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Bursting with energy

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LIKE a journey into Star Wars. That's what it feels like to be looking at the liquefied natural gas (LNG) complex in Bintulu at night. From the Menara Kidurong located on a hill, just next to the plant, the view is breathtaking.

Climb up the four-storey tower and you will see lights sprawling across the plant. Strong flames bursting from the flare stacks give you a sense of 'power', like cities that refuse to sleep.

It's hard to imagine that about 20 years ago, Bintulu was a quiet fishing village situated in the middle of Sarawak's long coastline. With a population of about 5,000 people, this small village located 800km from Kuching was known more for its belacan (shrimp paste) than anything else.

Today, it is fast becoming one of Malaysia's booming industrial centres with a population of more than 160,000.

It even has a new airport (opened two months ago) that looks a little like a mini Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

Ever since gas fields were discovered in Central Luconia (an area located between 125 and 275km off Bintulu's shore), the village has transformed into a bustling industrial township.

In fact, it is now not only the gateway to the Bakun Hydroelectric dam in Belaga, but is also home to the world's largest LNG production facility in a single location.

(Malaysia is the third largest LNG exporter in the world.)

The 276ha-integrated Petronas LNG Complex, launched yesterday by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, is located north of Tanjung Kidurong (20km from Bintulu town). If you can't imagine just how big the complex is, think of 402 football fields put together. (A football field is 0.64752ha)

The LNG complex comprises three plants - MLNG, MLNG Dua and MLNG Tiga - with a combined production capacity of 23 million tonnes per annum (MTPA).

The first plant (MLNG) has three modules or process trains (trains 1, 2 and 3), with a production capacity of 8.1 MTPA, while the second plant (MLNG Dua), with its three process trains (train 4, 5 and 6) produces another 7.8 MTPA. The first two plants started operations in 1983 and 1995, with Japan, Korea and Taiwan becoming its customers.

The third plant, MLNG Tiga, with its two process trains (trains 7 and 8) can produce 6.8 MTPA once train 8 starts operation in October. (Train 7 began operations on March 26 and has so far produced about 20,000 tonnes of LNG.)

With this development that has swept Bintulu, it is no wonder that this it is fast getting recognition as an 'energy town'.

After all, power generated from the LNG complex alone is 250 megawatts, which is about 40 per cent of Sarawak's electricity consumption.

Also, the LNG complex is also located in the same neighbourhood as the Sarawak Electricity Supply Corp (Sesco) and Shell Middle Distillate Synthesis (SMDS) plants.

The complex looks more gigantic during the day.

Huge tanks, heavy machineries, large pipelines and tall flare stacks filled the area, somehow making the workers look like dwarfs. Not many motor vehicles can be seen around the area and cycling seems to be the best mode of transportation at the plants.

Safety is the main priority at the complex.

Smoking is prohibited at the plants and in some areas, there are even restrictions on engine-driven vehicles, for fear it could cause explosion at the highly-flammable areas. Usage of handphones is also prohibited.

Closed-circuit televisions (CCTV) are located all over the place for safety and security purposes. Workers wear proper attires at all times and there are plenty of precautionary signs to remind them to be careful.

The 800-odd workers at the LNG complex have all gone through the safety procedures and attended courses, so as to prepare them for accidents.

Now, the LNG complex is buzzing with excitement, not only because of the birth of MLNG Tiga, but also the `rejuvenation' that is happening at the MLNG plant.

The staff are refurbishing trains 1, 2 and 3, and once completed, the plant is expected to last another 20 years.

In fact, Petronas is ensuring that by the end of next year, all its facilities at the LNG complex would be `usable' for 20 years.