

Jerejak steeped in Malaysia's migrant history, says researcher

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Before it served as a leper colony, TB sanatorium and prison, the island was the quarantine centre for migrants before they could enter any of the Straits Settlements.

GEORGE TOWN: A former penal island to the east of Penang Island holds Malaysia's rich immigrant history, a scholar has found after two years' of research.

He is appealing to the authorities to preserve the island for its heritage.

Researcher Michael Gibby said Pulau Jerejak was a mandatory stop for many immigrants entering the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca and Singapore) and the Federated Malay States since the 1870s.

He said they were screened for diseases before being allowed to enter Penang and other parts of Malaya.

"Jerejak has more history per square inch than most other places in Malaysia. Together with Singapore, and later Port Klang, it was the de facto Malayan gateway back in the day.

"If you were born in Penang, there is a good chance your great-great grandfather had once stepped foot on Jerejak before going anywhere else in Malaya.

"Muslims who went to Mecca for haj and returned were also required to be checked at the quarantine there."

The quarantine camp used to be located on the northwest corner of the island. Today, only ruins of the camp exist.

Jerejak has been slated for development. Last November, it was reported that UDA Holdings Bhd entered into a joint venture agreement with Q Islands Development to redevelop the disused Jerejak Rainforest Resort and Spa and 32.37ha of land surrounding it into a mixed development.

It was reported a bridge linking Jerejak to Penang Island on the west, 1,200 residential units, a theme park, a marina, four and five-star hotels and a cycling track will be built there.

Gibby said Jerejak's "quarantine station" was meant for all the sea travellers who came from the Indian sub-continent and for many from China, too.

He said quarantine wards were built for the travellers, immigrant workers, who were suspected to be suffering from infectious diseases, such as smallpox.

"They were quarantined until the infectious period was over. There was strict adherence to health rules then," Gibby said.

He said from 1877 until World War 2, 1.13 million people were quarantined in Jerejak before they were allowed to proceed onward to Penang and other parts of Malaya.

He said in 1948, a TB sanatorium was built on the southern part of the island. The chronic sufferers of tuberculosis stayed there, he said.

Jerejak was once known as "Malaysia's Alcatraz".

The leper colony was also once located there. The island is hence not very popular with tourists.

Currently, Jerejak consists of mostly dense jungle and hills. Of 362ha of the island, only 10% to 15% of it is flat land.

In 1868, Jerejak was the main leprosy sanatorium, one of the earliest in the country, built using funds collected by Chinese businessmen in Penang.

"The first 25 lepers moved into the building on a voluntary basis, before the island was recognised as a leprosarium. It once housed more than 7,000 lepers," Gibby said.

In 1875, the quarantine station was built.

Later in 1969, it was made into a maximum security prison. The lepers were transferred to the Leper Hospital in Sungai Buloh, Selangor. All penal facilities closed in 1993.

A 8.8ha shipyard was built on the eastern side of Jerejak in 1971 during the development of the Penang Free Industrial Zone. A resort was opened in 2004 where the leprosarium once stood.

Gibby said 5,000 deaths were recorded on the island and cemeteries of different faiths still exist on the island.

Penang Forum member Ben Wisman said Penangites ought to attend a talk on Jerejak by the Penang Forum this Saturday to get their voices heard.

Wisman said Jerejak was also a repository for natural biodiversity, with more than 100 species of trees and 20 species of ferns recorded on the island.

"These plants serve as food and shelter for small mammals and birds on the island, particularly during the migratory season.

“The gazetting of the forest reserve on Jerejak is a long overdue process and should be done soon to protect the natural heritage of Jerejak,” Gibby said.

Meanwhile, the Penang Forum said Jerejak ought to have its heritage protected, as it was part of the state’s history.

“Penang Forum advocates for the development of Jerejak in a way that respects the tangible, intangible and natural heritage values of Pulau Jerejak.

“Any form of development designed for Pulau Jerejak should be sustainable, and based on a master plan for the island,” Wisman said.

The talk will be held at the Penang Institute, Brown Road, from 9am to noon this Saturday.

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