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Attitude must be First World as well

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THE train ride to KL International Airport, I wrote about in this column earlier this year, had been a 28-minute pleasure. No scenes of dilapidated shacks, no delays, no begging bowls at the train station. Simply First World.

Still it was only a couple of weeks ago that I sat in it again, hand luggage for company, on my way to catch a flight to Melbourne.

KL Sentral is clean and user-friendly. You check in at the airline counters, buy a RM35 one-way ticket to KLIA, and take the escalator down to the ERL train platform.

One comes by every 15 minutes and it's known to be punctual. The ride is smooth and efficient. Never mind if the TV screens are still showing what they had been showing since whenever; there is the view outside distract the passengers.

And on that particular Saturday night, it was the view of miles and miles of traffic jam along the North-South Expressway heading to the airport. I was glad I was taking the ERL; many of those guys out there were going to miss their flights for sure.

And then the KLIA itself, a magnificent architecture as much as it is a super-modern infrastructure. It still amazes a lot of people, locals and foreigners, that such an airport can be built in a so-called Third World country.

In Melbourne and Adelaide, where I was part of an Asean delegation of motoring correspondents visiting the Holden facilities, several executives from the Australian carmaker commented on the "greatness" of the KLIA, with a skytrain that runs through it and the ERL that takes you to KL in less than half an hour!

Melbourne has a bigger airport than Adelaide, and neither is anywhere near KLIA in terms of size or grandeur. But big does not mean better all the time. Even Adelaide's modest airport, which reminded me so much of Subang before Terminal 3 was built (years before KLIA was born), is better than Melbourne's in some areas.

Sometimes the smaller airport is better in a certain department because the bigger airport overlooks particular areas dismissed as being trivial, maybe.

Take the lack of power sockets at the KLIA, for example. Welcome to the MSC (Multimedia Super Corridor) country, Malaysia, and you don't have sockets on the walls at the airport to recharge your laptops? How can?

Or you have two hours to kill before they call you in for boarding and you'd like to catch the EPL match (or F1 or the latest breaking news, for that matter) on TV, preferably on giant screens like the ones they have in Changi - the KLIA will disappoint you.

That night at the KLIA, a group of people stood around one of the shops to watch a re-run of Mr Bean on the 21-inch TV in the display window.

I was early for my flight so I thought I'd read up about Melbourne and Adelaide. But was I in for a jolt at the airport bookstore.

A STG15 Lonely Planet volume on Australia costs RM204! The very bad joke played on the six-point- something ringgit to the pound sterling exchange rate is made worse by the fact that the same book was going for A\$35 (less than RM100) in the small Melbourne airport bookstore and about A\$40 at Borders in Adelaide.

These little things bother me because they are Third World elements that

mar yet another of our First World facilities.

The touts at the KLIA's arrival lounge are another disease. Despite the publicity given by the media, they were still there to rob the legitimate limousine drivers and cabbies of business.

On my return to Malaysia, a couple of them followed me right to the counter where you buy tickets for the cabs and limousines. "Cheaper taxis, cheaper taxis" was the marketing chant.

The young cab driver who took me back to the NST office swore that one of these days he'd grab one of those touts and register his anger with his fists.

"The ERL took away some of our business. Now the touts are stealing our passengers. One day, I'm going to beat someone up, I swear," he said.

Ah, maybe we shouldn't name the KLIA after Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad until we look into some of these issues.