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## A state of surprises

PEOPLE have long thought of Kedah as a quiet backwater notable mainly for its maze-like patchwork of paddy fields and canals snaking through the idyllic rural landscape. Typically, their idea of a holiday in Kedah is a trip to Langkawi. It is time that they take a closer look at what the state has to offer.

In fact, as a travel destination, it has plenty of variety and quality, ranging from natural wonders to treasures from the past. Even the most jaded among tourists are likely to find it a pleasant surprise. It helps that the state's tourism industry has seen aggressive promotion and creative development in recent years.

With archaeological sites dating back to the country's Hindu-Buddhist era (4th Century to 14 Century), Kedah has a strong claim to being one of the most ancient states in historically rich Malaysia. On the other end of the spectrum, Kedah has been quick to latch on to the very latest trends in outdoor and adventure travel; an example is the top-class white-water rafting site at Sungai Sedim in its southern district of Kulim.

Nevertheless, it is plain to see that the jewel in the state's tourism crown is Langkawi, a group of 99 islands - at low tide, the number can be as high as 104 - located off the northwest coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Some 51km from Kuala Kedah (on mainland Kedah) and 30km from Kuala Perlis (in the neighbouring state of Perlis), the islands are steeped in a myriad of legends and lore about giants, mythical birds, warriors, fairy princesses, battles and romance. Perhaps more significantly, Langkawi is a place of famous beauty. Encircled by clear waters, the islands are dotted with fine beaches and caves. Equally stunning are the many top resorts and hotels.

Langkawi was just this year voted ninth favourite island in a poll by the Conde Nast Traveler, a reputable travel magazine. In the overseas leisure hotels category, The Datai Langkawi took fifth spot. And how's this for a touch of showbiz glamour? Langkawi's Pantai Kok (Kok Beach) and the nearby island of Pulau Dayang Bunting (Island of the Pregnant Maiden) have served as locations for the filming of a recent Hollywood movie, *Anna and the King*, starring Jodie Foster and Chow Yun-Fat.

Also, visitors to Langkawi are spoilt for choice in terms of sailing, dive sites with beautiful marine life, secluded sandy beaches, island-hopping and laid-back resort-style holidays. The most notable spot is Pulau Payar, which is just off Langkawi's main island and which forms part of a marine park.

The island is not just sand and sun either. It offers excellent restaurants, shopping (in new concept stores such as the RM19 million Oriental Village), historical sites and even an international book village.

It is no surprise then that Langkawi is the linchpin of the state's tourism strategy. The basic idea is for Langkawi to be the anchor destination, while mainland Kedah is offered as supplementary destination and as a gateway, as well as for excursions and stopovers.

The transformation of the duty-free isle has provided the spark for Kedah's tourism industry. From an isolated island reliant on agriculture and fishing, Langkawi has become a leading tourist destination in the region. It is also a favourite venue for international conferences and exhibitions, and has hosted several major sports events.

The island first gained international prominence when it was chosen as the retreat for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 1989. It has since progressed to become the permanent home for several international events. For cycling buffs, there is the annual Le Tour de Langkawi, which was patterned on the blue-ribbon Tour de France. Every two years, thousands of people gather on the island for the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition (LIMA). The annual Langkawi International Dialogue is an avenue for discussions on smart partnerships between countries of the South. And then, there is the most recent addition - the Langkawi International Festival of Arts, which brings together painters, dancers and musicians.

Soon to be accorded Tourism City status (which comes with a mayor and bigger allocations), there is no doubting Langkawi's importance. The island has enjoyed tremendous growth over the last decade or so (see table). In 1986, Langkawi recorded just under 210,000 tourist arrivals. This year, it is expected to receive 1.8 million tourists. It accounted for 70 per cent of Kedah's total visitors last year.

However, development on Langkawi has to be carefully managed, and the authorities have a crucial role to play. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who has been instrumental in Langkawi's changing fortunes, pointed this out earlier this year when he urged the use of the island's natural beauty to draw tourists. 'Langkawi should be developed quite differently from a town, and because of this, its natural beauty should be preserved,' he added. 'Tourists come to view the beauty of nature. If they want to see buildings, they can do it anywhere. I believe the state government will continue to develop this island into the No.1 tourist destination.'

Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, who is joint chairman of the Langkawi Development Authority (Lada) with Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain, recently reminded that efforts to promote Langkawi ought to be co-ordinated well. He said the efforts should target Malaysians, who make up about 60 per cent of tourists to Langkawi.

Tourism is a relatively small but serious business for Kedah. It is a priority area under the Kedah Development Action Plan, alongside the industrial and agricultural sectors. Much of the infrastructure for tourism (particularly air, sea and road links) is in place. Langkawi has an international airport, while the airport in the state capital, Alor Star, is being expanded at a cost of over RM300 million. Langkawi's Kuah ferry terminal can comfortably handle 1.2 million passengers a year. In addition, the state has a fine network of highways and dual carriageways.

As tourism continues to grow in importance as an income-earner for Kedah, investment opportunities sprout, especially to provide tourist services and facilities. These opportunities are not in Langkawi alone, but also on the mainland. One new niche market is eco-tourism, which focuses on forest and rural life. Top eco-tourism sites include Gunung Jerai, Ulu Muda and Pedu Lake, which is already one of the biggest contributors to mainland tourism. The authorities have recently identified several new eco-tourism sites such as Sungai Sedim, the Merbok mangrove swamp and the hot springs in Ulu Legong. A related development is a comprehensive plan to beautify rivers in the state with a view to introducing guided river rides.

Given the dominance of agriculture in Kedah in the past, it is only natural for the state to mine the potential of agro-tourism, comprising leisure activities built around agriculture and farming. To start with, the state is offering homestays in typical quaint Malay villages to provide tourists a taste of rural agricultural life.

There is also the far more ambitious plan to develop a RM1.5 billion

agro-tourism project in Bukit Tupah called the Kedah Resort City. Among others, the park will have a health farm, an orchid farm, a fish hatchery, hotels, camping facilities and a cultural exposition center.

Another promising segment is water-related tourism and this involves facilities such as marinas, water sports facilities, cruises and boating services. Entertainment and service aspects such as cultural performances and restaurants also show strong potential for investment. In addition, the Kedah mainland has hill and beach resorts that can be shaped into major tourist draws.

Although young, the tourism industry in the state is growing steadily. In all, Kedah expects to register some RM2 billion in earnings from its tourism industry this year. Tourist arrivals have increased correspondingly, from 1.2 million in 1998 to more than 2 million this year. With the mushrooming of tourism projects and initiatives to make Kedah a more attractive destination, the industry is set to become a powerful engine of growth.

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