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Alsatian wonders in Bukit Tinggi

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ALSACE is one of many provinces that, through the ages, has been coveted, conquered, lost, and won, or used as a sort of buffer state, when the conquerors took a breathing spell.

On the lighter, more positive side, this lovely province between Germany and France, was able to share the wealth of both cultures and traditions, without losing its strong personality, the heritage of a hard-working, fun-loving people.

Alsace's story begins in the year 58 BC, with the Romans. The Alemanni invaded Alsace in the fifth century AD, followed by the Merovingiens who reorganise the country with the assistance of the Church.

In 842 AD, the Strasbourg Oaths written in Teutonic (old German) and Romance (a forerunner of French) formed the basis for the division of Charlemagne's Europe.

In the 1300s, the Hohenstaufen wielded their imperial power from Alsace, where they founded a number of towns.

Some 50 years later, 10 of these towns gained their independence and formed the union known as Decapolis. The region became the crucible of Humanism and the Reformation.

The Thirty-Year War ended the province's prosperity.

In 1648, peace marked the start of the progressive integration of Alsace into the kingdom of France. Strasbourg is taken by Louis XIV in 1681, the Rhine forming a natural border to the east.

As someone aptly stated: "History's shillyshallying forged Alsace a nonpareil personality; its present crossroad situation transformed confrontation into harmony, it made it the vector of international exchanges, at long last, burying the bone of contention."

Strasbourg is now twinned with the not-too-distant German city of Stuttgart.

This rather long preamble ought to give one an idea of the irresistible charm of this small and rich European region, where, among others, Albert Schweitzer was born.

The famous theologian and musician took up medicine at the age of 30, to tend to lepers in Gabon, where he founded the well-known Labarene hospital.

It is hard not to be touched by the mediaeval beauty of the land, with its architecture, its fortress castles, its old half-timbered houses, its museums sheltering centuries-old works of art, such as the Issenheim altar-piece painted in 1515.

Strolling through the cobbled streets of Riquewihir, admiring the beautiful residences with their sculpted decorations - these vintners' houses - the amazing homogeneity of life in the Middle Ages, seemingly still intact in this jewel of a town, is one of my fondest memories of Alsace.

A miniature Alsace will soon be found in the heart of the Malaysian jungle: it will be known as the "Colmar Village" and the "Chateau" and be part of the Malaysian tourism resort, the Bukit Tinggi Resort.

The founder of this Alsatian resort is the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

A great traveller always seeking inspiration and ideas, he fell under the spell of Alsace in the summer of 1994.

He had suggested to Tan Sri Vincent Tan, president of Berjaya Group, to

create an Alsatian village in Malaysia.

According to David Tong, project manager of the Bukit Tinggi Resort, the "Colmar Village" and the "Chateau" will be built on 64 hectares, boasting luxuriously-fitted flats and bungalows.

When finished, at the end of this year or the beginning of 1999, the "Colmar Village" will boast either the Clock Tower of Riquewihr or the Watchtower of Kaysersberg.

Half-timbered houses will be established on both sides of the main street, accessible through a drawbridge.

An inn will serve beer and Alsatian wines, and shops will sell regional products.

For Jean Cassou, the French architect, known internationally for his highly individualised solutions to design and construction, the "Colmar Village" is not a matter of copying, but rather of building a holiday resort which historical architecture is a complete contrast to the buildings one sees in Malaysian cities.

To the commonplace resorts in tourist sites, he offers an historical fantasy where each house has its own personality.

As for the "Haut Koenigsbourg Castle", the illustrious fortress rebuilt by the last German Emperor, Wilhelm II, the architect again took inspiration rather than copying it faithfully.

Being particularly fond of this province, I wonder if a last touch to "Colmar in Malaysia" could not be added.

Alsace without its most important emblem is incomplete. The nearly omnipresent stork in Alsace should find a place in Bukit Tinggi also.

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