The Three Gorges Project in China

MY wife and I, together with some friends, travelled to Zhangjiajie to tour the UNESCO World Heritage Forest Park of unique towering mountain peak formations. The Zhangjiajie Mountains were also popularised by the movie “Avatar”. We then travelled seven hours eastward by road, running almost parallel to the Yangtze River to Yichang, the World Energy City.

The Three Gorges Project (TGP) was built across the Yangtze at Yichang in Hubei Province, some 1,800km upstream of Shanghai. The TGP is the world’s largest hydropower power plant (21,000MW capacity). The annual generated capacity in 2009 was 79.4TWh. However, the Itaipu Dam (by Brazil and Paraguay with a smaller 14,000MW capacity), which opened in 1984, has a larger annual generated capacity of 91.6TWh.

Unfortunately, due to the heavy river vessel congestion, regular leisure ships were no longer allowed to transit the shiplocks at will. We, therefore, had to be contented with only viewing the dam, the shiplocks and other facilities in the accessible areas of the TGP.

Another transit facility in the form of a 11,800 tonne capacity 113m vertical ship lift has been under construction since 2007. The lift, catering for 3,000 tonne vessels is scheduled for completion in 2014, cutting the transit time to only 45 minutes.

The TGP at 180 billion Renminbi (or about RM90 billion) is China’s pride and touted as an engineering and economic feat. Besides power generation, it also serves the functions of flood control and irrigation, and enables a multiple fold increase in shipping operations, allowing 10,000 tonnage fleets to navigate directly from Shanghai to Chongqing.

However, its success came with a heavy toll from the social, cultural, environmental and human perspectives. The initial impounding of the dam from 2003 was made possible after a massive five-year planned relocation and resettlement of some 1.3 million of the population and resulted in the permanent flooding of some 13 cities, 140 towns, 1,352 villages and 657 factories.

The 350 multinational passengers had a relaxing and enjoyable cruise through the magnificent Xiling Gorge, the Wu Gorge and Qutang Gorge with daily stops at various local jetties. Along the way, we passed under many spectacular long span bridges built across the Yangtze River.

We also passed by the entirely new booming Badong township where up to 100,000 of the resettled population now live in two- or three-storey high western style buildings with modern facilities. Surely, the TGP and the Yangtze will become increasingly popular as tourist attractions.