

01/07/2001

State of bliss

Peter Anderson

THE states of Kedah Darul Aman and Perlis Indera Kayangan are known as the 'rice-bowls' of Malaysia, producing 75 per cent of the country's rice. The state of Kedah stretches from the Thai border in the north to the island of Penang in the south. There is much to see in the state's capital, Alor Star, and a stroll around the town will reveal many hidden charms of a bygone era. One of the oldest buildings is the Balai Besar which was built in 1898. This impressive wooden building of Thai architecture is used both for state and royal functions.

Nearby is the Balai Nobat, a Thai pagoda-styled tower, which houses the royal orchestra consisting of three drums and a gong. Opposite the Balai Nobat is the majestic Masjid Zahir, built in 1912.

Make certain you visit the State Museum, with its typical Kedahan house situated nearby. To get a good view of Alor Star, a visit to the Telekom Tower will unfold both the Kedah urban and rural landscapes.

The house where Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was born is situated at No 18, Jalan Kilang Ais in Kampong Seberang.

Ten kilometres from Alor Star is the historical town of Kuala Kedah. As you make way into the town, you can see the new ferry terminal which is situated on the southbank of the river. Take a sampan across the river and visit the 18th Century fort Kota Kuala Kedah. It is one of the better-preserved forts in the peninsula and still has six cannons on the walls facing the river mouth.

Thirty kilometres south of Alor Star is Gunung Jerai; the highest point in Kedah at 1,200 metres above sea level. An 11-kilometre drive to the top will give you spectacular views of the Straits of Melaka and the surrounding countryside. Mount Jerai was an important navigational point for early mariners sailing from India. Nearby the Merbok estuary provided a safe haven for vessels plying the straits. Just before the top is a forestry museum, chalets, camping sites and jungle tracks.

Near Yan is a very pleasant beach, Pantai Murni, a pleasant spot for a picnic lunch.

At Lembah Bujang is Malaysia's richest archaeological site that dates back to the 6th or 7th Century. There have been about 50 Hindu candis (temples) discovered with the most outstanding one being Candi Sungai Batu Pahat, which has been largely restored. The Bujang Valley Archaeological Museum houses many artefacts that have been excavated from this fascinating valley.

Further south is Pantai Merdeka, which is one of the best beaches in the area with its white sands and clear water stretching for over a kilometre along the coast. This beach is popular with the locals and tourists as it is ideal for water-skiing, sailing and swimming.

In the west of the state is Baling, once a communist stronghold but now a town nestled against rocky cliffs and surrounded by jungle. If one takes the road north through Weng and towards Tasik Pedu, there are some magnificent views across the mountain ranges into Thailand. This part of Kedah is unspoiled with jungle-covered hills and kampungs nestled in the valleys surrounded by padi fields below.

Lake Pedu, tucked away in the west of the state, offers peace and quiet from city life. Only recently was it opened to the public and as such there is still plenty of forest and natural landscapes. At Lake Pedu are two resorts set amongst primary rainforest on the shores of the lake where

one can enjoy nature.

Pulau Langkawi, Malaysia's largest island, is a well-known tourist resort. Situated right on the Thai border in the north of Kedah, it has 103 neighbouring islands, 95 at high tide. There are numerous hotels and chalets throughout the island with most close to the beaches. The beaches are the main attraction for visitors and one of the most popular is Pantai Cenang. At low tide, it is possible to walk to the next island, Pulau Rebak Kecil. More attractive than Pantai Cenang is the beach at Tanjung Rhu. Here, vast expanses of white sand stretch to the blue waters of the bay. From Tanjung Rhu, boats can be hired to visit the legendary caves of Gua Cerita.

The other islands in the area are well worth visiting too. Pulau Dayang Bunting, the 'Island of the Pregnant Maiden' is popular with visitors. The emerald green waters of the lake on the island are said to possess special powers.

Pulau Singa Besar, or 'Big Lion Island', is a wildlife sanctuary. Although there are no lions here, it contains exotic birds and native flora. Pulau Payar, a three-hour boat ride from Kuah, is a marine park popular with scuba divers.

The local Kedahan culinary specialties include dodol; a sweet made with coconut and brown sugar, pasembor; a kind of rojak (a Malaysian salad with peanut sauce) and laksa.

(END)