

07/12/1997

Tea for two on the Awana boardwalk

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NASIRUDDIN left his wife and three children in Kuala Lumpur to earn a living elsewhere. The Penang-born Indian Muslim now looks after a nasi kandar restaurant set up by his grandfather many years ago in Langkawi.

The restaurant is located at the car park near the Beras Terbakar site at Padang Matsirat, not far from the airport. Nasiruddin's restaurant is known for its nasi kandar and roti canai. The teh tarik is not so good unless you give specific instructions how you want it.

Nasiruddin has opened another shop at Pantai Cenang where the sandy beach always beckons holidaymakers to idle and dream. Also selling nasi kandar, the second shop is just as popular even though Pantai Cenang offers a wide variety of local and international cuisine.

According to him, his grandfather started selling nasi kandar in 1967 when Langkawi was nothing more than an island of fishermen.

His uncle's business has since flourished and seems to be expanding rapidly. This would not have been possible without the deliberate measures taken by the Government to turn Langkawi from a sleepy hollow to an international tourist resort.

Since Langkawi was given duty-free status 10 years ago, the island has really flourished.

More infrastructure has been put in place and the island now has its own share of millionaires after landowners sold their land to businessmen eager to gain a foothold on the legendary island.

Apart from the duty-free status, the island's other significant catalyst for growth is the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace exhibition. First held under makeshift giant tents in 1991, Lima is here again.

The brainchild of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Lima is being held on a much bigger scale this time.

Held every two years in December, the exhibition boasts of more participation in the maritime and aerospace industries. There are some notable absentees this year, such as the popular Russian fighters, the Sukhoi and the MiGs.

Each time Lima is held, the island is turned into a supermarket selling and providing all sorts of goods and services. Shops such as Nasiruddin's enjoy roaring business while car rental operators can afford not to solicit business as they have more customers than cars.

As I was enjoying my nasi kandar, several ground handling crew members of Malaysia Airports arrived at the shop ordering nasi bungkus and canned drinks. I was lucky they came a bit later. If they had arrived earlier, I'd have to eat elsewhere.

It's not just that the nasi kandar is popular at the restaurant. Nasiruddin's own way of handling his customers deserves praise. He takes the trouble to listen carefully to his customers' orders, whether it's a simple teh tarek kurang manis or roti canai garing.

I've encountered many similar restaurants where the waiters pay little attention to their paying customers. At one such restaurant - Restaurant Akbar in Bangsar - one has to repeat the order for roti canai garing before one gets it.

Hopefully, if and when Nasiruddin's restaurant expands as a result of his success, he will not be like some of his more arrogant business colleagues. There's a limit to what customers can take.

Well, back to Lima. As always, the aerospace exhibition at the Mahsuri International Exhibition Centre attracts a lot of visitors, particularly those who have an affinity for the world of aviation.

But the most obvious success at this year's Lima is at the maritime segment being held at the Star Cruise jetty at Tanjung Malai. The organiser, Huswah Exhibition, involved in Lima for the first time, appears to have done a good job with fairly good logistical arrangements, including a well-supported Press Centre.

The maritime segment is a favourite among visitors, the biggest attraction being the four submarines which have been berthing for the last few days. A long queue can be seen at the jetty as visitors wait their chance enter the submarine.

A new hotel, the Awana Langkawi Island Resort, offers a panoramic view of the bay where yachts berth at the marina along with sailboats used by international competitors to compete in the Malaysia Challenge. At sunset, the boardwalk is full of people enjoying the sights while at night, the sound of the waves break the silence as couples walk hand-in-hand declaring their lifelong commitment to each other.

Indeed, the sea can be therapeutic. Tired minds and bodies should perhaps make their way to the Awana and sit on the railings along the boardwalk. Even complicated matters can be understood and resolved here.

Wasn't it Khalil Gibran who said: "A jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and thou beside me, is paradise enough."

Lima ends today and it'll be another two years before the macho sounds of fighter aircraft rules the Langkawi airspace and the sailing boats paint an idyllic, romantic picture at Tanjung Malai. Perhaps, by then, Nasiruddin would have another nasi kandar restaurant.

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