

Where the rich come to frolic in the surf



By Julia Chan
jcolea@nst.com.my

KOTA KINABALU: From the balcony of the carefully crafted teak and coconut wood villa, you can see a picturesque view of an unspoiled sandy beach and its azure waters, while a backdrop of rolling, rainforest-covered hills provide a perfect contrast to the adjacent padi fields.

It is like stepping into a painting, until the gentle sea breeze and the sounds of birds from the fields and forests remind you that you are in a tropical paradise, the Kudat Riviera.

The tranquillity, unspoiled surroundings and luxuriousness, are worth millions.

That is what Phil Dobson of Touchdown Holidays, a tourism company dealing with luxury products, is banking on when he decided to embark on the luxury villas on prime land at the tip of Borneo.

Dobson heads one of the first companies here to approach the high-end property market after first developing products ranging from yacht and helicopter chartering to restaurants.

"The natural next step for us had to be accommodation that would suit the high-end market. Sabah has some excellent resorts but it has lagged behind other top tourism destinations in 'boutique resort' and villa development.

"The growing trend for luxury travellers is towards exclusive destinations that provide bespoke encounters coupled with lavish accommodation that is both private and environmentally conscious."

Dobson said many doubted the project would be successful, given the remote and virtually unheard-of location.

"But a firm belief in the destination made me trust that there was indeed a market of high-net-worth individuals who would invest in luxurious homes in Sabah, particularly in Kudat.

"There are many other locations in the world that are popular for property investments.

"Sabah has areas that are more easily accessed or that are closer to the ever-growing Kota Kinabalu, but in my eyes and heart, no place in the world rivals the sheer beauty and exclusivity of Kudat," said Dobson.

As testament to his belief, all 30-plus villas at the Kudat Riviera are now sold out. Several other property developers are looking into similar projects.

Noting the high demand for such exclusive property as the Kudat Riviera, more such projects would be aggressively promoted under the Sabah Development Corridor (SDC).

Part of the SDC initiative is to market Sabah to high-end investors and holiday-makers who are seeking a luxury getaway in an exclusive tropical paradise that is not as commercialised as Bali and Phuket.

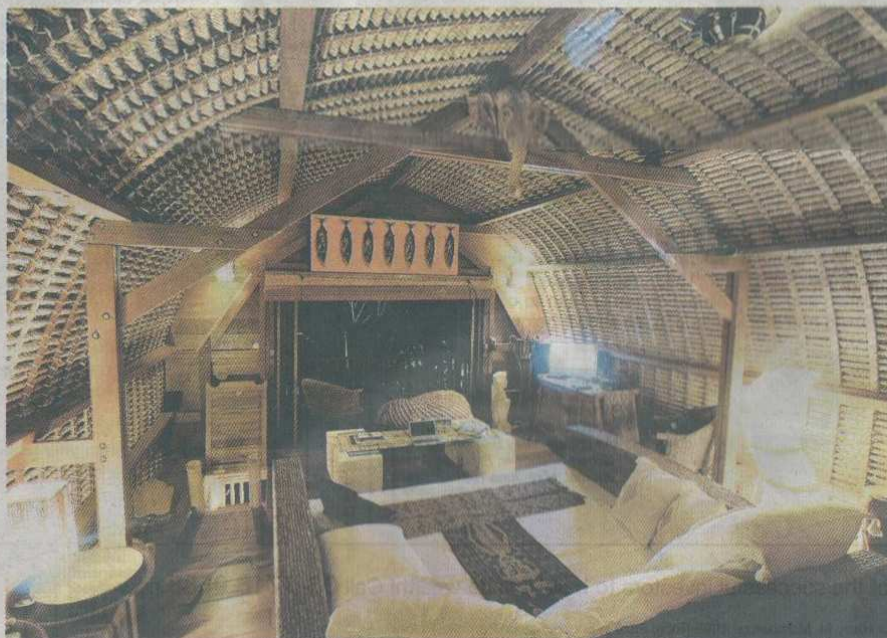
Dobson expects many more such properties along the coastline in the coming years, both from resort developments and investment homes.

"The response we received through our marketing efforts showed that there are hundreds of investors who are not only interested, but excited to consider Sabah a potential second home.

"It will be interesting to see this growth, and we only hope that the ensuing developments will be environmentally and culturally responsible to ensure that Sabah's rich heritage is not impacted by a big



The exclusive villas in Kudat Riviera are targeted at high-end investors and holiday-makers who are seeking a luxury getaway in a tropical paradise.



The villas are uniquely Asian in design and embrace the open-air tropical living concept. — Pictures courtesy of Touchdown UK

property boom."

The Kudat Riviera is a series of high-end villas located along the beachfront and hills just south of the tip of Borneo. They are available to the owner for six months in a year and up for rental for the other half.

Each villa has between 0.2ha and 2.4ha of space, and an architectural Asian design that uniquely embraces open-air tropical living in villas that

range from 120 sq metres to a massive 600 sq metres.

The villas will offer a boutique villa resort concept, with a full butler-service and facilities ranging from restaurants, a high-end spa, watersports and land-based activities and miles of beautiful beach.

With rates starting around RM2,000 per night, the resort will put Sabah on the map of luxury destinations and attract high-end travellers from

around the world.

The project has also committed to achieving the "Green Globe" status and aims to be the first resort in Malaysia to achieve the stringent extensive environmental controls laid out by the environmental organisation.

To ensure exclusivity and seclusion, there will be concerted efforts among government and quasi-government agencies involved in the indus-

try to control the nature of tourism development.

Long-term social visit visas should be provided to encourage high net worth individuals to make Sabah not just a holiday home but a second home.

Foreigners with a single investment of US\$1 million (RM3.3 million) and above in a luxury residential home in Sabah should be granted a long-term visa.