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Feature: Tioman

TIOMAN: QUEEN OF THE ISLES OF SOUTH CHINA SEA

By: Mohd Shukri Ishak

PULAU TIOMAN: Among the resort islands in the South China Sea, Pulau Tioman is the queen of them all, and the authorities want to keep it that way.

The scenic enchanting island off the Pahang coast recently joined the ranks of Langkawi and Labuan as duty-free island resorts but the planners are holding true to their course of making it a top quality tourist destination with unspoilt natural beauty.

At present, the "tiara" bestowed on Tioman in the form of duty-free status starting from last Sept 1, has yet to sparkle because the business establishments on the island have been given a three-month transition period (from that date) to sell off their stocks before going duty-free.

The only business to have gone "duty-free" from Sept 1, is the island's leading resort hotel, while the private and public sector are planning or building their business premises.

In addition, said a source, the Finance Ministry is compiling a list of duty-free goods to be offered on the island.

ISLE PROMISES SATISFACTION

But if the visitor is yearning for peace and quiet amidst unspoilt nature, without being harassed by the urban din, then Pulau Tioman will be the place to visit.

You can feast your eyes on the endless beauty of the white, fine sandy beaches, the exciting marine life that abounds around the island and breathe in the cool, refreshing and clean air.

Speaking on a recent visit to the island, Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Chan Kong Choy said the duty-free status was accorded to Tioman to enhance its tourist industry.

Any development project however would take into account the effect on its environment, he said.

Pulau Tioman, covering 13,360 hectares (134 square kilometres), is 36 nautical miles off Tanjung Gemok, Rompin, Pahang. In January this year Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad announced its duty-free status.

To give effect to its new status, the relevant provisions in the law such as the Customs Act, the Service Tax Act, Sales Tax, Excise Act and the Free Trade Zone Act were gazetted, Chan said.

Pulau Tioman is inhabited by some 3,200 people living in villages nestling in the hills and vales of the island such as Kampung Salang, Air Batang, Tekek, Genting, Mukut, Lanting, Nipah and Juara.

The villagers are directly involved in the tourist industry and work in the chalets and hotels or operate the boats that ferry tourists from the mainland to the island. Some of them also own sea food restaurants.

Visitors can reach Tioman either by flying Berjaya Air or by taking the ferry or tourist boat from Tanjung Gemok Jetty, Rompin or Mersing, Johor.

MORE FOREIGN VISITORS THAN LOCALS

The interesting point about Pulau Tioman is that its unspoilt beauty appears to be valued and appreciated more by people from overseas than locals. According to statistics, foreign tourists make up more than 60 percent of the visitors to the island during any one year.

In 1999, a total of 185,000 people visited the island and the number

went up to 200,000 in 2000 and 240,000 last year.

General Manager of Tioman Development Board (TDA) Hashim Tahir said in a recent interview that its development objective was to turn it into an international tourist destination with top quality environment.

"The tourism concept for Tioman will be based on eco-tourism, striking a balance between physical development and preserving the local ecology in an integrated way apart from conserving and retaining the existing image of the island," he said.

PRESERVING NATURE'S CHARMS

Hashim said the island's development strategy included preserving and maintaining the environment for the benefit of tourists.

The development strategy would also include restructuring its main settlements and increasing its physical and social infrastructure, he said.

Projects being implemented included the RM12 million Pulau Tioman Garbage Disposal System, Pulau Tioman Sewerage System (RM10 million), the Kampung Tekek, Salang and Genting water supply system (RM5 million), upgrading Kampung Tekek road (RM1.5 million), upgrading the jetties at Tanjung Gemok, Kampung Tekek and Kampung Mukut (RM6.4 million).

The TDA was also drawing up strategies to rehabilitate the beaches and arrest soil erosion, particularly at Kampung Tekek, Kampung Genting and Kamung Juara.

In short, there would be no drastic development that would tarnish the island's natural beauty, said Hashim. -- Bernama

MS AAM KGO