

# Malaysian Digest

## Retirement Homes: The Way Forward To Adapt To Malaysia's Ageing Population

Published on Tuesday, 06 September 2016 08:57



As Malaysia looks forward to advancing to 2020, it is also fast heading towards becoming an aged nation, with its population ageing rapidly after the year. The number of citizens aged 60 years and older will rise from 2.1 million (7.4% of the population) in 2010 to 3.4 million (9.9%) in 2020, a recent report revealed.

By 2030, 14% of the population will be above age 60, and by 2035, Malaysia is projected to become an ageing nation, according to the Statistics Department. But are Malaysians prepared to face the challenges of an ageing nation and are our citizens ready for retirement life?

The financial life cycle of Malaysians remain a concern, as one in three Malaysians does not have a savings account, and most have not saved enough to last them more than five years after leaving the working world, according to the Employees Provident Fund (EPF).

EPF stated, 90% of rural households in Malaysia have zero savings, while in urban households, 86% do not have savings. This was followed by another report stating, only 22% of the 6.7

million EPF active contributors aged 54 have sufficient savings of RM196,800 or more to sustain themselves during retirement.

“Malaysians need to be empowered and take charge of their own financial decisions according to their life stages,” EPF deputy chief executive officer (operations) Datuk Mohd Naim Daruwish urged.

Apart from being financially sound, Malaysians must start taking charge of guaranteeing better living standards are met and ensure that they are able to afford modern healthcare in their golden years.

To cater to the burgeoning number of senior citizens in future, a whole new market ranging from elderly healthcare, lifestyle services and facilities such as retirement homes, villages and mobile homecare, are starting to blossom, and Malaysia has become a playground for this new concept.

This concept of ‘senior living’ caters to the elderly who are able to live independently while having easy access to shared healthcare services. It ranges from resort-style homes with fun-filled recreational activities, active ageing, productive living and integration into the community, making the retirement experience a more meaningful one, contrary to popular belief.

*Malaysian Digest* decided to better understand the concept of senior living in this day and age, and sought Malaysians’ perspectives on their perception of retirement homes.

### **Retirement Villages Out To Change Malaysians’ Perception On Elderly Care**

In an Asian society, a retirement home is often viewed negatively. We presume that such places are only for those who are neglected by their families.



But in a well-run, properly managed facility, seniors can lead very productive lives in their retirement years. GreenAcres is an integrated retirement village in Meru, Ipoh, Perak completed in 2014 with the aim to improve the lifestyle and quality of life of active and independent retirees.

John Chong, executive director of Total Investment, the company that developed GreenAcres explains it was built to address the needs of the elderly, with its facilities and services, tailored. For example in case of an emergency, a 24/7 call system is available and a personnel will always be on standby.

“A retirement village is classified as “independent living” and is meant for active and independent retirees. It’s a place for the retiree to maintain his lifestyle and retain his independence as long as possible,” John explained to *New Straits Times*, adding that elders will also be able to make meaningful connections and relationships aside having their own living space in the village.

He feels the basic requirements of a healthy and happy retirement facility involves meeting the physical, mental, emotional and social needs of the retiree, and he is confident retirement homes such as GreenAcres is able to change the perception of locals in the near future.

“The idea of retirement homes as places to abandon old people needs to change and is slowly beginning to change. Retirees nowadays are better educated, healthier and have a longer life expectancy.

“Many retirees see moving into a retirement village not as an act of abandonment but as an assertion of their own independence.

“We do not have sufficiently high standards for retirement living and senior care in Malaysia. Many old folks’ homes or nursing homes are of very poor quality. This has resulted in a negative perception of such places and seniors do not wish to move into them.

“We hope to change this perception by introducing a new form of retirement living, to show that it is indeed possible to retire well and live with dignity in a place like GreenAcres,” John stressed.

### **Retirement Homes Equally Offer A Meaningful Experience**

Although retirement villages are way ahead of regular retirement homes in terms of facilities provided, however, it does not mean retirement homes in the country are less equipped or meaningful for the elderly.



*Malaysian Digest* approached Eldercare Nursing Home, which provides comprehensive care to address the specific needs and expertise for the elderly, and is an equally favourable choice for senior citizens in Kuala Lumpur.

In an interview, Brian Bajaj, Centre Manager for Eldercare, told us, he believes that his retirement home is a stepping stone to building something meaningful for the elderly to enjoy their retirement.

Brian shared throughout his time working with the organisation, Eldercare has encountered many life changing experiences and stories. Some of which are positive, negative, uplifting and even depressing.

“I’ve observe that those who are happy and has never been affected by life's challenges tend to have blissful lives.

“Most of my staff are youngsters and are exposed to many harsh realities of life like disease, sickness, sadness, separation as opposed to their peers who work in beautiful environments like hotels and restaurants.

“Here, we learn to appreciate life and understand that life is only temporary,” he expressed.

In regards to what a healthy retirement lifestyle requires and how to stay relevant in modern times, Brian believes it consists of increased specialisations in skills, practice and education.

“The demands on us are increasingly higher and to stay solvent in this era of increasing living expenses everyone has to work. Rather than an elderly person be left at home watching TV, they come to us to participate in our activities and make friends.

“We are better equipped mentally, physically and have structured activities and diet plans in addition to constantly training ourselves to better care for our elders,” he said, adding that Eldercare also performs various activities so children get to enjoy spending time with their parents.

He further relayed how most of their residents come to them by choice and pay for their stay using their own pensions, “My residents don’t need convincing once they meet us.”

Asked whether his home is looking towards transforming to a retirement village like GreenAcres, he positively replied: “When I started six years ago, I told my investors ‘I am a winning horse, bet on me, you won’t go wrong’.”

“But this is not a business,” he emphasised. “At this point, the middle income group employ home nurses/caregivers from us (Eldercare Home Nursing), while the higher income group come to retirement resorts like what I have setup at Kajang Country Heights and SS3,” he quipped.

“Perhaps, this is the platform that might help small players like me build something beautiful and meaningful for my generation to enjoy their retirement,” Brian convinced.

### **Malaysians Open Up On Retirement Life**



When *Malaysian Digest* went on site to ask Malaysians about their perspectives regarding the concept of retirement homes, many shared their mixed feelings towards the subject.

“My thoughts are, while many children still feel obligated to take care of their parents, parents themselves are opting to stay out of children's lives as much as they can and live on their own.

“However, in Malaysia I don't think older people would easily volunteer themselves to be placed in retirement homes,” Visha, 24, explained.

“The concept that has been built around their arsenal of thoughts tells them that retirement homes are for abandoned people and heartless children. They much prefer to stay in their own homes even if it means caring for themselves alone.

“I would much rather the parent live alone until they find it difficult to fend for themselves rather than have their children take care of them,” she added.

Another interviewee, May Chee, voiced out rather differently, whereby as a Chinese, she holds a fairly conservative value and would still perceive retirement homes as old folks' home.

“If I send my parents to retirement homes, I would be perceived by the elderly as a daughter with no filial piety,” the 23-year-old said.

On the other hand, Intan, 27, views the matter otherwise.

“My opinion towards retirement homes in general is necessary for those facing retirement at the age above 55 years in this era. Due to the change of lifestyle, we sometimes need our mentalities to align with the ongoing transformation.

“Yes, it is true that the elderly who were sent by their children will feel unloved or unwanted, but it may be the best for them to build networks and hopefully be able to contribute something to the society by doing some volunteering work in order to fill their time,” she opined.

Surprisingly, all three interviewees were aware of Malaysia now progressing towards the senior living concept, offering superior alternatives and tailored needs for senior residents.

“I agree with this propagation for the sake of the old people,” said Visha

“This is because either by choice or force, these well-built places are something that would ease the anxiety of the elderly who are bound for these retirement homes. It also provides a sense of relief that these our senior citizens will not be left to rot in unlikely environments,” she added.

While the concept is relatively fresh in Malaysia, May Chee however feels that rebranding is needed to market retirement homes and villages, onward to making it appeal as a decent leisure spot for senior citizens. “Retirement homes and villages sound really traditional and old,” she said.

As for Intan, she is just happy that Malaysia is moving forward in providing and ensuring more quality care for the elderly.

“Retirement homes in Malaysia should have good services and amenities for the seniors so that they can feel right at home. This will definitely change the old-fashioned mindsets,” she said.

So, are they out to prepare themselves for their future, whether it’s better financial planning or retirement homes?

“When I retire, I much rather retire in my French chateau with my God sent darling husband,” Visha declared.

“Hey, I’m only 23, I still have a long way to go,” said an indecisive May Chee.

As for Intan, she hopes, “In future I would like to live in a retirement home as my second option.”

“It’s best that children and parents have insights on the concept of retirement homes so they would have a mutual understanding between them,” she added.

### **How Should Malaysians Plan Their Retirement?**

In terms of advising Malaysians regarding their retirement plans if they perhaps had any, Brian concludes that growing old is a long-term process and most investments should work towards this aim.



“Monetary values presented in investment plans will succumb to inflation. Personally, I feel we will have a scenario like the UK where there will be firms who will allow real estate pledges in exchange for retirement care.

“In my opinion, a decent real estate investment would meet the needs of retirement better than most offerings of financial institutions,” he stated.

And while Malaysia is definitely advancing itself towards a more independent living for the elders, mimicking the Western culture and concept of retirement villages overseas, portraying what an ideal and comfortable retirement life should be, Brian believes we still have other matters to look after.

“As tempting as it sounds (retirement villages), we don’t live our youth like the West, no reason we should age like them.

“We have different priorities with different activities that attract us when we are aged as opposed to living in such villages,” he said reminding that we already have our hands full eradicating poverty, providing decent healthcare and education for our youths.

- *Malaysian Digest*