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Dr Mahathir to launch world's largest catamaran next month

PORT KLANG, Thurs. - The world's largest catamaran, owned and operated by Star Cruises, will be officially launched by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition next month.

The SuperStar Express, the first high-speed vehicle and passenger catamaran to operate in Southeast Asia, will be launched at Tanjung Malai on Dec 4.

However, the RM120 million catamaran will start operations before the official launch, on Nov 25, ferrying vehicles and passengers between Langkawi and Butterworth.

The voyage between Langkawi and Butterworth is expected to take about two hours.

A Star Cruises spokesman said the ferry service would be expanded to include Phuket in Thailand by February next year.

"With the expansion to include Phuket, we hope to attract foreigners to Langkawi and Penang.

"They will also be able to travel to other parts of Malaysia via the terminal in Butterworth," he said.

He was speaking onboard the 5,420-tonne vessel, custom built by Australian company Austal Ships, during a Press familiarisation trip from West Port, out to open sea and back.

With a top speed of 40 knots and measuring 82 metres, the ship can accommodate 900 passengers and 175 vehicles, parked on two decks.

SuperStar Express also has two passenger decks, a restaurant serving halal Asian food, a western delicatessen, a duty free shop and a children's arcade.

Passengers are provided headphone sets upon boarding, which they can plug into terminals in their tables and tune in to four television channels and two radio channels.

The catamaran is an all-weather vessel and has a crew of 30.

Star Cruises hired bridge officers from Scandinavian countries as these countries were experienced in operating high-speed catamarans.

The spokesman said Star Cruises purchased the catamaran due to the popularity of a new concept in holidaying, called the "cruise and drive" concept, in the United States and Europe.

"Families there like to travel in their own cars and with the introduction of the vehicle and passenger catamaran, they can drive around islands in their own cars shipped onboard the catamaran.

"With the catamaran, they can also travel there faster and in luxury," he said.

The ship was built larger than other catamarans taking into account the average Asian family is larger than the average Western family.

"Other catamarans are built to accommodate between 150 and 170 cars, with a passenger capacity of not more than 700," the spokesman said.

He added with the Asian family, there would be more people in the family vehicle, thus the need for a larger passenger capacity.

Members of the public who wish to see the catamaran can visit the ship at the Star Cruises Terminal in West Port between 10am and 5pm on Sunday.

Lucky visitors stand to win about 1,000 lucky draw prizes including cruises onboard several of the company's cruise liners, and the MS Europa, rated the best cruise ship in the world by the 1997 Berlitz Guide to

Cruising and Cruise Ships.

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