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Alor Star's main attractions

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IT is quite difficult to imagine Alor Star as a tourist town. Nonetheless, there were pleasant surprises in store.

The better part of the visit to the city was dropping by the home where Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was born.

Here you can step into the private days when the Prime Minister and his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali stayed at his parents' home.

View the room he shared with his wife when they were first married. Some of their clothes and Dr Siti Hasmah's vanity items are still there.

The house, a simple wooden structure with many partitions made into rooms, still maintains a sense of tranquility and it is not hard to imagine the family who lived in it.

The pots, pans, jars and even the big old wok in the kitchen are still there. The furniture around the house is mostly old but beautifully maintained.

On the walls hang newspaper clippings, dating back to the 1970s which feature Dr Mahathir and his family. A memorable one is an article on his wedding day.

If you have a sweet tooth and enjoy dodol and durian cake, Pekan Rabu is the place to shop for these delicacies.

Stall after stall sell dodol in pandan, durian and "gula Melaka" flavours. The price is about the same at all stalls, depending on the amount you buy.

And if you want to pick up fabrics, you have ample choices, especially for traditional Malay wear.

You can also see the Balai Besar, said to be older than the world famous Eiffel Tower in Paris.

Built by Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainol Abidin Mu'adzam Shah II (1706-1760), who directed and supervised its construction, it was built to face the Ka'abah in Mecca.

Balai Besar, completed in 1726, is made of cengal emas hardwood and has 42 timber pillars making up the building's main structure. Finely crafted golden motifs adorn it while the ceiling is made of glass imported from China.

The then Sultan of Kedah held the wedding of his five children there. Celebrations were said to continue for 40 days and 40 nights. King Chulalongkorn of Siam was also received here.

Across Balai Besar is the Zahir Mosque, a must-see for those who admire outstanding architecture. The royal museum, which boasts a large collection of Kedah's royal and cultural heritage is also nearby.

A hop away is the Alor Star Tower, equivalent to a 41-storey building and at 165.5 metres is the 18th tallest in the world. It has two viewing decks, at 45 and 88 metres above ground, giving visitors a pleasant view of the town and the padi fields that Kedah is famous for.

A revolving restaurant is also available for those who would like to dine "in the sky".