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Spotlight on country's transformation into a `tiger'

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - In its first story on Malaysia in 20 years, National Geographic magazine in this month's issue spotlights the country's transformation from a sleepy, agricultural existence into a dynamic "tiger" economy.

The 22-page cover story, entitled "Rising Star", kicks off with a night-time picture of the Petronas Twin Towers, seen by the writer, Washington Post correspondent T.R. Reid, as a symbol of "an enormous sense of national pride - pride that literally soars to the heavens".

"Just 20 years ago," Reid noted, "Malaysia had a sizable unemployment problem; young workers lined up for hot, dusty jobs on rubber and oil palm plantations."

An economic boom since that time, however, had encouraged a buoyant national mood that cemented the ties between the many racial groups in Malaysian society, he said.

"Malaysians now argue that their country has enjoyed greater economic prosperity and social harmony in four decades of independence than all the previous centuries of colonial rule."

Reid also noted that this had resulted in "a level of confidence that sometimes approaches disdain for the West" and quoted Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as saying: "The Eurocentric world is finished. Asians have now found the formula."

Reid endured a minibus ride, visited an old friend in Kepong Baru, patronised an open-air market in Kota Baru and travelled up the Skrang River in Sarawak for a stay with an Iban tribe in preparation for the story.

He found much evidence of Malaysia's passage into prosperity, but also wrote that the country's headlong rush into success was having a questionable social impact on its culture.

His visit to the Iban tribe, for example, showed that younger members of the community were more interested in pursuing the urban life they saw on television than living the traditional jungle life of their forebears.

"When I grow up, I want to be a nurse or a doctor in a city like Kuching," a 14-year-old farmer's daughter told him. "I'm not coming back to live here."

The 22-page cover story was supplemented by a 10-page pictorial essay entitled "Malaysia's Secret Realm", which was put together by Swedish photographer Mattias Klum after a year-long stay in Sabah's Danum Valley.

His photographs captured the valley's spectacular animal and plant life, including a king cobra that had caught him and his assistant by surprise during an assignment to photograph wild boars.

One of Klum's pictures, of a silvered leaf monkey peering out from behind the foliage, also graced the magazine's cover.

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