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Petaling Street puts on a new face

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THE last time Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad paid a visit to Petaling Street in Kuala Lumpur, it was an eyesore. Cleanliness was far from a priority and makeshift stalls spilled haphazardly onto an already congested road, threatening to engulf every visible square inch.

When he visits it today, he will be pleasantly surprised, for emerging like an ageing star after a Botox treatment is a Petaling Street up on the glamour quotient.

Lush palm trees line the street and paving has replaced the old tarred road. Sheltering shoppers from the sun and rain is a blue expanse of transparent, reflective roofing overhead. The latter is just one portion of a 600sq m protective roof structure planned for the trading area. More important, it was C-L-E-A-N and there wasn't a single fly in sight.

Although only the first two stages of renovation have been completed, the aesthetic improvements are apparent, especially at 11.30am in the morning when the street was virtually deserted, looking like a scene from the western Gunfight at OK Corral in which the extent of free space was obvious.

Close to noon, as traders began to filter in, the street began to come alive with the sights and sounds which have for so long been associated with the area. The air was tinged with the fragrance of fresh fruit and flowers mingling with the scent of roasted chestnuts. Locals and tourists were milling about looking for bargains, and trundling past was a wagon of roasted ducks.

Amidst the flurry of activity, an excited buzz filled the air as Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting dropped by to inspect the upgrading work. He was accompanied by representatives from the Kuala Lumpur Hawker and Petty Traders Association, Garment Traders Association and Nan Ann Chinese Guilds Association.

Pleased with the results, Ong remarked that while sprucing up beautified the street, the original look had been retained.

"The traditional part of Petaling Street is still there. You see the same shops, and the multi-racial representation in the hawkers. The beautification of the street has given them better facilities.

"The next thing we want to co-ordinate through the KLHPTA and Bukit Bintang MCA is to ensure that people here have a positive attitude towards cleanliness, are friendly to tourists and there is better co-operation between hawkers and storekeepers."

Drawing attention to stalls relegated to the pavement of the street, he said the result improved the look of the street.

"The stalls are all standardised now and we have introduced a traditional Chinese roof feature for each stall. The upgrading work is only half-finished. Once fully completed, the full beauty of Petaling Street will be unveiled," he said. He estimates this to be in October, before the Organisation of the Islamic Conference Summit.

Are there plans for further changes to the street? Ong said the matter would be weighed carefully to see what was suitable, necessary and acceptable to people before they were initiated.

On what the PM would see on his visit, Ong said that apart from the renovations, four giant posters of Malaysia's prime ministers would be raised - Dr Mahathir, Tengku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak and Tun Hussein Onn. The Jalur Gemilang will be placed at regular intervals along the

street. The National Day Eve celebration in the area is jointly organised by the KLHPTA, GTA and the NACGA.

Some hawkers, however, were less enthusiastic about the upgrading work, saying the changes were largely cosmetic. A hawker, who has been peddling his wares on the street for the last 20 years, sums up their sentiments: "Sure the roof looks grand and the place is good for tourists, but when there is a downpour - the rain still beats into our stalls."

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