

Langkawi loved by Frenchmen

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By PAUL GABRIEL

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia's tourism pride of Langkawi has caught the "eve" of the famed French Riviera, with French president Jacques Chirac one of the island's most ardent admirers.

(The French Riviera, on the Mediterranean coast of southern France, is known worldwide for its various tourist attractions.)

French Ambassador to Malaysia Xavier Driencourt said Chirac was absolutely "hooked" on Langkawi, since visiting the island resort in 1997.

He said the president never failed to remind French diplomatic staff and businessmen headed to Malaysia to include Langkawi in their itineraries.

"In fact, that was among the first things he told me before he sent me here as ambas-

sador in 1998. For Chirac, Langkawi is one of the best places in the world," he added.

Driencourt spoke about a phone call from Chirac to a French guest who was at his residence here last week.

"The mobile phone rang and it was Chirac calling from Paris. When my guest told him where he was, the president kept telling him not to return without visiting Langkawi," he added in an interview.

Driencourt said he had just received a letter for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad from Chirac, in which the president also expressed his desire to visit Malaysia again.

"My president has kept in regular touch with Dr Mahathir, writing to seek his views on a wide range of (international) issues, and also to keep the PM informed of developments (in Europe).

Both leaders are very close," he added in an interview.

The French president's tourism promotion efforts for Langkawi does not seem to be in vain.

The thrice-weekly flights between Paris and Kuala Lumpur are almost always fully-booked.

Efforts are being made to increase the frequency of flights between both sectors with the increasing tourist arrivals.

Meanwhile, the Russian diplomatic mission here is also helping to boost Langkawi's tourist appeal, with Russian Ambassador Vladimir Morozov spearheading the efforts.

Last week, he took a high-level Russian parliamentary delegation led by the Russian *Duma* deputy speaker Artur Chilingarov, to Langkawi for a break.