

Alor Setar And The State Of Kedah

By Datuk Hamidah M. Yusoff

'Selamat Datang ke Negeri Kedah - Jelapang Padi Malaysia' (Welcome to Kedah - Rice Bowl of Malaysia) is the sign that greets visitors entering the State of Kedah overland through its western border with Penang.



Vast fields of padi

You will understand why Kedah is aptly described thus, for as you travel around the state you will see miles and miles of padi fields amidst lush green rainforests on highlands. Even so, two thirds of the state is still forested. When you travel deep into the state you will see undulating hills and at the fringe of the forests you can see the land is covered with rubber, oil palm and fruit plantations.

Situated in the northwest corner of Peninsular Malaysia Kedah borders Perlis and Thailand in the north, Penang in the southwest, and Perak in the south. Alor Setar, formerly known as Alor Star, is the state capital of Kedah Darul Aman, the 'Abode of Peace' and is situated in the northern part of the state.

The People

Kedah is regarded as the Malay heartland of Malaysia, like Terengganu, Kelantan and Johore. It did not join the Federated Malay States during British colonial rule. Malays form the majority of the population but other races like Chinese, Indians, Siamese, Orang Asli and descendants of Arab and Indian traders live peacefully in the state. There is a sizeable Siamese population in the state and they have built a Buddhist temple, Wat Nikradharam,

right in the centre of the city.

The people of Kedah speak Malay with a distinctive accent. Kedahans were often teased by the way they speak when they interacted

people pronounced it as 'Alok Stuck anyway) and so the name has stuck.

Alor Setar is approachable from all parts of Peninsular Malaysia by road, by air, by rail and by sea.

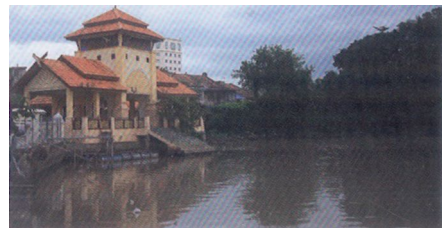
If you travel by road from Kuala Lumpur, use the North-South Expressway that takes about 5-6 hours of driving, passing through the states of Selangor and Perak, the longest state on the peninsula. Once you enter Kedah the scenery offers panoramic views of padi fields, mountains, rivers and sea. The vast stretches of padi fields beckons visitors to the state. Kedah is the largest rice producer in Malaysia and is also a distribution centre for manufacturing and agricultural products and supports agro-based industries as well. As you drive from the town of Gurun to Alor Setar, a distance of about 40 km, you will notice on both sides of the main road the Wan Mat Saman Canal. It is the longest canal or aqueduct in Malaysia and provides an important channel for the irrigation of padi fields in the Kedah plains. The canal was built in 1885 and was a tremendous achievement during its time. The water for the irrigation comes from Sungai Kedah (Kedah River) that flows through Alor Setar and connects to Sungai Anak Bukit. This river then flows into the Wan Mat Saman Canal. This canal was made to enable farmers to boost its rice production, thus earning Kedah the nickname, 'The Rice Bowl of Malaysia'.

with the other Malays in the peninsula. If the first Prime Minister, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra had shouted 'Merdeka' Instead of 'Merdeka' it would not have sounded so resounding and moving when he declared Malaya's independence in 1957. Kedah people pronounce 'a' as 'ah' while other Malays pronounce 'a' as 'e'.

Alor Setar is proud to be the birthplace of two Prime Ministers, YTM Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the first Premier, and YABhg Tun Dr Mahathir Bin Mohamad, the fourth Premier

Origins of Alor Setar

Do you know that Alor Setar is the oldest city in Malaysia and also in the region? Founded in 1735 by the 19th ruler, Sultan Muhammad Jiwa Zainal Adilin 11, the name is believed to have originated from the Malay words 'alor' which means river channel and 'setar', a tree. Called 'pohon setar' (Bouea Macrophylla) this tree grew along the banks of the river that flows pass the settlement of Alor Setar. In olden days visitors traveling by boat to Alor Setar would rest under these trees along the riverbanks. Thus the resting place became known as Alor Star. In 2009 the Kedah Government decided to change the name of Alor Star to Alor Setar (as the



Anak Bukit River

If you travel by rail take the train services provided by KTMB. In fact KTMB runs throughout Peninsular Malaysia connecting Johor Bharu and Singapore in the south to Alor Setar and Thailand in the north. The writer recalls during the school holiday traveling with her brother by train at night from Kuala Lumpur (where she was studying) and waking up in the morning at Alor Setar

(where her parents lived). It was a safe mode of travel, and fun as you meet many people on board the train.

If you drive through Alor Setar today you can't help being caught in the traffic congestion in the city centre as they are building a new electrified double-tracking railway track that will connect Kedah to Thailand. I believe this is part of the Trans-Asia railway project that will eventually link Singapore to Kunming in China, running throughout Peninsular Malaysia, an idea by former Premier Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Alor Setar is also connected by rail to Bangkok, operated by the State Railway of Thailand. And not to forget, the Eastern Et Oriental Express runs from Bangkok through Peninsular Malaysia to Singapore, an experience many tourists find fascinating.



Tunku Abdul Rahman

Alor Setar is also accessible by air. Malaysia Airlines, Air Asia and Firefly fly daily to Alor Setar from Kuala Lumpur, and the flight takes about 55 minutes. You can also take a flight to Langkawi Island or Penang and travel by sea/road to Alor Setar. During the monsoon period its best to check whether your flight will take off as the Sultan Abdul Halim Airport is built on flat padi land and last year the runway was flooded and the airport had to be closed for almost a week!

Kedah has more than 100 tropical islands scattered off the west coast of the state but it is the Langkawi Islands that is more well known and has become one of Malaysia's best tropical island destination - a paradise for sun, sea and nature lovers. The island's

beauty is as fascinating as the myths and legends that surround them. Note that the legend of 'Mahsuri', a wife wrongly accused of being unfaithful, was made into a movie by the first Prime Minister, the late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, a Kedah prince. Legend has it that before her death she put a curse on the island that it would not prosper for seven generations. It is believed the curse has been lifted and Langkawi, under the keen attention of the fourth Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, also from Kedah, the island has prospered and is now a premier tourist destination in Kedah. A few years ago Hollywood came to Langkawi to shoot a segment of the movie, 'Anna and the King'. The movie set left behind became a tourist attraction.

Langkawi is famous for two international events, the 'Langkawi International Maritime and Airshow' (LIMA) held every two years and 'Le Tour de Langkawi' an international cycling event also held every two years. Starting in Langkawi cyclists then cycle throughout the country. These two events have put Langkawi and Kedah on the world sporting and tourism events list.



One of the many resorts in Langkawi

The Kedah Sultanate

Many may not be aware that Kedah is the most ancient state in the country, dating back to 100 AD. Older folks referred to the state as 'Kedah Tua' (Ancient Kedah). The Kedah Annals narrates an interesting story of the first Kedah ruler, a Hindu known as Merong Mahawangsa. (This was the title of a recent Malay movie, 'Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa,' recently shown in Malaysian cinemas.) He was the first Maharaja of Kedah. It was the ninth maharaja, Phra Ong Mahawangsa, who converted to Islam in 1136, and ruled as Sultan Mudzaffar Shah (1136 - 1179). The Kedah Sultanate starts with this first Sultan and has been intact for more than eight centuries, making it the oldest continuous line of monarchy in Malaysia and in the world, second to Japan.

It is noteworthy that the state's Ruler, HRH Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah has been elected as the Yang di-Pertuan Agong (King of Malaysia). This will be the second time HRH Sultan Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah will serve as the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. The first time, from 21 September 1970 to 20 September 1975 when the Sultan was then 41 years, and the Prime Minister then was the late Tun Abdul Razak Hussein. The writer recalled seeing a touching photograph of HRH Sultan Abdul Halim hugging the late Tun Abdul Razak as they said farewell at the official sendoff when the Sultan ended his term as Yang di-Pertuan Agong in 1975. A few months later the country was in shock when Tun Abdul Razak passed away. This time around, as the Sultan begins his second term, the current Prime Minister is the son of Tun Abdul Razak.

Brief History of Kedah

Kedah's recorded history often begins at the Bujang Valley, the ancient wonder of Kedah, located in central Kedah. Kedah became a prominent maritime kingdom as early as the first century AD, visited by Indian, Persian, Arabs and Chinese traders. For many centuries, the Empires of Sri Vijaya and later the Cholas all exerted their influence and domination over the state. Kedah Peak (Gunung Jerai), at 1217 metres, provided the landmark for ships plying the Straits of Melaka. The Bujang Valley was a collecting centre for products of the Malay Peninsula and a transit trading post for ships awaiting the change of currents and monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean. Traders soon propagated Hinduism and Buddhism and their culture, of building shrines and temples along the coastal area, were evident from the artifacts found at the valley.

History lovers should not miss a visit to the Bujang Valley where historical evidence of the place gives an insight to the state's rich historical heritage - the Kingdom of Kedah, which was once part of the Kingdom of Langkasuka. Learn about the state's rich history when you visit Alor Setar, where the Royal Museum chronicles the history of the Kedah Sultanate.

In the 13th century, Siam, as it was then known, dominated Kedah and the state became a vassal of Siam. Kedah had to send 'Bunga Emas' or golden flowers to the Siamese King each year, and in return Siam protected Kedah from her enemies.

The succeeding centuries saw the scramble for power and control of the spice trade by other foreign powers such as the Portuguese, the Achehese and Bugis, that devastated the

state, slowly destroying its prosperity.

The British exerted their control over Kedah from the 18th century and took possession of part of Kedah, Province Wellesley, including Penang Island. Siam continued their influence and attacked Kedah in 1821. As a result Kedah lost more territories - Satun (now part of Thailand) and Perlis that was taken by Siam and later became an independent state within the Federation of Malaya. Under the Bangkok Agreement of 1909, Siam handed Kedah to the British and British Advisers were appointed to the state. This period also saw other states in the Malay Peninsula came under British influence and control.

Places of Interest to see in Alor Setar

Kedah is a state rich in history and natural beauty. It is an excellent destination for history enthusiasts, nature lovers and eco-tourists. It offers a mix of small urban centres, 'kampongs', an industrial park, fishing villages, and many nature parks.

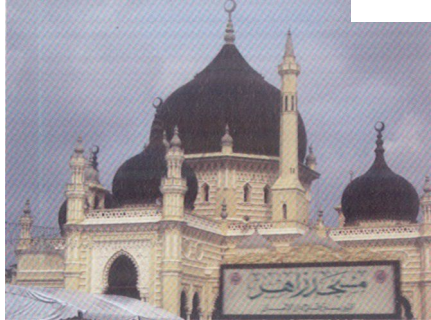
Besides being the state capital and administrative centre, Alor Setar is a royal town and also one of Kedah's historical enclaves with heritage buildings, museums and royal palaces. There are many interesting places to see and visit. Among them:

Balai Besar (Grand Audience Hall), situated in the town square, was built in 1735 as part of the Kota Setar Palace complex and served as an audience hall of the Sultan. It was badly damaged when the Bugis attacked the palace in 1770 and ruined further by the Siamese in 1821. It was refurbished in 1896 and was used for royal weddings, and now used as a venue for important official ceremonies and other royal events. The present ruler, HRH Sultan Abdul Halim Mua'dzam Shah, was installed here on 20 February 1959.

Balai Nobat (Nobat Hall), built in 1906, is also situated in the town square in front of the Masjid Zahir. It is an octagonal building and houses the Nobat, the ancient instruments of the state royal orchestra. The musicians are trained to perform at royal ceremonies such as the installation of the Sultan, at royal weddings and at funerals. They will play a key role in the forthcoming installation of the Sultan of Kedah as the next Yang di-Pertuan Agong just as they did during his first term in 1970.

* Balai Seni Negeri (State Art Gallery) located in the former High Court, a

heritage building, contains paintings, photographs, musical instruments and handicrafts. Temporary exhibitions are often held here.



Zahir Mosque

Masjid Zahir (Zahir Mosque), the icon of Alor Setar and one of the grandest and most beautiful mosques in the country, was built in 1912 and officially opened in 1915. It is said that the five black domes of the Zahir Mosque inspired former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir to design similar domes for the Perdana Putra Building that houses the Prime Minister's Office; Seri Perdana, the official residence; the Putra Mosque and the Palace of Justice. As a Kedahan, he brought an iconic symbol of Alor Setar to Putrajaya!

Istana Anak Bukit (Anak Bukit Palace) is the palace of the present ruler of Kedah, HRH Sultan Abdul Halim Mua'dzam Shah. He resides here with his family. The main entrance is lighted up at night and is a pretty sight to behold.

Birthplace of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, located at Kampong Seberang Perak, is a traditional wooden house where Malaysia's fourth Prime Minister was born on 10 July 1925. He lived in this house till his marriage. Exhibits include photographs and memorabilia from his student days till his tenure as Prime Minister.

Rumah Merdeka (Tunku Abdul Rahman Memorial), situated in Jalan Kampong Perak, houses photographs and documents on the life of Malaya and Malaysia's first Prime Minister and a Kedah prince, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, and his struggle for Independence. It was the Tunku's private residence whenever he was in Alor Setar. This writer was privileged to visit this house as a child with her father, a family friend of the Tunku. The exhibits include original furniture,

photographs and personal effects of the Premier's family. A stone's throw away is the Royale Hotel, owned by the Tunku's son, where the writer stayed recently, and saw many paintings of the Tunku proudly hung in the lobby.

Menara Alor Setar (Alor Setar Tower) is a modern landmark in the heart of Alor Setar. This 165.5 metre tower is Malaysia's second tallest communications tower and is a tourist attraction. Set in the city centre, the tower offers panoramic views of Alor Setar and the surrounding padi fields, mountains, rivers and sea. There is also a revolving restaurant and a viewing gallery.



Alor Setar Tower

Muzium Negeri (State Museum), houses a large collection of Kedah's historical, cultural and royal heritage. The collection includes early Chinese porcelain, artifacts from the archaeological excavations in Bujang Valley and a 'pokok bunga emas' or gold tree produced as a tribute to Siam, as Thailand was then known.

Muzium Di Raja Kedah (Royal Kedah Museum) traces the history of the Kedah Sultanate since the 4th century AD before the ninth ruler converted to Islam in 1136.

Kompleks Pekan Rabu (Pekan Rabu Complex) is a well-known bazaar in Alor Setar. Although the name means 'Wednesday Market' this bazaar

daily from morning till midnight. The bazaar has 347 stalls and is popular with locals and visitors alike as it sells an array of traditional Malay products, clothing, Asian and local handicraft and typical Kedah foodstuff and delicacies. Former Premier Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad was once a trader in Pekan Rabu during the Japanese Occupation and when he was in office he rebuilt the bazaar to a modern complex that we see today. He still visits Pekan Rabu regularly to get a 'songkok'(headgear), 'chapel' (slippers) or buy his favourite Kedah delicacies only available here.

Kota Kuala Kedah (Kedah Fort), built in 1771, is the remains of a fort that protected the Kedah Kingdom from naval attacks. It is sited at the mouth of the Kedah River facing the Straits of Melaka. The fort is the site of numerous battles that marked Kedah's struggle against foreign domination and control. In 1611 the Portuguese attacked the fort and the Achehnese attacked it in 1619. It was occupied by the Dutch in 1710 and attacked by the Bugis again a few years later. In 1821 the Siamese attacked the fort and Kedah came

to Kuala Kedah with her friends riding bicycles for the ten-km journey just to savour the 'Pulut Sambal!'

Kedah Food and Fruits

Be sure to savour the variety of food, exotic dishes and tropical fruits while you are in Alor Setar. Fruits like durians, rambutans, langsung, dukong, cempedak, nangka and even pomelos are available there. Rice is the staple food of the country and some of the rice meals you can order or buy at restaurants or street stalls made from rice include Nasi Lemak, Nasi Ayam, Nasi Biryani, Nasi Daun Pisang, Nasi Kandar, Nasi Kunyit, Nasi Ulam, and Nasi Durian. There are also savoury desserts like Pulut Udang, Pulut Sambal and Pulut Inti or dishes spiced with aromatic herbs like Sambal Belacan, Asam Pedas and Kuah Pindang. Other popular delicacies are Kueh Karas, Laksa Teluk Keca, Mee Abu, Apam Balik, Serawa Durian, Putu Piring, Bubur Cha Cha, Chili Crab and a variety of Chinese and Indian noodles.

Shopping

A trip to Alor Setar will not be complete if you do not stop at the shops or look for souvenirs. As mentioned above, 'Pekan Rabu' is a good place to start. You can also do your shopping at the smaller shops that have existed since Independence, or the newer malls like the Souq Al-Bukhary, Alor Star Mall, Star Parade, and City Plaza next to Holiday Villa. Take a trishaw or pedicap to rest your tired legs or just stroll along the older part of Alor Setar. Taxis are also available but you need to ask your hotel reception to call for one. If you want to get duty-free items, take a drive to the border town of Bukit Kayu Hitam where you can also get Thai goods like clothings, dinnerware, electrical goods and fruits.

Alor Setar Today

Looking ahead to 2020 Kedah is well prepared to meet the challenges of the future. Alor Setar has built its own administrative centre like Putrajaya, called Bandar Muadzam Shah, located in Anak Bukit, about ten-km from the present city. Besides the Kedah state government buildings, new Federal government buildings are also being built. A new railway station, Anak Bukit International Rail Station, will also be built when the electrified twin railway project is completed.

As an ancient Malay kingdom I wonder why Alor Setar, the oldest city in Malaysia, and in the region, is not declared a UNESCO World Heritage site. Unlike Melaka and Penang that have colonial buildings, Alor Setar has

a rich Malay and Muslim heritage that are well preserved that we can be proud of. No construction has taken place in the city centre where the heritage sites like Masjid Zahir, Balai Nobat, Balai Besar. Menara Jam Besar, and Muzium Seni are located. The people of Alor Setar are proud of their rich heritage and will not do any construction in this hikorical area even to attract tourists. Visitors should appreciate and respect what they see.

Or for that matter the Bujang Valley, the ancient Hindu-Buddhist civilization, an area that stretches from the foothills of Gunung Jerai to Kuala Muda in the south. Over 50 archaeological sites containing the ruins of Hindu and Buddhist temples have been unearthed and displayed at the Bujang Valley Archaeological Museum. The only recognition from UNESCO is that one of the islands in Langkawi was accorded the Global Geopark status for its unique geological structures. It is not enough to accord Alor Setar, the oldest city in Malaysia with a long history and a rich heritage, with the oldest Sultanate in Malaysia that is continuous for eight centuries, with just a city status. It should be accorded the UNESCO World Heritage site too. The authorities in Kedah should urge the Federal Government to do something about it with UNESCO. Kedah, the Malay heartland of Malaysia, deserves a better place in modern history despite its ancient origins.



Balai Nobat, Alor Setar

under Siamese suzerainty until 1829. Kota Kuala Kedah will always serve as a reminder of the town's eventful past. Today the people of Alor Setar often visit Kuala Kedah during weekends to visit the fort and to savour the 'Ikan Bakar', 'Laksa Teluk Keca' and 'Pulut Sambal' in the town of Kuala Kedah. This writer recalled school expeditions

