

22/03/2002

Island of leisure for all people

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THE emerald enchantment of the north, Pulau Langkawi, wants to remain a lush tropical paradise for a very long time to come - to be enjoyed by domestic and foreign tourists.

In short, it aims to be a leisure island for all people. This means development will be controlled without unnecessary felling of trees in order to preserve natural flora and fauna which has thrived and evolved for some 500 million years.

Casuarinas, crystal-clear beaches, and abundant and colourful marine life around the island will not be compromised for the sake of man-made structures.

The Langkawi Development Authority (Lada) promises to see to that.

Lada wants Langkawi, which celebrates its first anniversary as Tourism City on Sunday, to be a well-known centre for eco-tourism, among other attractions, in this region.

"Tourists who come here, especially foreigners, love Langkawi for its beaches, caves, countryside and nature. The infrastructure planned for the future should merely complement the natural elements and not destroy them," says Lada general manager Datuk Zainal Karib Abdul Rahim.

"We want to develop Langkawi to enhance the environment and nature. We still have a long way to go to catch up with the level of tourism in Phuket or Bali."

Zainal says while foreigners come to Langkawi looking for solitude, peace and nature, locals throng the island for shopping and maybe a little bit of sun, sand and sea.

"The other reason why some 1.9 million people annually flock to Langkawi is because it's a duty-free haven. However, the lure of reasonably-priced goods will not last forever as prices in Kuala Lumpur and other places are very competitive during the Mega Sale Carnival held three times a year," he says.

"This is the reason why Lada is also selling Langkawi as a centre for eco-tourism."

Since its inception in 1990, Lada has been responsible for the island's development. So far some RM1.3 billion has been spent.

Under the Eighth Malaysia Plan, Lada received a RM400 million allocation for 46 projects to develop the island further and upgrade its infrastructure.

This year alone, the authority has to complete 12 projects costing some RM103.8 million. They include the RM44.6 million cable car line at Gunung Mat Cincang and upgrading existing jetties at three main islands - Pulau Dayang Bunting, Pulau Singa Besar and Pulau Tuba - to make it easier for island hopping at a total cost of RM2 million.

The 2.9km cable car line will be completed in May at one of the oldest ranges in this region. It is expected to open in August after a two-month trial and promotion period.

However, no other development such as resorts and hotels will be planned for the 700m Gunung Mat Cincang because the peak is too narrow and steep.

"Cable cars will only take people up to enjoy the scenery, maybe walk around and come back to the Oriental Village where the station is," Zainal says.

The existing stadium in Langkawi, Kompleks Sukan Mini, will be upgraded to a full stadium and seating capacity increased from 3,600 to 18,000 to

enable the hosting of international sports events.

Makam Mahsuri or Mahsuri Mausoleum, situated 12km from Kuah town and erected in honour of the legendary Mahsuri, a maiden executed after she was unjustly accused of adultery by her mother-in-law, will see more interesting features added.

The ticket counter area will be beautified with more rest facilities and the gallery will have additional exhibits. All these come under the first phase of renovation now taking place.

Near the mausoleum, Mahsuri Village depicting the local 16th Century lifestyle, will be constructed. Lada has to acquire a roughly one-and-a-half hectares site costing about RM3.5 million for the purpose.

Gallery Perdana at Kilim, 11km from Kuah and housing an impressive collection of more than 2,500 gifts and awards presented to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife, will also be upgraded.

The two-storey gallery will see an extension to the existing building to take in more exhibits.

Of the 1.9 million visitors Langkawi gets annually, 300,000 are foreigners while the rest are Malaysians.

In three years, Lada is hoping to get at least three million people to come to Langkawi - one million foreigners and two million Malaysians, never mind even if they are day-trippers.

This means the island will need some 10,000 rooms to prepare for such an influx by 2005. Langkawi only has 6,900 rooms now. Six five-star hotels are near completion with another two in the pipeline.

"We can upgrade all the infrastructure to turn this place into a premier Tourism City but the lack of quality service is still a big issue. A lot need to be done. Those in the hospitality and tourism-related trade must put in a greater effort," Zainal says.

"Some parts of Langkawi need to be spruced up. People living in those areas should work hand-in-hand with Lada in making the island more attractive. Tourism helps raise the standard of living and generates plenty of job opportunities."

Before the big tourism make-over, many Langkawi residents were humble fishermen, farmers, padi planters or rubber tappers.

"Let's all work together to make Langkawi a better place. This should be our priority," urges Zainal.