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In love with Malaysia

By S.S. YOGA

Datuk Seri Jean Todt raves about what he likes here.

FOOD, glorious food is one attraction that lures visitors to Malaysia. Even Ferrari chief executive officer Datuk Seri Jean Todt has succumbed to the temptations of our cuisine.

"I love the food. I'm not used to having a heavy breakfast, but when I'm in Ipoh, Michelle's father will have a big breakfast ready for us and it is so good. You have such a great variety, and the dining atmosphere here is great," said Todt, the fiance of actress Datuk Michelle Yeoh.



Datuk Seri Jean Todt: 'You have such a great variety (of food), and the dining atmosphere here is great.'

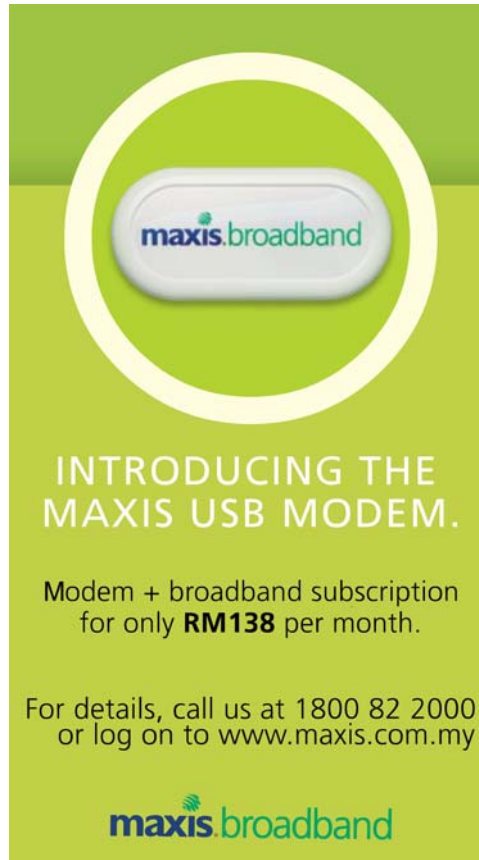
Since he comes specially for the Formula One event at Sepang and frequently accompanies Yeoh on her visits back, he has many chances to "rev up" his appetite for our varied dishes.

But last week, Todt was in Kuala Lumpur because Yeoh was awarded the *Legion d'Honneur*, the highest civilian award bestowed by the French Government. He took time off from his busy three-day schedule to grant a short interview at his suite in the Ritz-Carlton Residence.

When we arrived, Todt had just returned to his suite, where he then did a promotional clip for a private TV station for the Monsoon Cup, a sailing competition held in Pulau Duyung, Terengganu. He has been a supporter of this event since its inception in 2005.

The TV crew was still clearing up its equipment when the media group was ushered in. Five minutes later, Todt walked into the room and greeted each of us individually.

He says Malaysia is like a second home to him, thus his support for the Monsoon Cup, which has made Pulau Duyung and the country well known internationally. He sees a good future for the competition and reckons it could be one race that America's Cup challengers might want to take part in.



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"Sailing is something I need time for. Maybe in the future, I might go sailing in a boat. Last Christmas and during the New Year, I sailed on a boat with the Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi) in Australia and it was a great experience. I'm not an expert. I do follow the America's Cup, but for me, racing cars is more exciting."

Todt says that through the Monsoon Cup, he has become acquainted with Terengganu Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Idris Jusoh, the King, and various personalities associated with the event.

It is obvious that he is smitten by many things "Malaysian" – his fiancée, the food and the natural beauty of the country. He keeps talking about places like the Pangkor Resort in

Perak, and how beautiful Terengganu is, particularly Pulau Duyung,

"The island is unique, something like Phuket. But it, and Terengganu, are more beautiful. The first time you see it, you are taken away by the beauty."

No wonder that he and Yeoh decided to build a home on the island. Construction started late in 2005 at the Terengganu Heritage Bay and was expected to be completed within a year.

Todt says the place is still not ready because of delays and some paperwork, which needs to be completed. He denies a report which quoted him as saying that he was planning a second home in Merang, Terengganu.

"This is not even ready yet, why have another? A good house is better than two mediocre ones."

When the house is ready, Todt will probably spend even more time in Malaysia. Given the fact that he and Yeoh both have very hectic lifestyles, how do they find the time to savour their relationship?

"It is not the quantity but the quality of time. She is also very busy travelling, but she manages to come see me. She was shooting a movie in Canada and then she met me in Tokyo (for the Japan F1). Then we came here. Next, we will go to Shanghai (again for the F1).

"I meet her, too, when I can, but yes, we are not always together. When that happens, we spend several times a day on the phone."

And Todt reckons that marriage will not change anything.

"It is not a matter of being married or signing a document. What matters is being happy together."

Things will not change with retirement, too. Not that he plans to retire anytime soon.

"I will never retire as I like to keep active, so there are no plans for that. I divide my time for racing, business and charity work. There are lots of things I like to do but I will definitely spend more time here because this is where Michelle's family and friends are. I don't think she will enjoy that (I retire)."

It looks like we'll be seeing much more of Todt in Malaysia, and in the news.

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