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Museum captures aura of bygone days

THE National Telecommunications Museum (Muzium Telekomunikasi Negara) is perhaps the one and only such museum in the region to be housed in an old but well-restored building.

Standing among Kuala Lumpur's skyscrapers at the junction of Jalan Raja Chulan and Jalan Gereja, the museum boasts its tenure in a two-storey building of neo-classical Greek architecture.

Built in 1928 to house the Central Battery Manual Telephone Exchange, this building with eight imposing pillars as its dominant feature was gazetted for conservation in 1985 after Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad stepped in to stop it from being demolished to make way for a new 26-storey office complex.

According to Telekom Malaysia's journal, Interkom, over RM10 million was spent in its restoration project.

Today, this 70-year building houses the record on the nation's telecommunications history and is the first interactive museum in the country. The museum captures 120 years of telecommunications development, from the early days of the Morse Code Telegraph with its "ketuk-ketuk" to the cellular phones and digital network of today.

The museum captures the aura of bygone days and is a treasure chest filled with reproduction of historical photographs, printed materials, soundscapes and artifacts.

It successfully recreates behind-the-scenes stories of pioneers in telecommunications who went through all kinds of challenges to ensure the growth of telecommunications in the country.

A walk through the museum begins with the basic methods in telecommunications like the use of animals for transportations, writings on cave walls and ceramics and printing.

Do you know that the weaving on songket material was actually used to convey information? The songket is woven with caricatures and some are even inscribed with verses from the Koran.

Next, the journey takes you through the early years of the telegraph and telephone. The invention of the telephone in 1876 by Alexander Graham Bell and the invention of the radio by Guglielmo Marconi brought citizens of the world closer.

Telecommunications in Malaysia began with the first telegraph submarine cable linking Malaysia and Indonesia in 1870 and then extended to London in 1879.

The importance of telecommunications was underscored during the great floods in 1926 when emergency services were strained and the radio proved to be invaluable in sending messages and coordinating the relief effort.

There is a model of the Magneto 400 switchboard which was first installed in Sarawak in 1925.

Various write-ups, pictures and other models at the museum also show the progress made in the field of telecommunication such as the model of the gallows frame telephone by Alexander Graham Bell and the picture of the first railway tracks in Malaysia linking Taiping and Kuala Sepetang (Port Weld).

The railway tracks led to the further expansion of telecommunications as hundreds of metres of copper wire were strung on poles along the tracks to serve as telephone and telegraph lines.

Interesting material on the first Royal Malaya Police Radio linking

Pulau Ketam and Port Klang in 1929, the first commercial radio broadcast from Bukit Petaling Radio Station in 1931, a copy of the first telephone directory published (only half an inch thick) in 1937, the first Annual Report of the Telecommunications Department published in 1949, and more are available for all to see at the museum.

There is a section in the museum dedicated to the war, especially the Japanese Occupation from 1941 to 1945 when the telecommunications sector came to a standstill. During the occupation, telecommunications systems and equipment were destroyed by both sides so as not to be used by the enemy.

A further walk brings visitors to the post-war era and the rebuilding of the country's telecommunications system.

Visitors can read about the formation of the Postal Department and Telecommunications Department, the introduction of the first telex in 1946 which enabled the printed word to be sent over the wires and the introduction of the QEC mode telephone in 1948 which had no dials and all calls had to be made through the operator at the exchange.

An important event in the same year was the founding of the Gracelyn Training Centre in 1948 where Telekom staff were trained.

Not to be missed are the teleprinter models, the Siemens T100 and the Creed Teleprinter from England which are on display. Pick up the handsets and listen to the Declaration of Independence in 1957.

The inauguration of the Bukit Nanas Tower also known as the Kuala Lumpur Eiffel Tower by Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra in 1960 saw the introduction of the Microwave Radio System and more.

Visitors can see early telephone models, the Crossbar Exchange Switching Equipment which was introduced in 1968, the luxury model of the Erocophone, and also models of the telephonist switchboards used in the 1950s and 1960s.

Visitors will also see an exact replica of a Telephonist Assistance Centre where women of all ethnic groups and backgrounds worked together in this fast growing industry.

Going up the spiral staircase, visitors enter the realm of modern telecommunications. With an introduction to the age of privatization, the sections include customer service, services provided by Telekom Malaysia, Interactive Technologies and Towards Vision 2020.

Read about the introduction of International Direct Dialing, the first fully electronic exchange, the commissioning of Kuala Muda Maritime Coast Station for international maritime service, fibre-optic cables, the ATUR 450, the introduction of various Telekom Malaysia services and other milestones.

A unique communications tool found here is the interactive handset which visitors can use to listen to more information.

Last but not least is the section which provides information on new ideas and services.

Visitors will also be able to get a whirlwind video tour of the telecommunications industry in Malaysia which will leave a final and lasting impression long after they walk through the exit.

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