

And my vote goes to ... the old ferry

A week before Penang went to the polls, the locals were abuzz about another choice they had no say in. The new ferries were finally in operation. The boats are nice but for this writer, the old gentle giants were better.

IT'S election day in six states and close to 9.8 million people are ready to go to the polls and make their choice.

In most cases, they only have two choices – stick with the old, or embrace the new.

In Penang, Selangor and Negeri Sembilan, Pakatan Harapan are the old, albeit with a new partner in Barisan Nasional.

In Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu, PAS are the old and they, too, have new partners in Bersatu and Gerakan. They are collectively known as Perikatan Nasional.

So, will they go for the new? Or stick with the old? We will know later today.

As for me, I had my “old or new” dilemma last week. I was in Penang, and there was quite a buzz both on the island and the mainland.

The thing is, it wasn't about politics. Penangites instead were getting excited about the new ferries in town, which started operations on Monday.

There were free rides on offer, and I am a Penangite – the kind who will not let slip on anything free. So come Monday morning, I was on my way to the ferry terminal in Weld Quay with wife and daughter in tow.

The signboards weren't quite up and people had to ask for directions (at least on the island) to get to the ferries. Many pedestrians walking in from another direction got an earful from the security guards, but they were still

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Why not?

allowed into the rather fancy but sterile-looking waiting area, now at ground level.

Soon after, we were on *Teluk Kampi*, one of the four new ferries.

The first thing I noticed was its size. It looked really small, especially with two of the old iconic ferries parked right next to it.

The new ferries can take some 150 pedestrians and 50 motorcycles. The old ones? They could take about 30 cars, more than 150 motorcycles and more than 500 passengers.

The new ferries are faster, but the old ones could, well, ferry a whole lot more people and vehicles in one go.

The ride in the new ferry is comfortable enough, with a large air-conditioned area and about 15 seats in three rows in the open area at both ends.

The air-conditioning was not that cool, the automatic doors were not working and the toilet was a bit of a mess. And this was just day one.

Half the seats face one direction



The big and small of it: The new ferry looks tiny as it leaves the berth, with two of the old iconic ferries parked nearby.

and half the other. And I was left missing those seats of old; they were long hard benches but had grooves on either side that allowed you to swing the headrest and voila! you could switch the direction you are facing.

That wasn't the big issue, either. The front of the new ferry has an opening of about five feet. And as it started moving – without the boom of the iconic call of “*Pulau Pinang, boleh bertolak sekarang*” – the wind blew in.

I put my head up and braced for the wind to hit – and was left disappointed. There was little wind. The old ferry, you see, was wide open and the breeze slapped you in the face, blew your hair, and caressed all of you as the ferry crossed the channel. People left their cars and bikes and walked down the stairs of the old ferries to enjoy the breeze.

There was no such thing in the new ferry. The wind blew, but

with the huge gangway in the way, there was no feeling it inside. It was just stifflingly hot.

As we alighted, I looked to the 63-year-old man beside me. His name was Zul, and his disappointment was obvious.

“That is always better,” he said, pointing to the two old ferries rotting at the old landing berth just metres away.

I had to agree with him. My vote goes to the old, iconic ferries too.

That's not to say the new ones are not good. They are fast and run on time, although I expect breakdowns in the future with prolonged use.

They will serve as vehicles to cross the channel, but these yellow and blue tin-and-glass cans will never evoke the romance and nostalgia of the old ferries. It was a sheer experience riding on those lumbering giants, sitting on the bollards, watching jellyfish

and sometimes dolphins.

Still, it looks like these new ferries are here to stay; they are already renovating the old berths to fit the new boats. It will be one more change in the public transport across the channel, which was started in 1894 as a passenger-only service by entrepreneur Quah Beng Kee.

It then became a vehicle and passenger service in 1925, around the time it was taken over by the Penang Harbour Board, later to become the Penang Port Commission. They used modified ships and, later, lighters towed by launches.

It was only in 1956 that the first of the recently-retired fleet came into being, with the first being *Pulau Pinang*.

Ironically, the last such ferry to be commissioned was also *Pulau Pinang*, in 2002.

Now, 21 years on, they are no more and their fate has been sealed with the coming of the new “Teluk” series.

The Pakatan government led by Lim Guan Eng had cried foul when the old ferries were scrapped by the then Perikatan government, and promised to revive them. However, the same government, now led by Chow Kon Yeow, has embraced the new ones.

With that, the promise of bringing back the iconic ferries is as good as dead in the water. Let's hope whoever wins the state election will at least keep their more recent promises.