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Indonesia's Batam eyes S'pore tourism boom

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BATAM, Indonesia: Indonesia's Batam island, an industrial zone with dreams of transforming into a major tourist destination, is sprucing itself up to lure big-spending visitors from Singapore.

Batam is looking to emulate the success of another Indonesian island close to Singapore, Bintan, which is already a luxury beach and golfing destination after opening high-speed ferry links to the city-state in the 1990s.

To do so, it will have to overhaul its image to tap into the spillover from the booming tourism market in Singapore, the city-state just a 45-minute ferry ride away.

With Malaysia's nearby Johor state luring more visitors to its Iskandar metropolis, islands, beaches, palaces and national parks, Batam faces stiff competition.

Johor recorded 15 million foreign arrivals in 2011, 90 percent of them day-tripping Singaporeans.

Indonesian tourism officials say arrivals in Batam have stabilised at around one million annually for the past five years, many of them coming via ferry from Singapore, which welcomed more than 13 million visitors in 2011.

While nearly a third of the Singapore visitors were from Indonesia and Malaysia, the rest are tourists from other countries who Batam officials hope could be enticed to visit if it develops more attractions.

But while Batam's investors see an uncut diamond looking to progress from its transformation in the 1970s from tropical forest into a major



Photos 1 of 1

Passengers board the ferry along the harbour front in Singapore before heading to Indonesia's nearby Batam island. (AFP Photo/Roslan Rahman)

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industrial zone, it has its work cut out to reverse perceptions held by some tourists.

"It's so boring and I don't remember the beaches as being particularly nice," said Singaporean marketing manager Janet Tan, who recently flew to Bali with her husband and baby boy for a five-day break at four times the price. "I am not interested in Batam at all."

With its large industrial sector and legions of migrant workers, Batam city is thoroughly urbanised, but outside the city, underdeveloped islets and coastal areas are being eyed by investors.

Ong Chih Ching, a Singaporean property developer, believes that despite its major industrial zones, Batam still boasts pristine beaches and a rustic charm.

Her company, the KOP Group, is bankrolling the upmarket Montigo Resorts project, which could help reverse Batam's reputation as a shabby place where Singaporeans set up factories -- and where some men keep Indonesian mistresses.

"I just felt that it is a gem that has not been polished and that's not very fair because people just don't give it a chance," said Ong, whose change of heart came when she went to view a vacant plot of land in 2008.

She made the decision immediately after viewing the property and the Montigo project, which cost S\$110 million (\$88 million), will feature 88 pool villas and 45 residences nestled on a hill with panoramic sea views.

The complex -- which claims to be Batam's first five-star resort -- will start operating in a few months.

"The existence of Montigo Resort of course provides another hope for the progress of the tourism industry of Batam," said Yusfa Hendri, head of the local tourism body.

"The project will also create trust and confidence for future investors."

Both Batam and Bintan are part of the Riau archipelago, which has long been overshadowed by Bali as a tourist destination.

"Batam's proposition is its proximity to Singapore, a tourism and aviation hub," said Jonathan Galaviz, managing director of US-based research firm Galaviz and Company, which closely tracks Singapore's tourism industry.

"They need to figure out how to market the island as a secondary destination to Singapore," he told AFP.

With a population of just five million compared to Indonesia's 240 million and Malaysia's 28 million, Singapore's tourist arrivals boomed after it opened two casino resorts in 2010, building on its role as a gateway to the neighbouring Southeast Asian region.

By comparison, Indonesia welcomed fewer than eight million visitors in 2011 while Malaysia had about 25 million, according to official figures.

In Malaysia's Johor state, Asia's first Legoland theme park is set to open this year after a vast expanse of oil palm-covered hills was cleared to make way for the 76-acre (31-hectare) attraction, based on the popular Danish plastic brick toys.

The park is located in the Iskandar special development region, just across a narrow waterway from Singapore, which now hosts Southeast Asia's first Universal Studios movie theme park.

When completed, Legoland Malaysia -- featuring rides and recreations of global landmarks using Lego bricks -- will be the sixth of its kind in the world after those in Denmark, Britain, California, Florida and Germany.

There are also plans for a Hello Kitty Town, inspired by the Japanese merchandising icon, in Iskandar along with other attractions aimed at families with young children.

Developers hope a 50-kilometre (30-mile) radius spanning Singapore and Johor will become like Orlando, Florida, which hosts Disneyland, Universal Studios and SeaWorld.

"It's a nice little cluster. It certainly could be viable," John Koldowski, special adviser to Bangkok-based Pacific Asia Travel Association industry body, told AFP.

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