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Following in Henry the Black's footsteps

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BLESSED with a long coastline, numerous beautiful islands and a long sea-faring history, all Malaysians should be dreaming of sailing the seven seas. The words of Annie Lennox's song Sweet Dreams echoed in my ears as I sat on the deck of the Eveline with rain pelting down in sheets in the early hours of one morning while streaks of light dawned on the distant horizon.

The pilot cutter's sails were billowing, the motor silent, and the boat bounced and crashed through the waves at a speed of nine knots as we headed for Langkawi.

"Sweet Dreams are made of these;
Who am I to disagree;
I have travelled the world and seven seas;
Everybody is looking for something."

It is true that everybody is always looking for something, and by clocking 300 nautical miles from Port Klang to Langkawi during the week-long Raja Muda International Regatta, I feel I have rediscovered that something I have been looking for.

Those who have sailed, especially for long distances, can understand the joy of the blazing sun, the extremely cold nights, the hard work of cranking the winches to trim the sails and tacking them or sitting alone and absorbing the silhouettes of distant islands on a moonlit night.

During the regatta, Malaysians mingled and exchanged stories with other sailors from every nook and corner of the world. It was a ripe opportunity for us to act as ambassadors to spread goodwill, culture and friendliness to the rest of the world.

Currently, the sport is confined to a small number and although yacht clubs around the country are working hard to promote "optimist" programmes for youngsters, only a small fraction of them hang on to the hobby once they become adults.

There is also general perception that it is a sport for the rich, but this notion has to be changed.

Take Saskia Van Rijdt, 26, from Holland who spent the better part of her life studying for a maritime and shipping law degree in Amsterdam. After obtaining it, she packed her bags and went to Thailand where she worked with a diving company for eight months.

Having caught the sailing bug she ended up in Langkawi and ever since then, has been jumping from one boat to another doing odd-jobs, cooking, cleaning in return for the privilege of sailing with their crews. Soon she will be at the King's Cup regatta in Thailand and off to new destinations.

Mohamed Huzaizi Mohamed Ghazali, 40, (known as Adek in the sailing community) started off as a boat painter and later a cashier at the Royal Selangor Yacht Club in Port Klang and whenever any boat was short of crew, he would be the first to jump on board.

Last year, Adek was part of a crew that sailed a yacht from Langkawi to Turkey to deliver the boat to its new owner. He hopes one day to emulate his hero, Datuk Azhar Mansor, who sailed around the world single-handedly.

Azhar, who attended the prize presentation ceremony for the regatta, said there is a need to stimulate interest among Malaysians, especially youngsters, in sailing and this should be done at the school-level by including it as part of the curriculum.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who in his younger days

was involved in boat-building, has always envisioned Malaysia to be a major sea-faring nation. Apart from encouraging the boating and sailing industry, he has also been a prime mover in ensuring the necessary infrastructure is in place.

Critics who had denounced the spending of money for the building of huge marinas around the country, need only visit the Langkawi, Lumut, Port Klang and other yacht clubs to see boats from as far away as the Virgin Islands berthed there.

One can still remember that on June 23, 1991 on a visit to Chile, Dr Mahathir had startled many by announcing that the first man to circumnavigate the world was a Malay known as Henry the Black.

The Prime Minister had reasoned that Henry, a Malay from the Philippines, was taken to Spain by Spanish colonisers and later sailed with Ferdinand Magellan's fleet due west from Spain by way of South America and reached the Philippines. The combined journey made him the first man to circumnavigate the world.

In countries such as Australia and New Zealand, many young professionals slog for half a year and try to save as much money as possible so that they can hop on to a sailing vessel and see the world.

In Malaysia, this is possible since numerous boats are constantly looking for crew or "sailing friends" to go on long journeys. Picking up rudimentary knowledge of sailing is sufficient to find yourself on board a boat and with time and experience, you could even gain enough expertise to skipper a vessel.

Sailing brings professionals, businessmen and blue-collar workers together and on a boat, titles and credentials are of no consequence.

Adek gets to bark out orders to those who are accustomed to giving them on land. Because on his boats, Adek rules.

The opportunities for sailing are tremendous in Malaysia with the almost perfect weather throughout the year. More Malaysians should take up the hobby and apart from putting Malaysia on the world sailing map they can become our very own diplomats to the rest of the world.

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