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All about sharing festive joy

Alina Simon

SHARING the joy of celebrating a festival with kin, friends and neighbours - this is what a Malaysia-style open house is all about.

The local custom of inviting people during festivals is now adopted as part of the country's effort to promote nation-building and tourism.

Six festivals including Hari Raya Aidilfitri, Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Christmas, Tadau Kaamatan and Gawai Dayak are now part of the country's tourism calendar of events.

The recent celebration - the national Hari Raya Aidilfitri Open House - was held in Jitra, Kedah last Saturday evening.

There was huge turnout by locals as well as foreigners including thousands of Thais who crossed the border that evening.

But what made the event even more memorable was the presence of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra who brought along his cabinet Ministers and senior Government officials to share in the celebration.

The serene picturesque Bandar Darulaman Theme Park with its placid lake was transformed into a wonderland with tents, lights and a giant stage for performances by notable entertainers.

Many guests came as early as 5pm to make sure they get a good spot even though food was only served from 6.30pm.

The menu included popular local delicacies like the special laksa Kedah, ketupat nasi (rice ketupat), ketupat pulut (glutinous rice ketupat), rendang, kuah kacang (savoury peanut sauce) and teh tarik.

Guests were also entertained by cultural performances by the Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry's dance troupe.

Enchanting stage acts were also given by Siti Nurhaliza, Erra Fazira, KRU and their Thailand counterpart Sob Chai Kri Yoon Sen, Naruman Chivangkur and Yupa Jai Yen.

Thankfully, the event was held in the evening as the cool night breeze helped bring the temperature down. Many stayed on till the end as there was much interesting entertainment to be enjoyed.

There was the added glamour of royalty with the Yang di-Pertuan Agong and Raja Permaisuri Agong and the Sultan and Sultanah of Kedah present.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who had just turned 77 the day before, joined Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain and Cabinet Ministers to welcome the royal guests.

Dr Mahathir later received a surprise birthday cake although, in this case, the cake was made of pulut kunyit (saffron glutinous rice) while the crowd sang "Happy Birthday PM" in both Bahasa Malaysia and English to him.

A magnificent fireworks display capped off a splendid evening - until the next national celebration for Christmas and Chinese New Year.