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## Starry Bintang

Joyce Teh

IT has been on the grapevine that Kuala Lumpur's Bukit Bintang area will undergo a major facelift. Those who have been in the area recently would have seen the excavators, heard the steel drills and skirted the many workmen.

That is the coming of Bintang - the capital's new premier address - to be officially opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Dec 7.

Where plans hinged on YTL Corporation Berhad's successful acquisition of Lot 10 Shopping Centre, JW Marriott Kuala Lumpur and Starhill Centre, the sealing of the deal in February gave the group carte blanche to actualise its development blueprint.

This will take the form of a redesigned and relandscaped Jalan Bukit Bintang-Jalan Sultan Ismail-Jalan Walter Grenier parcel. The entertainment and shopping hub with beginnings dating back to World War II has a catchment potential of 400,000.

The new RM150 million premier precinct encompasses three shopping centres, two international class hotels, and to join the block - the Ritz-Carlton Residences. Expected to break ground by year-end, construction of the luxury service apartments is estimated at RM100 million.

Bintang will have the right mix to be a prominent tourist and shopping destination in YTL's books. "Bintang will be the next Bangsar, but better," says YTL group managing director Tan Sri Datuk Francis Yeoh Sock Ping at a recent press briefing at the JW Marriott Kuala Lumpur.

Yeoh intends to "put Bintang on the tourist map, not only in Malaysia but also regionally and internationally". He envisions creating "not only an exciting new attraction but a completely new lifestyle". One that encourages leisurely window shopping along shaded sidewalks, people-watching at one of the alfresco cafes, browsing at the artists' colony.

Yeoh named Dr Mahathir, who questioned the lack of pedestrian walkways in the city as far back as 10 years ago, as instrumental in initiating the Bintang project.

As for outdoor dining, he says, "Dining alfresco is essentially a very Malaysian concept. It has always been part of the Malaysian lifestyle to enjoy `teh tarik' or `cendol' under the shade of tree.

"For just that pleasurable and simple activity, Bintang will offer a clean, dynamic environment, plus exciting activities and options."

The area is being "streetscaped" using environmentally friendly schemes which include the creation of attractive pedestrian walkways with shaded trees and big potted plants.

Leading from JW Marriott right up to Lot 10, and around, is Bintang Walk - a spacious pedestrian walkway lined with mammoth palms and terracotta potted flowering plants.

"Malaysians are not used to walking. We want to change that habit. Park your cars at Starhill, Lot 10 or The Marriott and walk, shop, wine, dine... shop!" Yeoh says.

While retailers along the Walk are encouraged to provide access into their stores from the walkway, the side of Lot 10 that fronts Jalan Sultan Ismail will be converted into an environment-friendly terrace with food and beverage outlets like Caf, Societe, San Francisco Coffee and Dome Caf.

Prevalent features are outdoor balconies, outdoor kiosks and alfresco seating. Haagen Dasz, The Fish Shop, 1901 Hot Dog and Mrs Fields are

expected to operate on the Lot 10 terraces.

Meanwhile, the inner road between Starhill Centre and KL Plaza will be another food and beverage haven, starting from the Jalan Bukit Bintang end with Cesar's Bistro. Its imposing Roman facade demarcates what is currently being transformed into the Bintang Steps.

Replicating the concept of Rome's Spanish steps, it will front trendy food and entertainment banners like Delifrance, the Coffee Club, Schlotzsky's Deli, Austin Chase, Tapas Bar and The Roof. Many of the outlets will be opening for breakfast. "It will be where people can enjoy a `nasi lemak' before starting work," says Yeoh.

The Steps will also be the Malaysian Montmartre for local artists. "We hope world famous artists will be born on the Bintang Steps." This is one of the attractions of Bintang that Yeoh says will promote it as a cultural centre and showcase for local artworks.

In terms of tourist attractions, shopping is one of the biggest crowd-pullers. Yeoh envisions Malaysia as a shopper's paradise and YTL's part in it is attracting five-star operators to Bintang with one of the lowest retail rentals in the region.

He believes steps like abolishment of duties will further encourage retailers to shift their operation emphasis to Kuala Lumpur given the ready market and excellent infrastructure and services support. And in the long run?

"With our hotel, food and transport 50 to 60 per cent cheaper than other cities in the region, further abolishment of import duties on branded goods will definitely boost Malaysia as the preferred shopping destination and one that is customer-friendly," Yeoh proclaims.

"We want to take Lot 10 and Starhill to new levels of customer service."

Yeoh is introducing the Bintang Customer Service Counter, a seamless shopping concept. The service will provide shoppers with the option of leaving their shopping bags with the "concierge" to be picked up later or delivered.

"We want our shoppers to be able to shop, yet be unhindered by bags and parcels. To be able to enjoy lunch or tea after shopping and not rush home because they are laden with bags," he says.

Service, indeed. Shopping, anyone?

(END)