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## Little India loses chance to play host to tourists

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WHAT a shame.

It was announced last year that this year's Deepavali national open house would be held at Little India, one of Penang's famous ethnic enclaves.

However, the venue has been changed due to the delay in completing the RM7.6 million "facelift" of the State's oldest commercial centre for Indian traders.

The site, in the heart of George Town, would have been perfect for the occasion on Oct 24.

Instead, the open house will now be held at Padang Kota Lama or the Esplanade, near the star-shaped Fort Cornwallis, where Sir Francis Light and his crew landed in 1786.

All is not lost, however, since the organiser of the event, the Malaysian Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (Penang) will open a section of Lebuah Pasar and Lebuah Penang to greet Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin and Raja Permaisuri Agong Tuanku Fauziah.

The royal couple will be accompanied by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

Also in town will be Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon, Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir as well as other Federal and State dignitaries.

Now that the venue has been changed, gone is the chance for Little India to be presented to foreign tourists.

At the Chinese New Year national open house in the historical enclaves of Lebuah Armenian and Cannon Square in February 2001, more than 40,000 people showed up, many of them foreign tourists, to savour our hospitality and rich cultural heritage.

Traders and businessmen in Little India stand to benefit from the event if the enclave can be ready in time.

One Little India trader sums it up best: "I may just be selling thosai, but the thought of having the King and Queen visit us is truly exciting. Also, the presence of all the foreign visitors here will definitely put Little India and Penang on the world map."

Still on tourism, the Penang Tourist Guides' Association counter is no longer at its strategic site on the third floor of Komtar.

Instead, it has been shifted to an obscure place, sandwiched between a nasi campur shop and a women's apparel outlet.

Tourists will have a hard time looking for it for advice on attractions and events in Penang or the country, since they would have to go through a maze of lanes to reach the counter.

And the signs are of little help.

"This is terrible," said one irate tourist from Japan recently.

"I don't want information on what you have in this building as much as I want to know what is good to do or where to visit in Penang," she said.

Apparently, she and several friends had gone to the "old" counter, but found that the management of the Komtar building had taken over.

Instead of brochures and guides on interesting sites or local events, the counter now mostly displays handbills and Komtar shopping guides.

The counter had served well as a frontline tourist desk for the past 16 years. However, the association was not told why it had to move.

Again, what a shame.