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We are sailing...

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MALAYSIA boasts of a 4,675km long coastline littered with thousands of picturesque islands, lagoons and shimmering seas but Malaysians do not seem to be a seafaring lot.

Except for the occasional ferry ride to Penang, Langkawi or Tioman, most Malaysians seem to be contented with hogging the roads and taking up hobbies that are kilometres away from the sea.

Former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, a sailing buff himself, had on Oct 3, launched the Langkawi International Yacht Registry, the first of its kind in the region.

The move was aimed at making Langkawi and Malaysia a better known destination and an eastern point for yacht owners of the world to make their base while sailing in these waters.

While this augurs well for the yachting fraternity, it is important that more Malaysians take up sailing for a vibrant sailing scene would attract more foreign and local sailors and boats which can help the economy.

The success of the recently concluded Raja Muda International Regatta (RMIR) speaks volumes for Malaysia's capability to organise international sail boat races.

Despite being held during the fasting month of Ramadan, the event attracted many local boats as well as those from the US, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Thailand and Singapore.

The Government's push for the sailing industry is evident in the recent announcement by Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir that 20 more marinas would be built in the country and more academies would be established to teach the rudiments of sailing.

The RMIR took the boats from Port Klang to Pangkor, Penang and Langkawi. There were two days of harbour races in Langkawi.

For the uninitiated, the Malaysian sailing fraternity is a friendly one. Yacht owners and skippers are more than happy to take volunteers on board during regattas or cruises as long as they have some basic knowledge of sailing and are willing to learn.

The commodore of the Royal Selangor Yacht Club, Aziz Kadir, said his club provides courses for those who want to take up sailing. Most other yacht clubs in the country, he said, do the same.

"Just look at the young sailors such as Tiffany and Jeremy Koo who are keen to participate in as many races as possible and actually go out and look for skippers who will take them on board," said Aziz.

"Such enthusiasm is needed among other youths as sailing in Malaysia is possible round the year and they can hop on to boats anytime.

"Taking up sailing or becoming a member of the crew of passenger and cargo vessels as a career is also lucrative but only a handful of Malaysians seem to be interested compared to the Filipinos and other nationals in the region.

"It also provides them an opportunity to see the world which should be an attractive proposition for youngsters compared to working in a fast food chain."

Many of those who took part in the RMIR sail the seas more as a hobby than a vocation and declared that they would not miss the opportunity to take to the high seas.

Public relations practitioner Mazlan Sharif, who was caught in a squall in the Straits of Malacca in his friend's yacht during the RMIR when the

boat was tossed around like a tin can in two-metre high waves, said such experiences only made him return to sailing year after year.

"The crew had life jackets on, had to wear strobe lights on the arms and had to be harnessed to the railing as the boat was buffeted by the wind and waves," said the father of three.

"With the dim deck lights and the moon light to guide and rain lashing down and lightning illuminating the skies from all corners, we had to be alert and kept calling out to each other to make sure nobody fell overboard.

"Whether in good weather or bad, there is much work, reefing the sails, hoisting and bringing down the multi-purpose sail and the yankee as well as tacking and plotting the course.

"There is always an element of danger in sailing, especially travelling overnight in rough seas but we always have time to reminisce about the events at breakfast the next day, which is quite exhilarating."

Datuk Richard Curtis, the chief executive officer of the Melium Group, fell in love with the sea at a young age and his passion for boats prompted him to go searching for one that had a rich history.

"That's when I came across the Eveline, which I admit needs more attention and tender loving care than my wife," he said with a laugh.

Curtis took possession of Bristol Cutter, built in Shanghai in 1910 and refurbished it in Teluk Intan.

Over the past few years, it has brought immense cruising pleasure to his family, friends and races in the Classic class of local and regional regattas.

"I am glad that many of my friends have learnt much about sailing from it and this too using traditional ways not dependent on winches, grinders and push-button electronic gadgetry," he said.

Joan Foo Mahony and Tengku Soraya Dakhlah, who are avid sailors, began the all-women Dewi Bayu team which has emerged as a force to be reckoned with in the male-dominated sailing world in this part of the region.

For this year's RMIR, the team chartered Gotcha Lagi, a fast boat which had won honours at the RMIR and the King's Cup in Phuket and raced against seasoned sailors from all over the world.

They came in with a credible finishing in several of the races before heading for Phuket to take on more challengers.

"Our performance has brought lots of enquiries from other young women who want to take up the sport," said Foo Mahony.

"We want to create a large pool of women who can sail and do the nation proud in international events."

The year-long sailing environment, the Government's initiatives to build more marinas, the yacht clubs' enthusiasm in promoting races, the availability of sailing courses and the opportunity to hop on to sail boats will help make sailing a foremost sport in the country.

The keen interest shown by Malaysians would help make Malaysia a sea-faring nation that it once was.

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