

30/06/1998

Goodbye Subang airport, hello KLIA

Carolyn Hong

ITS grey concrete exterior may not be eye-catching but to many Malaysians, the glimpse of the Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport from the aeroplane is a signal that they're finally home.

This ranks it among the most welcomed of sights, especially after a long journey cramped into uncomfortable seats.

Better known as the Subang airport, this patched-up set of buildings has long been the point to begin and end journeys, whether a routine trip or an emotionally-charged one.

For those departing on a long trip away from loved ones, the airport is the venue for wrenching goodbyes and a last glimpse of home. On a happier note, the airport is also the place where joyful reunions take place.

The sight of tearful goodbyes and equally tearful welcomes are played out daily at the airport departure and arrival halls, a rather bare setting for such emotional scenes.

Not all journeys are emotionally charged, of course. Routine business trips see crisp departures and arrivals, with speed being the only thought in mind.

The battered and worn-out airport has seen many dramatic and melodramatic moments in its relatively short history, since it opened on Aug 30, 1965.

Costing RM52 million, it was built on 535 hectares after the Government decided in 1960 that the country needed a new airport.

The old one at Sungai Besi which received international status in 1956, nine years after operations began, was just too cramped. A Bristol Britannia aircraft had been the first aeroplane to fly from Kuala Lumpur to Europe in 1956, but soon thousands more were doing the same.

Air links with other countries became more important as Malaysia grew rapidly after independence.

Thus, a new Kuala Lumpur international airport had to be built in Subang, 19km from the city, and was officially opened by the then Yang di-Pertuan Agong, Tuanku Syed Putra Ibni al Marhum Syed Hassan Jamalullail.

The opening was witnessed by more than 1,500 guests.

This "new" airport has now become the "old" one, succeeded by the grand Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang opened by the King, Tuanku Ja'afar, on Saturday.

The Subang airport has long aged, and not very gracefully. It has been repaired and mended so many times that it looks permanently dishevelled, every touch-up obviously just a new patch on an old dress.

But it wasn't always a tired airport. When it opened, recalled its first airport manager, J.D. Desmond Lee, now 75, it was very modern and well-planned.

Its 3,474-metre runway was then the longest in Southeast Asia.

"It was a beautiful building, lots of open space around it. I remember there weren't any street lights on the road leading to the airport and it was very dark at night," he said.

Subang was then on the outskirts of the city, and it would certainly have been dark with plantations closing in on the narrow road. But the plantations have long disappeared and the road was well-lit some years later.

There wasn't much air traffic then, Desmond Lee said, but the momentum grew and by the late 1960s, the airport was bustling.

It soon became inadequate. A decade later, there were plans to expand a choked Terminal One and in 1980, work begun. The work initially went rather slowly, much to the annoyance of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

To speed things up, he directed that Terminal Two be extended to cope with the entire airport operations, leaving Terminal One completely free for renovation works.

The spanking new Terminal One, spanning more than 823m, opened again on June 1, 1983, and was greeted with as much excitement as that which launched the KLIA.

Praises were heaped on this new terminal for its "ultra-modern" features which are now taken for granted - a baggage trolley conveyor, nose-in parking apron for aircraft, 12 aerobridges, duty-free shops and walkalators.

The aerobridges were something to be proud of. Gone were the days passengers had to brave the elements and clamber up stairs into the aeroplanes but with this, also went the cherished tradition of waving the traveller off from the waving gallery.

The waving gallery itself was sealed off some years later for "security reasons", and any waving had to be done behind double-glazed glass.

The gallery used to be a hit with families who wanted to show their children the aeroplanes. Desmond Lee said it was common to see families making a trip to the airport for a look-around and a meal.

In fact, the newly-opened Subang airport used to attract many non-travellers, just as sightseers now flock to the KLIA.

A Malaysian, then a 14-year-old boy, remembers a family trip to witness the first day of Subang's operations. They ran into a huge traffic jam of people with the same idea, an unheard-of experience for relatively car-free 1965.

Terminal Two took over all domestic flights on Dec 1, 1989, a job which later went to Terminal Three on Dec 16, 1993.

Over its last 33 years, the Subang airport had served many travellers, including VIPs and celebrities.

Desmond Lee remembers the excitement of the arrival of heads of state, when the airport would be closed for 45 minutes for a welcoming ceremony to be held on the parking apron. "It was very colourful, and I enjoyed it hugely," he said.

The less pleasant moments include three fires, several security breaches and a gold heist, as well as a Malaysia Airlines flight gliding off the runway into a swamp in 1983.

But these days, both good and bad, are now just memories as Subang shuts down for the last time tonight, and hands over the job to KLIA.