

28 JUN 1996

Bernamea Feature

"NIKO" WELCOMES TOURISTS TO PULAU PERHENTIAN

By: NODIN MOHADI

KUALA BESUT: The name may be alien and she is definitely not a demure Japanese girl. But her fondness for the company of visitors makes "Niko" yet another attraction to the already unique and fascinating Pulau Perhentian, one of the few remaining spots in the country where the earth is still at peace with the sky.

"Niko" is, by the way, a jungle squirrel living in a Casuarina tree near Pelangi Teluk Dalam Chalet on Pulau Perhentian Besar, one of the two main islands that made up the Pulau Perhentian chain that is fast gaining popularity as a tourist destination.

Although Niko is never kept in captivity by man, she never fails to display her agility and tameness every time she is approached by visitors.

She will slowly descend from her hide-out and playfully reach for your hand or fingers, or even jump on your back or shoulder.

Niko's presence is regarded by many of the island's tour operators as yet another small contribution which would further promote Pulau Perhentian, long acknowledged as one of the 10 most beautiful islands in the world.

Pulau Perhentian deserves the accolade because of her natural beauty, white sandy beaches, dense tropical rainforest, azure sea and fresh air.

Generally, the two main islands -- Pulau Perhentian Besar and Pulau Perhentian Kecil -- have all the qualities of a magnificent destination, fancied and fantasized by tourists the world over.

Nevertheless, the 867-hectare Pulau Perhentian Besar has a brighter prospect as compared to the 525-hectare Pulau Perhentian Kecil, for the latter is inhabited by some 1,500 islanders.

In addition, the Terengganu state government, with the Malaysian Tourism Development Corporation (TDC), began to give serious attention to developing Pulau Perhentian Besar as a major tourist destination as early as 1989 with the construction of 32 chalets, mainly around Teluk Pauh.

The idea to develop the island was mooted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was fascinated by its natural beauty and uniqueness. An initial allocation of RM5 million was then approved for the construction of the basic infrastructures.

And there was no turning back since. Accommodations and other recreational facilities to cater to the increasing number of arrivals are now mushrooming all over the islands.

Among the favourite pastime of the tourists are scuba diving, sailing, kayaking, fishing, squid catching, jungle trekking, camping and around-the-island tour by boat.

Several training centers have also sprung up on the island to meet the demand of the visitors, like the internationally recognised diving center at Teluk Dalam on Pulau Perhentian Besar.

New attractions followed the discovery of Gua Layang-Layang (Cave of the Swallows) and Sungai Mata Air (Spring River), known to the locals as "Air Berani" (Brave Water) on Pulau Perhentian Besar.

According to Kuala Besut State Assemblyman Datuk Wan Zakaria Abdul Rahman, there are now at least 1,000 medium-cost and exclusive rooms or chalets run by 25 operators on both the islands.

Among them are the D' Lagoon Resort, Coral Bay Resort, Aur Bay Resort, Chempaka Chalet, Coral View Island Resort, Perhentian Island Resort, ABC Chalet, Pelangi Teluk Dalam Chalet, Samudera Chalet and the District Office

Rest House.

Wan Zakaria said the room rates on both islands, some 20 km from the Besut beach on the mainland, are very reasonable, ranging from RM30 to RM280 a day.

He said Pulau Perhentian is becoming more popular as an international tourist destination, as evidenced by TDC statistics which showed that out of 250,000 tourists to the islands last year, 40 percent were foreigners, mainly from Europe.

The operator of the Pelangi Teluk Dalam Chalet, Ramli Yaacob, 42, said industry is flourishing on the island due to the ability of the operators to provide comfort and convenience to their guests.

His 20 chalets are always fully occupied by guests from Germany, Italy, Australia, Japan or England.

The owner of Flora Chalet, Baharuddin Idris, 39, explained that Pulau Perhentian became the favourite choice of tourists not only because of her natural beauty, but also because the supplementary activities such as diving, fishing and jungle trekking.

A Singapore tourist, Aminah Jamal, 35, who was fascinated by the beauty of the island's underwater world, hoped that the state government will continue to preserve the diverse natural attractions there, even if the plan to develop Pulau Perhentian Kecil as a free-trade zone like Langkawi Island becomes a reality.

Deputy Minister of Entrepreneur Development Haji Idris Jusoh, who is also the Besut Member of Parliament, is confident that the island's tourism attractions could help realise the "Visit Terengganu Year" campaign next year.

The government, he said, will ensure that Pulau Perhentian continues to flourish as a tourist destination of international standard by implementing several new projects, like an air strip on Pulau Perhentian Kecil and more luxury hotels on Pulau Perhentian Besar.

He hopes that the plan to introduce a glass submarine service for tourists to have a closer view of the underwater world around the island could materialise soon.

For the moment, Haji Idris said there should be more jetties and boat services from the mainland to the islands, while fresh water supply for the convenience of tourists on the islands must be upgraded. -- Bernama