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Impressed with the wonderful changes taking place in Malaysia 28 years later

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I AM an Australian ex-serviceman, having served at the Butterworth Air Force Base from 1969 to 1971, and again from 1981 to 1983. I lived in Penang at Vale of Tempe and Tanjung Tokong with my family after our marriage in September 1969.

My wife, Alice, is from Penang (Hokkien Chinese) and our two sons were born at the British Military Hospital Penang (now Universiti Sains Malaysia) and are now 26 and 27 years old.

Our initial courtship was quite difficult as we were engaged during the May 13, 1969 race tensions and the ensuing curfews.

However, my wife's family was very kind to me and lent me every assistance during what was a trying period of time, particularly for a young 21-year-old Australian away from home and with no family support in relation to the pending marriage.

Indeed, the RAAF (Australian Air Force) administrators and my supervisors made every effort to dissuade me from marrying a "local".

I did, however, gain great support from the RAAF Provosts who were required to investigate my wife's family background. In fact, both officers attended our wedding.

We have now been married for 28 years, and return to Penang as often as possible to visit our relatives, and to enjoy the continuing friendliness and hospitality of the Malaysian people, in particular those in Penang.

We returned to Penang for a week last month, joined by our oldest son Scott and his girlfriend.

We had a grand time with all in the family and relatives who came from Singapore just to be with us. I acted as a "tour guide" driving my son and his girlfriend around the beautiful island of Penang and soaking up the atmosphere of the place, which no tourist brochure or round island tour could ever capture.

The high spots of the week were celebrating my wife's 50th birthday at the Komtar Buffet (59th floor), spending all our time having "makan", and visiting a durian plantation owned by friends of my brother-in-law in Balik Pulau.

I must confess to having waited many years to enjoy the delights of the legendary durian; however, I now eat more than my fair share each time we return to Malaysia to make up for lost time.

The low point was paying our respects to my wife's deceased father and mother at their respective resting places at the Buddhist temple and Mount Erskine cemeteries.

At the end of our week, we did not wish to return to Australia, as my wife and I consider Penang to be home.

I had the opportunity to spend time with my brother-in-law in 1994/95 in his capacity as salesman with Sunway Building Services in the northern region.

We visited the development sites around Kulim and Bukit Mertajam, and I could not believe the tremendous amount of development taking place in the country.

This has been substantiated during our recent visit when we could not believe the changes to the Penang and Kuala Lumpur landscape/skylines.

I am further impressed by the harmony among the people of Malaysia and in particular Penang.

It is wonderful to see everyone getting along so well and enjoying what to me is a wonderful country that has gone along in leaps and bounds under the direction and guidance of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Government.

He is indeed a very far-sighted man, dedicated to the future stability of his country and his people.

We in Australia are currently subjected to the "Pauline Hanson" phenomenon.

May I say that all intelligent, fair-minded people of this country will not allow this kind of person to overstep the bounds of decency, and will certainly not allow them to affect our continuing harmonious relations with countries in the Asean region, nor to jeopardise our trade relations with these countries.

When approached by many Malaysians expressing concern, my response was that Hanson is basically a "storm in a teacup", and that her views are not those of the majority.

Further, the media has blown the whole thing out of proportion, unfortunately to the detriment of many in our multicultural society.

It is to be remembered that Australia practises freedom of speech, which effectively provides the Pauline Hansons of this world with a legal platform for their opinions and aspirations.

Those who care about the future of our country, and in particular the younger generation, duly acknowledge that our future lies with Asia, and will deal with Hanson in the only way possible, by way of democratic vote.

Be assured that the majority of Australians love to visit your fair country, and to enjoy the hospitality of the Malaysians.

I am biased and, God willing, my wife and I will be able to visit for longer periods, for many years to come.