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Enter Star Cruises SuperStar Express

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AS A spin-off of its successful leisure and cruise business, Star Cruises has embarked on providing passenger ferry services with the introduction of its first high-speed catamaran called SuperStar Express.

A spokesman for Star Cruises said the new passenger catamaran will start operating between Butterworth and Langkawi from November 25 this year and will extend its service to Phuket in Thailand in January next year.

"Targeted at families with own cars, SuperStar Express has a capacity that is larger than two Boeing 747s and can accommodate 900 passengers and 175 cars," he told reporters on a familiarisation tour on board the catamaran in West Port yesterday.

"It will allow families to tour Langkawi in their own cars," the spokesman said.

Star Cruises is also targeting tourists from Phuket who are visiting Langkawi and Penang.

"We hope to draw some 500 foreigners to Langkawi ... that will provide a good foreign exchange earnings for the country," he added.

SuperStar Express can move at a maximum speed of 80km an hour and the travelling time between Butterworth and Langkawi is expected to take about two hours.

Customised-built at a cost of RM120 million, SuperStar Express will be officially launched by the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Langkawi on December 4.

The spokesman also said Star Cruises has no plans to purchase more catamarans to cater to its passenger ferry service at least for the time being.

"This is because catamarans of this kind is very expensive and to be profitable, we have to make sure that a catamaran operates to popular destinations such as Penang, Butterworth, Langkawi and Phuket," he said.

He added that SuperStar Express has to run at a minimum passenger load factor of 50 per cent in order to break even and at least 70 per cent to become profitable.

"We expect to achieve a load factor of 50 per cent in the first year of operations and subsequently increasing this to about 70 per cent in two to three years," the spokesman said.

Asked whether the current economic slowdown in Malaysia will affect the new passenger ferry service, the spokesman said it is not likely "because people will still go on holiday".

"In fact, the slowdown in the local economy is good for domestic tourism. People in Malaysia will opt to travel on short haul since travelling abroad has become too expensive," he said.

He also said although the passenger ferry rates may seem a bit high (between RM250 and RM400) for many Malaysians, "it is quite cheap for Europeans and Singaporeans to join the cruise".

On its new terminal in West Port, the spokesman said, it is in the final stage of completion and is expected to be completed within the next month or two.

"We are positioning the opening of the latest Star Cruises terminal in the first half of next year," he said.

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