

Let's make the passage really smooth

As public transport in our country, especially in the Klang Valley, reaches new, glorious heights, it's important that we look not just at the 'hardware', but also the 'software'.

LOOKING out from the office in Phileo Damansara, Petaling Jaya, these days, one can be forgiven for seeing a vision of the future.

Bright red and white plastic barriers line the road, the slopes have been cleared and several areas have been boarded up with signboards saying that the land has been acquired for the MRT project.

Yes, the multi-billion-ringgit MRT is coming to the office, and it's going to be cinch to get to work when it's all done.

Elsewhere, the LRT extension work is going on at full steam, the double-tracking system is at full-tilt and anyone who goes into the city centre cannot help but be impressed by the new spacious city bus terminal at Pasar Seni.

It's all very exciting. And, Prasarana says it's going to be seamless.

Soon, it will be easy for anyone from up north in Penang to take a high-speed train to Kuala Lumpur, hop onto a commuter train or LRT to go anywhere in the Klang Valley and then switch to a bus or monorail to get to the doorstep of their destination.

The people of Klang Valley are going to have it so good when it comes to public transport.

But that's only as far as the "hardware" is concerned. What about the "software"?

By software, I mean the people who will run these services, the guy selling the tickets, manning (or will it be woman-ning) the doors, the maintenance people and the customer relations people.

Why do I ask the question? Well, there was this nasty experience I encountered a few days ago.

My brother dropped by my home in Petaling Jaya for the weekend and was preparing to return on Monday.

He had to start work in Butterworth at about 8pm, but had to first get to Kulim, where his motorcycle was parked.

A bus leaving Kuala Lumpur for Kulim at about noon would be just about right, we thought.

So, there we were at Puduraya – it's Pudu Sentral now – and we realised we had forgotten that it was the Malaysia Day weekend! The only tickets available were for the 2.30pm trip. It was cutting it thin but he got the tickets anyway. They cost RM40.

Thinking that all would be fine from here on, we left him.

However, at 3.30pm, I got a call from him. The bus was nowhere in sight. He confronted the guy at the counter and was curtly told: "Go and wait, the bus will come."

And the bus did come – at 4.30pm. His chances of getting to work on time were slim. So, he sat out for the five-hour trip until the bus pulled up at 9.30pm. The driver killed the engine and got off.

So did my brother, only to realise that he was not in Kulim, but miles and miles away in Parit Buntar.

There was no explanation, no apology. Just passing of the buck.

The bus agents in Parit Buntar said it was the fault of the people in Kuala Lumpur that he was stranded in the little border town, so he should return to Kuala Lumpur to argue his case.

After much argument, they offered a compromise. They would pay half the taxi fare to Kulim. The taxi fare was RM50. He had paid



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RM40 to the bus company and had ended up in Parit Buntar. Now, he was being asked to pay another RM25 to get home. And he had lost a day's salary, to boot!

"No go," I told him on the phone. "We will let SPAD or the small claims tribunal handle that."

Meanwhile, a relative in Parit Buntar took him in for the night.

I guess it's one of those things that happen. For every nasty episode, thousands of others get to their destinations safe and sound.

But every nightmare like this is one too many. The service providers – whether it's the cabbie, the bus driver or the consortium that runs these huge businesses – really need to care for those who pay the fare.

Just last month, the monorail service broke down – twice in a week.

The first time around, 183 passengers were trapped some 30 feet above the ground for two hours. Some could not breathe and had to break open the windows to let some air in.

Then, they had to be brought down in firemen's ladders. Those things look scary and rickety. And, there were elderly people trapped in the trains.

Were there any nice young people holding the hands of these traumatised people? Was there anyone offering them a cup of hot coffee or chocolate, a massage or some medicine to help them ease the tension and get over the two-hour nightmare?

A week later, in the second breakdown, the train stalled near the station and after a half-hour wait for the next train, many of the stranded passengers just walked away to get to work on other modes of transport.

Was there any attempt by the service providers to make good their losses?

You know, they could have made a gesture. Something like: "We're sorry, ladies and gentlemen; here's a complimentary (or half-price) coupon. We guarantee that your next ride with us will be a comfortable one."

That would have been nice.

Here's a disclaimer, though; I don't know if the company did extend any such help or offers to the passengers, but I certainly did not see it in the papers.

> Speaking of public transport, the writer has been impressed with a quote making its rounds on Facebook. It is attributed to the mayor of Bogota and goes: A developed nation is not where the poor drive cars, it's where the rich use public transport. Touche!