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Foreigners thrilled to meet Dr M

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - They stood in line, sometimes for hours, to shake the hand of a leader of a country that was not theirs.

But the foreigners who went to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's open house today all said the visit was worth the wait.

Thomas Scholl, 26, of Germany, came to Malaysia for his professional training in the plastic industries. But when his language teacher told him about the open house, he could not resist the opportunity to meet the Prime Minister.

"I can't imagine shaking (German Chancellor) Helmut Kohl's hand like this," he said.

Scholl was one of the few visitors to the country who blended in with Malaysians from all levels of society to see the Prime Minister and his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali in their home.

Michael Guimey of Australia has visited Malaysia many times in the past as a tourist, but he has never met the Prime Minister.

So when Guimey was invited to a wedding in Malaysia around Hari Raya, he made it a point to attend the Prime Minister's open house.

"I congratulated him on his administration of his country," Guimey, 54, said. "I think it's a great thing for him to meet the people, meet the common people. I had a marvellous time."

Roger Rosche, a Singapore resident who once called the United States home, decided to make a visit to the Prime Minister's home, part of his holiday in Malaysia.

"He's going to be very tired with all the people he's meeting," Rosche, 40, said of the Prime Minister, who stood tirelessly for hours while visitors shook his hand.

After four years of living in Malaysia on business John Van der Zaag, 64, and his wife, Tonny, 63, are going back to Europe in mid-February. Shaking the Prime Minister's hand was the highlight of weeks of shaking Malaysian hands to say goodbye.

"We thought a good last person to shake hands with would be the Prime Minister," he said.

Georgia Beauchemin, who now lives in Florida in the United States, spent a lot of time in Malaysia during the 60s and 70s. Since then, she has watched from afar as the country developed. She credits the Prime Minister - and thought it was an honour to meet him.

Beauchemin, 57, who came with about 11 Malaysian friends, waited about an hour and half in line before shaking Dr Mahathir's hand.

"We were very close to the front, until one line became 17 lines," she said.

But Beauchemin said she didn't mind the wait.

"It was very thrilling," she said. "I felt like I was shaking hands with history."

Hailing from Japan, university students Junko Suzuki, Mihoko Enari, Toshiyuki Usami and Yosuke Horiuchi, said today was the highlight of their first year in Malaysia.

"We heard about it through the radio and found it wonderful that a national leader would be so kind," Suzuki said.

The four, currently studying Bahasa Malaysia at Universiti Malaya, said they would try to visit other open house events later in the day as well as for other festivals.

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