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Full speed ahead

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THE brand new, yet cosy Langkawi Yacht Club stands ready to welcome international sailors and perhaps draw many to stop here who traditionally head for Phuket.

The seas around South-East Asia have, for the last decade, been a popular playground for adventurous yachties from the Western Hemisphere as well as from Australia and New Zealand.

Currency exchange has always been in their favour, more so now than ever. Many sea 'gypsies' spend months around here, hopping from one tropical land to another.

Some serious sailors like to take part in races which pass this route. Many sail to Phuket at this time of the year to take part in the King's Cup Race. Phuket is also a favourite destination for boaties to refuel, repair or to top up supplies before proceeding to their intended destinations where they throw their anchors and stay for a much longer spell.

Malaysia is hoping to change this trend as is evident by the opening of several marinas all along the west coast - Johor Baru, Port Dickson, Port Klang, Penang and, of course, Pulau Langkawi.

The Langkawi Yacht Club is already complete and is preparing to launch its membership drive and official opening, but final bureaucratic procedures have yet to be finalised.

Complete with a marina, it reflects its own as well as the country's hopes to draw international boats to berth; to promote Langkawi as a yachting destination instead of a place just to have passports stamped (a ploy only too often used to overcome the problem of overstaying of social passes).

Since its soft opening a couple of months back, its berthing facilities have been enjoying only 50 per cent occupancy. It swelled to full-house during the last week of November because of the Raja Muda International Regatta, a yearly major yachting event organised by the Royal Selangor Yacht Club.

The race/social event attracts participants from all over the world, some on their way for the more established King's Cup Race in Phuket later in the year.

The event wound up at the Langkawi Yacht Club with its prize-giving dinner. Such events, says club general manager Michael Willie, a 38-year-old Canadian, are a good promotion tool for the club as participants will inevitably talk about it and word will get around the sailing community.

The club is jointly owned by a subsidiary of Melewar Group Company Bhd, Nilam Timur Sdn Bhd which holds a 70 per cent share and Langkawi Development Authorities (30 per cent).

It is the vision of chairman Tengku Abdullah Tuanku Abdul Rahman that the region will attract more international yachts from the traditional yachting paradises in the Caribbean and Mediterranean.

He envisages more boats sailing this route all the way to Manila, which places Langkawi in a very strategic position.

However, he says, there is a need for local authorities and those responsible for promoting in-bound tourism to adopt a proactive attitude. Definitely, laws regarding liquor and pub/disco licenses should be reviewed if Langkawi wants to vie with Phuket for tourists.

Willie, who spent some time in Thailand with his wife before coming to

Malaysia, agrees that what draws the yachties to Thailand is the unrestrictive environment (not necessarily sex as most people might think, he points out!).

However, they certainly do choose a place where they can drink and where nightclubs and discos are not frowned upon. Reportedly, some discos in Langkawi have been closed and things like this spread fast in the international yachting circle.

Besides, Willie reckons that Langkawi could do well by having guides to inform sea tourists where the best anchorages are - and there are plenty among the 99 islands of Langkawi.

There is no shortage of attractions for tourists, but these need to be promoted and nicely packaged - like the waterfalls, fresh-water lakes and abundant flora and fauna. Langkawi should also be promoted as a divers' paradise.

"We should also use the club to promote water sports among locals," says Tunku Abdullah who will look into this personally.

The yacht club idea was mooted by the Negri Sembilan prince, who is the brother of the present King. He has done some sailing himself on his motor yacht, named Puteri Maimunah, after his mother.

In fact, he says, the project is a result of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's suggestion that he (Tunku) do something in Langkawi.

"I was considering which industry to go into. I did think about a hotel or transport but finally settled on a yacht club because I could see there is a lot of potential because of the increasing number of boats coming this way."

And an ideal spot with deep waters for the bigger boats to sail into presented itself just next to the jetty.

The club house is preparing for the day when sailors come in great numbers, perhaps to berth for a while before continuing on their journey. Indeed, the jetty is conveniently near the Immigration and Customs offices.

It is only only a five-minute drive away (taxi fare RM4) from Kuah town where boaties can buy provisions. Being a duty-free port, spare parts for yachts are also cheaper than elsewhere in Malaysia.

The marina has 51 wet berths: eight for up to 150-footers and 43 for up to 60-footers.

People who want to 'park' their boats are assured of 24-hour security services besides normal marina facilities like electricity and fresh water supply, postal and parcel services, locker room and port clearance services, things those who have been on the high seas for weeks on end would certainly appreciate. The clubhouse has a swimming pool, laundrette facilities, sauna and jacuzzi as well as restaurants and bar.

The club is currently on a membership drive. There will be places for 24 founding members (VVIPs) who will enjoy very special privileges like being met at the airport; discounts and use of the meeting room and the private restaurant named Crow's Nest.

The founding members' entrance fee is RM60,000. Why only 24? "There is a wall in the club just big enough for 24 portrait photographs!" he explains.

Another special category is for local residents (RM10,000). There are also corporate memberships (fees still to be confirmed). All memberships are transferable.

Also in the planning is the development of about 100 apartments on another two-acre strip of land behind the club house.

Currently, visitors and users of the club and marina are largely foreigners (over 70 per cent). There is hope that with the membership drive, the situation will be reversed.

The club has invited Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to be its patron. Tunku Abdullah, by virtue of his chairmanship, wears the hat of club commodore.

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