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Historical Alor Star worth checking out

Ridzwan Chesterfield

THE depreciation of the ringgit may be a blessing in disguise, believe it or not. It offers opportunities to travel in Malaysia rather than splurge on trips overseas. After all, how many of us have travelled around this country?

Even senior citizens have not had the chance, despite having been around longer. There are lots of chances available today for the elderly. Why not make it a point to help grandma and grandpa to do some weekend tripping as there are perks offered to senior citizens which drastically cut the cost.

Malaysia Airlines offers 50 per cent off fares, and Keretapi Tanah Melayu and some major hotels do the same. Full fares and costly accommodation are tough on retirees' budgets but now really interesting trips can be made with a much lower outlay. My wife and I did such a weekend trip to Alor Star and found much to enjoy and appreciate.

Alor Star is a serene town with prices that boggle city folks like us - the food, shopping, taxis were a boon after years of living in Subang Jaya, Selangor, where life is fast, expensive and depressing at times.

Alor Star is so clean and tidy that I for one was delighted. The sights, which one can view in a couple of days, are most rewarding for anyone interested in the country's history.

From our base at the four-star Holiday Villa Alor Star - the latest in the Antara Group stable - we visited Masjid Zahir and the adjacent Balai Besar, an old palace built in 1898.

It's a sort of "great hall" now but still a most impressive wooden edifice which embodies certain aspects of architecture from neighbouring Thailand. Caretakers tell me that the majestic structure today is often used for State or royal occasions.

Unfortunately, there were no such functions at the time of our visit but my imagination tells me the pomp and ceremony must be impressive and a joy to view. Perhaps another time.

Lembah Bujang, however, captivated our interest being Malaysia's richest and oldest archaeological area. Views are out of this world with the panoramic vision of the State coastline not to be missed by travellers.

Relics and historical remains are on display here and the ruins are said to have been originally temples and statues of Indian gods and goddesses probably because of cultural exchanges between India and Malaya.

Seeing the many stone caskets and gem stones and the 50-odd candis or temples, eight of which are restored to their original form, left me spellbound. There's a kind of ambience around Lembah Bujang, vibes characteristic of such a place.

I sensed an atmosphere where Hindus dominated and craftsmen cut stone into statues and caskets and wished that for a minute or two I could be transferred back to the 7th century, to this rich cultural place of activity. But to no avail.

We made the journey to Gunung Jerai, which before carried the name Kedah Peak. This is of limestone and rises 1,200m above sea-level, in surroundings of breathtaking beauty. The mountain air is crisp and fresh - little wonder Srivijaya used the place as a mainstay in the ancient kingdom.

There is to this day a Hindu shrine and at the bottom of Gunung Jerai ancient ruins still exist.

Later, we drove to Prime Minister Dr Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's house of

birth. The house was restored and preserved by the National Archives of Malaysia and shows many pictures of the Prime Minister, from boy to man (call 04-7721795 if you wish to pay a visit to No 18, Lorong Kilang Ais, Off Jalan Pegawai, Alor Star).

Seeing Dr Mahathir as a young man is indeed gratifying whilst viewing his father wearing a school blazer at a tender age brought tears to my eyes. His (Mahathir's) bicycle rests under the house looking the worse for wear but after some two score years has a right to be.

No. 18, Lorong Kilang Ais, is well worth a visit if you respect the man who has done much for his country and continues to do so. Alor Star has many points of interest the older generation especially should view and will no doubt appreciate their off-spring arranging it.

Alor Star's crop of hotels is led by Holiday Villa at Jalan Tunku Ibrahim, which is located conveniently for shopping. In fact, the hotel is part of a 20-storey shopping, office and hotel complex.

Views from the hotel at night need to be seen to be believed. Holiday Villa had special promotional room rates which we enjoyed.

We didn't check out other hotel prices as the Antara Group has always been obliging. To them their operating word "Manja" is a fact of life and we take advantage of it anytime we travel to places at which they have hotels.

Some shady characters are manipulating the ringgit these days, so why not take advantage of the wisdom of making use of special offers to senior citizens?

What a delightful surprise it can be for Grandpa and Grandma to get tickets and perks to destinations in Malaysia from grateful children with halal food all the way.

Holiday Villa's coffee house and halal Chinese Restaurant are exemplary and please the taste-buds. I like the safety precaution in the room bathrooms.

Hand-grips are fitted on each side of the long bath with another such grip higher on the wall.

An adhesive substance is fitted to the bath bottom for good measure to prevent slipping.

There are facilities for the handicapped available as regards toilets, and wheel chairs are always on hand if so desired.

In other words, the hotel cares for all guests, irrespective of age or health. The time is ripe: help the country even as your old folk have long waited for such opportunities.

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