

19/04/1998

How technology has helped air travel

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AIR travel has become so advanced, outspread and affordable that we have come to take it for granted.

With millions of Malaysians travelling by air annually either on business, vacation or going to Mecca for the haj, air travel has become all too familiar.

Yet only three or four decades ago, air travel was as rare and remotely realisable as spotting an aeroplane streaking across the skies and leaving in its wake the jetstream.

As a boy growing up in a village in Kedah in the fifties, my friend and I would spend hours in the evening gazing at skies in the hope of spotting a tiny white speck ahead of a trail of "white smoke" that was an aeroplane.

Only on a quiet day would the sound of the engines of the high-flying aeroplane could be faintly heard. We had then mistakenly referred to the aircraft as "rockets".

Occasionally, we managed to have a closer look at these amazing machines when one of them, usually belonging to the Royal Air Force, flew low over our village on the way to bomb suspected communist hideouts in the jungles or to drop leaflets urging the communists to surrender and warning the people against supporting them.

My late grandmother, who lived through the Second World War, would frighten us into leaving the snake-infested belukar (secondary forest) by saying that the aeroplane might mistake us for communist terrorists and drop a bomb on us.

We spent a considerable amount of time on the weekends and during school holidays in the belukar trapping birds, picking wild berries and fishing in the streams. Getting us to leave our jungle "hideout" required ingenuity.

Today, no Malaysian would dream of going on a pilgrimage to Mecca, visit temples in India or seek out long lost relatives in China by any other means but by air. Even for domestic travel, the elderly, who once considered air travel dangerous and often associated it with death, are favouring this mode of transportation.

It is fast and certainly safer than riding those accident prone express buses. By most standards, domestic air travel in Malaysia is affordable though not exactly cheap.

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TRAVELLING ON a Malaysia Airlines ultra-modern Boeing 777-200IGW, nicknamed Long Ranger, on the inaugural flight to New York's Newark International Airport last Sunday confirmed just how technology has helped air travel.

IGW stands for increased gross weight which testifies that this series of the jetliner can carry more load and fly a longer distance than the standard version.

The service also shows just how far Malaysia, its people and businesses have progressed.

The thrice weekly flights, which take approximately 20 hours, are made possible by the advancement in aircraft technology, progress of our country and more specifically by the Open Skies Agreement between Malaysia and the United States of America.

From the technology standpoint, the Boeing 777 is the most advanced

passenger aircraft ever built by the Boeing Company. Although it is powered by only two engines, it can carry 278 passengers and fly ultra long distances.

One of MAS' Boeing 777-200IGW, created world civil aviation history in April last year when it flew non-stop for 19,920 kilometres - in the north-easterly direction from Seattle in the US to Kuala Lumpur. The flight took 21 hours and 23 minutes.

The same aircraft then set the fastest round-the-world trip by a jetliner - 41 hours and 39 minutes, including the time on the ground.

The MAS aircraft is powered by Rolls-Royce Trent 800 engines and boasts of the most luxurious and passenger-friendly interior. At full complement, MAS will have 15 of these aircraft.

The Kuala Lumpur-New York service is the airline's third destination in North America but the first over the Atlantic Ocean. Its other destinations are Los Angeles in California and Vancouver in Canada which are operated over the Pacific Ocean.

MAS executive chairman Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli, who led the inaugural trip, is confident that the new service will facilitate travel and strengthen the bond of friendship among countries and people covered by the route.

He thinks the service can take advantage of the strong links that exist between Malaysia and the Middle East and between the Middle East and America.

With MAS being the only carrier to operate directly between Dubai and the US East Coast, Tajudin thinks many Middle Eastern people living in the US will use the service.

This is also the sentiment of US Ambassador to Malaysia, John Mallot, who was on the flight and was among the key officials involved in the speedy conclusion of the Malaysia-US Open Skies Agreement.

Speaking at a gala dinner held in conjunction with the inaugural flight at New York's Waldorf Astoria Hotel, Mallot said, like himself, Americans would find Malaysia exciting and fascinating.

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AGAINST the backdrop of the festivities, of the multi-cultural Malaysian dances, costumes and food, and a fashion show by New York-based Malaysian designer Teng Yeoh Lee, a sombre mood persists.

The Asian economic downturn is taking its toll on the once vibrant travel industry. Even the strongest and most profitable Asian airlines are reporting lower passenger loads and profits. Some are cutting back on services while others are reducing their workforce or both.

More of them are expected to report lower profits or even losses. This is inevitable as economic slowdown curtails travel and the depreciation of regional currencies adds to the cost.

In recent years, Asian airlines expanded their capacity and raised their standards of service by adding new and luxurious aircraft to their fleet for which they now have to pay more due to the currency depreciation.

To survive these difficult times, some hard choices must be made - not just within the airline industry but economy-wide.

Even the Government is not spared. With poorer corporate performance, falling employment and lower private consumption, the Government's revenue is bound to drop. It has to start thinking of the inevitable, including a drastic reduction in the number of civil servants.

This is already happening in the private sector. The only difference is the speed with which retrenchment is taking place and the degree of it. The younger and weaker companies are among the first to reduce staff.

The older and more established companies are less prone to firing staff. But as revenues decline and costs increase, they too are being compelled

to consider retrenchment as a last resort.

Mergers and takeovers too will lead to retrenchment as the workforce is rationalised.

Only the willingness of management and workers to take salary cuts and improve productivity will save more jobs from being lost. Unemployment will become rampant and intractable if workers continue to be choosy or are unwilling to be flexible in their expectations.

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OVER the decades, we have gained considerable experience and expertise in many areas of development. In more recent times, the construction of major infrastructure projects like the North-South Expressway, the independent power plants and the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport have given the country new skills.

Some spinoff benefits have already been derived from these new experience and skills. An increasing number of Malaysian companies are winning contracts to build roads, power plants and telecommunications networks abroad.

More has to be done if we want to maximise the benefits of the experience in building and managing these large projects.

Take the construction of the KLIA, for instance. The expertise in planning and managing its construction alone can be neatly packaged and sold to other countries which are planning to build new airports or upgrade existing ones.

Equally marketable is the expertise that will be built up over time in managing airports.

To maximise the benefits, such parties as KLIA Berhad, Malaysia Airports Berhad, Malaysia Airlines and the contractors should consider forming a company to sell airport construction and management services abroad.

We must seek to give substance to the "Malaysia Boleh" (Malaysia Can) slogan if we do not want it to remain mere words.

The recent success of Malaysia Airlines in forming a joint venture with General Electric of the United States to overhaul aircraft engines at Subang is a good example.

Taking advantage of the experience and skills it gained as the largest regional operator of GE-powered Boeing 737 aircraft, MAS has joined hands with GE to set up a regional overhaul centre for such engines and all other engine types used on the aircraft.

MAS alone operates 50 of these twin-engine, short-haul jetliners.

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WITH the domestic sector of the economy going through a "convulsion" (to borrow the term used by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim in his address to the Council on Foreign Relations in New York on Wednesday), it is imperative that we utilise whatever opportunities that exist in the external sector.

Export manufacturing, tourism and education are our best hope. But with haze remaining a lingering threat and a water shortage disrupting manufacturing activities, the prospects remain uncertain.

Much depends on the weather pattern and the effectiveness of the ongoing efforts to solve these problems.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's uncompromising stand on open burning and water could not have been more timely.

In the case of open burning, this is not the first time the Prime Minister made known his concerns.

Weeks before the Cabinet ordered an all out effort to put out peat fires in the Selangor forest reserves, Dr Mahathir had informed two Selangor State Assemblymen as such.

It happened when he spotted a fire in the Sepang forest reserves while

on his way to the site of the Malaysian Wetland Conservation not far from KLIA. He remarked to the Assemblymen, who were accompanying him in the visit, that the fire should be immediately extinguished and people should not be allowed to enter the reserves and start fires.

I was present when the Prime Minister made the comment but I am not sure what the two Assemblymen did after that. What did happen is that more fires have since occurred in the reserves.

As for water, the truth appears to have sunk in, though not fully. The States, according to Dr Mahathir on Tuesday, have now agreed to the Federal Government's proposal to set up a national water council.

With their credibility as managers of natural resources and the suppliers of water having been eroded by the crisis, especially in Selangor, it is foolish for State Governments to continue to resist the setting up of a national-level body to co-ordinate water supply.

Yet there seems to be a lack of urgency on the part of the Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers when they said a meeting would be convened in two months time to discuss the setting up of the council.

Their stand is baffling. Why wait two months when they know that over a million people are already enduring water rationing, and business activities may be affected by the shortage?

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