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Lee's Midas touch that turns into gold

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IF ANYONE is said to have the Midas touch, it would definitely be Tan Sri Lee Kim Yew. Things touched by the Country Heights Holding Bhd group managing director will eventually turn into gold.

A good example is the Mines Resort City at Sungai Besi in Selangor. Another would be the Borneo Highland Resort in Sarawak.

Once the world's largest open cast tin mining facility, the Mines Resort City is now Country Heights' pot of gold. The former mining area is now home to the Palace of the Golden Horses, Mines Beach Resort and Spa, Mines Resort City, Cyberview Lodge Resort, Mines Theme Park, Mines Shopping Complex, Mines Business Centre, Mines Water-front Park and Mines International Exhibition and Showroom Centre.

Lee has an eye for anything beautiful. The Palace of the Golden Horses, for example, exudes all the nicest things in life. It speaks highly of Lee's taste in interior design.

Another example is Country Heights, which has set the style of country living among the well-heeled. It is now an exclusive enclave of premier residential property incorporating a golf course with bungalow lots upon which owners have built homes of different architectural designs.

As Lee puts it succinctly: "I'm not selling property per se you see, I'm selling a lifestyle."

He believes he is moving along the right path as Asians are becoming more affluent these days. They are more than willing to pay a little bit more for a lifestyle that befits them and their families.

But contrary to what people may think, making money is the least on Lee's mind.

Lee - who once dabbled in printing presses and sold automatic gates before he founded his flagship Country Heights residential project in Rawang in 1984 - believes a businessman must be ready to suffer before undertaking any businesses.

"Every businessman must be ready to suffer first before he or she can achieve success. Sometimes, one will suffer losses for the first 10 years before he can even smell success.

"If you don't have that belief, then I am afraid the battle is already lost."

Money aside, his passion is nature and the environment. His mantra is "bring your heart to the environment and the environment will follow you".

"As a developer, it is my personal belief that man and nature co-exist without damaging one another," he said.

His latest venture, the Borneo Highlands Resort, reflects his love with nature and the environment.

He had turned a former army camp left by the British to guard the Malaysia-Indonesia West Kalimantan border into a nature lovers' paradise. Lee owns 70 per cent of Borneo Highland Resort and Sarawak Land Custody and Development Authority the remaining stake.

One cannot blame Lee for his deep affinity for the resort. Situated 70km from Kuching at the Upper Padawan region, the resort is rich in wild flora and fauna.

"When I first came here, I fell in love with it immediately. Now, I try to come here at least once a month," Lee said.

Lee was at the resort almost every week to oversee its design and various construction works.

The resort's recreation executive Allan Ananth Pandian, who has been working at the resort for two years, said Lee knows the resort like the back of his (Lee's) hand. "He knows of every nook and cranny of the resort. He will go out at 8pm to see the fireflies at Hole Number 3 ... I've just discovered it myself although I have been here for two years. He also knows where the lairs are," Pandian added.

Pandian admitted that Lee's regular visits put the management staff "on their feet". "He has a creative mind and is full of ideas on how we can beautify the resort further," he added.

Lee's affinity with nature goes back a long way. "When I was young, I was very much involved with nature.

At 15 years old, I was a King's Scout and had plenty of nature treks. We went camping and I had dabbled in planting flowers and decorating my classroom with flowers," he said.

Now at 46 years old and a father of three daughters and two sons, Lee is still very much involved in nature.

Carmen Liew, one of Lee's four personal assistants, said many people do not understand him. "When he first started Borneo Highlands Resort, people say it is such a waste of money and that it will not be a profitable venture.

"All they see is making money. They fail to see that the project is Lee's way of contributing to the people of Malaysia."

Lee's dream is for "all Asians to visit Borneo Highlands Resort at least once in their lifetime".

With that in mind, Lee had launched in May an air transportation company called Vision Air (M) Sdn Bhd. The private airline, plying between Kota Kinabalu in Sabah to Mulu in Sarawak, offers local and foreign tourists alike the opportunity to view the two states' magnificent forests from the air.

Tourists can get a magnificent bird's eye view of the gigantic Mulu Caves, Deer Cave, Mulu's Pinnacles, Mount Kinabalu, lush jungles and wild rivers of Borneo, Gunung Mulu National Park, Tunku Abdul Rahman Park and other Sarawak's best kept secrets.

"I am doing this to make immediate profits but I feel that it is my duty to play a part in promoting tourism in the state," he said.

Next, Lee wants to put Malaysia on the world map through the Malaysia Flower Show next year. Country Heights will hold the second national level Malaysia Flower Show from August 30 to September 30 2001. The show is expected to attract some 24,000 visitors compared with 12,000 last year.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is expected to launch the show.

"The smell of fresh flowers soothes the mind," Lee said. So, it is hardly surprising then to find that the Borneo Highland Resort is dotted with over 300 species of flowers.

It is my hope that Malaysia will one day emulate the flower shows of Chelsea, Buchard and Vancouver," Lee, who is a member of the UK-based Royal Horticulturist Association, said.