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## Joining the big league

Shanti Gunaratnam

MALAYSIA has big ambitions - to become an established Asian shopping destination in the class of Hong Kong, Singapore and Dubai.

If Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir has his way, this will be achieved by the end of the year.

"We can be equal to or even better than these places if we work very, very hard. We should do use the trio as our benchmark and will start seeing results," Kadir says.

"In fact, in a short time of three years, Malaysia has already become a well-known shopping destination among Indians, Thais, Indonesians and many from the region."

Kadir had just announced that the March Mega Sale Carnival 2003 will be launched in the duty-free island of Langkawi on March 1 at 9pm by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The ceremony will be held at Pandak Mayah in Kuah town and this shopping carnival carries the theme of Home and Lifestyle.

The carnival signifies a month-long spree of super bargains and discounts on a wide range of selected and high quality products, concessions on hotel rates, discounts on food and drinks and attractive offers on holiday packages.

Besides great bargains during launch night by big time retailers, visitors can expect to be entertained by top local artistes, street performers, fashion shows, arts and craft demonstrations and even try some local delicacies.

Cartoon Network and the Royal Sporting House will also be having a month-long sale on the island.

While the private sector is the biggest beneficiary of the carnival, it also poses a stumbling block. The lukewarm response from retailers has been a source of frustration for Kadir.

"From the day we started the shopping carnival three years ago, our aim was to be as good or if not better than Singapore, Dubai or Hong Kong. Unfortunately, the private sector hasn't been equally passionate," Kadir says.

"When the Government goes all out to make it a success, many retailers hardly do anything about it. When nothing is done, they complain. Retailers should realise that a lot of money is spent overseas to promote the carnival.

Kadir is getting a little more optimistic, judging by the number of outlets involved in the last carnival in December - 5,148 participated.

Permits to hold sales outside the three shopping seasons - March, August and December - will now only be allowed for "emergencies" such as business closing down or moving out, fire or floods.

"There is a need to tighten the issuance of permits because retailers are reluctant to go by the book and have sales during the three seasons. So when the country is supposed 'on sale', only a third of the outlets are actually participating. The rest prefer to have theirs at other times.

"What happens is that visitors come under 'sales tour packages' and think they are being taken for a ride when the majority of retailers is not involved."

The decision to restrict sales permit was made recently after discussions with the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry, which has jurisdiction over this matter.

The upcoming carnival will see the launch of a brand new Malaysia Mega Sale Mastercard contest, running from March 1 to 30.

Shoppers who spend RM50 using Mastercard will be entitled to enter the contest through two methods - telephone SMS and contest forms in local newspapers.

The grand prize is a Proton Perdana V6 while daily prizes include a holiday package for two worth RM1,000 and RM50 mystery gifts.