

Kuala Lumpur, Paris of the East

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THE differences between Paris and Kuala Lumpur are not as enormous as you might imagine. They both have similar-sized populations — if you use the strict definition of Paris and exclude all the troublesome suburbs. They both have a river at their heart. KL has two, of course, but less is probably more when you compare the Seine with the combined appeal of the Klang and the Gombak.

There are differences, of course. Paris has about 100 museums, and Kuala Lumpur has fewer. Some of these Parisian institutions are unlikely to catch on over here.

The Museum of Wine, for example, will not excite the majority of Klang Valley residents. The rest might be put off when they find that it costs almost RM50 to get in. For this price, they will also get a complimentary glass of wine. For RM200, they can opt for more than a tour and have the "Sensory Analysis" instead.

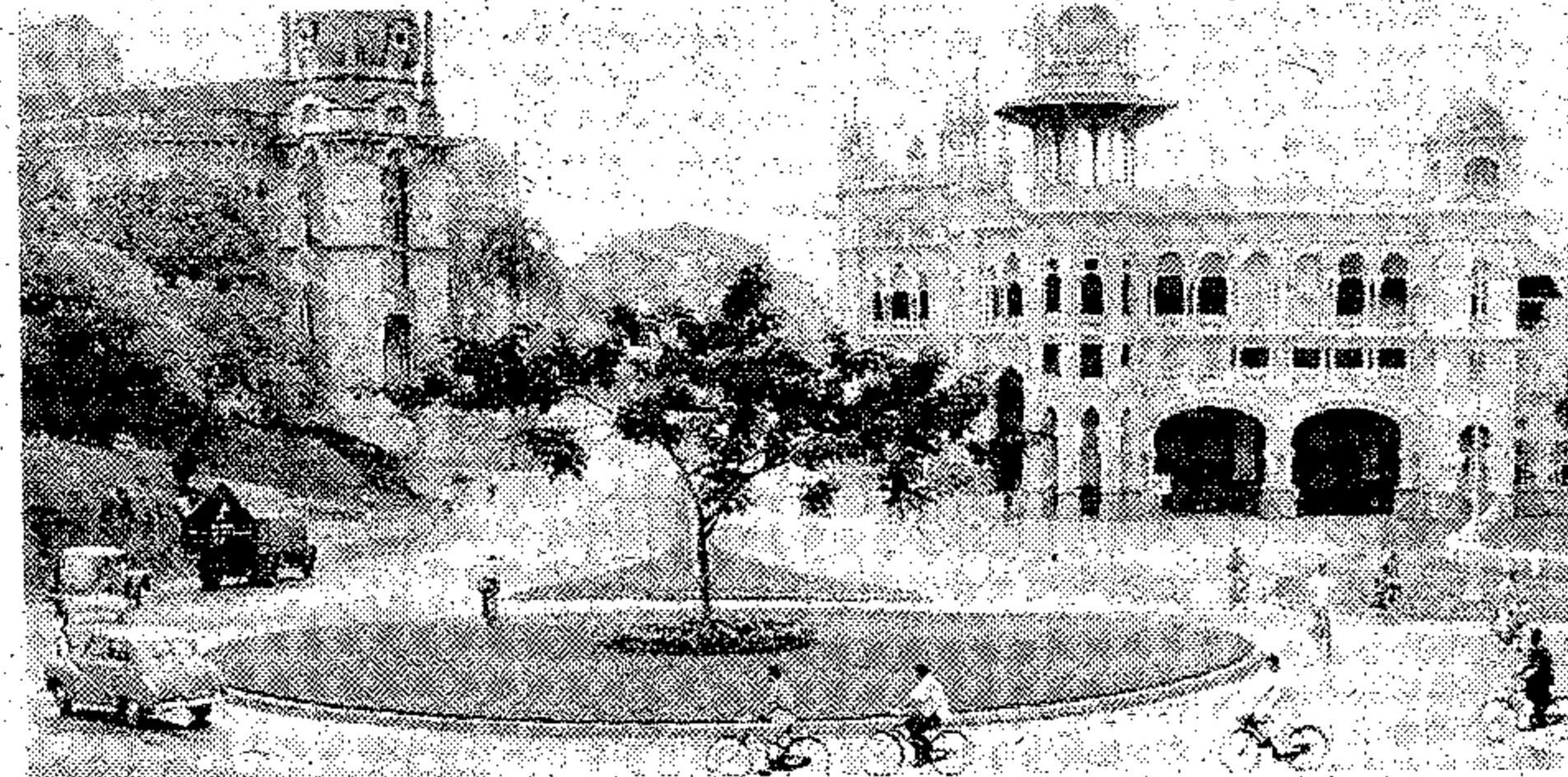
Another difference of approach between the two cities is how to recycle old buildings. Paris has been doing this for years but it is catching on more slowly here. On a recent visit to the "Kuala Lumpur of the West", I was reminded of how most of the great names once served another purpose before becoming places for sombre culture-loving tourists to queue in the rain. The Louvre, which is the biggest museum in the world,



used to be one of the biggest royal palaces in the world. The Musee d'Orsay, which is almost as popular as the Louvre, used to be a railway station. With this realisation dawning, my thoughts returned to Kuala Lumpur. By coincidence, the "Paris of the East" has a nice-looking station that is doing much less these days than it used to. There is also going to be a new royal palace in a couple of years. This will, apparently, include a mini army camp.

What plans are there for the present palace? Istana Negara is popular with tourists who don't usually catch more than a long-distance glimpse through the gates. There are some guards who attract a bit of attention, but I have yet to see any tourists trying on any of those humorous stunts to get a reaction out of them that visitors to London inflict on the Queen's guards. That is something else that Paris and KL have in common: The guards in both cities are equipped with weapons rather than a sense of humour.

The old station would probably make a more interesting museum



than the palace. It has the sort of skyline that leads people to think there is more to it than a public utility that has seen better days. Over the road is a building which did, for a while, take a Parisian course. The Majestic Hotel had been a real hotel before it served as Malaysia's National Art Gallery for many years.

That institution was later relocated to the less tourist-amenable surroundings of Jalan Tun Razak. This was excellent news for car owners, who finally had somewhere to park; it was bad news for art thieves, who found the previous building less of a challenge.

The old KL railway station still has its own hotel, the grandly named Heritage Station Hotel. Now that only commuter trains are using the station, it is hard to imagine the hotel doing much business. It is good value at just over RM100 per night for a basic

Put old buildings such as the Kuala Lumpur railway station on the cultural map of Malaysia.

room, accompanied by breakfast for two. Food is one of this establishment's main selling points. There is a promise of "old school food", which can be taken in a number of ways. Not many of these possibilities are very appetising. It sounds like quite a cultural experience as the website promises that the food is "a must for any traveller to get in right with the locals".

If the old KL railway station or the present Istana Negara were to be repackaged as something of lasting cultural significance, what would they be filled with? For the Istana, official sources have suggested, not too surprisingly, that it could become a royal museum. This would put it well ahead of Paris, which tends to ignore its royal past. The main exception for the city authorities is mentioning with relish the place where King Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were

guillotined.

The old train station would be a natural choice for a museum of railway history. A lot of cities have one of these and business has been booming since Thomas the Tank Engine and his friends were revived on television, accompanied by some creative merchandising.

KL should perhaps take a more distinctive route. For this, our city might look once again to its spiritual sister in France. Paris has a Museum of Contrefacon. In other words, this is about fake luxury products. This important subject is seen very much from the point of view of the victim, which is inevitable when France loses around €6 billion (RM 28 billion) a year on infringements that range from Louis Vuitton bags to the Champagne brand name. Malaysia's version of this museum could take a different viewpoint, highlighting the astonishing range and quality of "contrefacon" that is available here. As China and other parts of Asia take over as capitals of counterfeit goods, now could be the right time to create a permanent testimonial to one of Kuala Lumpur's greatest contributions to tourism.

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