

From a sleepy backwater town to a capital masterpiece: Reliving Kuala Lumpur's past

New Straits Times

October 25, 2020

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Excitedly, I grip my well-worn, bright red holdall bag in my hand, readying myself for the moment when the train would screech to a stop at the station, so I can jump in and chup a good spot by the window.

"Don't dilly dally because the train won't stop forever," my cousin's warning rings in my ears, as I happily clamber up to take my place in the carriage. My bag safely tucked under my seat, I poke my head out of the window, breathlessly taking in the early morning bustle of the cavernous Stesen Keretapi Kuala Lumpur (Kuala Lumpur Railway Station).

"Faster laaa," I find myself hissing, as images of my cousins waiting impatiently at the Stesen Keretapi Tasek Gelugor (Tasek Gelugor Railway Station) in Penang begin to swim into my periphery. Suddenly mere minutes felt like hours.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?" The deep sound of a man's voice slices into my daydream, and suddenly the image of the old train station with excited travellers whizzing around like ants dissipates into thin air. I turn and find myself looking into the bespectacled eyes of Sharezal Abdul Wahid, director of Concierge for The Majestic Hotel, Kuala Lumpur.

Without another word between us, we turn to stare at the Moorish-style building across the road. With its striking white facade and elegant chhatris (dome-capped pavilions of Indian origin) along its roof line, the Kuala Lumpur Railway Station, located along Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin, is a breath-taking landmark which served as the city's main rail hub until Kuala Lumpur Sentral Station took over in 2001.

It's a truly beautiful afternoon; the kind of picture-postcard perfect day for an exploration — and plenty of pictures. The sky's a stunning shade of azure and there's a gentle breeze to provide some respite from the late morning rays.

Standing next to me clad in a casual white T-shirt over comfortable khaki slacks, a bag slung over his broad shoulder, Sharezal, my "companion" on this special "Colonial Walk" around the heritage heart of our capital, is barely able to conceal his excitement.

Sheepishly, the affable father-of-two begins by confiding that he's no historian. Or a certified guide, for that matter. What he is, however, is a born and bred KL-lite with a love — and curiosity — for his city.

"Actually, this is the first time I've done this kind of thing," he shares, grinning broadly, before adding: "But I AM a history buff. I guess that's an advantage. And of course being born and bred in KL, you tend to have this affection for your city."

He's swift to add that prior to being thrust in this role, he already had some knowledge of Kuala Lumpur's history and stories. "Through my own reading... listening to stories... and I did go to school here in KL. I'm a VI (Victoria Institution) boy!" shares Sharezal enthusiastically before

informing me that his beloved school, located on Jalan Hang Tuah, is the oldest secondary school in Kuala Lumpur.

A LESSON IN HISTORY

Returning his attention to the station, the self-confessed intrepid traveller continues to display his knowledge, telling me that at one time, the building we'd been transfixed by had housed the offices of the Federated Malay States Railways, before being turned into the administrative head office of the Keretapi Tanah Melayu (KTM).

Continuing, he says: "Today, it's still used as a train station but more for transit. You can still see the KTM trains, commuters passing by. If you're travelling to Ipoh, Penang etc, the train will still stop here after KL Sentral. In a way it's convenient for our guests. I always remind them to be quick because the train will only stop for five to 10 minutes before departing." The other train that's known to pass here, adds Sharezal, is the Eastern Oriental Express.

"There's a hotel inside there, right?" I blurt out, as an image from the past suddenly swims into view. "Heritage Hotel or something?" His head bobs in response. "Yups, that was the Heritage Station Hotel, located on the first floor. But I think it closed its doors sometime in the late 1980s, early '90s," replies Sharezal.

Dreamily, he adds: "I've actually seen the insides of old hotels and I can imagine all the grandeur of the past. In fact, I've peered into the window of the Heritage Station Hotel and seen the lobby. It would have enjoyed quite a bustle."

"Is it haunted?" I retort, playfully. Sharezal's eyes dance mischievously before he replies: "A lot of people say so!" Oooo, now that's the kind of "walk" I wouldn't mind joining, I tease before the air is filled with our raucous laughter.

HISTORY UNFOLDS

Walking in companionable silence, we pass another Mughal-inspired masterpiece — the Railway Administration Building. Completed in 1917, I'm duly informed by Sharezal that this building, the administrative quarters of KTM, had been bombed several times. "Its north wing, if I'm not mistaken, was seriously damaged by bombing in World War II (WWII) and again by fire in 1968."

As I take in the impressive structure designed by the British architect from the Public Works Department, Arthur Benison Hubback (AB Hubback), the same chap who designed the railway station across the road, I couldn't help but exclaim in awe at just how solid it looks.

Sharezal nods solemnly before saying: "That's the one thing about old architecture, Intan. They're just so solid. To think they only had the technology and the know-how of the day to work with... and yet they could still build buildings that can stand to this day. Not like our modern-day constructions..."

Nodding my agreement, we proceed with our walk, crossing the road to the sound of a playful honking from a passing lorry. "If I were to tell you that the roundabout never used to be there, what would you say?" Sharezal suddenly poses, pointing to the busy roundabout just ahead of us.

My look of bewilderment prompts him to answer his own question. "There used to be a roundabout where the Majestic is located. And around the train station, there was almost a park-like setting," he elaborates, before smiling broadly at my surprise.

The sun's piercing rays now searing my head, I listen in rapt attention as Sharezal continues to regale me: "KL was founded circa 1857 by a member of the Selangor royal family, Raja Abdullah, who was the representative of the Yam Tuan who administered Klang. Together with Raja Jumaat of Lukut and a number of Chinese workers, he came to explore the district in search of tin ore."

Adding, he says: "Where they did it was actually in Ampang and more towards the Sungai Besi side. Ampang was where most of the Chinese settled. This side had more of the Mandailing people." The Mandailing, a traditional cultural group in Southeast Asia, are found mainly in the northern section of the island of Sumatra in Indonesia.

Trying desperately to imagine what our capital city would have been like back in the days, images of a sleepy backwater town born of the tin mining industry flashes into my mind's eye. Visuals of rickety wooden shanties, inhabitants scurrying about their daily routine, a horse cart somewhere... all add to the sense of a makeshift township.

Kuala Lumpur was founded right at the confluence of two rivers — the Gombak and Klang rivers, Sharezal's voice once again interrupts my reverie. "We're heading there," he assures me as the National Mosque or Masjid Negara looms into view, its 73m-high minaret resembling a closed umbrella easily its most distinguishable feature.

Built in 1965, the contemporary-styled mosque, which sits on 13 acres of land was designed by UK architect, Howard Ashley, and Malaysians Hisham Albakri and Baharuddin Kassim. "I've always loved its outdoor gardens with the white marble pools and fountains," I confide to Sharezal and he beams.

"Did you know that the mosque, which can fit up to 15,000 people was actually built on a piece of land that was once occupied by a church in 1922?" he poses, before sharing that the church was later moved to somewhere near Bukit Aman side, the location for the headquarters of the Royal Malaysia Police.

Elaborates the 42-year-old: "Tunku Abdul Rahman, our first Prime Minister, wanted to have a mosque for the nation. He suggested for it to be built nearer to the train station so that travellers could stop over for prayers, to rest and to find solitude."

TRANSFORMING THE LANDSCAPE

Coming to a sudden halt, Sharezal points to a familiar building across the road. It's the 35-storey Dayabumi Complex, at one time the city's earliest skyscrapers. Also known as Menara Dayabumi and designed by Malay architect, Nik Mohammed, it was the first modern building in the capital to incorporate principles of Islamic design into its architecture.

"Isn't it ironic that we're seeing Dayabumi here set against the backdrop of Malaysia's soon-to-be tallest building, the Exchange 106?" poses Sharezal, a trace of incredulity lacing his voice. Adding, he shares: "Back in 1982, Dayabumi, built within a space of two years, was considered one of the tallest buildings in the city. Back in the '80s, it was a happening place! Kalau

nak lepak, lepak kat Dayabumi (If you want to hang out, hang out at Dayabumi)."

A flurry of more familiar landmarks assails our sights as we continue on with our exploration of KL's historical mile — from the copper-domed red brick of the Sultan Abdul Samad building and its famous clock tower, known as Big Ben to me for as long as I can remember, to Dataran Merdeka (Merdeka Square).

Located in front of the Sultan Abdul Samad building, this square, a quintessential throwback to the region's colonial past, was formerly known as the Selangor Club Padang — or the Padang — and was used as the cricket green of the Selangor Club.

Another beautiful heritage building peeks out from behind the glare of the sun. It's Masjid Jamek, one of the oldest mosques in KL. Located at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak rivers, it was also designed by Arthur Benison Hubback and built in 1909.

"It's really pretty," I couldn't help exclaiming and Sharezal nods enthusiastically. Smiling, he asks: "Did you know that the mosque was built on the location of an old Malay burial place?" My shake of the head induces another grin from this Hotel Management graduate.

He goes on to share that previously, there were a couple of mosques in the Java Street and Malay Street area, which served the Malay community. "But Masjid Jamek was to become the first large mosque to be built in KL. And it would continue to be the main mosque in the city until Masjid Negara was built in 1965."

Our arrival in front of an impressive mural just across the river makes me gasp in wonder. It's been a while since I've walked around KL and certainly, this is a sight that's new to me. Having travelled back in time, it's almost a rude awakening to look upon something so... modern!

"This is the River of Life mural," points out Sharezal, noting my close scrutiny of the larger-than-life street art wrapping the building like a worn wallpaper. The artists behind it are the same as the ones behind many famous murals around the capital, for example, at Jalan Alor.

The River of Life project is a seven-year project that aims to transform the Klang River into a vibrant and liveable waterfront with high economic value. Covering eight rivers, the project is divided into three main components, namely river cleaning, river beautification, and commercialisation and tourism.

"They say this is where KL got its name," adds Sharezal, his hand sweeping the view in front of us. "It's like a confluence of two rivers — the muddy confluence. So, Kuala Lumpur!"

HIS STORY

"The diversity," exclaims Sharezal, whose father was a diplomat before joining the Ministry of Education, when asked what it is about KL that he loves so much. Pausing to reflect, he eventually continues: "I travel a lot but I don't see the kind of diversity that we get here. KL is so diverse in many aspects — culture, food, architecture... it's just a nice mish-mash of everything."

Offering Chinatown as an example, he points out: "You can pass a Hindu temple, and then just opposite would be a Chinese temple. And you can enjoy a nasi lemak somewhere. That's the charm of KL."

He confides that the more he delves into the stories behind KL, and the more he pores over the old photographs of the city, the more fascinated he becomes. "I start to see the city with different eyes," shares Sharezal. "I used to think the KL of old wouldn't be too different from what we see today. But how wrong I was! To see how much it has transformed is really mind-boggling."

When the team at The Majestic was developing the concept for this Colonial Walk, it was agreed that they would not bog down guests with too many hard facts. Shares Sharezal: "When you go for a walk like this, you can't cram in too much facts. Especially if you're taking a foreigner around because frankly, they may not be interested in things that don't resonate with them. My approach is to find the stories behind the places."

Thoughtfully, he adds: "We want to do it in such a way that it propels our guests to imagine how it might have been like back then and for them to see how it really is today. We want to touch their imagination. Sometimes when you're telling a story, it's the gist of it that makes it interesting rather than the nitty-gritty facts."

Chuckling, Sharezal, in his seventh year working with The Majestic, concedes that it's not surprising that people would expect for a heritage guide to be a historian. "That's why I'll reiterate to those who join me for the walk that it's not a tour."

Just the mere act of exploring the city together, basking in all its glorious history, sharing stories, and learning new things from each other are essentially the attraction to this Colonial Walk. His biggest challenge, admits Sharezal, would be fielding the flurry of questions that gets thrown at him!

"I just need to be prepared for the questions," he confides. "And ensure I get the facts right. It's like going back to school having to memorise everything! But like how I advise my colleagues who are also doing this, just think of it like a storytelling exercise! An enjoyable storytelling exercise!"

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Source: <https://www.nst.com.my/lifestyle/sunday-vibes/2020/10/635067/sleepy-backwater-town-capital-masterpiece-reliving-kuala>