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Making the world a better place at Pangkor Laut Retreat

DKL

THE choice was the Diarist's - a helicopter to Pangkor Laut Resort or make his own way there. Mrs Diarist, as always, made the final decision. It took time, but we drove on Friday to Lumut and boarded the speedboat Seri Melor, piloted by Abu Bakar Othman, to Pangkor Laut, which opened in March 1994.

Pangkor Laut is a perfect short-break island. It's been more than a decade since the Diarist was at the Royal Bay, where he is spending this weekend. Today, it is a renowned holiday destination, dotted with villas on hill slopes and on the beaches overlooking the four bays. The Diarist is staying in a beach villa - there are also villas on stilts.

The kind of holiday you get depends what you want and how many days you have at your disposal.

The Diarist, US Ambassador Marie T. Huhtala, Steve Forbes (chief executive officer and editor-in-chief of Forbes) and Dr Karl-Hermann Baumann of Siemens, Germany, gave seven-minute speeches on how to make the world a better place!

The respondents were Datuk Dr Munir Majid (NST columnist and director of Telekom Malaysia) and David Pawson (Still Water, UK), with Datuk Paddy Bowie in the chair.

This is the synopsis of what the Diarist said: "Islamic radicalism - even in gentle Malaysia - has heightened the differences between Malays and non-Muslims and even drove a wedge between these newly Islamised Malays and their customs, traditional language and culture.

"The notion that religion should and could be the dominant driving impulse of governance was also a negative change. While it is true that a good Muslim would make, by definition, a good administrator, it does not necessarily follow that a so-called Islamic administration would be better than any other.

"Stripped down to the bare essentials, the world's problems continue to stem from the greatest evil of all - Ignorance. Wars are being fought now between peoples ignorant of each other's religions and beliefs, languages, cultures and ways of life.

"Among the changes I would most like to see, therefore, is the global media - including our own - returning to its primary role of projecting truths and realities as much as ideals and ideologies. We have to get to know each other better. We cannot go on focusing on our differences, or seeing our similarities as evidence of cultural conquest by one or another party.

"The unhappiness of the world is caused by ignorance, socio-economic immobility and inequality. All three are rooted in poverty. The root of all evil is not money, not even the love of money, but the lack of it. When nations and governments fail to bring economic development and human dignity to their people, they fail completely. They fail their people, themselves and the world. People let down in such a manner lash out at each other and the world, blaming their misfortunes on everyone who does not share their misfortunes.

"Human nature doesn't really ask for much. The basics are very often all we really need for happiness. Food, clothing, shelter - and also decency, dignity and self-respect. The first three, money can buy. Which is why the latter three are more valuable and elusive.

"This is where there is a growing gulf between how the US thinks of the

developing world, and how the developing world thinks of the US. America's influence on the globe is so pervasive that it encroaches on jealously guarded notions of self-determination and sovereignty. Those values will be hugely impaired if America were to project its manifest destiny by imprecise language, force, economic or military.

"There is undoubtedly room enough for all faces of mankind on this Earth, even in Jerusalem and Palestine. And I still can't think of a better way to express it than in the words of John Donne: 'Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee'.

"There is, perhaps, a silver lining which is the interdependence - of values, hopes and interests - that defines the world we live in."

On Saturday evening, the Diarist and Mrs Diarist joined Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, host and hostess Tan Sri Francis Yeoh and Puan Sri Rosaline, his parents Tan Sri Yeoh Tiong Lay and Puan Sri Kai Yong, Datuk Seri Najib Razak and his wife, and others at an open-air concert for a special performance by tenor Luciano Pavarotti at Emerald Bay, with the rainforest as a backdrop, followed by a fireworks display from a barge.

Even sans Pavarotti and speechmaking, Pangkor Laut is an excellent resort where KL-lites can pop over without difficulty and effort. It's also ideal for families: golden sand and beaches, its bukit or cliffs rise (not steeply) from the waves of the glittering and empty sea. It's sublime!

As the Pangkor Laut Retreat debated ways of improving the world, the US held a high-powered conference on anti-Americanism, showing an obvious concern about this increasingly globalised phenomenon. Washington's double standards will continue to hurt US interests. As Salman Rushdie says (the Diarist doesn't read his novels), "apparently, Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein are terrorists who matter; Hindu fanatics (massacres of Muslims in Gujarat) and Kashmiri killers (against Hindus) aren't. This double standard makes enemies."