

12/05/2004

Stage set for more Cuban sizzle

By Ooi Kok Chuen

CUBAN Ambassador Pedro Monzon Barata is working tirelessly to acquaint Malaysia with Cuban art and culture. OOI KOK CHUEN reports.

IF you think Lady Salsa is sizzlingly hot, you haven't seen nothing yet. Cuban Ambassador Pedro Monzon Barata, who was instrumental in pushing for the musical extravaganza's debut at Genting Highlands last September, said the next musical, Havana Night, promises double the excitement and glamour.

"It's bigger and more sophisticated," said Barata, who is thinking of hosting it during the December holidays, at a venue yet to be decided.

Havana Night will boast lavish sets, dazzling costumes, memorable songs and energetic dance routines like the rumba, salsa and Cuban flamenco.

Since he was appointed ambassador to Malaysia, with accreditation to Brunei and Timor Leste, Barata and his wife Sylvia have been working indefatigably to acquaint Malaysians with Cuban living arts and culture.

There's more to Cuba than just cigars, and maybe coffee and ice-cream, lobsters, and beer, wine and Mojito (a Caribbean cocktail).

After the back-to-back celebrations of Cuban art in Kuala Lumpur - the "New Route to Cuban Art" exhibition at the National Art Gallery and the paintings-only "Cuban Passion" show at Wisma Soka Gakkai in March-April - the Baratas have packaged a mini festival to be held later this month in Penang, at Universiti Sains Malaysia It will feature Cuban painter-ceramist Nelson Dominguez.

Dominguez had exhibited his works at the ABN-Amro Bank Gallery in Penang and the Townhouse Gallery in Kuala Lumpur last December, but this time he will collaborate with local artists on a mural. Last November, there was an exhibition of Cuban photography at Muzium Negara.

There is also the establishment of the Malaysian-Cuban Friendship Association. Barata is looking at greater people-to-people exchanges at all levels, and the establishment of the association will help facilitate this.

"I want maximum co-operation, besides business and trade, to cement and form a more lasting relationship. And art is a bridge, a form of communication," he said.

He proposes to take a group of Malaysian artists, traditional dancers and musicians to Cuba, especially with next year being the 30th anniversary of relations between Malaysia and Cuba although the turning point came when then Prime Minister Datuk Seri (now Tun) Dr Mahathir Mohamad visited Cuba in 1997.

Barata brings into his office a wide range of experiences, with a marked interest in the finer arts.

He first came to know about Malaysia, and its then Look East policy, when he was in Japan for four years. He studied political science and foreign relations, majoring in Japanese studies.

He was posted back to Cuba where he became a professor at an academic institution, before becoming director of foreign relations at the Ministry of Culture.

* The writer can be contacted at ooi@nstp.com.my

(END)