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Impressed with the Malaysian way

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FEW things are better than listening to the thoughts of foreigners about one's own country. I had that pleasure last week in Houston, Texas.

There on a speaking engagement at the invitation of a Mexican cement company Cemex to talk about the Southeast Asian market, I met the organisation's senior corporate personnel who asked a number questions about the country.

At a casual after-dinner conversation later, there were more enquiries about Malaysia and not wanting to risk being seen as biased in my views, I let the host do most of the talking.

Many of the participants have travelled to Asia and many have made stopovers in Kuala Lumpur. Also included in the group were several from the US.

The first subject of discussion was their entry point to Malaysia, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang.

Levy Benshimol is the company's official based in Caracas, Venezuela. He has travelled worldwide.

His first comment about the airport was on the opposition the airport project has faced from some quarters in Malaysia.

"It's easily the most beautiful airport in Asia. I can walk in the terminals of the Changi Airport in Singapore and still think I was in Tokyo's Narita instead or rush through New York's John F. Kennedy, Chicago's O'Hare or London's Heathrow without even bothering to look left or right."

"But the Kuala Lumpur Airport is different. You are in an airport but still feel like you're not in one. You have to stop and enjoy the entire facility," he said.

Sharing his sentiments was conference organiser and New York-raised Jeff Borda.

"I've been to the old Kuala Lumpur Airport in Subang. It was like the 42nd Street Port Authority bus terminal in downtown New York and the new one was really needed," he said.

Benshimol however had a suggestion. The KLIA, he said, must be marketed widely.

He pointed to advertisements already appearing in many international newspapers on the renovations to be undertaken by the JFK International in New York.

And so the informal discussion went on and it was a matter of time before it drifted to Kuala Lumpur's most visible landmark, the Petronas Twin Towers.

Both men marvelled at the building and and its surrounding area and again wondered why there have been people who objected the project. "Completion of the towers says a lot about your country," Benshimol said.

Quickly too, the project was equated with Malaysia's Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's single-mindedness in turning Malaysia into a developed nation. Apparently, the Prime Minister is well known in Latin America.

Borda said the economic crisis of 1997 showed the world what Dr Mahathir was made of. "He was the only Asian leader who had the courage to say 'no' to attempts by outside powers to dictate how the Malaysian economy should be run," he said.

Of course, the ever-important topic of what Malaysia and the region has

to offer in the commercial sense later surfaced with both men agreeing that Southeast Asia was not as bad as western Press has pictured it.

"Which is why we wanted to hear from a local, to have first-hand information of what the country and region has to offer," Benshimol said.

An invitation to explore more what Malaysia has to offer was in order and just to show them the advent of the cement industry in Malaysia, the 700-odd kilometre North-South Expressway in Malaysia served as a fine example.

About half of the expressway is paved with concrete.

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