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Langkawi - intriguing heritage of myths, legends

LANGKAWI needs no introduction. The island is blessed with an intriguing heritage of fabulous myths and legends of ogres and gigantic birds, warriors and fairy princesses, battles and romance.

Legend says Langkawi, the main island in a group of 104 off the northernmost tip of Peninsular Malaysia, had been a "cursed" island for a very long time.

For seven generations, the island was cursed of its prosperity by its prettiest maiden, Mahsuri, who was sentenced to death for allegedly committing adultery.

Seven generations have now lapsed and the curse has been broken - the island has since become Malaysia's latest tourist paradise.

Admittedly, Langkawi is not only a tropical paradise of the purest white sands, clear tropical waters, island sunsets and sun-filled days, but steeped in history and full of legends of wronged maidens and lovelorn princes-all of which have left their mark for posterity.

The centre of Langkawi is actually the heart of the legends of the island. Makam Mahsuri (The Tomb of Mahsuri), located in a small village 12km from Kuah, was erected at a spot where she had died.

Other attractions include Beras Terbakar (Field of Burnt Rice) where after Mahsuri's death and due to the Siamese invasion, villagers were forced to burn their rice crop and a granary; Telaga Air Hangat (hot springs) where legend has it that the hot spring was created when a jug of hot water was smashed to the ground during a bitter quarrel between the island's two leading families over a rejected offer of marriage and Telaga Tujuh (a freshwater stream which cascades some 90m down through seven wells).

In the neighbouring islands is Tasik Dayang Bunting (Lake of the Pregnant Maiden). This freshwater lake is mostly frequented by childless couples. According to a local tale, a couple who had remained childless for 19 years, drank the water from the lake and subsequently gave birth to a baby girl.

South of Langkawi is the Pulau Payar Marine Park which offers unhindered views of soft coral gardens.

Among the enchanting dive spots is the "Coral Garden", an area covered with bright, multi-hued soft corals. There are several sandy beaches on Pulau Payar island for picnics as well as hiking trails for those who wish to explore the island. Just off the beach, one can indulge in the thrilling experience of feeding baby sharks.

Some 10km from Kuah is Galeria Perdana, which houses an impressive collection of over 2,500 state gifts and awards presented to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. The exhibits include fine crystal ware and gifts fashioned out of wood, leather, silver, copper, pewter, ceramics and glass. There are also musical instruments, Islamic art and craft, textiles and weapons.

A part of the display includes various prototype cars and 4-wheel drive vehicles. The Galeria Perdana comprises two double-store buildings set within a beautifully landscaped garden.

For agro tourism lovers, they should not miss Laman Padi Langkawi. Located at Pantai Cenang, it showcases the history, heritage and development of the nation's rice growing industry. Among the attractions

is a rice museum displaying artifacts, charts and photographs showing the significance of padi cultivation to the country. Visitors have the opportunity to enjoy a bird's eye view of the fields from a roof-top garden.

The most prominent landmark for visitors arriving by sea is Dataran Lang (Eagle Square). The main attraction of the square is the magnificent statue of the reddish brown eagle majestically poised for flight. According to local folklore, Langkawi derived its name from the eagle or "helang".

The island is also not short of shopping facilities and lend itself to conferences and meetings away from the hustle and bustle of the major cities.

All these combined will give a distinctive image for Langkawi.

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