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Wishing Harris a smooth road ahead

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TWO fasting months ago, I broke fast at a restaurant named Restoran Mat Dollah. It was located in a new shopping complex in Bandar Utama, a bustling business centre which is becoming increasingly popular.

Restoran Mat Dollah was operated by an old friend named Harris who believes in the potential of the food and beverage business. The food was generally good but the restaurant was rather small. I didn't think it could have taken more than 40 people at any one time.

I wanted to go there again a few days ago but a phone call from Harris and a newspaper item changed my mind. Harris, a mild-mannered man with seemingly unlimited supply of patience, is now operating a fast-food restaurant! Goodbye Mat Dollah, Hello Burger King!

About a week ago, Harris served Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his entourage at his restaurant when the Prime Minister declared opened the new food lay-by in Sungai Buloh.

The RM26 million overhead bridge restaurant, PLUS Bhd's latest addition to its chain of highway stopovers, straddles the expressway.

It does appear to be gaining popularity among highway travellers. Burger King competes with several other outlets - Kentucky Fried Chicken, Tasty Noodles and Malay House. Travellers have a choice of a simple beef burger, deep-fried chicken, noodles or other dishes.

The lay-by also has other facilities such as convenient stores, petrol stations, a surau, washrooms and banking outlets in the form of automated teller machines.

There's ample parking space too, but I expect crowds on weekends and public holidays.

I brought along a whole gang of hungry husbands to Harris' Burger King outlet since he had talked endlessly about this project many months ago. The restaurant was full, as were the other three main ones. And some of the customers were not even travelling long distance.

I found out that many of them just wanted to eat their particular choice of fast food in a different setting. Sitting in air-conditioned comfort above the highway seems a cool thing to do for the city folk. Since the fast-food business is operating on a franchise format, I'm sure that the geographical location of these operations made no major difference to the taste of the beef burger or fried chicken.

Harris was very happy to see the hungry husbands tucking into the beef burgers and french fries. The crowd was huge and the queue for food was long. We managed to get our food because Harris jumped queue and filled our orders quickly.

I took a quick walk past the Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet and saw it was also full. Children were shouting and running while their parents were trying very hard to ensure some order in their pack.

I hope that the lay-by's popularity isn't just due to the novelty of munching a meal while Protons, Fords and Toyotas zoom past beneath. I wonder how the restaurant would cope on rainy days when bikers are likely to seek shelter there and while their time away over cold Pepsis. It can be chaotic, I believe.

As for Harris, Burger King looks set to satisfy him. He has been in the food business for a long time, learning all there is to learn. Since the Prime Minister's visit to his outlet, which had given it a higher profile, Harris has been laughing all the way to the bank.

Of course, it'll take a while before the outlet breaks even and for profits to show. But Harris is confident that with the right kind of support from the public and good service from his crew, the restaurant will thrive.

I will not be surprised if his cash register rings up RM20,000 daily. Should he extend his operating hours from the present 10am to 10pm, business will surely pick up further.

It's a fact that lay-bys are very popular on public holidays because the great Malaysian travelling public is fond of stopping for a quick bite.

Well, I'm sure that the hungry husbands whom Harris had hosted on the First of Muharram will join me in wishing him all the best in his current endeavour. May this be your last (and most successful) venture. When the pictures are developed, I'll make sure everyone has a copy for their albums.

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