

A Melting Pot in Malacca City Chinatown

Wahyuni Kamah discovers the cultural heart of a historical Malaysian city built by a fusion of traditions

“You chose the right location for staying in Malacca,” my guide Firdaus said as he started to pedal his trishaw through Jl. Tun Tan Cheng Lok, formerly known as Heeren Street, the location of my bed-and-breakfast in Malacca. “You are in Chinatown.”

Malacca is a Malaysian state located on the southern part of the Malay Peninsula. The 38.62-hectare core zone of Malacca City, its capital, has been listed as a World Heritage Site by Unesco since 2008.

The city is home to around 800,000 people of various ethnic backgrounds: Malay, Chinese, Indian and even Dutch and Portuguese.

Originally a fishing village, the port city was founded by Parameswara (1344-1414), also known as Iskandar Shah, who later became the Sultan of Malacca.

Situated on a strategic strait, Malacca flourished into successful trading city, attracting Chinese merchants in the early 15th century. Adm. Cheng Ho of China's Ming Dynasty visited Malacca several times. In order to strengthen the bilateral and trade relation of both sides, he brought with him princesses to be married to local rulers.

The sixth Sultan of Malacca, Sultan Mansur Shah who ruled the region from 1456 to 1477, strengthened ties with China by marrying Hang Li Po, a daughter of the Ming emperor. She brought along with her servants and staff who also married with local Malays, starting the “Baba-Nyonya” or “Peranakan” culture practiced by people of mixed Chinese heritage.

These immigrants and their descendants founded Malacca's Chinatown, which started as rows of huts situated on the west bank of the Melaka river.

Considered the oldest Chinatown in Malaysia, the area is now concentrated on three streets, namely Jl. Tun Tan Cheng Lock (Heeren Street), Jl. Hang Jebat



Chinatown in Malacca City is a bustling center for commerce and culture and reflects a unique blend of Chinese heritage mixed with Malay and Dutch influences. JG Photos/Wahyuni Kamah

(Jonker Street) and Jl. Tokong.

On Jl. Tokong in the 1600s, *Kapitan China* Tay Kie Ki built Cheng Hoon Teng temple to serve the religious needs of the people. It is now the oldest and finest traditional Chinese temple in Malaysia.

“Heeren Street used to be the elite residential area for Dutch masters during Dutch control of Malacca [1641-1825], while Jonker Street used to be the residential area for their servants and subordinates,” Firdaus said.

The Dutch colonized Malacca in 1641 after defeating the Portuguese who had destroyed the city and the Sultan's palace 130 years earlier.

In a 1824 treaty, Malacca came under British rule in exchange for Bencoolen, in Sumatra (now known as Bengkulu). After the Dutch left Malacca, the prosperous Babas and Nyonyas moved to occupy the three main streets.

These narrow roads are now filled with houses, many of which have two storeys, displaying both Dutch and Chinese-influenced architectural designs.

Many are noticeably narrow, because during the Dutch colonial times, a tax was imposed based on the number of windows a house had. Residents, therefore, built up, instead of out.

My bed-and-breakfast is located in one of these narrow houses. It boasts a small courtyard and lofty ceilings.

On Heeren Street, houses are made of concrete and have a largely Dutch influence in their designs, with small local touches. Buildings on Jonker Street and Tokong Street, meanwhile, are primarily made of wood. These different materials denoted the different social classes of the residents.

During Chinese New Year, most business in the area are closed, with the exception of Jonker Street, the most touristy part of Malacca City.

The street is also the commercial and cultural center of the capital. This is

where visitors can find shops filled with antiques, souvenirs, clothes and shoes, food, snacks as well as lodgings.

Some shop owners use Malay, reminding me of home. Several houses have been converted into heritage hostels.

This street has a large Baba-Nyonya community, with restaurants serving Chinese-influenced cuisine, such as *laksa* (spicy noodle soup), *otak-otak* (fish cakes), *kangkung belacan* (spicy stir-fried water spinach) and *asam pedas* (sour and spicy fish stew). Tourists can also find plenty of shops selling *kebaya nyonya* (a traditional blouse) and *nyonya-style* shoes (handmade, beaded shoes).

The area also has many Chinese clan houses, or *kongsi*, which were established to help newcomers from China find their bearings and settle into their new home. These meeting halls also serve as temples, which are always beautifully decorated for the New Year celebrations.

The mood was festive on Jonker and Tokong Street, with red lanterns and red-and-gold posters of goats (to celebrate the Year of the Goat or Ram) adorning the buildings.

I visited Cheng Hoon Teng temple on Chinese New Year's eve. The structure's exterior and interior are beautifully decorated with carvings and murals. Its roof is particularly eye-catching, with beautiful porcelain sculptures depicting a scene from an ancient tale.

Construction of the shrine hall in the temple did not use a single nail. Three large doors that lead to the main area are adorned with big red ribbons — the color red in Chinese culture symbolizes joy and prosperity. A small crowd of worshipers had already filled the main hall.

The temple is located only a few meters away from Kampung Kling Mosque, the oldest mosque in Malacca, as well as the Sri Poyatha Vinayagar Moorthi Temple, the oldest Hindu temple in the region. These places of worship are both located on Harmony Street.

Despite the heavy rain showers on New Year's eve, the celebration went ahead and fireworks filled the sky. On New Year's day, dancers performed the dragon dance on the streets to attract luck to residents and banish evil spirits. Unlike Western culture, which considers dragons fierce and dangerous, the Chinese view these mythical creatures as helpful and friendly.

The festive ambiance reminded me of Idul Fitri celebration back home; a time of family togetherness.

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Firdaus, trishaw driver and part-time tour guide

Chocolate Greenhouse Working to Save Cocoa

Alfons Luna

Chocolate lovers take heart: a steamy greenhouse near London is helping to ensure that cocoa crops globally remain disease-free and bountiful to cope with the growing appetite for sweet treats.

On a winter morning, the temperature is a chilly eight degrees Celsius but inside the International Cocoa Quarantine Center, which simulates tropical conditions, the air is a balmy 23 degrees.

“Cocoa plants are generally quite difficult plants to grow,” said Heather Lake, a technician at the newly revamped center, which is funded half by the British chocolate industry and half by the US government. “They don't like too much sunlight, they don't like too much shade. It's quite difficult to get the climate correct.”

Situated in the village of Arborfield, west of London, the ICQC boasts around 1,000 square meters of greenhouse space and 400 cocoa plant varieties.

The center's aim is to reduce the amount of disease affecting cocoa plants

by quarantining them before sharing them with different countries to produce new, more resistant varieties.

The plants are often collected in the wild on expeditions to the tropics on which researchers collect cuttings or seeds from disease-free samples.

At a time when changing tastes in emerging economies like China and India are fueling global demand for chocolate, the center acts as a vital resource for producer countries when pests or droughts strike crops.

“That's where we come into play,” said Andrew Daymond, manager of the ICQC, which was set up 30 years ago. “We are the main hub for international movements of cocoa plants.”

Cocoa originates from South America but west Africa now dominates production, accounting for 73 percent of global output, according to the International Cocoa Organization.

Such a heavy concentration of production in one region — Ivory Coast and Ghana alone represent 60 percent — makes it vulnerable to shocks.

Prices leapt to almost \$3,400 a metric

ton in New York in September amid fears that the Ebola crisis in west Africa could affect cocoa supplies. Both Ivory Coast and Ghana have, however, so far been spared by the outbreak.

The three countries worst hit by Ebola — Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia — represent just 0.7 percent of world cocoa output and saw their yields plummet.

Cocoa prices later fell back again but still rose 15 percent overall during 2014.

There is also the potential threat to the industry from plant diseases, which in west Africa can mean up to 30 percent of the annual harvest is lost.

“In each cocoa-growing country, they face particular challenges to do with pest and diseases, low yield potential of planted materials, extreme weather events,” Daymond said. “The basic objective of the project is to allow safe movement of cocoa plants from one part of the world to another.”

In Britain, which has no endemic pests or diseases affecting cocoa, the center can grow resistant varieties before dispatching them around the world, though few would recognize these as cocoa trees.



“When we do an export, we send the small branches off a tree,” Lake said. “We then remove all the leaves and we just send a stick.”

Daymond explained that producer countries can then “establish a plant that is genetically identical to the plant that they received the cutting from.”

The center also researches the effects of climate change on cocoa crops and is looking at developing new varieties that would be more resistant to droughts or increased carbon dioxide levels.

Agence France-Presse

A horticultural technician checks cocoa plant leaves for pests inside the International Cocoa Quarantine Center in Reading, near London.

AFP Photo/Justin Tallis