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Dr M: More marinas to be built at strategic locations

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LANGKAWI, Sat. - More marinas will be built at strategic locations along the country's coastline to attract more luxury boat owners.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said luxury yacht owners represented the high-end segment of the tourism sector and could contribute much to the country's cash earnings.

"In the Mediterranean, for example, those who own mega-yachts like to sail and make stops in small ports to enjoy the food and historical sites there. We can also do such things.

"This is part of the tourism industry and because of that, we need to entice foreigners who have mega-yachts to come here and go sailing along the Straits of Malacca," Dr Mahathir said.

The Prime Minister said in addition to yacht and luxury vessel marinas currently being developed in Kuala Kedah, Penang and Lumut, marinas would also be built in the east coast such as Tioman, and also in Sabah and Sarawak.

Dr Mahathir said this at the opening of the Langkawi Lagoon Resort in Padang Matsirat, here.

Developed by Tema Teladan Sdn Bhd, a subsidiary of MK Land Holdings Bhd, the resort is five minutes' drive from the airport.

Phase One of the resort costs RM100 million and consists of 96 hotel suites, 78 sea villas and four sea bungalows which sport traditional Malay architectural influences.

They are sheltered from the open sea by a 2.7km-long breakwater.

Present were Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain, Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, and MK Land Holdings Bhd executive chairman Tan Sri Mustapha Kamal Abu Bakar.

Dr Mahathir said the purpose of building a sea wall in the waters off the Padang Matsirat coast was to facilitate the establishment of water village resorts, which are based on the traditional "kampung air" communities found in Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei.

These are communities where dwellings are built on stilts over the water, allowing the fishermen to be close to their boats at all times.

"It then occurred to the Government to develop luxury versions of these water villages as hotels to cater to tourists who want to experience the life of people who populate the traditional kampung air."

Dr Mahathir said another source of inspiration in developing water village resorts in Malaysia was a project in southern France located in a swamp area with hotels, restaurants, houses and chalets built on reclaimed land jutting into the water.

"The people who stay there go sailing in the Mediterranean and then return to park their boats behind their houses."

Dr Mahathir said such developments have a future in Malaysia, and congratulated Mustapha Kamal for picking up the idea to use the water village concept for the resort.

"It's been a long time coming because the recession in 1997 slowed down Malaysia's economic development. Many found themselves in debt and unable to proceed with their projects."

The Prime Minister said with the economy now having largely recovered with a 4.2 per cent growth last year, "we can continue to grow provided that people work hard and come up with ideas that attract visitors and investments to Malaysia".

The Prime Minister noted that while the east coast had 600km of pristine beaches, many of the rivers in the west coast brought mud to the estuary, which ultimately covered the sand on the beaches.

Dr Mahathir said the Government was trying new technology to reduce the mud and silt but has yet to find a good solution.

On his vision for tourism in Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said the Government wanted tourists to stay longer in the country, as well as to attract more "rich tourists".

"We want the rich to come here and even build houses here, because they contribute a lot to the country's earnings, particularly cash earnings."

On the related sports and leisure fishing industry, Dr Mahathir said it could lure domestic and foreign tourists.

Relating his experience at the Joran Perdana fishing competition held at the breakwater, Dr Mahathir said he was happy to see the big number of participants.

On the future prospect for tourism in Langkawi, Dr Mahathir said tourist arrivals to the island had increased.

"We will have greater co-operation between Langkawi and Phuket in Thailand to conduct joint promotional activities," he said, adding that there were still no flights to ferry tourists directly between these two destinations.