philippine scenic attractions,” however you slice them, are big factors in tourist decisions. They imagine that people sitting in New York or London will suddenly resolve that “I must see those Igorots before I die” or “I must go see where the nurse-with-syringe came from.”

Most of the bureaucrats in the DOT have never lived abroad or traveled much, and their main goal when traveling is to find an outlet mall and a McDonald’s whose toilet isn’t keypad-protected. Naturally they have no idea what might draw large numbers of tourists, and wind up sounding like e-Bayers proudly selling Michael Jordan’s unwashed socks. Since they don’t know any better, they keep trying to convince tourists to come for Philippine culture and Philippine scenery.

OPM Por-eber. Many hotels are grumbling about the DOT’s directive to play OPM (Original Filipino-composed and Filipino-performed music) in lobbies. There is no other country in the Free World with a similar requirement. Does Canada require its hotels to play Celine Dion? Why not? Because, in case you forgot, Canada is a free country.

So are we, in theory, but apparently not in the opinion of our DOT.

The overwhelming choice of the 4- and 5-star hotels I have stayed in over the years is to play NO MUSIC, or practically-inaudible music, in lobbies. After a journey people don’t want to be “entertained.” They want to get to their rooms and wash up. It is the lower-end hotels that play loud music, which is to keep the desk clerk awake, not welcome the guests.

In my hotel, Plantation Bay Resort & Spa, guests arrive at the lobby to the sound of a gentle waterfall. We are a truly world-class resort, 100 percent designed and run by Filipinos with no input from any international chain, perfectly competent to compete internationally. Instead of just leaving us alone, the absence-of-competence DOT and other elements of our government have, over three decades, repeatedly sabotaged us. How did some clueless bureaucrat in Manila acquire the right to force me to “culturally-brand” based on their baduy idea of Filipino service?

Once we consider what other industries culture-branding could be imposed on, we quickly realize that THIS IDEA IS STUPID. Shall we culture-brand our beer? Hospitals? BPOs? Condos? Airlines? Instant noodles? Shoes? Military? Export garments? THE IDEA IS STUPID.

Hilot by the book, DOT’s book. As part of its culture branding, the DOT has also instructed that all spas in the country must offer a native hilot massage with a precise sequence for its entire hour, minute by minute. As you might guess, Plantation Bay Resort & Spa has a spa. I have been directly involved in the development of several of our treatments, and I assure you this hilot-by-the-book idea is also STUPID.

How the DOT plans to enforce this directive without thousands of hidden cameras all feeding to central command in Manila is a mystery to me. Giving instructions that aren’t capable of being obeyed or verified is absence of competence.

At Plantation Bay we have a hilot massage but we are CUSTOMER-focused, not time-and-motion focused. A good massage is a work of art. Our DOT in its blissful ignorance wants to make it a mass-production-line.

Scenery, anyone? There are several places in the world where people from far away travel for the scenic wonders. The Grand Canyon, Norwegian fjords and the Pyramids come to mind. The Philippines is not on this short list, and never will be. We need to understand that, accept it and get over it. Indonesia has rice terraces just like us, and to most people either version is worth just two minutes. Between our “perfect cone” and Mt. Fuji, most tourists will prefer the snow-capped version. Naked tribesmen appeal to nobody.

Fortunately, scenery is not what most customers want to buy. So let’s stop selling it. What most tourists want to buy is illustrated by Thailand, Spain, Mexico, Hawaii, the Caribbean and most successful tourist destinations: ease of access, comfortable accommodations, climate, rest, relaxation and some diversions (but not round-the-clock diversions).

Sino ba ang general? The DOT is run by clueless bureaucrats who believe that everyone in tourism should “Obey us, kasi kami ang Expert.” In fact, what they mean is, sila ang general.

So, have these self-appointed “generals” won any war, battle or even skirmish in the past 30 years?

Our tourism industry – formerly 15 percent of the entire economy, now only 5 percent – is in the hands of petty bureaucrats with no relevant experience, no basic business sense and not even any common sense.

Nonetheless they believe that this is a Communist country, and that they are Stalin.

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