THE horizon is a sea of uninhabited jungle green, interrupted only by dusty roads which bend and dip over undulating slopes.

Welcome to the rustic Lagoi district of Bintan. Alas, the natural scene is starting to vanish. The island is being redeveloped, in line with the Indonesian government's plan to position it as a tourism gateway to Indonesia's Riau archipelago.

As a sign of the importance of the project, Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono turned up in person to name the area "Pesona Lagoi Bintan". It means "Wonders of Lagoi Bintan" in Bahasa Indonesia – an apt name for an area sold as a premier lifestyle destination.

It is part of a growing buzz centred in and around Singapore, now a hotspot for integrated resorts (IRs) and other similar developments targeting the lucrative tourism and business sectors.

Neighbouring Indonesia and Malaysia are attempting to leverage on Singapore's reputation as a corporate hub and tourism locale for fringe benefits.

A comparison can be made with how Shenzhen grew from a sleepy Chinese village to become a metropolis, by using its proximity to Hong Kong to attract investments.

The Indonesians – as well as the more ambitious Malaysians, who are building a huge economic zone in Johor called Iskandar Malaysia – clearly hope that they can replicate Shenzhen's success.

**THE TREASURE BAY PLAN**
In Bintan's Lagoi area, construction on a 338ha site called Bintan Treasure Bay began in March.
Its developer, Malaysian-listed lifestyle-business company Landmarks Berhad, wishes to transform the site into a water resort city catering to wellness, leisure, cultural, residential and commercial needs.

Convention centres, theme resorts and cultural villages are all part of the overall masterplan. Plans for a casino have not been ruled out.

Phase One of the project, estimated to cost about $425 million, will be completed by 2015.

It boasts an iconic luxury resort called The Ring, which will be built 30m above what is to be the world's largest lagoon stretching 32ha and with crystal-clear water.

The circular shape of the 149-room resort means that guests will enjoy panoramic views of the water. They can also swim and engage in various water-based activities.

A multi-modal transport terminal will be built right next to the resort. It will include a marina where visitors can charter boat services, ferry rides and seaplane flights.

At the naming ceremony in Bintan in February, Dr Yudhoyono gave his approval for a domestic airport to be built on the island. And with that, Bintan expects tourist arrivals to rise.

Indonesian officials estimate visitorship to Bintan to triple to about one million per year when the first phrase of the project is completed.

**ISKANDAR'S DEVELOPMENT**

As for Iskandar Malaysia, which is located at the southern-most tip of Peninsular Malaysia, the Malaysian government has big plans.

By 2025, the 2,217 sq km site is set to be transformed into a premier economic-growth area combining work, education, wellness and leisure.

With investors pumping in a projected US$100 billion (S$124 billion) into the project, the government is ensuring it will not be a white elephant.

Since the project's announcement in 2006, an array of incentives to attract investors has been rolled out. These include attractive tax breaks, while corporations will not be bound by the government's usual 30 per cent bumiputera (ethnic Malay) equity ownership rule.

To capture a larger share of the global tourism market, the Malaysians have planned for three internationally branded theme parks to be operational in Iskandar by 2025.

First to open by the end of next year is the much-hyped Legoland Malaysia – Asia's first Legoland – located on a 930ha site in Medini, which will boast more than 40 interactive rides, shows and attractions. It is targeting at least one million visitors in its first year of operation.

Details are not yet known about the other two theme parks.
TAPPING ON SINGAPORE
Already, the Indonesians and Malaysians are hoping to tap into the 17 million tourists expected to visit Singapore in 2015.

Last year, Singapore saw a record 11.6 million foreign visitors. This was a 20 per cent rise from 2009, due largely to the draw of the two new IRs, one of which has a Universal Studios theme park within its complex.

However, Treasure Bay officials say the Bintan project will not pose a serious threat to Singapore's two IRs.

"As a water resort city, it will focus mainly on offering water-based activities," said Mr Gabriel Teo, chief operating officer of Landmarks.

"It will cater more to the tourist market, rather than the business and commercial sectors, like in Singapore's case."

Said Mr Paul Leong, chief operating officer of Bintan Treasure Bay: "Visitors to Singapore can stay in the country for a few days to experience its unique culture and the excitement of a vibrant, cosmopolitan and urban city state. They can then go over to Bintan for a different holiday experience."

ALL PARTIES GAIN
Analysts my paper spoke to said that the two regional developments will complement Singapore's tourism offerings and, in fact, boost its economy.

They added that the current developments rekindled memories of the Sijori Growth Triangle, announced in 1989 by then Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong.

This was a partnership between Singapore, Johor, and the Riau islands (Batam, Bintan and Karimun) in Indonesia, which sought to combine the competitive strengths of the three areas.

Mr Irvin Seah, an economist with DBS Group Research, noted that tourism is a diverse market, and there are prospects for collaboration.

"There are different types of tourists who look forward to enjoying different activities when they travel, but there's only so much a small city state like Singapore can offer," he said.

For example, he pointed out that Sentosa beaches can hardly hold a candle to Bintan's endless beaches, especially for tourists looking for an idyllic beach-resort experience.

Malaysia's ability to offer a rich eco-tourism adventure is also something that Singapore cannot compete against, given its limited land.

"Major tourism developments within the region will make available more options to tourists and draw more visitors to (South-east Asia) as a whole," said Mr Seah.
"As long as Singapore is able to continue to tap on the strong intra-regional tourist flows, prospects for our tourism industry and economy will remain bright."

Associate Professor Jeremy Goh, of the Singapore Management University's Lee Kong Chian School of Business, agreed that the developments would woo more tourists to travel around the region, and not just to individual countries.

"If these projects are successful and their impact on tourism and the economy positive, then there may be more projects to come."

But he added: "There may be over-saturation if the expected increase in numbers of visitors does not materialise."