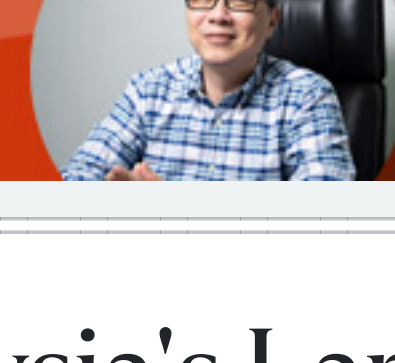
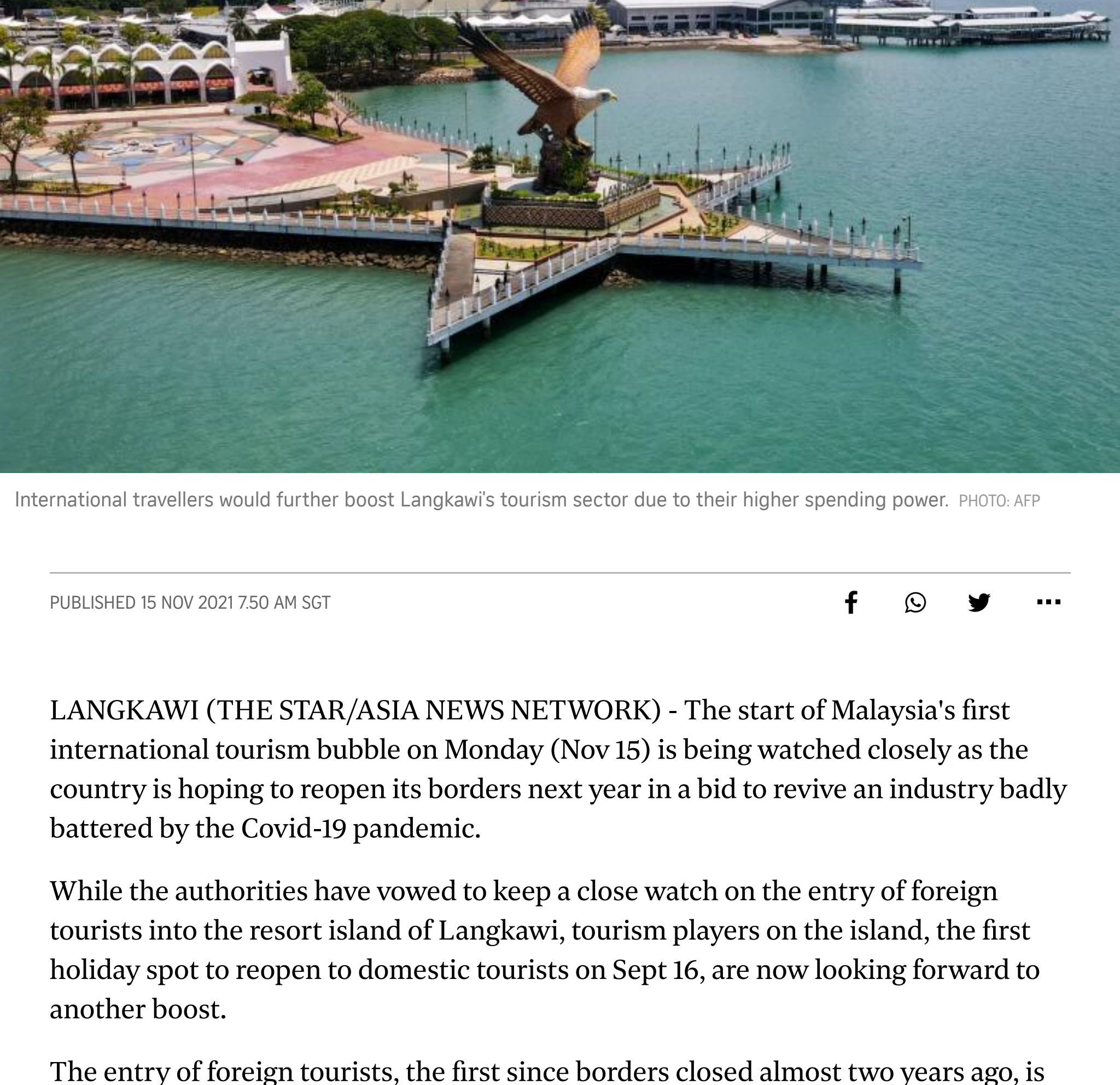


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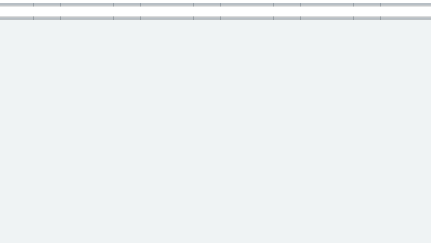
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In bubble plan, Malaysia's Langkawi island opens up to foreign travellers



International travellers would further boost Langkawi's tourism sector due to their higher spending power. PHOTO: AFP

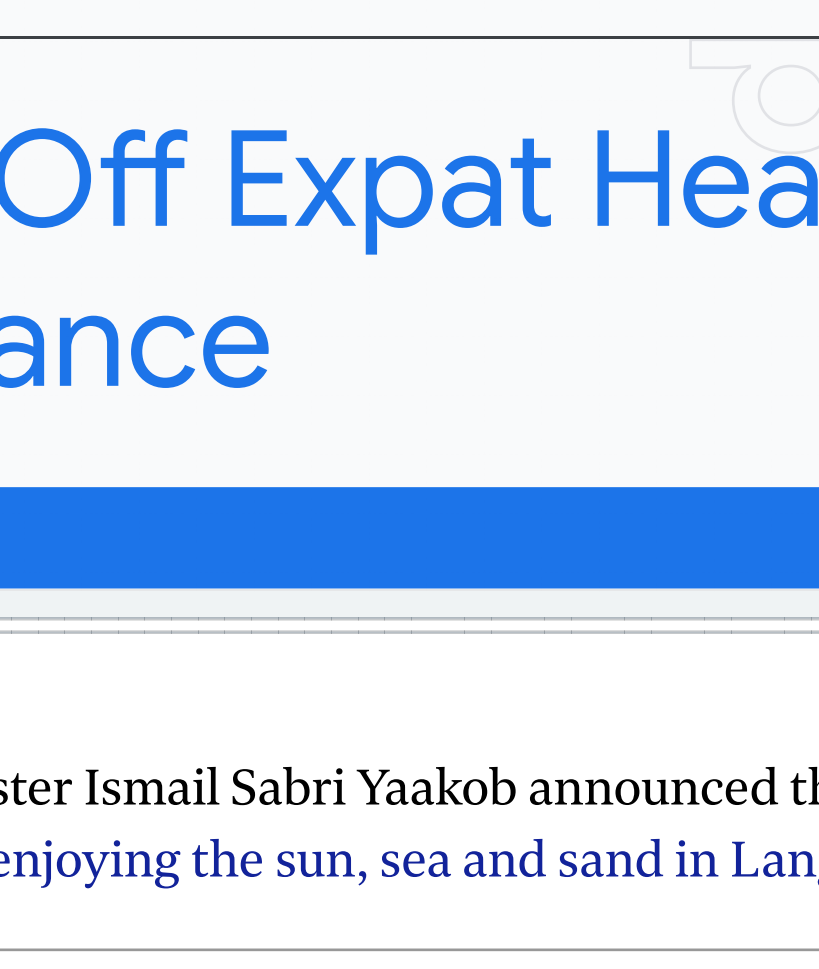
PUBLISHED 15 NOV 2021 7:50 AM SGT



LANGKAWI (THE STAR/ASIA NEWS NETWORK) - The start of Malaysia's first international tourism bubble on Monday (Nov 15) is being watched closely as the country is hoping to reopen its borders next year in a bid to revive an industry badly battered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

While the authorities have vowed to keep a close watch on the entry of foreign tourists into the resort island of Langkawi, tourism players on the island, the first holiday spot to reopen to domestic tourists on Sept 16, are now looking forward to another boost.

The entry of foreign tourists, the first since borders closed almost two years ago, is taking place amid warnings that Covid-19 cases may rise again with the recent increase in the infectivity rate despite the country's high vaccination rate.



Kedah state executive councillor Mohd Firdaus Ahmad said the state had completed its preparations for the travel bubble with the local authorities and agencies, such as the Langkawi Development Authority (Lada), as well as tourism players.

"All foreign holidaymakers have to undergo Covid-19 screening upon arrival at the island, and the results would be known in 10 minutes.

"They have to take the test at a facility near the Langkawi International Airport. These travellers will be moving about within a travel bubble guided by their agents," he said, adding that all eateries and tourist attractions were also ready to receive tourist arrivals.

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On Oct 22, Prime Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob announced that **foreign tourists could once again start enjoying the sun, sea and sand in Langkawi** from Monday.

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Former premier and National Recovery Council chairman Muhyiddin Yassin had proposed that the **country's borders be reopened to foreign visitors on Jan 1 next year**, in a bid to expedite the country's economic recovery, especially since the tourism sector in 2019 brought in around 26 million tourists and more than RM86 billion (\$28 billion) in revenue.

International travellers, said Mr Mohd Firdaus, would further boost Langkawi's tourism sector due to their higher spending power.

"In the past five years (before the pandemic), international travellers spent a significant amount in Langkawi and this was good for the local economy.

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"On average, each of them spent between RM1,000 and RM2,000 per person daily for accommodation and activities like island-hopping and to hire tour guides," added Mr Mohd Firdaus, who holds the state tourism, arts and culture, entrepreneur development and cooperatives portfolio.



A Malaysia Airlines plane carrying the first batch of domestic tourists arriving in Langkawi on Sept 16, 2021. PHOTO: REUTERS

Lada chief executive officer Nasaruddin Abdul Muttalib said tourists had to undergo Covid-19 tests within 48 hours of landing.

"We encourage them to get this done as soon as possible. If any of them is found to be positive, there are 118 rooms in 20 hotels on standby for any quarantine measures," he said.

On the number of tourists expected this week, Mr Nasaruddin said it was difficult to gauge as over the next fortnight, most of the tourists were likely to be those transiting from Kuala Lumpur International Airport.

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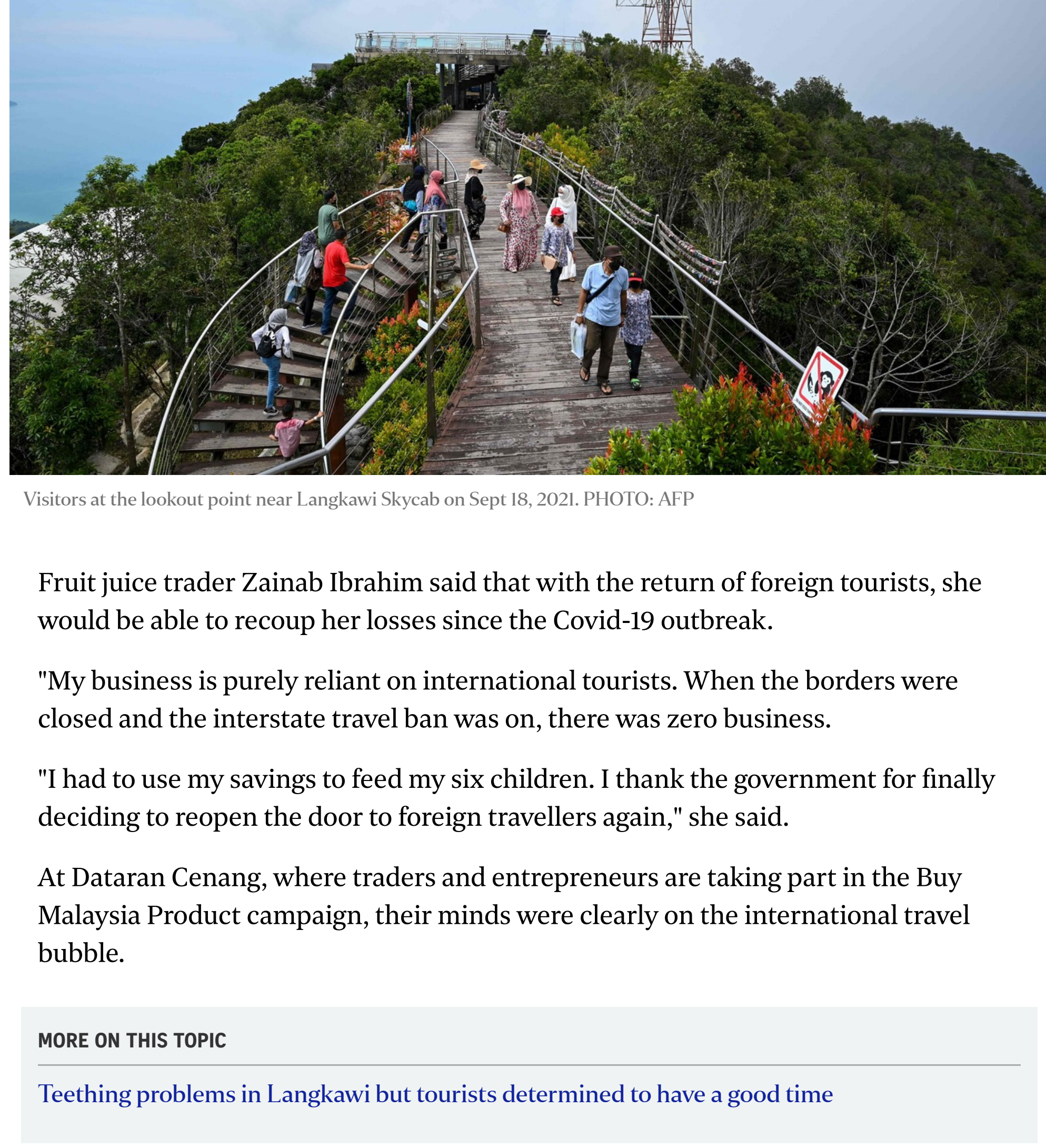
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"We are expecting to see more direct flights into Langkawi in early December, especially when the festive holidays begin in Europe and the United States," he added.

Lada has also set up two private laboratories to conduct Covid-19 antigen rapid tests for tourists.

Restaurant operator Rosseta Mohd Karim, 53, said foreign tourists had more spending power, while locals could only help sustain her business.

"News of the international travel bubble is music to our ears. But there is always this fear that the bubble would not last for long," she said.



Visitors at the lookout point near Langkawi Skycab on Sept 18, 2021. PHOTO: AFP

Fruit juice trader Zainab Ibrahim said that with the return of foreign tourists, she would be able to recoup her losses since the Covid-19 outbreak.

"My business is purely reliant on international tourists. When the borders were closed and the interstate travel ban was on, there was zero business.

"I had to use my savings to feed my six children. I thank the government for finally deciding to reopen the door to foreign travellers again," she said.

At Dataran Cenang, where traders and entrepreneurs are taking part in the Buy Malaysia Product campaign, their minds were clearly on the international travel bubble.

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Handicraft entrepreneur Syarhnir Setapa, 24, said he had sold his products online to customers from Germany and the Netherlands.

"I am looking forward to international tourists coming here to look at my work," he said.

Since the reopening of Langkawi under the travel bubble programme on Sept 16 for domestic tourists, a total of 240,361 travellers have visited the island, bringing more than RM240 million in revenue in less than two months.

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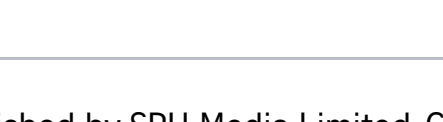
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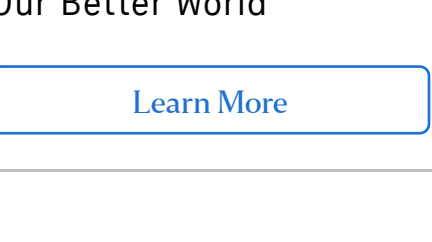
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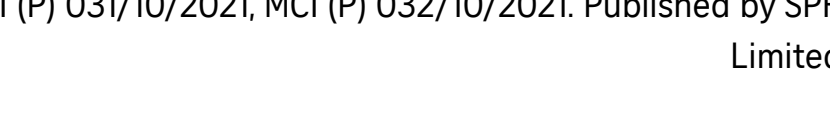
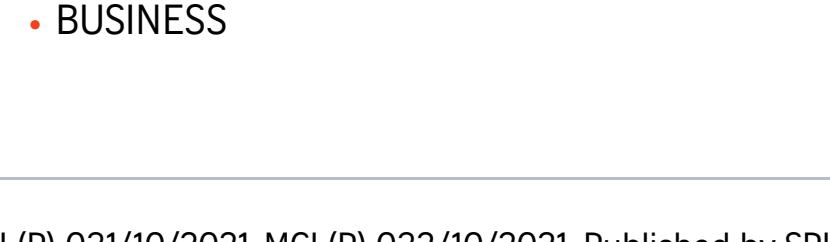
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