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Pictures taken 40 years ago now part of show

LANGKAWI, Sun. - When he went round on foot and on an old bicycle taking photographs of the people, buildings and scenery of this legendary island back in the 50s, Kwong Loo Eng had no idea of what the pictures were really for.

"I was just doing it for fun ... you can say it was a hobby," said the 81-year-old man when interviewed today.

However, more than 40 years later, he suddenly realised that the efforts he had put in had paid off.

Tomorrow, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will open the New Straits Times-Langkawi Development Authority photo exhibition which includes several photographs taken by Kwong.

"Certainly, I am very proud," he said when asked how he felt about having the pictures displayed in the 10-day exhibition.

Two of the photographs show Kwong with the first Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman and the crowd in front of his hotel in Kuah when Tunku opened it in 1958.

The hotel, which he named Fairwinds, was the only one then and had six rooms. It was closed down in 1990 because it was too old. The row of 11 units of double-storey shophouses where the hotel was located was built in 1895.

"We are building a 90-room hotel at the same site," said his Australia-trained architect son, Francis Kwong, who was with him during the interview.

Today, with the rapid development taking place in Langkawi, the number of hotels has grown by leaps and bounds. There are now 43 hotels with almost 7,000 rooms which are heavily booked during peak seasons, especially school holidays.

Kwong, who speaks English and the Kedah Malay dialect, can vividly remember how he sought the help of the penghulu of various mukim in Langkawi to "round up" the residents to enable him to take their photographs for identity cards.

Kwong was not a photographer by profession.

"I suddenly found myself taking pictures when my elder brother, who was a cameraman, migrated to China in the 50s."

In his own words, he was "doing many things at one time". In between taking pictures, he was also selling newspapers, air tickets and motorcycles. He was also a goldsmith.

"You can say I am a jack of all trades and a master of none," said Langkawi-born Kwong.

Recalling his job as an air ticketing agent, Kwong said in the 50s, only a four-seater Cessna was able to land at the runway in Padang Mat Sirat.

"Everytime a plane was about to land, I had to inform the villagers who would immediately form a squad to chase the buffaloes away," he said.

He also remembers seeking treatment from Dr Mahathir when the latter was a medical officer on the island some time in 1956.

His last business was running a shop "which used to be the biggest" selling jewellery, cameras and watches.

Despite his age, Kwong is still healthy and sprightly.

"Since retiring 20 years ago, I have spent my time visiting my children and grandchildren and travelling."

Kwong travels overseas at least twice a year, normally accompanied by

his 78-year-old wife Chin Lai Pheng.
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