

RM100mil makeover for ferry service

Penang terminals and ferries to debut new, improved look next year

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GEORGE TOWN: After 50 years, the Penang ferry service will see a RM100mil makeover, including the arrival of a fleet of four new ferries costing RM16mil each.

Penang Port Sdn Bhd (PPSB) chief executive officer Datuk Sasedharan Vasudevan said the terminal upgrade on the island and mainland were expected to be completed in mid-June and October next year respectively.

A total of RM30mil is being spent on transforming the Raja Tun Uda terminal on this island and the Sultan Abdul Halim terminal next to Penang Sentral in Butterworth.

Four new ferries, each costing RM16mil, will be ready for service by mid-2023.

"This is the first major expansion of the ferry terminals in the last five decades.

"We want to transform the entire area into a vibrant public transport hub with retail outlets, hawker stalls and a business centre," Sasedharan told *The Star*.

"It's time for ferry travel to be something to look out for as we have 2.5 million pedestrians and 1.5 million two-wheelers using the ferry services every year.

"The waiting area will feature amenities like those you see in airports. It'll be air-conditioned, have WiFi, feature universal access to cater for disabled persons, have phone charging docks, passenger lifts, as well as retail and food and beverage areas," he added.

On the new ferries, Sasedharan



Timely transformation: A graphic impression of the new Penang Port ferry design at Penang Sentral in Butterworth. — ZHAFARAN NASIB/*The Star*

said they would resemble the iconic Penang ferries, even retaining the familiar shade of yellow that many are familiar with.

However, the new ferries are much faster, needing only 10 minutes to complete the journey like the present fast passenger-only boats.

The new ferry can take in about 250 passengers, including two-wheelers.

"It is 35m in length, compared to the old ferry which is 55m.

"Basically, it is a combination of a water bus and vehicle transporter.

"It will take 12 to 18 months to bring in the ferries commissioned by Dutch company Damen Shipyards Group which won the tender.

"There was a plan to get five ferries, with the option of buying the fifth one later, as there could be more technologically advanced ferries in the future," he added.

Sasedharan also said the Transport Ministry would contribute

RM30mil, with the first RM15mil disbursed this month and the balance to be given next year.

He said PPSB would pump in RM70mil for the upgrade and purchase of new ferries, adding that the move would reduce the operating loss of present ferry services from RM20mil to RM7mil a year.

"As a public transport provider, we have requested a fuel subsidy.

"The new ferries will need less manpower, as such it will reduce

our operating cost.

"We have also proposed that the price of the ferry tickets, which is currently RM1.20, be increased to RM1.50 or RM2 to keep up with the times. The ferry rates have not been revised for a long time," he said.

The entire expansion plan, added Sasedharan, was aimed at moving people instead of vehicles.

"We have plans in the future to have a multi-storey car park where commuters can just park their cars and take a ferry ride.

"At present, such facilities are not available at the ferry terminal area on the mainland. This discourages people from riding ferries," he said.

Penang's ferry service started in 1894 using steamships. The fleet had been replaced many times over the years.

This previous fleet of boxy, double-deck old ferries were commissioned between 1971 and 2004.

The iconic Penang ferries ceased operation on Dec 31 last year, with only a single ferry now carrying two-wheelers with pedestrians plying from the ferry terminal between the island and the mainland.

A Ro-Ro boat is also being used to carry two-wheelers with pedestrians, while fast boats are used for foot passengers to travel between the island and mainland.

All four-wheelers are presently using the two Penang bridges to cross over the Penang channel.

On another matter, Sasedharan said Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Wee Ka Siong would launch the "Cruise to Nowhere" at the Swettenham Pier Cruise Terminal on Dec 26.