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Feature-Labuan-Tourism
LABUAN OUT TO WOO A DIFFERENT CROWD

By: Mohd Haikal Mohd Isa

KUALA LUMPUR: The Federal Territory of Labuan is now known as an International Offshore Financial Centre (IOFC), a haven for unrestricted flow of capital, but not as a tourist destination.

Since its inception as an IOFC in 1989, Labuan island, lying some 120km south of Kota Kinabalu, has been attracting droves of professionals, bankers, financial executives with their colourful ties and designer-label suits but not the bermuda-clad tourists.

Director for the Sabah office of Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board (MTPB), Zakaria Mohd Nani acknowledged that much need to be done to promote Labuan as a tourist destination, without shedding its image as an alternative IOFC to Singapore and Hong Kong.

For the record, Labuan has 1,870 offshore and supporting companies by December 1998, compared with 1,657 at the end of December 1997.

By the end of 1998, there were 62 offshore banks, 40 offshore insurance and insurance-related companies and 20 trust companies in Labuan.

It is a well-known fact that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has given his personal attention to the development and progress of Labuan, similar to Langkawi, which has since become a jewel in the nation's tourism industry.

During his last visit to the island last March, Dr Mahathir directed that the landscaping works by the island's municipal council be speeded up to turn the island into a beautiful garden.

"The government wishes to turn Labuan into a major tourist destination by making it the most beautiful garden island in the world," said Zakaria to a group of newsmen taking a look at the MTPB strategies to turn Labuan into a tourist haven.

Labuan has many historical attractions dating back to the days of the Brunei Sultanate till its handover by the British to Malaysia.

A short walk from the Labuan Square stands a memorial marking the landing of 9th Division Australian Imperial Forces on June 10, 1945 which led to the liberation of the island from the Japanese Imperial Army.

In those warring days, control of Labuan was strategic as it commanded the vital sea lanes connecting the major supply lines between Japan and the then Malaya.

Lying beside the Australian memorial is the monument of the Japanese Imperial Army in tribute to its commander-in-chief in then British Borneo, General Maida, who was killed in an air crash at Bintulu on Sept 5, 1942, en-route to Labuan to open an airfield there.

In Dec 1942, Labuan was renamed "Maida Island" by the Japanese Government on orders by the Supreme-Commander, General Tojo, who passed through the island in July, 1943.

A few meters away from the Maida monument is another memorial marking the landing of His Royal Highness Prince of Wales on the island on May 17, 1922.

A distance away from the busy industrial port and jetty is the Labuan War Cemetery or the Commonwealth War Cemetery, the final resting place of thousands of soldiers who fought gallantly to oust the occupying Japanese army during the Second World War.

Although most of the soldiers buried there were Australians and British who were Christians, visitors can see the graves of Muslims, Jews and others who had fought and died on the same side during the vicious war, as

well as ponder over the tragic tales of those unidentified soldiers, who made up about half of the 3,908 graves there.

Within the war cemetery is a memorial for Australian soldiers who died during the operation in Borneo or while being the prisoners-of-war in Borneo and the Philipines.

The cemetery has been receiving a regular stream of relatives and compatriots of the dead soldiers, especially those from Australia, New Zealand and Britian.

Another war monument in Labuan is the "Taman Damai Labuan", built in 1984, in remembrance of those thousands who were killed in Borneo during the war. The park also stands as a symbol of hope for long-lasting peace on earth and the aspiration for a continuation of relationship and harmony between Malaysia and Japan.

A walking distance from the park is another memorial marking the unconditional surrender to the Commander of the 9th Division, Australian Imperial Forces by the 32nd Japanese Southern Army in North Borneo and Sarawak on Sept 9, 1945.

Labuan's distinct attractions are not only found on land but also underwater, offering unlimited diving experience both for the experts and novices.

Borneo Divers, an award-winning diving company, offers diving enthusiasts various shipwrecks for adventure. According to the company, the sea around the Labuan hosted four shipwrecks: the American Wreck, the Cement Wreck, the Australian Wreck and the Blue Water Wreck.

"The American Wreck" has been identified as the US Navy minesweeper, USS Salute, which sank on June 8, 1945 with the loss of nine men after hitting a mine during the Allies pre-invasion sweep of Brunei Bay, Borneo.

"The Cement Wreck" located at about 20km from the company's base in the island, was the 105-meter "Tung Hwang", a modern style freighter which sank after hitting the Samarang Bank on Sept 25, 1980, while taking cement to Brunei for the construction of the Sultan's new palace.

"The Blue Water" wreck was a Philippine stern type fishing trawler named "MV Mabini Padre" and her nickname came about as it can best be seen during the dry season when the waters turn "true blue".

"The Australian Wreck" was identified as the Dutch freighter "S.S De Klerk". Built in 1900 in Amsterdam and put into service by the Dutch Indies (present day Indonesia), the Dutch Navy scuttled her at Tanjong Priok on March 2, 1942 in the face of the advancing Japanese forces.

The Japanese salvaged her in November 1942 and put her back into service sometime in the early 1943, renaming her the "Imabari Maru".

Adding more colours to an already congested line of historical buildings and monuments in the island, the Labuan Development Authority (LDA) has also begun to rebuild the "Hara-Kiri House", so named because it bore witness to a sacred ritual of "Hara-Kiri" by the Japanese soldiers after the defeat of their Imperial Army.

The authority is expected to put the house in order for tourists before the year's end and it has requested for financial aid from Tokyo for the purpose.

Apart from historical monuments, the LDA with its private partners, also organise several events like the underwater treasure hunt, international fishing competition, jet ski, and traditional games fair.

The authority has also lined up the BIMP-EAGA Travel, Trade and Financial Exhibition this September, Remembrance Day in November and the Labuan Karnival in December to attract domestic and international tourists.

According to LDA, all efforts to promote Labuan are beginning to bear fruits with tourist arrivals on a constant uptrend. The island recorded 542,481 arrivals last year, compared with 460,814 the previous year.

However, the financial crisis did not spare Labuan which received only 96,241 tourists by April this year, and officials are now working extra hard to catch up with last year's figures. -- Bernama

MHI KGO