

01/11/2002

Sights and sounds

THE OLDEST state in the region, Kedah is a land blessed with a wealth of nature's abundance as well as an intriguing past. Thus, tourism has been identified as an important economic sector that will spur the socio-economic development of the state.

Under the Kedah Maju 2010 Action Plan, the state has plans to attract some 4.9 million tourists in 2010, of which, 2.68 million are domestic and 2.2 million are foreign, with an annual growth rate of 12 per cent from 2001. Tourism is projected to contribute some RM650 billion in revenue by 2010, from RM3.6 billion in 2001.

Much work and attention has been paid to the development and promotion of various ecological and historical spots under an integrated plan to ensure tourist attractions in Kedah become competitive and sustainable destinations.

Visitors, both Malaysian or foreign, will be astounded to discover all this northern state has to offer, from the mountain peaks to the roots of ancient civilisation.

ECO-TOURISM

Gunung Jerai

A journey up Gunung Jerai, Kedah's highest peak, brings you to a mountain-top experience among the clouds. Rising 1,217 metres above sea level, the different vantage-points at the peak give you a breathtaking panoramic view of Kedah.

Situated on the highland is the Sungai Teroi Forest Recreation Park, which houses a variety of herbs, ferns, flowering plants, and climbers. The Museum of Forestry, located at its entrance, displays various artifacts and species of wood from the mountain, giving you an insight into forest-related activities undertaken here.

Hiking trails and jungle treks are interspersed with flowerbeds, while waterfalls make ideal picnic sites. Chalets and camping facilities, as well as public toilets, are available for an overnight stay. One can track up the mountain via the 20,000 Kenari Steps, which are lit for nocturnal hikes.

Ulu Muda Eco Park

Located in the eastern part of Kedah, the 40,400-hectare Ulu Muda region is Kedah's largest forest landscape. A remote and unspoiled natural heritage wilderness, cited as one of the 10 best eco-tourism destinations under the National Eco-tourism Plan, the forest extends into Thailand, allowing the free movement of wildlife across the border.

The scattered areas of intrusive granite rocks acts as a source of hot mineral springs and the nine salt licks, including Sira Hangat, the country's largest mineral spring.

Endowed with the best of nature's beauty, the ecological park serves as a reserve for a variety of wild Malayan mammals, big and small. Even the elusive tapirs can be spotted at the salt licks.

Pedu Lake

Located 90 km from Alor Star in the district of Padang Terap, about five km from the Malaysian-Thai border, Pedu Lake is known as the best jungle retreat on the west coast of the peninsular.

Situated in the midst of the Gunung Fakir Terbang's rainforest, the 12 km-long man-made lake has been transformed into a premier holiday resort.

Part of the Pedu Lake area has been designated as a wildlife sanctuary,

complete with hides and canopy walks, for a taste of adventure in the wild. Nature lovers will be thrilled with the jungle treks and the rich wildlife. For the lucky visitor, you might come across a special breed of 'albino snakes'.

One unique attraction is 'swarm' hunting, where you can watch millions of Appis Dorsata, giant honeybees, swarm back to their hives or see natives collecting wild honey from the hives.

Holiday resorts Pedu Golf & Lake Resort and the Desa Utar Pedu Lake Resort provide visitors with the luxurious trappings of five-star hotels and an 18-hole golf course. Water-sport lovers can also indulge in a variety of activities, from fishing and jet skiing to canoeing and boating.

HISTORICAL TOURISM

Bujang Valley

At the foothills of Gunung Jerai, a 20-minute drive from Sungai Petani, lies Bujang Valley, the cradle of Kedah's pre-Islamic civilisation. Lembah Bujang has been hailed as the most significant archeological site in Malaysia, with archeological findings such as ancient tomb temples called 'candi', statues of Indian deities and other artefacts dating back to a Hindu-Buddhist era of the fourth and 14th centuries.

Relics from this site are displayed at the Bujang Valley Archaeological Museum in Merbok. To date, 50 historical sites have been unearthed. These are located mostly along the banks of Sungei Bujang, Sungei Merbok and Sungei Muda, with several at the areas surrounding Gunung Jerai, Bukit Choras, Bukit Meriam, Bukit Penjara, Bukit Gajah and Bukit Pendiati.

The Hindu-Buddhist government of Lembah Bujang lasted until the 14th century until the advent of Islam.

Alor Star

The 265-year-old Alor Star town was named after the Setak tree on the riverbank, which was used by early traders to tie their boats. Following constant attacks by invaders, the town assumed the dimension of a fortress township under the reign of Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zaidal Adilin. Under Sultan Mukarram Shah II, Kedah's 24th ruler, Alor Star became the seat of administration and a commercial centre. It was attacked by the Bugis in 1770 and, thereafter, by the Siamese.

The town hosts a wealth of historical sites, with many old buildings still standing in their original form.

One such landmark is the Balai Besar. The hall, built in 1736, is constructed from cengal emas wood. The intricately carved walls of the hall are painted gold and the roof is made of imported glass. The building was damaged during the war, but in 1904, Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah ordered its reconstruction. Today it is primarily used for official royal and state ceremonies.

Kedah is also the birthplace of two of Malaysia's prime ministers - Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Visitors can take a peek into the lives of these two men at the new Memorial Tunku Abdul Rahman in downtown Alor Star, which traces the life of the father of Malaysia, and the birthplace of Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was born on Dec 20, 1925, which was built in 1900.

For art connoisseurs, a visit to the State Art Gallery may prove fruitful. Located near the Balai Besar, it houses works of art from Kedah and other places. The building itself was formerly used as the High Court in 1921, and in 1923, it housed the Audit Department, Treasury and the British Advisors Office. In 1983, it was designated as the state's art gallery.

And for a peek into the lives of the state's royals, take a trip down to the Royal Museum. Built by Sultan Muhammad Jiwa in 1735, it was called the

Istana Kota Setar. It became known as the Istana Pelamin in 1904, following a RM3-million wedding of five princes and princesses of Sultan Abdul Hamid.

The museum showcases artefacts linked to the Kedah royal lineage, including a complete 800-year-old genealogy. Artefacts include costumes, ornaments, photos, weapons and documents that paint a picture of the history of Kedah's monarchy. Perhaps the most outstanding exhibit is the replica of the bersanding (sitting in ceremony) and the bilik berinai (henna-staining room) of the 1904 wedding. The married couples' rooms have also been carefully preserved for posterity.

Another monument worth visiting is Cik Spacendra's Palace, Kedah's very own Taj Mahal. Built in 1882, it stands as a tribute of Sultan Abdul Hamid to his first wife.

Also known as Istana Kampung Baharu, it features exquisite architecture and intricate finishings.