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Langkawi-Status (News Focus)

LANGKAWI THE DUTY-FREE ISLAND: 10 YEARS LATER

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LANGKAWI, July 11 (Bernama) -- Ten years after obtaining duty-free status, Langkawi is one of the fastest growing districts in Malaysia.

From being an isolated island, it has turned around and become not only a popular tourist destination and a favourite venue for international conferences and exhibitions, but also a host to several major sports events.

The island gained international prominence when it was chosen as the retreat for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

Now officials are talking about improving infrastructure on an island that used to have only gravel roads with hardly any cars using them.

Special attention is being paid to the much used metal roads which have potholes and are dusty.

The dust is from lorries taking earth from sites being levelled for development -- which a Kedah Executive Councillor said is "reflective of Langkawi's changed status."

Up to the late 80s, there were no dusty roads and hardly any development. There were no duty-free shops, no Dataran Lang, no Galeria Perdana, no Langkawi Legends Park, no Aquabeat theme park, no Underwater World, no Crocodile Farm, no Pulau Payar Marine Park and no five-star hotels.

Ten years ago people came to Langkawi to see Mahsuri's grave, Telaga Tujuh and Beras Terbakar and buy "gamat" water or oil, anchovies and Jawa tobacco at the riverside stalls in Pekan Kuah.

Real estate then was worth very little. Many locals sold large tracts of land for pittance and left for the mainland.

The turning point came in 1987, when the Federal Government conferred duty-free status on the island. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who served as medical officer in Langkawi in the 50s, saw the island's potential as an international tourist attraction.

Investments poured in and a host of projects were carried out. Prices of land shot up as the island thrived and several people became overnight millionaires.

On Dr Mahathir's initiative, the island became the permanent venue for several international events like the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition and the Langkawi International Dialogue.

The latest project is the Langkawi International University Of Tomorrow which will offer courses ranging from space science to tourism, and from robotics to sports. The university is being built on a 200ha site on Pulau Tuba, one of Langkawi's numerous islets .

Kedah Menteri Besar Tan Sri Sanusi Junid said the university would start to operate next year at a temporary campus in Kuah.

The island looks set to prosper further as it becomes better known to international tourists.

In 1995 1.8 million tourists visited Langkawi. Now that renovations to the international airport to accommodate big planes had been completed, the number is expected to easily exceed two million. -- BERNAMA

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