

03/08/2000

From sleepy hollow to tourist draw

K. Bala

IT was April Fool's day when Datuk Abdul Halil Mutalib started as the pioneer general manager of the Langkawi Development Authority in 1990.

About five months earlier, Parliament had approved the setting up of the authority to spearhead the development of the then sleepy hollow of an island.

In efforts to jolt Langkawi which some believe had fallen under the spell of the seven-generation curse of the wronged Mahsuri, the island was accorded duty-free status in 1987.

Even after the duty-free status, there were only two hotels including Pelangi Beach Resort which was completed in time to host the retreat for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 1989 and a few small chalets.

Little did Halil realise that he would take over the helm of Lada. As the then State Development Officer, based in Alor Star, he was asked to nominate a few names for the post by the Treasury.

"Of course, I did not nominate myself but somehow I was selected," said the the modest and popular Halil who "clocked out" of his post last Monday to assume duties as Customs and Excise Department director-general in Kuala Lumpur.

"I started during the fasting month on April 1, 1990, practically with only a pencil. There was no office, no accommodation, no supporting staff and no facilities to speak of."

He squatted in a corner of the District Office to chart the beginnings of Lada, which recently celebrated its 10th anniversary.

Forced to stay in one of the three hotels, as there were no houses to rent or housing schemes to speak of, Halil and his small team began the task of transforming the island with the required infrastructure and tourist facilities besides helping the investors to get started.

Work began in earnest as Lada moved to rented premises in the Bangunan Lembaga Padi dan Beras.

Today, Lada has its own impressive premises which also house many government agencies. It has some 220 employees including those from its subsidiaries Lada Holdings, Lada Consolidated and Lada Travel and Tours.

More importantly, under Halil, who turns 54 this October, many infrastructure projects and tourism products were developed.

From less than 1,000 rooms in 1990, today the island boasts about 7,000 rooms or 14,000 beds including several five-star resorts.

Halil recalled that there were not many roads on the island.

"There was no central spine road, no metalled roads along Pantai Tengah, Pantai Cenang, Teluk Burau and Datai to name a few," he said.

"The Kuah jetty was in bad shape, the airport was small, no port and no housing or shopping projects and no sports complex.

"When I first came, there were not many eateries at night except at a few wooden shacks along Padang Pasir. Now, we have many restaurants and shopping outlets. Along all the roads on the island, we have lights, some glittering with neon and decorative bulbs."

Halil said with the addition of man-made tourist attractions and facilities initiated by Lada, visitors are also staying longer. These include Taman Lagenda, Dataran Lang, Galeria Perdana and Laman Padi.

Locals spend at least three days and two nights now compared to just a night six years ago, while the average stay for foreigners is four nights.

Halil attributed the success of Lada's role to the guidance of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin.

"If not for our catalyst role, why was there no development during the first few years of the island being declared duty-free status?" he asks.

"The reason why we developed so rapidly was the reduction in red-tape. I believe that rules and regulations are meant as a guide and not to hinder development."

He conceded that the success was because of the willingness of the Federal Government to spend and due to its rapport with the State Government.

The total investment in Langkawi over the last 10 years was RM5 billion of which RM1.5 billion was by the Federal Government.

"This huge amount of money was well spent as the returns are evident," he said. "During the peak period of 1996, tourist receipts amounted to RM920 million of which 28 per cent or RM250 million went to the Government.

"Going by this rate of return to the Government, the RM1.5 billion will be recovered in the next few years," he added.

Halil said his greatest satisfaction is that "I have made so many people rich and got so many people to invest and become millionaires."

He is well aware of the rumblings by a small section of this predominantly Malay populated island, fuelled by the Opposition.

He replied: "When I came, there were no brick houses. Now they are everywhere in the kampungs including beautiful bungalows belonging to the locals.

"Less than 10 years ago, there were only two commercial banks but now we have eight which shows people have money.

"Surely, the eight banks have not been servicing just the 3,000 odd Chinese on the island," he said.

Insisting that the locals especially the Malays have benefited, he said some had become millionaires when their land was acquired and those "Malays who reaped the benefit prefer to just keep quiet."

He recalled that 10 years ago, an acre of land cost RM1,000 but now it is RM100,000.

"Anyway, most of the land acquired did not have the potential until we created the development. Those not satisfied with the pay out, could always turn to the courts to decide.

"Also, the social upliftment of the people is the task of other agencies as well and Lada can only play a supporting role.

"I have done my part to enhance development not only physically for the island but also the people. This is my greatest satisfaction.

"I don't have a single inch of land in Langkawi except for a shplot which I bought with a bank loan to fill the Bumiputera quota and a small house for my family to stay in case anything happened to me while in service."

He left the island for his new post with mixed feelings but plans to settle on the island when he retires from government service.

"As a government servant, I go where my services are required. My work philosophy will remain the same except that the scenario will be different."

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