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For all to appreciate

By Ahirudin Attan

THERE are, if you like, two kinds of tourists: those who must include museums in their travel itinerary and those who don't understand why some people do that.

I was never in love with museums, not even as a kid. I like aquariums more. So for the longest of time, the existence of museums had no relevance to me.

Which is why when I was assigned on Dec. 3, 1995, to cover the launch of the Galeria Perdana, a museum of mementos collected by the then Prime Minister Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in Langkawi, I wasn't too thrilled.

What I was, though, was curious. I thought museums are for artifacts and relics from another age. At Galeria Perdana there were thousands of mementos, furniture and silverware, gold coins, arts and craft, and exotic cars given to Dr Mahathir by foreign kings, presidents, prime ministers and corporations.

At the launch, a gleaming green BMW caught my eye. It was one of the many cars presented to Dr Mahathir (an F-1 car has also been included since). Someone said the BMW was a special edition.

It certainly looked a million bucks and, I thought, it had no business being in a museum.

My good friend Janet Tee from the Department of Museums and Antiquities told me that I had grossly misunderstood museums. "Museums are not just for old things... or dead and boring things. Museums are for prosperity, for the nation. The BMW is contemporary but it belonged there because it was a gift to Dr Mahathir," she lectured.

In any case, an aide to the former PM told me that the man himself asked that all the cars given to him, including the Beemer, be put in the Galeria. Dr Mahathir told us after the opening of the Galeria Perdana, those gifts presented to him were not personal gifts. "These are gifts presented to the Government... to the people of Malaysia."

Before it ended up in the Galeria, Dr Mahathir himself might have test-driven it. But the man, the aide told me, was happier driving a small car.

This was around the time some people had reportedly spotted him zipping around in a "tiny, Mini-like Malaysian-made car"; which later, I believed, was unveiled to the public as the Kancil.

A Kancil, in my opinion, would make a good gift to exchange with even the BMW. But gifts take many forms. Dr Mahathir had given many gifts to foreign kings, presidents, and prime ministers - the timber which President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe used to build his STG5 million mansion in the suburbs of Harare included.

What other heads of government and state did with the gifts from Dr Mahathir is not a concern at all to me. Whether Mugabe, Lee Kuan Yew, Suharto, or Clinton, and anyone else who had exchanged gifts with the former PM, displayed the gifts in their museums or built themselves a palace with the gifts is their own affair.

I am satisfied to know that the gifts given to Dr Mahathir are there for everyone to appreciate, whether or not you like museums. The next time you are at the Galeria - and 270,000 people visit it each year - look up the Beemer and see if it's not a beauty.

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