



For many suppliers, Malaysia's flagship furniture exhibition marks the first stop of the March sourcing expedition. Set within the hallways and corridors of Kuala Lumpur's PWTC complex – with an overspill at the modern KLCC a short minibus ride away – the Malaysia International Furniture Fair (MIFF) is the best representation of the product available from this rapidly-growing exporter.

Destination KL

By Paul Farley

Now in its 17th year, MIFF has steadily generated more sales with each edition. This year, it generated a record high of \$800m in export sales, easily surpassing last year's \$755m.

The five-day fair now comprises nearly 500 exhibitors over 75,000m², and, as an export-focused event, attracts around 20,000 visitors including 6500 international buyers – mainly from ASEAN (21.4%), Europe (14.5%), the Far East (13.4%), Middle East (11.9%) and other Asian countries (11.7%).

Around two-thirds of the companies present are Malaysian, many of which work principally with rubberwood, although metal and upholstered goods are present. A country rich in natural resources, Malaysia has quickly evolved from an exporter of raw materials to a manufacturer par excellence – as far back as 1990, manufactured goods accounted for more than 70% of exports, reflecting the country's journey up the value chain.

These days, enough Malaysian product is suitable for our demands that MIFF attracts many of the UK's key buyers. The show is renowned for its hospitality, and features a glamorous buyers' night filled with entertainment and games. Kuala Lumpur itself is a joy to visit, offering a wealth of quality hotels, cultural and retail destinations.

MIFF adds value to the visitor experience year after year, and now features a seminar schedule, alongside several best-practice awards in the fields of presentation, product and design. With its international judging panel, the latter, entitled the Ideation Award, enjoys prominence as the fair's platform for championing young designers.

This year's entries featured several promising prototypes based on a brief to design sustainable furniture for a limited urban accommodation space. Highlights included the space-saving modular Nerd bench set, and the Unity stool, a low table in which four stools can be neatly stored. The winning design was Bernadette Quah Paik Choo's Samarata, which



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can be folded into several configurations including a table, chair and bed.

Good design is a crucial to furniture export. Together with its focus on sustainable initiatives and materials, MIFF is ensuring that Malaysia heads in the right direction.

A delegation of Malaysian companies attended interiors back in January, under the MATRADE banner. Actively seeking direct trade with the UK, these companies generally found a receptive audience in Birmingham. While completely new to the UK, Jetexim saw its Windsor dining set perform well, while the more established THS Furniture further increased its roster of international wholesalers.

Tube Home was also present at the NEC – the UK is its key export market, so this part of the MATRADE world tour was critical for the company. Best known for the 25,000 plastic beds it supplied the Sydney Olympics, Tube Home was the first Malaysian company to meet EN747 standards, back in 1994. Tube Home boasts 33 years' experience in the manufacture of steel-based ranges, and recently turned its hand to outdoor furniture.

Chairman Dato' Y C Tan explained to me a few of the difficulties facing Malaysian manufacturers – rising labour costs, competition from China – but also pointed out that MIFF, an essential date on his calendar, is performing well.

At MIFF, Tube Home put its new Zen bed front and centre. Zen is a rubberwood model which features innovative aluminium inlays.

Other UK-facing players included: My Home Furniture, which trades within the UK and Ireland, but cites the US as its biggest market; BJ Cabinet Enterprise, whose Crown Furniture brand of high gloss AV furniture is ideal for UK consumption; and Fair Products, which deals with many accounts in the UK, principally through mail order.

This year's MIFF proved a success on several fronts. While opening new markets in South Africa, Africa and Russia, the show exceeded past editions on every count, providing a professional and welcoming platform for the fast-evolving Malaysian product, and a springboard to the wider Far East market.

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