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Now comes the hard part for Langkawi to match its new status

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LANGKAWI residents witnessed another significant event on Saturday when the Sultan of Kedah declared the island a tourism city.

They watched with interest under the hot sun how the declaration scroll was presented to the Ruler in a full Malay traditional ceremony and lined up the streets of Kuah town at night to watch a parade of floats and a colourful fireworks display.

Now, where does Langkawi go from here?

Besides tourism industry players the island is banking on the participation and commitment of its 60,000-odd residents, without whom the authorities will have an uphill task ensuring the island lives up to its new image.

But are the residents ready to play their roles?

The declaration, which came at the same time the Langkawi District Council was given municipality status, now makes it possible for the island to be administered professionally.

With status comes responsibility.

Langkawi will have to emerge as a popular international tourist destination in the accepted sense of the word if it is to live up to its new image.

Visitors' expectations, for one, will be higher.

The local authority, despite its various constraints, including financial, will have to improve its services, keep the island clean and create and maintain a tourist-friendly atmosphere.

Perhaps it is for these very reasons that Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir was not in favour of Langkawi being declared a tourism city when the idea was first mooted by the State Government.

Abdul Kadir feared the island would not be able to keep up its new image.

That is understandable. Langkawi still has a long way to go to compete with other resort islands, what more the high expectations of being a "city".

The Minister even suggested that the term "Tourism Island" would be more suitable as the word "city" may give tourists the impression that Langkawi is just like any other city full of skyscrapers.

Take a look at neighbouring Phuket island in Thailand.

Its friendly people is a pull factor as are its beautiful beaches, entertainment outlets and competitive accommodation rates.

Likewise, the locals of Langkawi must play their part. They will have to adopt a more serious attitude and complement the efforts of those in the tourism industry.

"We hope the island's newly acquired status will bring about a change in the residents' mentality towards tourism.

"The island must be kept clean or tourists will run away," said Abdul Kadir after the declaration ceremony.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is the prime mover behind Langkawi's rapid development since the island became duty-free in 1987, also wants to see participation from the local residents.

"The people of Langkawi should play their roles in assisting Government agencies in maintaining Langkawi's beauty," he had said in his message in the souvenir programme book for the ceremony.

Langkawi has made great strides in its tourism efforts since gaining free-port status and has made a name for itself as an attractive tourist destination in this region.

Its landmarks such as Dataran Helang and the Tanjung Rhu and Pasir Hitam romantic beaches have become sought after locations for Bollywood film producers and the makers of Tamil and Telegu films as well.

The island's tourism potential was identified in the late 1950s, yet nothing much was done for Langkawi until 1987 at the prompting of Dr Mahathir.

Major developments on the island are carefully scrutinised by the Prime Minister himself. He is known to ask for briefings from developers and to visit construction sites to ensure sustainable development is being practised to protect the island's natural beauty.

All this explains why the Prime Minister received special mention for being the driving force behind Langkawi's development at the ceremony on Saturday.

Langkawi was identified as the main centre of tourism by the Department of Tourism when it was created in January 1959 under the aegis of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

Compared to the pace of tourism development in Penang, Taiping, Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur, Malacca, the East Coast, Taman Negara, Pulau Pangkor, Frasers' Hill and Cameron Highlands (whose potential was also identified then), the pace in Langkawi was very slow.

Although Langkawi has since left its mark on the world tourism map, the island still needs to take a more aggressive approach to promoting itself so that it becomes a leading attraction in this region.

This requires a huge financial allocation and a commitment from both the private and public sectors.

Industry players are optimistic that the Langkawi Development Authority's (Lada) target of drawing 70 per cent of the country's foreign tourists to the island by 2005 is achievable if promotions are more focussed.

Besides exploiting its natural beauty and having many sporting facilities of international standard to attract tourists, the island will need to provide good entertainment for its visitors.

State Tourism Committee chairman Osman Md Aji admits the island is lacking in this area but gives his assurance that efforts are being made to charm visitors with cultural performances.

"It is difficult for us to provide the kind of entertainment found in Phuket but we will provide our kind of entertainment through cultural performances.

"We look forward for better co-operation from those in the tourism industry, especially the hoteliers and tour agents to help keep up Langkawi's new image," he said.

Lada, set up in 1990 to plan and monitor the development of the island, has already allocated RM150 million for the implementation of various infrastructure and tourism projects on the island this year.

One boost to tourism will come next year when the RM46 million cable car project linking the 700m high Mt Machincang to the Oriental Village shopping complex at Teluk Burau becomes operational.

Opportunities to shape Langkawi according to Malaysia's own mould are aplenty.

It is now up to the authorities and the local residents to take up these challenges.

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