

THE STAR

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Malaysia, truly global



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After years of being considered as some random Third World Asian nation, Malaysia has finally come into its own, thanks to mega development projects, our well-travelled cuisine and, just maybe, that catchy advertisement on satellite TV...

FIFTY years as a nation, and despite the morass of "Happy 50th Nation-day" articles, I too will put in my contribution to this. Sorry to be so pedestrian, but the national celebrations can be inspiring, you know, even if it is to pen a short piece on how Malaysia is known the world over.

Although I currently live in Malaysia, I have spent a third of my life overseas, and I'd like to think I'm a global traveller, a citizen of the world, home is wherever my backpack lands - even if I'm still attached to it when it falls. So, I've been around, and unlike the current trend for Americans to pretend to be Canadians, I have been and certainly am proud to proclaim myself Malaysian.

One thing I have seen over the years is the reaction to Malaysia change from "Whazzat?" to "Ah... Twin Towers". I remember as a young teenager having to explain to my friends in school where Malaysia was. "You know Singapore? It's that really tiny bit at the tip of Malaysia. No ... the southern tip."

Coming from an obscure country was an advantage sometimes. Whenever any of my foreign schoolmates in boarding school wanted to try some of my food, I'd just dissuade them by telling them it was something exotic - shredded chicken testicles, or dried gecko tails. It only took six months before they realised what asam boi or serunding was.

After a while though, they developed a real taste for traditional

Malaysian student food - Maggi Mee. It was a revelation, seeing the sons of our former colonial masters paying up to a pound each for a packet of Maggi Mee. I don't have to tell you what they started paying when they discovered Brahim's packed foods. The aroma of kurma and sambal began to waft around the dormitories.

I'm not sure if it was the quality of food, or just our insistence that Malaysia is not Singapore that won people over, but by the sixth form, most of the boys knew where Malaysia was. They also knew that her students were geekish, or hard-working, and quite able to compete for and win the limited number of scholarships available. A fine swap for a few packs of Maggi Mee, if you ask me.

It wasn't until I travelled in the United States for a few months that I understood what it felt like to be misunderstood again. It was amusing to see how people would just generally ignore me as I walked around, until I opened my mouth and said something.

Thanks to the colour of my skin, coupled with my generally messy and laid-back demeanour, people assumed I was Latino. But when they heard my accent, they would take notice. Like Eliza Doolittle, I became the centre of attention, and I took full advantage to grab all the free food and drink I could in that time.

However, if those in Britain were unsure of where Malaysia was, then Americans were almost completely

clueless. Even when I tried to explain it in the context of Vietnam - where they had, after all, fought a major war - it really came across as some random Third World Asian nation. To them, I wasn't Malaysian, just somebody who came from somewhere else.

In the mid-1990s, for better or worse, our exposure as a nation began to grow. Now, being Malaysian in a foreign land gained you an identity. Unfortunately, it wasn't always one representing the progressive, fast-rising ingénue that our nation builders hope for. Instead, there was a feeling that people considered Malaysia as being ambitious, but not having proven our ability yet. Mega-projects were labelled as "follies" and our Prime Minister at that time, Datuk (now Tun) Seri Dr Mahathir, was widely quoted, and not always in the most appealing light. Meeting strangers overseas was a case of, "Ah... Malaysia", followed by a moment of silence. Things that are left unsaid speak the loudest.

The events of Sept 11, 2001, also eventually put Malaysia under the spotlight. Surprisingly though, I wasn't treated badly at all as I travelled across Asia and Europe two years after that. Everyone I met was generally friendly, and that's probably because quite a few had personally been to Malaysia themselves. In return, there was also a Malaysian diaspora, and the country became better known and understood.

For example, you can now find decent nasi lemak in places as



The Petronas Twin Towers has done plenty to put Malaysia on the world map.

diverse as London and Phnom Penh. And, when I was in South Korea, not one, but two South Koreans spoke to me in fluent Bahasa Melayu.

The only places that didn't really know about Malaysia were in Russia, and Eastern Europe - although a souvenir seller in Prague claimed that he had a sister who now lived in Malaysia. Funnily enough, a rickshaw driver in Ho Chi Minh said the same thing, as well as a tuk-tuk man in Siem Reap. I thought they were out for a quick sympathy buck, but they seemed to know the basic facts about the country.

I think that perhaps the branding of the country has improved in leaps and bounds. Partly it's because we seem to do more on an international stage, but also because

we are marketing our country to the whole world. Yes, we want all the Middle Easterns, Russians and Japanese we can get. You can hear "One Golden Celebration" in hotel rooms all over the world.

It was strange when I was in Germany last year, and a group of football fans came across me. Immediately, they pointed, and sang, "Mexico, Mexico, Mexico!", assuming I was there to watch that team play. I instead said, "Malaysia!", at which they launched into song: "Malaysia, Truly Asia..."

■ *Logic is the antithesis of emotion but mathematician-turned-scriptwriter Dzof Azmi's theory is that people need both to make sense of life's vagaries and contradictions.*