

Malacca A UNESCO World Heritage Site Just a Short Drive from Singapore

By Andra Leo

Six hundred years ago, a fugitive prince named Parameswara from Majapahit (Eastern Java) landed at the site of present-day Malacca. Legend has it that he observed a tiny *pelandok* (mouse deer) kick at one of his hunting dogs. Impressed by the diminutive creature's bravery, he decided this was a propitious spot to establish a settlement, which he named Malacca after the malacca (Indian gooseberry) tree he'd been standing under.



Malacca's famous red buildings include Christ Church and the Stadhuys

By 1403 Malacca was an established trading centre with sea-going vessels unloading in the deep-water river while an easily defensible hill (now St Paul's Hill) provided a natural vantage point. These natural features helped Malacca prosper, with traders coming down the coast from the Arabian Peninsula and lands to the north. China also noticed this rich *entrepot* – the sultanate was visited no less than seven times by Chinese fleets, including that of Zheng He (1371–c.1433).

Europe's resource-hungry colonial powers also took notice. First came the Portuguese, succeeded by the Dutch and finally the British, each leaving forts, buildings and customs to mark its passage. Malacca was an intriguing melting pot of races and cultures from which emerged distinctive blended groups, such as the Peranakans and the Malaccan Portuguese, whose language, *Cristao*, dates back more than 400 years. In 2008 the city's eclectic mix of buildings from earlier eras garnered Malacca the coveted UNESCO World Heritage status.

A stroll around Malacca's heritage area is a peek into its exotic past. All that remains of the great Portuguese fort *A Famosa*, razed by the British in 1803, is its gate, but recent excavations have unearthed parts of its walls, which are now a tourist attraction adjacent to the modern Pahlawan shopping centre.

Malacca's Dutch heritage also remains in the form of the red Christ Church and the old *Stadhuys*, once the governor's residence and now an ethnography museum that offers overnight stays. Isabella Bird, an intrepid

female traveller of the Victorian era, stayed here in solitary splendour, describing the building as having an "eerie, faded stateliness" – not necessarily the best recommendation for today's traveller!

Across the Malacca River is Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lok, a living museum of Peranakan houses showcasing Malacca's Baba and Nonya heritage. The conserved former home of the Chan family, with many wonderful artefacts on display, is especially worth a visit. The area is filled with inns, cafés, art galleries and restaurants. Nearby is Jalan Hang Jebat which, during the day, is the bustling antiques street of the heritage area, but at weekends metamorphoses into Jonker Walk, a lively night market.

The once-famous, deep-water Malacca River became silted up, but has been revived. One can take cruises to admire the historic buildings lining the riverbanks and to view the prehistoric-looking monitor lizards sunning themselves in the mud.

Given its blend of ethnicities, Malacca, not surprisingly, is also famous for the variety of its cuisine. Portuguese and Peranakan restaurants abound, while roadside stalls sell local favourites such as *nasi lemak* (rice cooked in coconut milk), *satay celup* (a unique steamboat type of dish) and *roti canai* (unleavened bread and curry).

From Singapore there is a train service to Tampin, Malacca, but buses and cars are probably the most convenient way to get there. It's about a three-hour drive once you cross the Causeway.



Trishaws awaiting customers

Two useful websites are:
www.malaxi.com/melaka and
www.melaka.net

Andra Leo settled in Singapore 42 years ago. After a stint as a lecturer at NUS, she spent three years in Malacca as managing editor of *The Malacca Spectrum*. Her interest in FOM was awakened by its *Study Tours*. She is also a member of an FOM book group and an active volunteer for **PASSAGE**.

Photos courtesy of Susan Hunter