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Yes, Malaysia, you definitely can!

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THEY say hindsight gives you 2020 vision, but even on the eve of the new year, it's obvious the events that shaped 1998 defy any pat description.

Socio-political tremors were countered by a number of advances in the field of sports, engineering, transport and the arts. Continuing economic difficulties grappled with ego-boosting achievements. For better or worse, the last 12 months put Malaysia on the map like never before.

January kicked off with the opening of the RM1.3 billion Second Link to Singapore, complementing longstanding trade, historical and psychological ties between our two countries.

Plagued initially by poor traffic and complaints of expensive toll charges, the link nevertheless draws Malaysia and Singapore closer than before, an irony if you consider the way both started bickering with each other - again - as the year progressed.

Malaysians also completed an epic 33-day journey across the African continent in the year's opening days, bringing a message of peace, goodwill and harmony to the 12 countries they passed through.

The 17,000km Silverstone TransAfrica 4x4 Expedition necessitated a massive logistical effort that also caused some neighbouring African nations to put aside their differences and make sure the group of Malaysians received a safe passage.

In March, Microsoft chairman Bill Gates stopped by to plug information technology and Malaysia's own Multimedia Super Corridor.

The arrival of the world's richest man grabbed newspaper headlines and sent the message out that the MSC was shaping up as a force to be reckoned with.

After that though, the country hit a massive pothole when scant rainfall (or ill-managed development, depending on who you talk to) plunged millions into a water shortage crisis.

On March 27, Selangor implemented a rationing exercise that was not to be lifted until five months later.

Officials scrambled to set things straight as consumers cried foul and the elderly, very often the only ones home when the water tanks came around, staggered up flights of stairs with buckets of precious water.

A few things happened in the meantime to distract Malaysians from their misery, such as the North Pole Freefall expedition on April 21.

Sixteen Malaysian skydivers parachuted into the icy wilderness - with no less than a Proton Wira 1.5 in tow - to plant the first Asian flag into the freezing tip of the globe.

Then on June 30, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport opened for business, four years after 25,000 workers from 52 countries first undertook the task of piecing together one of the most ambitious projects ever attempted on local soil.

KLIA overcame an initial period of teething problems to emerge as an architectural marvel as well as an efficient transport hub that will serve the country well into the next millennium.

In the entertainment field, television viewers had cause for celebration when ntv7 was officially launched on July 7, joining the stable of four existing free channels already on offer.

Music was also brought to the heart of Kuala Lumpur when the Petronas Philharmonic Hall opened on Aug 17, giving the country the gift of world-class concert performances.

On the opposite end of the musical spectrum, singer Amy left the venerable rock group Search later on in the year, leaving mat rock fans everywhere in shock.

Sandwiched between these events was the emergence of Internet rumours about a riot in Chow Kit on Aug 7, supposedly brought on by Indonesian workers unhappy about not getting their work permits renewed.

The abuse of the Internet put four people in the dock and left many realising that while Malaysia was pushing for an IT agenda, the gifts of modernisation could bite back if put in the wrong hands.

Later in the month, on Aug 24, Perodua unveiled the first made-in-Malaysia four-wheel-drive, the Kembara. The nation's stable of vehicles continued to grow in the year, most recently with the addition of Hicom's Perkasa range of trucks in November.

All these achievements, however, took place against the unnerving backdrop of economic uncertainty, a legacy of the regional economic downturn that had begun the year before.

On Sept 1, after earlier mysterious allusions to "shocking measures" to put the economy back on track, the Government stunned the world when it imposed currency exchange rate controls that effectively stopped the ringgit from being traded overseas.

Positive short-term developments afterwards won the controls some grudging acceptance from certain quarters, but the final verdict is still out, and all eyes are watching to see how the experiment turns out.

More drama was to come. The day after the controls were imposed, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was removed from office for moral misconduct, ending months of speculation that sprouted from the earlier publication of the book "50 Reasons why Anwar Cannot be Prime Minister".

A defiant Anwar launched the reformasi movement, went on a roadshow to plead his case to the people and levelled his own accusations at his ex-mentor, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The tumultuous events and the demonstrations that accompanied them culminated in Anwar's arrest on Sept 20. His dismissal and ongoing trial have dominated the front pages of every newspaper and attracted criticism from overseas. This is one situation that won't play out in the immediate future.

The furore over the Anwar case was only overshadowed in the public's eye by the staging of the 16th Commonwealth Games beginning Sept 11.

Despite dire predictions of failure from some, Malaysia was able to pull off its stint as Games host with aplomb... and with a clutch of 10 gold medals to call its own.

Local athletes upset giants and broke the threshold of endurance to win the honours, along with other sporting feats that have been achieved this year. Young squash players Nicol David and Ong Beng Hee, for example, took home titles that strung words like "world" and "champion" together.

Another cause for excitement was the October announcement that Malaysia would host the penultimate leg of the enormously popular Formula One World Championship on Oct 17 next year, on the newly-completed Sepang International Circuit.

Petronas also used F1 technology when it created the country's first prototype automatine engine, which it unveiled on Nov 9.

The last major event of the calendar was the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation, which kicked off on Nov 13. Leaders from 21 countries came together to brainstorm on ways of helping the region climb out of its economic doldrums.

While initiatives such as the United States and Japan joint aid package provided some meat to the meeting, much of the thunder was stolen by US Vice President Al Gore and his now infamous dinner speech.

The faux pas triggered an enormous outcry and a campaign to boost patriotic spirits.

1998 drew largely to the close on a graceful note. Lina Teoh, Malaysia's representative to the Miss World competition in Seychelles, walked away with third place after the glittering finals on Nov 27.

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