



Sea Gateway to George Town UNESCO World Heritage City

George Town Heritage Festival is celebrated with street activities in separate parts of the heritage enclave from July 7 to July 9.

In and around Armenian Street are community-based activities that visitors can take part in to appreciate the cultural practices and games of the multi-ethnic society.

While you are there, do not miss out on the varied ethnic food offerings - that give rise to Penang's tribute as a Gourmet's Paradise - that are only congregated in one spot once or twice a year.

The Swettenham Pier Cruise Terminal (photo) is the gateway of over one million passengers who arrived and can step right onboard into the heart of George Town heritage enclave.

The Royal Caribbean Line's latest Quantum of the Seas, scheduled to call to port at the terminal over six months from November this year, will bring in another 190,000 cruise passengers to this heritage city.

Celebrating 10 years as UNESCO World Heritage City



On 7 July 2008, George Town was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. This year, we celebrate its 10th anniversary and I am proud to say that our city has remained one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world.

George Town is inscribed as one of the two historical cities along the Straits of Malacca, the other being Melaka.

Message from Penang Tourism, Heritage, Culture and Arts Committee chairman Yeoh Soon Hin



www.visitpenang.gov.my

George Town has grown from a British trading post to a bustling city, yet much of its pre-war buildings are left untouched by modernisation, hence retaining the charms of yesteryears.

Being culturally diverse, Penang's history is a colourful melting pot of different religions and ethnicity. On Penang's Street of Harmony, you can find 19th century places of worship all along the same street; the St George's Church which is South East Asia's oldest Anglican Church, two mosques

over a century old, two Taoist temples and a Hindu temple.

This is a reflection of the ethnic and religious harmony that we have worked so hard to achieve. We Penangites should be proud to celebrate the George Town World Heritage Day.

My task now is to get international airlines to fly directly to Penang more frequently, improve the dissemination of information on tourist attractions to local and foreign visitors, and creating new products as well as hosting more events and activities to attract tourists.

I wish all Penangites a Happy George Town World Heritage Day and I pledge my support for any innovative product or idea that will ensure our city's success for many more years to come.

Message from Melaka Tourism, Heritage and Culture Committee chairman Muhammad Jailani Khamis



The Melaka government has declared the year 2019 as "Visit Melaka Year". There will be many programmes to attract both domestic and foreign tourists to the state.

My immediate task is to utilise the state's allocations to upgrade the local tourism infrastructure to ensure that it will be able to cater to an influx of visitors.

As Malaysians make up the bulk of the

tourists to Melaka, the state government will spend more time and money to entice them to return.

State-sponsored activities such as overseas promotion efforts will be pared down as the state government streamlines its activities.

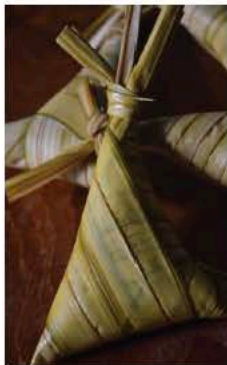
The Tourism Melaka Board, whose primary function is to help promote tourism products and hotels to domestic visitors, will be restructured to focus its efforts to woo them.

I will see to it that the board changes its management style to make it more effective and more able to achieve its core



objective.

While this year's UNESCO World Heritage Day celebrations will be a low-key affair, we will not spare any effort to maintain its billing as the state with the highest tourist arrival, a feat achieved last year.



A delicacy to last



The Ketupat – rice wrapped in palm leaves – is a popular Malay delicacy. Legend has it that the style of wrapping the rice in a triangular pouch was passed down from sailors and seamen.

It was necessary to prevent the rice from going stale during long trips. The seafarers found that by wrapping the rice in palm leaves – the way dumplings are wrapped – and hanging them on their ships, the moisture would evaporate quickly, thus preserving its freshness.

Today, the Ketupat is listed as a heritage food in Malaysia. It is usually eaten with

beef curry or rendang or as a side dish with satay. It is traditionally served during open house at festivals such as Hari Raya Aidilfitri.

There are several varieties of the Ketupat but the most common ones are the Ketupat Nasi, which is made of white rice, and Ketupat Pulut, made of glutinous rice.

The Ketupat Nasi is often wrapped in coconut palm leaves into a square while the Ketupat Pulut is usually wrapped in daun palas (another palm species) into a triangular shape.

According to Zaharah Jaafar, owner of Lyza Café on Lebuhr Buckingham, George

Town, it takes about two hours to make a Ketupat.

The wrapping is usually of two strips of palm leaves woven together and the ends are twisted tightly to make a pouch so the rice does not spill out before it is cooked.

For the Ketupat Nasi, the leaves are woven in a chequered style and for the Ketupat Pulut, the daun palas is woven into a triangular shape pouch before it is filled with the rice, says Zaharah.

Once cooked, the Ketupat will remain fresh for up to four days.



It's been in the family for a century. Now, Colleen Read is ready to share it with everyone. It is the Mustard Salad recipe, a Eurasian favourite.

"It's no secret actually," she says. The dressing is typically a blend of boiled eggs, dry mustard, cayenne pepper and full cream carnation milk.

Toss in the cherry tomatoes, green apples and cucumber, then add a little salt and sugar to taste – and there you have it – a healthy starter.

come to mind at the mention of Eurasian cuisine.

Eurasian cooking can be traced back to the days when the Portuguese first settled in Malacca and later the other Straits Settlements of Penang and Singapore. Over the centuries, Chinese, Indian, Malay and Nyonya cooking methods have been incorporated into the Portuguese cuisine, making it a fusion fare.

The Eurasian community in Penang has kept its culinary tradition alive, passing

The Eurasian Mustard Salad

It's also versatile enough for you to add new ingredients to it to make it more pleasing to your palate. It can be paired with rice, fish, meat or any roasted meats or vegetables on the dining table.

It's a family favourite and Read, who will be 75 this year, is happy to share the recipe "so everyone can cook up a storm in their kitchen".

Nonetheless, the Mustard Salad is still a rare treat. Few restaurants or bistros have it on their menu. Even among Penangites, it is the Devil Curry and Sugee Cake that

down the recipes from one generation to the next. These dishes are a must on the table during the festive seasons and on special occasions.



Joss stick making tradition burning out fast

Burning joss sticks to beseech the gods for good fortune or to grant a wish is a Chinese tradition that dates back centuries. The sight of smoke-filled Chinese temples is testament to the fact that the tradition is alive and well today.

In Penang, the practice has helped to sustain a small industry – mass production of joss sticks.

But for Lee Beng Chuan, tradition matters – even in how the joss sticks are made. Lee, who only just celebrated his 90th birthday, insists on hand-made joss sticks, and to top it off, they have to be made of sandalwood.

He is perhaps the only traditional joss stick maker left in Penang. His business, he says, is not profit-driven. "It is important that we preserve this art form, keep our heritage alive, and leave a legacy," he says.

"All I want is to make enough to cover overheads such as rental and electricity bills with some left over for our meals," he adds.

"I love what I do and I'll do it for as long as I can."

Lee insists on using only sandalwood rather than the cheaper sawdust for his joss sticks. "The sandalwood is imported from Western Australia and it is of a higher quality," he explains.

Apart from the pleasant aroma, he says, sandalwood is also a less harmful alternative. It produces less smoke and does not irritate the eyes and nose. "Most of all, it is good for eradicating negativity," he adds.

Apart from sandalwood, he uses agarwood and Tibet holy grass that help to improve appetite and repel mosquitoes.

Despite the higher quality and therefore more expensive material, Lee insists on selling his joss sticks at a fair price to help keep the tradition alive.

At his shop, it is all a manual process. He mixes the sandalwood with a sticky powder from the Teja wood tree gum, and kneads the mixture by hand to ensure it is of the



right consistency. "Such traditional methods are essential to produce good quality joss sticks," he says.

Lee's fourth son Chin Poh assists him in managing the business now, but he hopes others will pick up the skills to preserve the heritage.

Chin Poh began helping his father manage the business after his mother passed away two years ago.

Occasionally, Lee can be seen teaching young students and tourists who want to have a go at making joss sticks. They get to keep all the joss sticks they have made during the visit as a souvenir.

"The art form may be lost in the future, so I am doing as much as I can for as long as I can (to keep the tradition alive)," he adds.



Photo courtesy of The Star

From Dough To Doll

It is a delicate task, yet Khor Ewe Hock executes it with perfection. It does not come as a surprise. His mastery of the art of moulding dough into figurines has been honed over more than half a century.

It requires attention to detail and speed – the dough dries up quickly, making it impossible to shape after that.

But the results are amazing. Khor is inspired by characters as diverse as heroes from Chinese legends such as Journey to the West and the Eight Immortals, to drama series stars and even Pokemon.

The dough is a mix of glutinous rice flour, wheat flour and tapioca flour. Colour is added to the dough before it is shaped into the desired form.

It takes Khor 10 to 20 minutes to work on a figurine, depending on the character he chooses and the depth of detailing required.

Khor, aged 73, is a self-taught figurine artist. He was intrigued after watching a Shanghaiese artist demonstrate the art of shaping dough into delicate works of art. He was only 15 then.

Khor immediately took it up as a hobby, and has not stopped since. Over the decades, he has worked hard to perfect his skills and now has a collection of dough figurines to showcase.

It is, undoubtedly, his favourite leisure activity. His enthusiasm is unmistakable when asked to talk about his hobby. He

spends every second of his spare time kneading and moulding. Occasionally, he accepts invitations to showcase his skills in shaping dough into figurines. Khor says he is ecstatic that people are fascinated by the cute and petite figurines although they are not edible.

He continues to improvise and to add new cartoon characters to his repertoire. However, he is not ready to give up his full-time job as a rojak seller to concentrate fully on his art.

"There is not enough interest in this art form so it is quite difficult to make a living out of it," he says. He laments the fact that the younger generation is more taken up by their computer games and super cool gadgets than traditional art and craft.

He had had a few apprentices in the past but they invariably dropped out eventually. But Khor is not about to give up his lonely quest to preserve the living art.

When he is not busy with his hands, Khor is happy to whip up a packet of spicy sweet rojak for his customers at his stall on Macallum Street in George Town.

Preserving the art of Nyonya Kebaya embroidery

The Kebaya is, undoubtedly, the most prominent feature of the Baba-Nyonya or Peranakan culture. However, the embroidered blouse and sarong are not just a traditional piece of attire popular among Straits Chinese women in the early to mid-20th century.



In some ways, it also defined the woman's place in the household. The place of the Nyonya (in this community, the men are known as Babas and the women as Nyonyas) was in the house. She was taught from a very young age to sew, clean and cook, skills that were considered a reflection of good virtue and capabilities.

More than that, a Nyonya's ability at embroidering her own Kebaya was a tell-tale sign of good upbringing and domestic competencies.



Photo from Wikipedia by Jamieson Teo

Of course this is no longer the case. As a matter of fact, the Kebaya has given way to more trendy items in the woman's wardrobe, and the woman is more likely to spend her day at the office than in the kitchen.

Nonetheless, the Kebaya may be



getting a new lease of life. Many women opt for the Kebaya when attending social or formal events.

The Kebaya is a figure-hugging blouse-dress, often made of silk, Swiss cotton or robia cotton, with various motifs embroidered on it.

The most popular motifs are usually floral or human, but whatever the theme, it either tells a story or merely reflects the expression of the wearer.

Therefore, how beautiful the design and how skilfully it is embroidered depends largely on the imagination and passion of the seamstress. It requires a lot of creativity and effort.

Koid Boon Ean, 51, is one of a very small group of people who still specialise in Kebaya embroidery.

According to her, it takes 12 days to a month to complete the embroidery for a Kebaya blouse. "It is work that requires a lot of passion and patience," she points out. However, few people have the time or the inclination to learn the art today.

Coming up with a suitable design and translating that design into embroidery by hand is a long and tiring process.

Koid, who works from her store at Kim Fashion in Gurney Plaza, George Town,



laments the fact that appreciation among the young for the art of Kebaya embroidery is declining, and "originality and creativity are dying".

Today, mass produced Kebayas flood the market and are cheaper, making it less and less profitable to continue with the traditional art of hand embroidery.

Nonetheless, Koid, who is the third generation in her family to be involved in the business, is hopeful that the art will not be lost in the future.



Photos from ColourBeads.com

A pair makes a complete Nyonya



Beaded Shoes have adorned the feet of Nyonya women for generations. Together with the Kebaya, they are an icon of the Peranakan culture.

The Beaded Shoe is more than just a footwear. A work of art, it is literally thousands of miniscule beads – called “manek potong” – sewn onto a piece of cloth that is then affixed to a sole to make the footwear.

Thanks to its intricate design and refined form, the Beaded Shoe was also a status symbol – only the well-heeled could be seen stepping out in them.

But just like the Kebaya, the Beaded Shoes have lost their glory although they did enjoy a short-lived revival from 2000 to 2004, according to Tan Kok Yu.

The 62-year-old Tan is possibly the only person left in Penang who still makes those shoes. He operates from his shop on Armenian Street in George Town.

At that time, Tan says, many locals and

foreign tourists flocked to Peranakan shops in Melaka and Penang just to get a pair of those shoes.

“But for most people, one pair is more than enough. After all, it’s not cheap,” he muses. Tan sells a pair of handmade Beaded Shoes for anything from RM600 to RM2,000. “You have to pay for the intricate handiwork and attention to detail,” he explains.

The smaller the beads, the harder it is to make a pair of shoes, and it takes more time as well. It could take up to three months just to make a pair of beaded shoes by hand. It also takes time to come up with an attractive design.

Tan’s favourite designs are those with floral motives. “These are also most sought after,” he says. He still makes them by hand, determined to keep the tradition alive. True connoisseurs are prepared to spend more on a decent, handmade pair of beaded

shoes over the mass-produced and cheaper versions from Indonesia and Singapore.

Tan also laments the fact that few people now have the patience to learn the art of making Beaded Shoes. At 62 now, he has been making Beaded Shoes for almost 44 years and is planning to refurbish his shop to give his workplace a new look.

But the shoes are not exactly flying off the shelves. “Not many people appreciate the design, artwork and most of all the effort that goes into making a pair of Nyonya Beaded Shoes,” he points out.

Ironically, Tan is not of Peranakan descent. Nonetheless, that has not come close to dampening his personal enthusiasm for the Nyonya tradition. He plans to do what he knows best for as long as it is possible.

Thanks to him, women will continue to adorn their feet with traditional handmade works of art for some time to come.



A potpourri of tradition

If there is one item that symbolises Malay tradition more than any other, it must be the Bunga Rampai. This medley of fresh flowers, artistically presented in small baskets, is a must for weddings or engagements as well as official functions.

At weddings, the Bunga Rampai is



placed in the middle of the pelamin where the bride and groom sit, signifying the couple embarking on a new beginning.

Guests also hold the Bunga Rampai when they sprinkle water on the couple to offer their good wishes in the upacara merenjis or blessing ritual.

The Bunga Rampai is often handmade, using flowers such as Jasmine, Rose or Morning Glory. These are sliced thinly and tied to tiny nettings and placed in mini baskets or other containers depending on the occasion. Perfume, essential oils or pandan leaves are sometimes added for the

fragrance.

However, the tradition has slowly given way to modern practices. “These days, many Malay couples do not use the Bunga Rampai anymore because it takes too much work to make them,” says Sharita Azira, owner of Kedai Kraf, which still sells containers for Bunga Rampai.

“They prefer potpourris, perfume or trinkets that require less work,” she adds.

Nonetheless, some are keeping the tradition alive. Sharita says some couples still prefer to go traditional for their wedding and even give away Bunga Rampai and Bunga Telur to their guests as a way to share their happiness and goodwill. The Bunga Telur is another item essential to a traditional Malay wedding.

Some also send the Bunga Rampai to the bride as part of the dowry during engagement ceremonies.

When the celebrations are finally over, the item is kept at home for its fragrance.

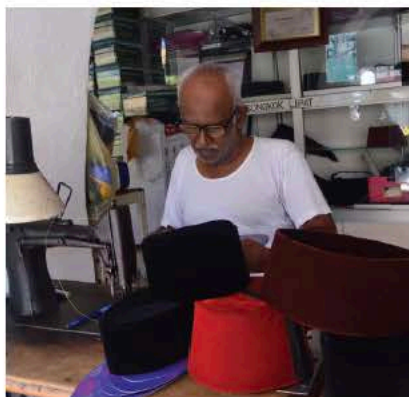


Keeping the Songkok-making tradition alive

A Malay-Muslim man's attire is not a full ensemble without the Songkok. This traditional headdress is worn during festivals or on special occasions, or when he goes to the mosque for Friday prayers.

While it is not expected to go out of fashion anytime soon, the same cannot be said of the traditional way of making the Songkok.

One person who is trying to keep the tradition alive is Haja Mohideen bin Mohd Shariff. The 72-year-old traditional Songkok maker operates from the alcove of the Nagore Shrine on Lebu Chulia in George Town. The company – Kedai Songkok OSM Mohd Shariff – was founded by his father in 1936.



Mohideen developed a fascination for the Songkok at an early age, and began to learn the trade from his father when he was 12. Very soon, he was able to weave up a wide array of the headdress, including the Songkok Lipat, Songkok Karzi and Songkok Melayu. By the time he turned 24, he had



already taken over the business from his father.

He continues to improve his skills to better serve his customers.

It takes several steps to make a Songkok, Mohideen explains. Cardboard is used to give the headdress its cylindrical shape. The inside is layered with satin while newspapers or satin could be used to line the exterior before a layer of velvet is sewn onto the exterior. The satin gives the Songkok a "soft touch" while the velvet gives it a distinctive soft feel.

Every layer of satin or velvet is sewn together on his foot-pedalled sewing machine. Mohideen insists that it is important to make a Songkok by hand to ensure that it is perfectly shaped. He sometimes weaves intricate designs on the inside of the Songkok.

The Songkok has to be stiff and firm, and it should be able to stand on its own when placed on a flat surface.

Making Songkok is a time-consuming

undertaking. Mohideen starts work at 11am and does not finish until about 9pm. He takes a break from work when it's time to pray.

Despite the long hours and hard work, he still tries to charge a reasonable price for his Songkok. Mohideen sells his Songkok for RM20 to RM40 each, depending on the size and shape.

Despite the inconvenience of a small space to operate from, Mohideen seems happy. He does not have any plan to expand to give himself more space.

"I am thankful that I am still able to run the business and meet the demands of my loyal customers, especially during the festive seasons like Hari Raya and the month of Ramadan," he says.

But it may not be long before he hands over his business to a successor. His son-in-law is learning the trade with the intention to take over the business after Mohideen retires.





The *bak chang* is distinctive to the Penang Hokkien. A glutinous rice dumpling filled with multiple ingredients and wrapped in bamboo leaves, it is an immensely popular delicacy in Penang.

There is even a festival, based on a tragic tale, surrounding the dumpling. It is the story of scholar Qu Yuan, who drowned in a river in China's Hunan province in 296 BC.

The people scoured the river in search of him. They even played drums on their boats to scare away the fishes to prevent them from nibbling on Qu's body. When they failed to find him, they made glutinous rice dumplings that they threw into the river to feed the fishes so Qu's body would remain untouched.

Today, the tragedy is marked on the fifth day of the fifth month in the Chinese lunar calendar as the Dumpling Festival or more commonly known today as the Dragon Boat Festival.

The drum remains an essential paraphernalia in the dragon boat race.

The *bak chang* is commonly made

A delicacy to mark a tragedy



Words by Rena Lim
Photos by George Cheah

with fillings of pork belly, Chinese mushrooms, chestnuts, salted egg yolk and dried shrimps.

While it may seem like a simple dish, it takes a lot of hard work and up to eight hours to make. Teoh Siew Hong, founder of Feng Yi Dumplings, explains that the ingredients must be prepared separately.

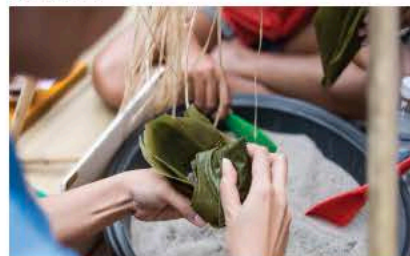
The chestnuts, salted egg yolk, mushrooms, pork belly and dried shrimps must be cooked separately and then covered in glutinous rice. The rice is then wrapped in bamboo leaves before the dumpling is boiled.

Teoh explains that the rice must be well-seasoned and half cooked before it is wrapped in the bamboo leaves together with all the ingredients. The rice becomes

fully cooked in the boiling process.

Teoh's daughter Jess Chan says her mother began making dumplings for sale in 1975, using the family's own recipe when she arrived from Fujian, China.

It was her way to earn a living, but the business has expanded substantially over the years.



Feng Yi Dumplings operates from an outlet on Pengkalan Weld. It is opened from 10am to 10pm daily except Wednesdays.

A variety of dumplings such as glutinous rice dumplings and crystal dumplings with Gula Melaka syrup are available.



Sieh Liu Kuih



The proverbial monster under the bed has scared many a child, especially in the West. But children of the Teochew community have a friendlier companion in the night – she is Ch'ng Bo, or Slumber Mother, and she resides inside an urn placed under the bed.

Ch'ng Bo is a deity worshipped by the Teochew community on the seventh day of the seventh month in the Lunar Calendar. The ritual is conducted every year until the child turns 15, when he pays his respects for the last time. The urn is then removed from under the bed and food is offered to the deity.

This is not only to symbolise the belief

that the child has been blessed with a peaceful life, it is also an opportunity to beseech the deity for a blessed life ahead.

When worshipping Ch'ng Bo, the Teochews like to offer the Sieh Liu Kuih, a cake made of flour, pickled vegetables, red beans and black beans. This will be accompanied by fresh fruits, chicken, rice and tea.

Unfortunately, the tradition is no longer observed by the Teochew community, according to 68-year-old Ng Wee Lay, a member of the Penang Teochew Association. Ng fears even the art of making the Sieh Liu Kuih, a delicacy of the community, may soon be forgotten.

Despite it being a minor community in the mainly Hokkien Penang, the Teochews have enriched the traditions of the Chinese community with their unique customs and practices. But soon, these may all be lost.

Ng says many in the Teochew community are still aware of the custom of worshipping Ch'ng Bo but

they no longer practise it.

"Our children do not see the significance in continuing with the tradition, and they do not even know how to make the Sieh Liu Kuih anymore," he adds, a hint of sadness and regret in his voice.





Marking a decade as World UNESCO Heritage Site

From its refurbished Chinese manors to its artsy cafes, swanky shop terraces to boutique hotels, George Town has skillfully blended East and West, tradition with modernity, making it one of the most culturally diverse cities in Asia.

Yet, it remains unashamedly Malaysian – a melting pot of Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures that have endured the test of time.

As the city marks its 10th birthday as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in July, George Town looks set to retain its old charms and quirky architecture even as it thrives as a 21st century metropolis.



There is a lot going for George Town. While Penang is a state with a Chinese-majority population, it has effortlessly blended the cultures and traditions of the major races in its heritage while retaining much of the characteristics of its past as a British Straits Settlement.

These are, undoubtedly, the main draw for visitors.

Talk to the locals and they will be happy to share their version of stories of old Penang. They are proud to showcase their cultural practices, community traditions and oral history, and they are likely to spice it all up with a great variety of local delicacies.

The local culture and traditions are written in its food, art and craft, its many

festivals, even on the walls of its many century-old shophouses.

All these and more will be showcased in the George Town Heritage Celebrations (GTHC) over two days on 7th and 8th July. Being its 10th anniversary, this year's celebrations also hold special significance.



The theme for this year's event is **POTENTIAL** – Of the Past, In the Present, For the Future. The theme represents a discovery of the city's present and future potential while commemorating its past achievements.

George Town was a trading post where seamen and traders connected. Today, it thrives as a cultural and heritage site. Only time will tell what the future holds.

The city has a lot of potential yet to be discovered, according to Dr Ang Ming Chee, director of George Town World Heritage Incorporated.

"We have seen the past, and we are now experiencing the present. Traditions, culture, heritage, community and sustainable development – these are all factors



Dr. Ang Ming Chee



that have shaped the present. We see a lot of potential for higher achievements in the future," he says.

A lot of exciting programmes have been lined up to ensure that visitors get an unforgettable experience in the celebrations.

The festivities will revolve around four main areas – auspicious things, handicraft, leisure and daily delights. There will be opportunities for cultural exchanges between the locals and foreign visitors.

The 23 major and minor communities from all over Penang are all set to share their tradition and culture, and have a lot of fun at the same time, with anyone who is curious enough to hop in and join in the celebrations.

Melaka's heritage is its chequered history as a spice trading port and the legacies (oh yes delicious cuisine and architecture) left behind by its conquerors by the Dutch, Portuguese and the British.

The intermarriage of its local Malay maidens with Chinese sailors throughout the seven voyages of Admiral Zheng He created an unique community called the Peranakan Baba Nyonya who continued to keep its Chinese tradition.

Malay-infused culinary taste gave rise in its delectable Baba Nyonya cuisine that few visitors in Melaka would want to miss out.

HISTORICAL MELAKA

Photo courtesy of Tourism Malaysia

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SPECIALISTS IN
INCENTIVE
& BUSINESS
TRAVEL

BMC
TRAVEL

- A haven for travellers

Words by Laura Lee

BMC Travel Sdn Bhd has been instrumental in promoting Melaka and George Town – two cities that will mark 10 years as UNESCO World Heritage Sites in July – as choice destinations for tourists.

This destination travel company, incorporated in 1979, making it the oldest travel agency in Malaysia, differentiates itself from others by setting high standards for itself to earn the trust and confidence of its clients.

He credits his company's success to its brand image, product attributes and shared values. "We ensure personalised and cherished experiences as well as service commitment. Partnership with integrity is also paramount to us," he adds.

Leong claims BMC is the first travel agency to offer cost breakdown for its clients in the name of transparency.

Such ethics are imparted to the staff

from the first day of operations, thanks to corporate coach Michael Heah, an ex-boss and mentor who helped conceive the company's values. Leong also counts former tourism minister Tan Sri Dr Ng Yen Yen as a mentor. He recalls how his team had a

ly," he says.

He personally coaches new employees and organises two training sessions for the staff every year. "This year, we did a Han cultures study @ The Malaysian Han Studies Melaka. It's the teachings of Confucius that emphasizes justice, honesty, honour, integrity, righteousness, politeness, decorum and a sense of propriety," he adds.

"This is the kind of corporate culture that differentiates BMC Travel from the rest."



The company that started with only six staff now has a team of 52, led by a strong senior management. Owner and managing director Billy M.C. Leong, says his company specialises in incentive and business travel and has survived through thick and thin, thanks to the employees.

"I'm blessed to have this committed team," he says. In an industry with a typically high employee turnover, more than 30% of his employees have stayed for more than a decade. Leong adds that 85% of his clients are also repeat clientele.

great time working with her in Australia to revive Malaysia's tourism industry that had been hit hard by the SARS scare in 2003.

Strong Value System

Leong, a staunch Buddhist, holds strongly to the company's values. He refuses to take any commission from his customers' spending at restaurants, tourist commission shopping stops, or nightlife activities. It's not in our culture and if any employee is caught doing it, he is dismissed immediately," he says.



Thematic offerings

BMC Travel inbound segment focuses on corporate travel, supported by incentive groups from China, India, Indonesia and the Philippines. It offers thematic excursions, such as the gastronomy tour. It facilitated Hong Kong food critic Choi Lan's group tour to Malaysia.

Leong says the challenge, besides ensuring operational efficiency and high service standards, is managing customers' expectations. This is especially so in niche areas such as the tour to Penang for 1,100 members of the Millionaire Club Indonesia that BMC Travel managed recently.

The largest group ever handled by BMC Travel comprised 3,800 visitors from an insurance company in China. "We had a kenduri and even added a mock wedding ceremony and a wayang kulit performance at Tok Senik Village in Langkawi," Leong says.



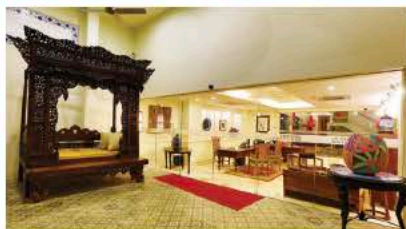
In Penang, BMC Travel has also organised various unique thematic events – from beach dinner parties featuring the island's famous hawker fare to dragon boat race for team building exercises. Leong recalls fondly the Rose Wedding tour where couples participated in a mass wedding ceremony and dined on the beach in their wedding gowns.

He has brought celebrities such as Hong Kong renowned actress Petrina Fung Bobo to speak at corporate events in Penang and to record a video to promote life values at his four-star boutique hotel in Melaka.

Caring & Sharing

Corporate social responsibility features strongly in the company's culture, a reflection of its values that emphasize compassion, passion, a commitment for what they do, caring and sharing with the community and eliciting trust and engagement with them.

Among its earlier CSR projects was a



Penang Bridge cycling event to raise funds for underprivileged children. The company also invited Chinese national Huang Jie, a teacher who lost an arm and her feet in the Sichuan earthquake of 2008 to share her story of how she inspired others to live a life with dignity in spite of their mishap.



He has regarded blind pianist Colin Ng and renowned autistic savant artist Yeak Ping Lean as teachers of lifelong learning. They were invited to share stories at BMC Travel's corporate events to motivate participants to stay strong in life. Yeak Ping Lean's paintings are featured in the gallery of the Settlement Hotel, Melaka, which recently bagged the Best Hotel in Malaysia for Hotel

Services (4-star city) category at the Malaysia Tourism Awards 2018.

"Whenever Ping Lean comes back to Malaysia, we get him to share his inspiring story of how he saw his two sisters through university through sales of his paintings," Leong says.

Innovative Outbound Tours

On a typical day, BMC Travel handles an average of 1,000 outbound travellers to various parts of the world. Recently, it had a group of 1,800 people going to Budapest. It also organises study tours for small delegations to foreign universities and it works with TV stations as part of its activities.

Apart from ticketing, BMC Travel also handles events, frequent independent travellers, niche tourism and special interest groups including Muslim clients.

For Leong, getting into the tourism business has been a meaningful self-fulfilling journey.



DRIVEN TO SUCCESS

by his mother

Words by Laura Lee



Behind every successful man there is a woman. In the case of BMC Travel Sdn Bhd owner and managing director Billy M.C. Leong, that woman was his late mother Chan Yoone.

Apart from single-handedly raising Billy, his sister and their two brothers after their father passed away when Billy was only 10 years old, she was also his close confidante and advisor.

Billy says his mother had even managed to send him and his brothers either to college or university. "She was a very capable woman," he says with pride.



On graduating with an accounting qualification at the age of 20, Billy began working as a professional accountant with a leading local accounting firm. However, fate works in mysterious ways. Late one night, while riding his motorcycle home, he

met with an accident. His mother, always a strong influence in his life, decided that he should stop working there.

Billy then turned to a favourite pastime. He began teaching ikebana and flower arrangement (he is a qualified instructor for both) as well as teaching book-keeping classes. While he was helping out at a relative's florist shop, Mari-gold, in Petaling Jaya, a customer offered him a job as a freelance tour guide.

He developed a new-found interest in tourism, leading to him taking a course for tourist guides. He emerged as the top student in the Melaka Guide Course. At that time, he was coached by the late Robert Tan an extraordinary tour guide in Melaka.

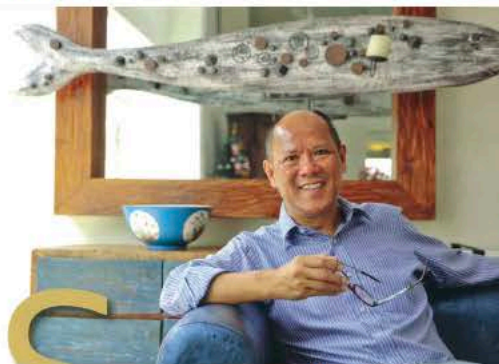
By age 22, Billy was hooked on tourism. A leading local travel agency, offered him a job. He learned the ropes quickly and over the course of 11 years in the company, he rose to become head of international marketing, responsible for setting up offices overseas and serving major international corporate clients in the company.

His sincerity and sense of responsibility did not go unnoticed. One of his clients, the late Tan Sri Ahmad Razali Mohamed Ali, Selangor's 10th Mentri Besar, encouraged him to strike out on his own and even offered to bankroll him.

Combined with his RM12,000 savings and some borrowings from his sister-in-law and a close childhood friend, he acquired

Bandar Management Corporation (BMC) from the Low Yat Group. He has today developed BMC Travel as the most reputable agency in Incentive and Business travel in Malaysia.

He made Ahmad Razali the first chairman of his travel agency. For the company,



he retained the initial BMC, this time as an abbreviation for Business Meeting, Conference and Convention (BMC) Tours and Travel.

There were other reasons for retaining the initial "BMC", Billy says. "It stands for Billy Mun Cheon (his name) and, to my mother, it stands for 'Bring Money Come,'" he says with a laugh.

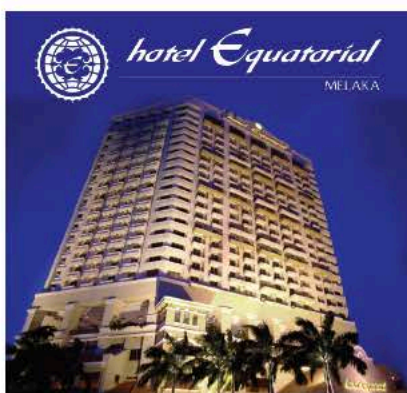
He still remembers vividly what she told him. "The tourism job is a very good one because you are sharing goodwill and knowledge with people when you take them abroad. For those who come to your homeland, you are sharing your joy and friendship. This is a business full of merit. You should keep at it."

He has, for 38 years now.

Long-serving GM back for a second stint

In a mean and results-driven industry, where a general manager rarely serves in the same hotel for more than three or four years, Dato' Syed A. Rahman Alkaff is an exception. He has been at the Melaka Equatorial Hotel for 16 years.

He first took the helm at the hotel in 1997, left in 2013, and returned recently to take charge again. That puts him in the unique position of having had a hand in the steady growth of the Equatorial into a leading hotel in the state. It is, indeed, a labour of love.



Melaka Equatorial Hotel is located within the enclave of the UNESCO World Heritage City, a prime location by any measure. It is also close to the Tunku Memorial where, on Feb 20, 1956, then Chief Minister of Malaya Tunku Abdul Rahman announced that the nation would achieve independence on Aug 31, 1957.

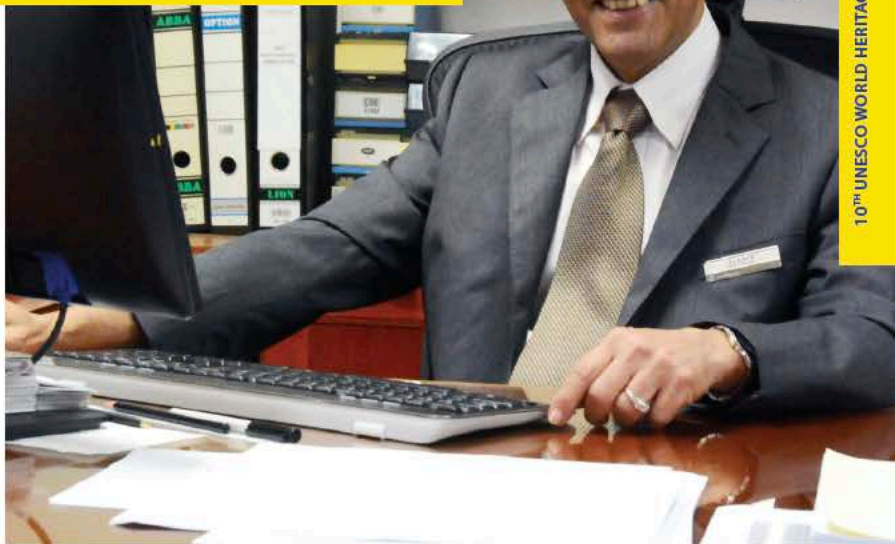
Dato' Syed Rahman has witnessed the transformation of Melaka from a mediocre tourist destination to a must-visit place of interest. He has served under five of the state's Chief Ministers, including recently appoint Adly Zahari.

Before joining Equatorial, he worked at the Hyatt Hotel Group where, over a 27-year period, he served in the group's properties in Singapore, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.

His love for Melaka

In recounting the changes over the years, Dato' Syed Rahman recalls that when the hotel first opened its doors in 1997, the

TOURISM PERSONALITY



competition was not as keen as it is now.

"There are many new hotels today, and room rates have become very competitive, making it a challenge to compete with them," he points out. Even so, the Equatorial has successfully retained its position as a market leader and trendsetter in this over-crowded industry.

To stay ahead of the game, the hotel will begin upgrading its facilities after its 20th anniversary celebrations in June.

Failure is not an option. For him, the industry maxim "pain of change or pain of staying the same" is a constant reminder.

Melaka the largest tourist attraction

Melaka's unique tourist attractions are what differentiate it from the other states. It is a historical town with an abundance of history and culture going back to the days when it was a centre of trade in Southeast



Asia.

Chinese-Muslim Admiral Zheng He made seven voyages to the city state. Arab and Indian merchants plied their trade there before Melaka was eventually colonised, first by the Portuguese and then later by the Dutch and the English.

All of them left behind a rich legacy, best reflected in the architecture of Melaka.

The future

Dato' Syed Rahman expresses hope that the new state government will act as a catalyst for the growth of the tourism sector by promoting the state as a top tourist destination.

He is also of the view that the authorities should regulate the hospitality industry to avert the situation of an overhang of rooms. Hotels are fully booked in the weekends and holidays but occupancy rates drop on weekdays.

Dato' Syed Rahman looks forward to a period of rapid growth and major challenges. On his return to the Equatorial, he says that when the owners of the hotel called him, he agreed without hesitation.

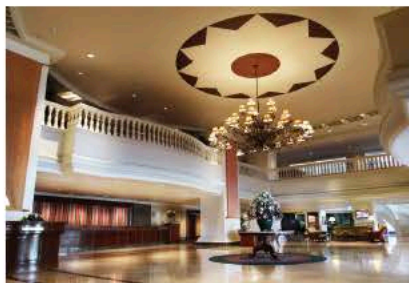
"It's wonderful and that's one of the reasons why I don't mind coming back for the second time," he says.



SEEING MELAKA ON FOOT

Words & photos by Rena Lim

The best way to get the inside story on a city and to feel its vibes is to walk its many streets with someone who knows its customs, culture, cuisine and history. On a recent walking tour of Melaka's UNESCO World Heritage Site, I had the benefit of the company of the lovely local guide Peck Choo.



Having checked into the Equatorial Hotel, which is just a stone's throw away from the A Famosa, I decided that it would be ideal to take in the historical sites first.

On the short walk to the Portuguese fort, I was greeted by colourful trishaws blasting cheerful music in the air. I could have taken a ride on one of these trishaws, but travelling on a shoestring budget meant that walking was a more economical option.

The A Famosa is a favourite subject for shutterbugs, and I too clicked away.

Information on the history and significance of the structure can be read on a bulletin board posted nearby.

The fort looks old but sturdy, a cannon stands guard near the entrance, still symbolically serving its original purpose to stave off invaders coming in from the sea. But the new breed of intruders – the tourists – could safely walk in for a closer look and even pose for photographs.

I took Choo's advice and made the Melaka Sultanate Palace, located next to A Famosa, our next stop. Be made aware that this is a replica of the original palace. After all, wooden structures don't stand the test of time.

For RM3, you get to tour the inside of the royal abode. It was a construction marvel in its time – the palace was erected without the use of a single nail. Stepping



into the palace is akin to walking into a traditional Malay house. The floorboards creak with every step you take.

The Melaka Sultanate Palace also serves as a museum of sorts – relics of the once powerful empire – such as the keris, trinkets and attire – are displayed in there. The royal chamber was a sight to behold. On the ground floor, there is a gallery of paintings and mannequins that depict how the barter system worked and how business was conducted in those early days of Malay civilisation.



Next up was St Paul's Hill, from where you get an equally spectacular view of Melaka as you would from the top of the revolving Menara Taming Sari.

Walk down the other side of St Paul's Hill and you will come to the Stadthuys, an old building that used to serve as the Dutch governor and deputy governor's office. Its red exterior gives it a distinct look.

Next on my jaunt was Jonker Walk, and I was looking forward to it. It was not 6pm yet and most of the stalls had not been set up, but there was still a lot to see. When night fell, Jonker Walk came alive, with restaurants and shops fighting for patrons.

I then crossed the Melaka River to take a pleasant stroll along the bustling, yet clean, streets. The food here is not to be missed, and you can have it all. From durian puffs, sweet desserts, Nyonya kuih, cold coconut



shakes to full Nyonya cuisines and chicken rice, I was spoilt for choice. Ultimately I gave in to the aromatic fragrance of the chicken rice lingering in the streets and settled for a plate of chicken rice balls served by a Hainanese uncle.

Continuing my walk, I found more Peranakan trinkets, kebayas, beaded shoes and Nyonya theme paintings. I walked past the Baba and Nyonya Museum housed in a traditional Peranakan home, and could not stop wondering how quaint it looked.

A 20-minute stroll from Jonker Walk took me to my last stop for the day – the Quayside where a replica of the Flor de la Mar is berthed. This was the ship that the Portuguese general Alfonso de Albuquerque sailed to Melaka to capture the city in



the 1500s. It was the finest vessel of its era.

Thanks to Choo, a Melaka resident of 34 years, I learned more about the heritage city than I ever did on previous trips. If you need a local guide, you can reach her on 017-944 4197.

The Straits of Malacca has always been one of the world's busiest maritime routes. Thanks to its strategic position, Melaka – one of the earliest settlements along this great waterway – quickly established itself as a major trading centre.

It was where Chinese, Arab, Indian and Javanese traders bought or sold spices, silk, porcelain and tea. They brought also along their cultures and practices which intertwined to give Melaka its unique characteristics. The Portuguese, Dutch and British who came later enriched the local culture with their own.

There are many stories of Melaka's origins – each more fascinating than the one before. Historically, the city was founded by a Palembang prince Parameswara who fled a Majapahit invasion to set foot in the Malay Peninsula in 1400.

He was inspired by the scene of a mousedeer kicking its predator – a dog – into the river. He decided to name his newfound home Melaka, after the tree under which he was resting when he witnessed how the mousedeer turned the tables on the dog.

Along with its history and culture, Melaka is also marked by a unique blend of the architecture of the different communities that have made the city their home.

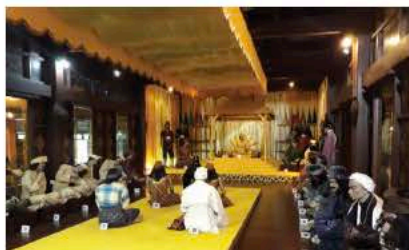
Where2 explores some of them.

Melaka Sultanate Palace

Melaka has some of the most interesting historical artefacts in Malaysia. Within the confines of the Melaka Sultanate Palace – a replica of the original royal abode – you can catch a rare glimpse of the glory of the once great Malay kingdom.

Inside are the Sultan's Chamber, King's Audience Hall, trading materials, traditional attire and objects from the reign of Sultan Mansur Shah. In one of the eight chambers, visitors can sit down for a game of *Congkak* or Chinese chess while enjoying the nostalgia of classical Malay music.

The palace is a marvel in itself – it was constructed without the use of a single nail.



In each chamber the visitor will see trinkets and jewellery used by the royalty, exhibits of traditional Malay attire, musical instruments, weapons and gifts from foreign emissaries. The Melaka Sultanate Palace offers a rare peek into this ancient Malay kingdom like no other.

St Paul's Hill

Just above the Melaka Sultanate Palace stands a hill rich in Portuguese and Dutch history. Within the ruins of St Paul's Church there stand tombstones dating back to 1650. Stepping into the old, brick wall structure is like taking a trip back in time. You could almost witness the fall of a once glorious kingdom.



At the edge of the hill facing the Stadthuys, the statue of St Francis Xavier stands guard over his flock. The statue has lost its right arm, severed by a large casuarina tree that fell on it. It is said that on the morning of the statue's sanctification in 1952, blood flowed from the stump where the arm was detached.

Ironically, the missionary's right arm

was severed and sent to Rome on the orders of the Vatican when he was canonised in 1641, more than 300 years before his stone replica also lost an arm. The Catholic Church had made the demand for the arm that was used to bless his converts.

A Famosa

In the heart of the heritage site and on the riverfront stands a vibrantly bright red building that the Dutch had erected. This is the Stadthuys, believed to be the oldest surviving Dutch building in the East. It once served as the office and official residence of the Dutch governors and officers and became the focus of the British when they took over Melaka from the Dutch.

In 1982, it was converted into the Museum of History and Ethnography. Here visitors can find maps, prints and pictures recounting the city's rich history. Nonetheless, the chunky doors and wrought iron hinges clearly speak of its Dutch heritage.

In front of the Stadthuys is another relic of historical value – the Tang Beng Swee Clock Tower. Although it bears an unmistakable Dutch design, it was actually built in 1886 by Tan Jiak Kim for the people of Melaka at the request of his father Tan Beng Swee. The Tans were a millionaire and philanthropic family.

In 1982, the original clock from England was replaced with a Seiko, causing an uproar among the locals who were still bitter about their harsh treatment during the Japanese Occupation.

Stadthuys & The Clock Tower

This Portuguese structure has become synonymous with Melaka. Only a gate and a cannon remain of the once formidable A Famosa fort that used to occupy the entire hillside.

The fort was built by the 16th century Portuguese explorer and general Alfonso de Albuquerque. It would later house the entire Portuguese administration, complete with hospitals, five churches, stockades and four key towers.

In 1641 the Dutch captured Melaka and drove the Portuguese out. The new occupants proceeded to carry out massive renovation of the fort. During the Napoleonic Wars, Melaka changed hands once again. In a swap deal, the British surrendered Bencool in the East Indies (now Indonesia) to the Dutch in exchange for Melaka.

Based on the fact that the structure has seen so much history, it would be remiss of

visitors to just pose for pictures.

Today, the remaining gate of A Famosa has become a gathering point for buskers. Eager crowds would gather to be serenaded by the classic songs accompanied by the strumming of guitars.

Flor de la Mar

The *Flor de la Mar*, or *Flower of the Sea*, was a 40-tonne ship that ruled the seas in the early 1500s. The massive vessel had separate areas for the captain's cabin, the deck and detention room. These have been faithfully replicated and the modern version is now berthed at Quayside. Inside, the vessel is lit by dim orange lights and visitors learn all about the ship through an audio commentary.

This offers visitors a glimpse of what it would have been like sailing back to Portugal in this vessel. Unfortunately, it never



made it home. The *Flor de la Mar* capsized and sank off the coast of Sumatra, with the rumoured massive amount of treasures going down with it. There have been attempts to find the treasure but there has not been a single report of success.

The *Flor de la Mar*, built in Lisbon in the 1500s, was one of the largest and most beautiful ships in its day. Not only was it a trading vessel. It also saw many sea battles, like in 1507 when the Portuguese attacked Ormuz.

The Portuguese general Alfonso de Albuquerque led the invasion of Melaka in 1511 on board this vessel.

These historical sites are some of the many attractions in Melaka. The cultural scene and local cuisines are equally alluring, and visitors will be taken in by the warmth and chatter among the locals.

Welcome to Melaka!

HISTORY IN A boutique hotel

If you're taking a walking tour of the Melaka UNESCO World Heritage Site, you could add the historical Settlement Hotel to your list of places to visit.

While it's not exactly located in the city centre, it is still within the heritage area, and it's worth the effort to take a detour there if you can. The boutique hotel is a 10-minute drive or a 30-minute trishaw ride from the A Famosa fort.

It is located on a humble spot along Jalan Ujong Pasir, near the Portuguese Settlement, which is off the route to the main tourist attractions. Nonetheless, it turns out to be the perfect place in which to relax



and chill out.

On reaching the Settlement Hotel, you will first step into a traditional English garden with a majestic looking fountain set against the whitewashed façade of the hotel. As you walk through the entrance, you are greeted by beautiful pergolas of pleasant pink bougainvillea. It is a gorgeous sight.

Beside the pergolas sits a white wicker swing chair. There's no better way to spend a lazy afternoon than to curl up in one of these chairs.

But the main attraction – the real deal – for any visitor has to be the ornately carved

350-year-old Sultan Bed from Palembang, Sumatra. It sits on the verandah, next to the white wicker swing chair.

If you remember your history lessons well, you will know that the founder of Melaka, Parameswara, was a Palembang prince who fled Majapahit invaders to reach Melaka. He established an empire that would last more than a century. At its height, Melaka controlled all of the Malay Peninsula and a large part of Sumatra.

On the site where the Settlement Hotel now stands was a four-storey government building. The Sultan Bed used to be housed in that building.





Keeping the

PORTUGUESE DANCE

alive

Photos from 1511 o maliao mallao dance troupe FB page

The Portuguese Settlement is a quiet and peaceful little enclave in Melaka. But whenever there is something to celebrate, the place comes alive with dance and music.

The Portuguese continue to keep their arts and culture alive and their traditional or folk dances, of which there are 15 variations, are an integral part of that tradition. Among the more popular variations are the Cianika and Farapeira.

One person who has spent most of his life to promote these traditional dances is Gerard de Costa, through his dance troupe 1511 O' Maliao Maliao. He is full of enthusi-

asm whenever he is asked to talk about his passion for dance.

The 1511 O' Maliao Maliao – made up of 20 to 22 members – is likely the only Portuguese dance troupe left in Malaysia. The dancers don different costumes – from working clothes to colourful traditional attire – for their performances.

De Costa, a second generation troupe leader, began to perform in 1974, at the age of 11. Since then, he has worked hard to keep the troupe together to ensure that his community's tradition is kept alive.

Apart from the traditional Portuguese

festivals, the 1511 O' Maliao Maliao also performs at corporate events. "We go wherever we're invited to showcase our dance," de Costa says.

Sadly, troupe will not be performing at this year's Fiesta San Pedro from June 29 to July 1. "But we are happy to perform at corporate functions," de Costa says.

The troupe charges between RM2,000 and RM5,000 for each performance, and those interested in hiring them can call **016-684 2502**.



PAIN AND AGONY

in the name of art

Foot-binding, a Chinese tradition dating back to the 12th century, has given way to modern sensibilities and compassion. Today, the tiny footwear of this imperial practice has become a collector's item.

When the Peranakan community emigrated to then-Malaya in the 15th to 17th centuries, they brought the practice along with them. Today one person who keeps the tradition – though not the practice – alive is Raymond Yeo. He continues to make

these three-inch footwear at his old straits-theme shop on Jonker Street in Melaka.

The shoes are sold at RM90 or more a pair. Purchasers can choose to have their prized collection encased in glass.

According to Yeo, just in Melaka alone, there were as many as 1,000 women with bound feet back in the 1920s. The practice died in the late 1990s. By 1992, there were only about a dozen of these women still alive.



The practice was introduced during the Song Dynasty. Girls had their feet bound when they were about three years old. Their feet were kept small so they could fit into tiny shoes. Bound feet, a painful process, was nonetheless deemed a symbol of wealth and status.

Today, these shoes are seen as works of art. Apart from shoes for bound feet, Yeo also makes and sells hand-made beaded shoes.



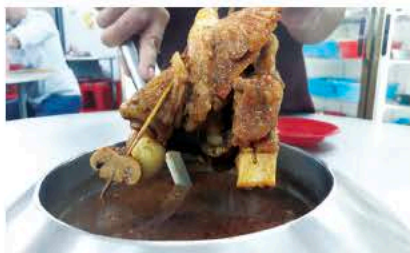
A gastronomical excursion in

MELAKA

A part from its history and harmonious multi-cultural community, Melaka is equally known for its many cuisines. It is for this culinary delight that visitors are drawn to the state.

From satay celup to chicken rice ball, the menu is representative of every culture that makes up this melting pot that is Malaysia. Sampling each and every item is a gastronomical exploration.

Take the satay celup, for instance. It has become so popular that restaurants serving this dish are seeing a boom in business. Skewers of raw or semi-cooked seafood, meat and vegetables are dunked in boiling satay gravy until they are cooked, enabling the seafood and meat to soak up the spicy and fragrant flavour of the gravy. Tasty and spicy, it is best paired with fresh chilled juices.



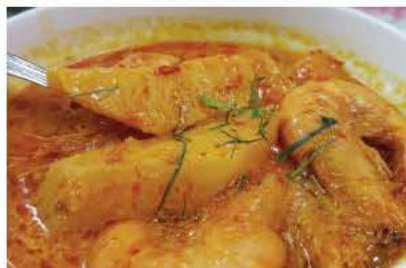
At Ban Lee Siang, one of the first satay celup restaurants, it takes up to eight hours to prepare the 20 different ingredients for the gravy.

It is an equally tedious process to make the chicken rice ball, another Melaka favourite. Preparation begins even before the rice is cooked. The sticky and fragrant rice is then shaped into spheres to give it a unique taste.

It is best described as an explosion of flavours on your palate – there are hints of garlic, onions and sesame sauce. Pairing with crispy roasted chicken enhances the taste.



A visit to Melaka is not complete without sampling its heritage – authentic Peranakan food. The Peranakans (also known as Baba-Nyonya) are Straits Chinese who have adopted the Malay customs and their cuisine is a fusion of these two cultures. It is guaranteed to satisfy any type of craving.



The Kocik Kitchen on Jonker Walk offers one of the most complete range of Nyonya dishes. Don't be fooled by what you see. For instance the ayam buah keluak may look quite ordinary but the chicken in soya sauce packs a robust flavour and unique taste.

For those who prefer something sour and spicy, the lemak nanas prawns and Nyonya asam fish are perfect. They also

come with a hint of sweetness that will tingle the taste buds.

The Portuguese community has been in Melaka for centuries, and its food has become very much a part of the local cuisine. At the Portuguese Settlement, numerous stalls manned by friendly faces welcome hungry diners.

If you're not sure where to start, try the chicken devil curry for its fiery and sharp taste. The brightly coloured dish is packed with a wide range of spices, including shallots, garlic, turmeric, red chillies to give it the complex flavour that will tantalise the taste buds.

Add some vinegar and it is unlike any curry you have tasted in Malaysia. Malaysians love the nasi kandar curries but given a choice, most will pick the devil curry any day.

With its rich history, vibrant local culture and enticing cuisines, Melaka is a place you must experience.





20
YEARS OF DEDICATION
HOTEL EQUATORIAL MELAKA

COMFORT & LUXURY

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