

Too many cars, too many bays

THE recent announcement by the Tourism Board that Malaysia generated RM106bil in tourist spending from 25 million international tourists in 2024 is significant. Out of these, nine million came from Singapore. If even half of them drove to Johor Bahru's shopping malls, an important question arises: Do these malls have enough parking spaces to accommodate such a surge in shoppers?

The answer is a resounding yes. For example, key malls in Johor Bahru easily provide 4,000 to 6,500 parking bays. Major shopping centres in the Klang Valley each boast approximately 10,000 parking bays.

In fact, Malaysia is one of the most generous providers of mall parking spaces—not just in Asia but globally. This would be considered excessive in many other countries, yet Malaysians still struggle to find parking. The issue is not a shortage of space but the overwhelming number of cars on the road.

Cost of each parking bay

The construction of parking spaces is an expensive investment. A single parking bay costs approximately RM40,000 to build and this cost doubles to RM80,000 if the parking is underground due to added structural complexities.

For a mall with 5,000 parking bays, this represents a minimum investment of RM200mil—before the mall even begins operations. To achieve a marginal 5% yield over 15 years, parking fees should be around RM3 per hour just to break even. If premium features such as epoxy flooring, smart guiding systems and enhanced lighting are included, a sustainable rate would ideally be RM5–8 per hour.

This is why the common RM3 for the first three hours parking charge is only RM1 per hour, in reality, subsidised by the mall's overall operational revenue.

Despite the relatively low cost of mall parking in Malaysia, the price remains a contentious issue. In comparison, shopping malls in Hong Kong and Singapore charge between RM5 and RM10 per hour while in the Melbourne central business district, parking fees can exceed RM100 for just a few hours.

Besides the costs of construction, high parking costs must consider factors such as expensive land, high insurance premiums and stringent zoning laws. Unlike Malaysian malls, which provide thousands of parking bays, overseas shopping centres even in central business districts, offer limited parking, often charging hefty fees for even short stays.

Malaysia's car-centric nature

While public transport has expanded in Malaysia, driving remains the primary mode of transportation. Blaming parking problems solely on inadequate public transport is an oversimplification. The issue is rooted in a combination of fac-



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tors, including national car policies, the privatisation of toll roads and highways, urban sprawl and the car-centric nature of Malaysia's infrastructure.

Driving in Malaysia is not just a convenience—it is a necessity. People drive to work, to run errands, to visit family and to send their children to school. With a car ownership rate of approximately 500 vehicles per

1,000 people, Malaysia surpasses countries such as South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand in the Asia region. This reliance on private vehicles extends beyond shopping malls to workplaces, residential areas, hospitals, hotels and schools. In short, Malaysia cannot function without cars.

This reliance on driving explains why commercial shoplots frequently experience severe parking shortages and congestion. In high-traffic areas such as Taipan, SS2 and Kota Damansara, double and even triple parking are common. A typical café with 12 tables and 48 seats can serve around 288 customers per day during the six peak hours.

Assuming three customers per car, this restaurant requires 96 parking bay turnovers per day or 16 bays per hour, yet most shoplots only provide four parking bays in front of their premises. As a result, customers are forced to park along roadsides, in nearby buildings or unauthorised spaces.

This example illustrates why parking shortages persist in these commercial centres and how businesses may struggle when parking availability is inadequate. To mitigate this issue, commercial centres often require

developers to construct elevated car park buildings to ease the demand for parking.

A new challenge

The rise of electric vehicles (EVs) presents an additional challenge in parking space management. While EV charging stations are an attractive feature for malls, regulations must ensure that they are used efficiently and fairly. Without proper enforcement, these spaces could become monopolised by a small number of vehicles, exacerbating existing parking shortages.

Office parking is another long-standing issue in Malaysia. Since the introduction of the Park and Ride system in 2006, many office buildings in Putrajaya were designed with fewer parking spaces, assuming that employees would use public transport.

However, due to the low adoption of carpooling and public transit, many companies have had to rely on open-air parking lots or even undeveloped land to accommodate the overflow of vehicles. The fundamental problem lies in the mismatch between building regulations and actual parking demand.

Office spaces are typically designed to accommodate one employee per 200 sq ft, yet the building code only mandates one parking bay per 1,000 sq ft.

Even if two employees share a car, the parking shortfall remains three times greater than the available supply. Most Malaysians prefer to drive alone, which explains why streets surrounding government buildings in Putrajaya and high-tech offices in Cyberjaya are lined with parked cars.

If local councils or traffic police were to strictly enforce illegal parking laws, many offices would likely find themselves operating at half capacity due to a lack of available parking for employees.

The pandemic provided a temporary glimpse into how e-hailing services could impact parking demand. During lockdowns, fewer people drove to malls, making parking more accessible. However, as e-hailing prices surged post-pandemic, many Malaysians reverted to driving, bringing back pre-pandemic parking congestion. This highlights that while e-hailing may provide a temporary alternative, it does not replace the long-term need for private vehicle ownership in Malaysia.

Ultimately, there is no definitive solution to Malaysia's parking dilemma—perhaps because it is not truly a problem but a way of life. Parking, much like dealing with Malaysia's hot weather, wet public toilets or the usual traffic jam, is simply part of the Malaysian experience. Driving is deeply ingrained in the culture and searching for a parking spot is just another aspect of daily life.

As long as Malaysia continues to offer reasonably affordable parking, it remains a part of the country's urban ecosystem—one that Malaysians have learned to navigate and, in many ways, embrace.

