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Feature-Tioman

TIOMAN: FROM LEGENDS TO DUTY-FREE HAVEN

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PULAU TIOMAN: According to local folklore, the enchanting Pulau Tioman, reputed to be among the world's ten most beautiful islands, was created by a mystical giant female serpent which slithered out of her lair in Tasik Chini in Pahang and plunged into the South China Sea.

And as for its name, a tale has it that it came from an islander's pet Mynah bird ("Burung Tiong" in Bahasa Malaysia). Tioman-born Jumaat Ahmad, 76, said many years ago a traveller asked a villager the name of his pet bird and he responded "Tiong Man" which means "my Tiong" as it is common for the islanders to refer to themselves as "man" (me).

Whatever the tales, Pulau Tioman was an important port of call in the old days for Chinese and Thai seafarers, seeking trade with locals or taking refuge from raging storms.

Today, the island has been transformed into a top regional tourist draw, receiving some 200,000 visitors in the year 2000.

The figure is expected to increase many folds when Pulau Tioman, located off the Pahang coast near the Johor waters, is gazetted as a duty-free island.

The proposal to convert the scenic island into a duty-free haven was announced by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad recently.

If it turns into a reality, then Pulau Tioman will become Malaysia's third duty-free island, after Labuan and Langkawi.

RIVALRY TO BATAM DAN BINTAN

To the islanders, the move would enable Pulau Tioman to compete against leading Indonesian tourism resorts like Pulau Batam and Bintan which have been favourites among Singaporeans.

They also say more tourists would mean more money for the islanders, hence boosting the island's socio-economic growth. To them, the duty-free status will transform Tioman, renowned for its exotic flora and fauna, into a shopping haven for both locals and foreigners alike.

Fisherman Ismail Awang Ngah, 60, is confident that more visitors would provide more business for the islanders, like enabling the fishermen to operate guided escapades for anglers as well boats and buses for sightseers.

"However, basic infrastructures like roads should be provided first for the convenience of the villagers and tourists alike," he said.

Pulau Tioman currently has a single road, a mere 2.5km linking the Berjaya Hotel to Tekek and the Marine Park. Half the length is made of concrete and passable only to a single vehicle at a time.

"A network of roads which link all the major spots on the island and other basic amenities need to be provided for the expected arrival of more tourists," he said.

SEA ROUTES AND JUNGLE TRACKS

At the moment, villagers in Tekek can reach Salang, Mukut, Juara and other areas using sea routes or jungle trails.

Ismail and most of the villagers would admit that road work on Pulau Tioman would be difficult as some 80 percent of the 13,360-hectare island is either hills or ravines.

The tough terrain has prevented the setting up of other facilities like a business complex. This problem is further compounded by the fact that the

available flat terrain which is owned by villagers had been developed with hotels and chalets.

Pahang Executive Councillor for Culture, Arts, Tourism and Women Affairs Maznah Mazlan said all development to be implemented on Pulau Tioman would adhere to the structural plan drawn out by the Tioman Development Authority (TDA).

"This plan, drawn up in 1996, has classified the island into three categories which are the development, limited development and development-free zones," she said.

The development zone covers only 1,202 hectares, while that designated for limited development is 1,470 hectares. The remaining slopes and highlands, which covers 10,688 hectares, will remain untouched.

TDA INFRASTRUCTURE PLANS

Among the infrastructures being planned by the TDA are a 45km-long road linking all villages on the island, a RM6-million business centre in Kampung Tekek and 200 houses for the relocation of villagers squatting on government-owned land and those living in "rumah rakit" or raft dwellings.

The state government is trying to obtain a federal grant for the construction of cargo jetties in Kampung Tekek and Tanjung Gemuk to facilitate cargo movement between the two locations.

However, some other islanders have their reservations over the duty-free proposal, saying that they are still in the dark over the concept.

Chalet operator Baharom Abdullah, 38, said before implementing the proposal, the Pahang government must give an assurance that any development on the island would not disturb Pulau Tioman's eco-system and its social norms.

He claimed that some of the islanders do not even know about the proposal, saying that they should have been among the first to be informed of the move to dispel any fears and confusion which might crop out later.

"They want to know whether the proposal will bring them benefits or is it a way of providing outsiders the opportunities to reap profits under the guise of development?" he asked.

VILLAGERS' INTEREST

To these doubts, Pahang Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Adnan Yaakob has given an assurance that each of the development projects to be implemented on Pulau Tioman would take into account the interest of the islanders apart from conserving the island's natural beauty.

While urging Tioman residents to support the government's development plans, Adnan advised them not to be easily "blinded" by attractive offers from outsiders, who are actually after their premises or land.

The price of land, which previously fetches some RM150,000 per acre (0.4 hectare) can now easily reach RM500,000.

Despite the government's freeze on land deals on Pulau Tioman since 1998, there are reports that some residents had already sold their land to certain parties without changing the ownership titles.

But chalet operator Nazri Abdul Karim is different. Owning some 30 acres (12 hectares) of land on the island, he had managed to convince his children not to be tempted by the lucrative offers from land buyers.

His son, Mohd Sabri, 35, believes that his father is right about the land and said that he would make sure that the ownership of his father's land stays within his family.

"Even though the offers can turn us into instant millionaires, accepting them is meaningless as we will lose the heritage left by our forefathers and where will our descendants stay in time to come?" he asked.

-- Bernama
HIS AM ZUL KGO