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Pekan Rabu brings `em in

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IF you take a tour of Pekan Baru, Alor Star's oldest landmark, you will find the items on sale are the same offered at any other bazaar in the country.

And if you are the kind who likes to make price comparisons, you will also find the prices of foodstuff, textiles, fruits, garments, bags, handicraft and loads of others at the complex not as cheap as many people think.

Except for those who are clever at the art of bargaining, the same items can easily be bought at much cheaper prices and without much hassle at nearby stalls and shops.

A teacher was baffled when a trader quoted the price of a set of buttons for "baju Melayu" at double the amount he had paid to another trader manning a stall outside the complex less than five minutes earlier. Visitors from other States have also complained of prices of the same item being sold cheaper back home.

Yet, Pekan Rabu which started as "Pekan Nat" or a day market more than a century ago, continues to draw the crowds, especially on Saturdays and Sundays when the 250-odd traders at the complex make brisk business.

Visitors also come in bus-loads during school holidays as shopping at Pekan Rabu is part of the itinerary of most day trips to Kedah.

Come Ramadan, Muslims including those from the neighbouring States of Perlis and Penang throng the complex to buy ready-made Malay traditional clothes like "baju kurung", "baju Melayu", "songkok" and "capal" or sandals.

A visit to Alor Star seems to be incomplete without visiting Pekan Rabu and buying one or two items there. Often, people, whether on holiday, visiting relatives or attending a course or seminar in Kedah, try to make time to shop for "souvenirs" to take home or for friends.

A taxi driver based at the Kuala Kedah passenger jetty said it is common for passengers returning from Langkawi to head for Pekan Rabu before proceeding to their next destination on the mainland.

"They want to buy their favourite items like the `dodol', `kuih karas', `pulut hitam', `bubur cha cha' and `kuah rojak' for relatives and friends back home," he said.

If prices of items offered at the complex are not competitive, then why do people still go shopping there?

Elderly Alor Star folks believe the complex, which is synonymous with Alor Star town, is the factor drawing the crowds.

Whatever the reason, Pekan Rabu is a tourist attraction. Thus it is not uncommon to spot "Mat Sallehs" browsing through items on display and bargaining for a good price.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad too has a fondness for Pekan Rabu as he was a trader there himself during his teenage days.

Whenever he is in Kedah, he makes it a point to find time to drop by, chat with the traders and buy some cakes.

It is this nostalgia and the desire to see the traders there live up to Pekan Rabu's symbol of Malay entrepreneurship that led Dr Mahathir to initiate an extensive renovation at the old complex.

Experts from Japan were brought in to give the market a facelift. The market now is much better, brighter and more customer-friendly.

Since the traders moved back to the renovated complex three years ago

from their temporary site, their attitude has not changed much. The free trip given to them to visit Central Market in Kuala Lumpur appears to have not had the desired results.

The traders are back to their old habits - neglecting cleanliness, hanging their wares on the corridors and displaying their items for sale poorly.

With so much effort put in and the huge amount of money spent to improve Pekan Rabu's physical state, the least traders can do is abide by regulations and inject some creativity in their business.

There are suggestions that some of the food stalls on the ground floor of the complex sell Kedah's traditional delicacies.

The stalls can serve traditional cakes, laksa Kedah and "nasi ulam with "sayur keladi", hence, providing an opportunity for outsiders to savour the State's specials.

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