'Ghost town' turns into shopping haven

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NILAI, Sun. — On weekdays, the Nilai 3 industrial zone looks like a ghost town. On weekends, the commercial area is transformed into a mega shopping centre.

Huge discounts in Nilai's wholesale shops — a 29-inch television set costs RM559, a twin-tub washing machine is RM378 — have attracted shoppers from all over the country.

The shopping area, which sits in an industrial park, is likely to be upgraded and turned into a duty-free zone and tourist destination soon, as reported recently.

For now, many flock to the area for bargains.

A four-metre piece of cloth can cost as little as RM12.90, a radio-cassette player is RM37 and teak wood coffee tables cost as low as RM180.

Many people, however, come with the pre-conceived notion that everything must be cheap, said wholesaler Janice Chia Lai Seng, in her 40s, who owns a home furnishing shop.

Because of this, they demand excessive discounts which can sometimes exceed the cost of the products, she said.

Chia said although most items were from Thailand and China, not all were cheap.

Besides, she said, cheap goods were not always of good quality and consumers had to accept that.

For 25-year-old Shahril Nizam Zakaria, who manages an Indonesian teak wood furniture shop, business in Nilai had grown tremendously since it started two years ago.

"From one shop, we now have many. The shoppers coming here range from ordinary folks to VIPs," he said.

"The business is OK. We have customers from as far as Kedah," he said, adding that his sales averaged about RM150,000 a month.

Shahril said one reason why Nilai may be a popular shopping destination was that prices were not fixed. Many furniture retailers like him were prepared to give additional discounts.

For Hasnita Abdul Hamid, who joined some 80,000 shoppers for the first time today, the low prices were an exciting discovery.

After just an hour in the area, she had purchased RM300 worth of household items like curtains and bedsheets.

The 35-year-old senior executive from Shah Alam is planning another trip to Nilai next week for her Hari Raya shopping.

Unfortunately, it was not the same for Uma Sugumaran, 27, a Universiti Putra Malaysia student, who was disappointed the prices of some goods weren't as cheap as they were made out to be.

"This is my first time here. I had heard about this place from my friends in Seremban," said the undergraduate.

"I came here to buy artificial flowers but they cost the same as in wholesale shops in Sungai Buloh," she added.

As for Fatimah Mohamed, a human resource director, Nilai offered the best prices of goods she has seen so far.

"I must say, though, that shops here cater more for women. There should also be shops for men," she said.

Her 25-year-old daughter, Mahani Izrina Suleiman, had her own opinions about Nilai.

"This place is not cool. There are not many shops here which cater to younger people," she said.

A check on public amenities showed that toilets were not kept clean and there was no automatic teller machine in the area.

However, there were many food and drink stalls where shoppers could take a respite while trawling through the bargains.

Parking is free and ample.

Suppiah Govindasamy, 55, a retired civil servant, said the authorities should considered rearranging the shops and building walkaways.

Despite these minor grouses, thousands continue to visit the area every weekend for good bargains.

■ Fatimah's take on Nilai

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■ Her daughter Mahani

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HASNITA: Will return for her Hari Raya shopping

SHAHRIL: Sales average RM150,000 a month

UMA: Looking for cheaper artificial flowers