

# Malaysia Looks Down on World From 1,483 Feet

By SETH MYDANS

New York Times (1923-Current file); May 2, 1996; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times  
pg. A4

## Kuala Lumpur Journal

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By SETH MYDANS

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — In the afternoons, their twin pinnacles are lost in the monsoon rain clouds. At night they twinkle like parallel columns of stars. Malaysia officially became home recently not only to the tallest but even to the two tallest buildings in the world, the side-by-side Petronas Towers.

For the first time in more than a century, the United States is not home to the world's tallest building. Perhaps it had to happen. And where else should the title go but to Asia, where national economies are growing faster than anywhere else in the world?

Chicago was left pointing desperately to the television antennas atop the 22-year-old Sears Tower, which would still make it taller than the Petronas Towers, but in vain. The Council on Tall Buildings and Urban Habitat, the international arbiter of the world's skyscrapers, voted on April 13 that television antennas are irrele-

## Kuala Lumpur's twin towers are the world's tallest.

vant, and awarded the title of world's tallest to Petronas, by 33 feet.

It was a heady achievement for Malaysia, which yearns to become a player on the international scene, and the symbolism is apt. Perhaps no nation is remaking itself physically with more ambition than this one.

Dr. Lynn Beedle, director of the Council on Tall Buildings, declined to call this a sad moment for America. "No, no, no," he said. "There are still many great things about American buildings. Oh, many, many great things."

The Petronas Towers, the 1,483-foot-tall, 88-story home to Malaysia's national oil company, have risen on the site of the now-demolished Selangor Turf Club, a last vestige of the British colonial heritage that has been methodically erased since independence 39 years ago.

"I call this the shaking away of the colonial mantle," said Ken Yeang, a leading local architect who is a member of the Council on Tall Buildings. "You rediscover your identity and self-confidence."

Tall as they are, the \$1.2 billion towers will be dwarfed in scope, if not height, by other building projects here, including an entirely new \$8 bil-

lion capital city to be called Putrajaya, a \$3.6 billion international airport and one of the world's biggest hydroelectric dams, the \$8 billion Bakun dam in Sarawak, which will create a lake the size of the entire island nation of Singapore.

Only recently a poor country whose economy rested on exports of rubber and tin, Malaysia seems eager to develop the kind of urban mass that now horrifies many people in the developed world.

"One day, Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and our new airport will become one mega-city that can be compared to centers like Tokyo-Yokohama," said Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad, the driving force behind his nation's development.

His goal is to turn Malaysia into a fully developed nation by the year 2020, and with an annual growth rate of 8 percent or more, it is well on its way. Construction projects that total \$73 billion are on the books, including cities, ports, highways and mass transit systems.

The Petronas Towers were topped off in February, and tenants are scheduled to begin moving in by the end of this year.

This heady growth has its critics. "We are on a building binge, and I think one can question the need for all these big mega-projects," said Gurmit Singh, a leading environmentalist. "They come out with these projects and then they try to justify them. They build this big building first, and then they try to fill it up."

But supporters say the symbolism itself is worth the cost of construction. "The twin towers are a symbol of Asia's dynamism and growth," said Razak Baginda, executive director of the Malaysian Strategic Research Center. "These towers will do wonders for Asia's self-esteem and confidence, which I think is very important, and which I think at this moment are at the point of takeoff."

He added, "This is not in any way to suggest that we are taller or better than the West, but it does have to do with that competition of growth."

People here may be careful not to gloat, but Chicago has been left only with consolation prizes: the Council on Tall Buildings, based in Bethlehem, Pa., says the Sears Tower is still the "world's biggest tall building," with 4.5 million square feet of space, and calls it home to the world's highest occupiable floor and world's highest elevator ride.

The highest occupiable floors in the Petronas Towers are 150 feet below that of the Sears Tower. But the Petronas Towers are crowned with 242-foot spires that the Council on Tall Buildings ruled are integral to their architecture in a way that Sears's television antennas are not.

Noelle Gaffney, the spokeswoman for Mayor Richard M. Daley of Chicago, stood by her town. "While there still is a dispute over what qualifies as the tallest building in the world," she said, "there is no disputing the fact that Chicago would still have the highest observation deck in the world."

There is still more symbolism in this drive to be big. The "American century," as measured by the world's tallest buildings, might be calculated at 111 years, since the completion of the first skyscraper, the 180-foot Home Insurance Building in Chicago, in 1885. Malaysia's moment will be more fleeting.

Even as architects in the West are favoring low-rise, decentralized construction in the new era of telecom-

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David Portnoy for The New York Times

With completion of the side-by-side Petronas Towers, Kuala Lumpur has officially become home to the two tallest buildings in the world.

## LOOKING UP

### Tall, Taller, Tallest

An international group has declared the Petronas Towers in Malaysia the world's tallest buildings; the group includes their structural spires but does not count the television antennas atop the Sears Tower in Chicago. Both structures will be eclipsed by the World Financial Center in Shanghai in a few years.

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munications, ever-taller skyscrapers are rising all around Asia — in Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and China.

Malaysia is expected to lose its title before the decade is over, when

the 1,509-foot World Financial Center is completed in Shanghai — 259 feet taller than the Empire State Building, 59 feet taller than the Sears Tower and 26 feet taller than the Petronas Towers.