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THE EDGE MALAYSIA
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Urban ideals

InvestKL CEO
Datuk Zainal Amanshah
on promoting
Kuala Lumpur to an
international business
audience and why our
city is an easy sell



A KKL STATE OF MIND

Although famous the world over as a tourist destination, Kuala Lumpur's capacity as a destination for investment is not quite as well known. As CEO of InvestKL, it is the role of Datuk Zainal Amanshah to spread the word as well as to convince multinational corporations to set up shop in our capital city. He tells **Anandhi Gopinath** how InvestKL achieves its objectives, why KL is a truly wonderful city and why he signed for the job of salesman extraordinaire.

InvestKL's modern, sun-drenched office boasts gorgeous drawings of the city's skyline on its walls — on a background of white, the red sketches look especially magnificent. It's a wonderful reminder of how beautiful our city is, although the bright tone of red looks like it comes from CEO Datuk Zainal Amanshah's allegiance to English football club Liverpool FC. It's something he will not readily admit to, but it is telling that he does not openly deny it either.

Then again, Zainal is InvestKL's first CEO, and as the person who bought the company's first stand fan and fax machine, one can hardly fault him for choosing its official colour based on his favourite football team. "Red is a powerful colour, so I think it works," he grins, as he surreptitiously shows me the Liverpool FC logo on his red necktie.

Tall and elegant with a perpetually mischievous glint in his eyes, the Penang-born Zainal is charismatic, interesting and quite a good storyteller — ideal traits to sell the idea of KL to a global audience. Not as a tourist destination, however, as enough people around the world know about our city's potential for a stellar holiday. KL as a business and investment option is not very well known, and that gap is what InvestKL aims to fill.

A government entity under the purview of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, Ministry of Federal Territories and the Performance Management and Delivery Unit (Pemandu) under the Prime Minister's Department, InvestKL works with other ministries, entities and agencies to formulate attractive fiscal packages and help corporations

identify business opportunities while strengthening their competitiveness regionally and globally.

Overseen by the Prime Minister's Office, reporting to three ministers and headed by Zainal, InvestKL focuses on attracting global multinationals such as Fortune 500 and Forbes 2000 companies to set up their regional business, innovation and talent hubs in Greater Kuala Lumpur and strategically grow their business in Asia.

"Malaysia in the past has enjoyed good FDI (foreign direct investment), but very much in the manufacturing and shared services space. The idea is that many of these companies have a footprint in the region, but their headquarters aren't here," says Zainal. "So, the government decided that there was a need for one focused entity that could talk to these big boys and get them to locate their headquarters here. That's what we do at InvestKL — we talk to them, understand their plans and persuade them to come here. We give them a reason to come and open up here, and we help them to do so."

Because of our active oil and gas industry, many of the companies that InvestKL reaches out to are in this industry. Responding to a burgeoning need for infrastructure in Malaysia and around the region and, of course, a growing consumer base in this part of the world, the engineering, construction and supply chain industries have also responded well to the idea of setting up a base here — a zone referred to as Greater KL, covering 2,793 sq km and managed by 10 local authorities.

InvestKL was founded in 2011 and given a specific target to convince 100 large-scale companies to set up base in Greater KL by 2020. At present, Zainal and his team are about halfway

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there. "In terms of total approved amount committed, it's about RM5 billion. And so far, what these companies have already spent has reached about 30%. About 7,000 regional jobs across Southeast Asia have been created, of which 60% are already on payroll," Zainal says, the numbers rolling off his tongue.

But the work does not end with foreign companies signing on the dotted line, as it turns out. "The next question is what happens after 2020. Because persuading these big boys to come here is just the beginning — after that they will want to expand and acquire new businesses. It's the start of a long-term relationship, and you have to continue providing the necessary support when it comes to things like immigration, taxation and even talent acquisition," Zainal observes.

With a childhood based in KL and London, Zainal is equally attached to the two cities and is objective about KL's growth and development. "Watching how an international city like London evolved while having roots in KL — I guess the city factor was something I could relate to very quickly. When you compare KL and London — London is a hub for Europe, it's rich in arts and culture ... you can draw a lot of comparisons to KL," he says thoughtfully, looking outside the large windows.

From our vantage point, ensconced in a large meeting room on the 16th floor of Menara SSM, we have a stunning view of the KL Sentral complex — an impressively busy transport and business hub and one of the many recent developments in KL that have made this city more efficient and better connected.

Oddly enough, the knowledge that KL is such an advanced city is not all that well known — and spreading the word is part of InvestKL's job. "The lack of awareness is a huge challenge to get past — I still get people asking me if we practise capital controls, which is something that we did away with years ago," Zainal says. "When you think of this

announced plans to open its regional operations hub in Greater KL while Swiss speciality chemical company Clariant will establish its first Asia-Pacific Centre of Excellence in our city.

With the uplifting news last month that the ringgit will be stronger this year came more positive developments from Zainal and his team — American conglomerate and global innovation leader Honeywell announced that it will establish its Asean principal hub for two major strategic business units in Greater KL.

Zainal joined InvestKL as salesman extraordinaire after a 22-year career in several industries in the private sector, all of which provided some input for the job he holds today. A qualified electrical engineer, Zainal travelled to many cities in Malaysia when he was with Unisys, went from hardware to software with a subsidiary of Dataprep, tested the waters of entrepreneurship — at "the young and impatient age of 28" — and then headed the shared service division of Lotus Notes, the underdog that staged (and lost) a valiant fight against Microsoft. Zainal — who is a father of three boys — also spent a large portion of his career with integrated telecommunications company REDtone, which he co-founded.

The kind to get bored quickly unless he is doing something interesting and game-changing, Zainal was offered the role to head InvestKL by Pemandu CEO Datuk Seri Idris Jala. It came at the perfect moment — REDtone was doing well and Zainal was itching for a new challenge.

"My initial reaction was 'Are you serious? Me, work in the government? No,'" he recalls with a laugh. "But as I grew to understand the role, I was increasingly interested. I also had the opportunity to talk to the lead ministers — back then, it was Datuk Seri Raja Nong Chik Raja Zainal Abidin — and I was quite piqued. It was an interesting proposition and a greenfield project because there was nothing in place — no logo, no office,

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region and you think of big economies, it's Indonesia. When you think of low cost, it's Vietnam. When you think financial hub, Singapore tends to come to mind. In terms of getting our name out there, to promote us as a viable investment destination — we are getting there, even though there is a lot of work to be done. That is why we exist."

This is a slightly harder key performance indicator to quantify and will be an ongoing task for InvestKL. Fortunately, the vacuum of information is a great opportunity for InvestKL to define our city in a positive light.

"Imagine you're an investor and you're going to a new region that you're not familiar with. So, the common questions are like what is the quality of life, what are the people like, what is the rule of law, that sort of thing," says Zainal, on the kind of queries he gets. "I think people look for a feel-good factor. What the people like, can I blend in and can I do really good business there? Fundamentally, that's what people want to know. In our experience, however, once you get them to KL, they are sold on the idea."

For many, the idea of KL is an easy sell — it is busy, cosmopolitan, colourful and a vibrant expression of Asia. But it is hard to deny that like any city, it has its drawbacks too. The tough economic climate, for one, seems like an insurmountable test as KL becomes increasingly expensive to live and work in.

"Globally, we are facing a number of challenges," Zainal says, expertly addressing this concern. "The oil and gas industry has taken a hit, so Malaysia is feeling the pinch too. What's happening politically doesn't help, but what investors are more concerned with is what's happening globally. So, our job is to engage with these investors and say — this is the politics, these are the fundamentals, but here is how we can help. It's going to be a tough 6 to 12 months, but this is the new normal — volatile conditions aren't uncommon any more and business goes on."

Zainal has a point. Despite the troubling news surrounding the reducing value of the ringgit and the general decline of global economies last year, InvestKL was able to celebrate some good news — British rail freight company Colas Rail

not even a phone number. We used to be based in a meeting room in Mida (Malaysian Investment Development Authority), with no clue how to start an entity that is going to sell KL."

Although Pemandu had initially envisaged a staff strength of about 10 people, under Zainal, the team is now 35-strong. Testament to how quickly InvestKL has grown, no doubt, and the nature of the challenge put before them. "We've had to do this, so the team could grow. We had to find people who were motivated by the role that InvestKL was going to play. It was what I said when I was first interviewed for this job — there are two challenges, which is dealing with your external stakeholders and inspiring your internal stakeholders.

"I always tell my team, 'In this job, you need to be inspired and challenged like never before. Because you're promoting KL and this is for your city and your country. If you can do interesting things here, it's good for you, our career, your city and your country.' The achievement orientation that I drill into the team probably inspires them, and they are a good team," he says proudly.

"He is demanding, but understanding and easy to work with," pipes up director of marketing and communications Tim Saw, returning Zainal's compliment.

In fact, passion and drive are the values Zainal looks for most when he hires — for anyone looking to join InvestKL, you have quite a challenge ahead. "Everyone who is interviewed here does a one-hour case study — they sit in this very room, they are given a laptop and in one hour they have to produce a case study on developing KL," he says. "When you are passionate and driven, it shows. Your capability comes through because you believe in the cause. That's what we are looking for."

KL is not perfect — no city is — but it does have a lot going for it. By 2020, its population is set to hit the 10 million mark, and it will be teeming with opportunities and chances to grow. As InvestKL continues to favourably position the city as a prime location for international business, we can only expect things to improve.

Let the good times roll.