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Asia Pacific leaders feted

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THE old and the new were prominently featured at the gala dinner on Wednesday at Kuala Lumpur's latest five-star hotel, the Mandarin Oriental, for economic leaders attending the sixth Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation summit and other guests.

A grand, colourful and elaborate affair, the dinner was attended by over 1,800 guests including Trade and Foreign Ministers of Apec member countries, Malaysian Cabinet Ministers and leading corporate big-wigs.

Not since the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 1989 has Kuala Lumpur played host to such a high-powered ensemble of leaders and it was fitting that the dinner showcased the best of Malaysian hospitality and culture.

The guests-of-honour were Australian Prime Minister John Howard, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei Darussalam, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien, Chilean President Eduardo Frei Ruiz Tagle, Chinese President Jiang Zemin and Hong Kong's Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa.

Also present were Indonesian President B.J. Habibie, Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung, Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo Ponce, New Zealand Prime Minister Jenny Shipley, Papua New Guinea Prime Minister Bill Skate and Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori.

Other leaders were Philippines President Joseph Estrada, Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, United States Vice President Al Gore, Vietnam Prime Minister Phan Van Khai and Chinese Taipei Council for Economic Planning and Development chairman Dr Chiang Pin-Kung.

The guests were entertained to some delightful singing from local artistes Yusni Hamid and Salimah Mahmood during dinner.

But the highlight of the evening was the performance by the National Dance Troupe, comprising dancers of the National Theatre, Kwantung Cultural Troupe and Temple of Fine Arts, who took everyone's breath away with a brilliant cultural presentation titled The Malaysian Heritage.

The performance reflected the country's rich cultural heritage which is strongly influenced by Malay, Indian and Chinese traditions. Local singing sensation Siti Nurhaliza and Noraniza Idris completed the fine cast of performers.

The performance ended with a segment called Harmony where the fusion sounds of the Chinese drums, robot, rebana ubi, sita, tabla and other drums reverberated around the ballroom.

Among other dignitaries present were Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Apec Business Advisory Council chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Second Finance Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed.

Earlier, the spouses of the leaders visited the Petronas Twin Towers for an afternoon of music fashion and shopping.

Hosted by Dr Siti Hasmah, the first ladies' programme included a performance by the "Young Musicians in Concert", presented by 55 musicians and singers from the Yamaha Music Academy of Arts and Music.

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