

On the heritage trail in **Kuala Lumpur**



Jaswinder Kaur Gill gives a new image by exploring the old

Captions, from left to right:

1: The Old Post Office's grand stair-tower with its many arches

2: View of colourful 19th-century shophouses along Lebu Ampang

3: The Central Market along Jalan Hang Kasturi is a row of shophouses

4: The Moorish facade of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building borders one side of Merdeka Square. In the background is the three-storey building housing the National History Museum

Kuala Lumpur is a vibrant metropolis of shiny glass towers and mega shopping malls. Development is the buzzword. As the city expands in size, its core of old buildings remains. Sleek towers of glass and steel dwarf two- and three-storey shophouses rich in architectural details.

Heritage trails through the old quarters of Kuala Lumpur offer an insight into the city's past. Good times to walk the trails are in the mornings and evenings when the tropical sun is more forgiving.

A city built largely on the fortunes of tin, Kuala Lumpur was founded at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak Rivers in the 1850s. As immigrants flowed in, a pattern of settlement developed, which can still be seen today in the four distinct quarters of the city. The British administrators congregated around the Merdeka Square area. Market Square, close to the rivers, quickly became the commercial heart while Petaling Street became home to Chinatown. Lebu Ampang, together with Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman, is where the Indians settled. Kuala Lumpur's rich immigrant history is etched in these very streetscapes.

A good place to start is at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak near the Masjid Jamek LRT station. This part of the Merdeka Square trail takes you through the civic quarter of the city, site of all the old government buildings. Walk past the stalls selling handicrafts to the bridge spanning

the rivers to get a panoramic view of the majestic, 96-year-old Masjid Jamek, the oldest surviving mosque in Kuala Lumpur. Nearby on your left are the Moorish structures of the Sultan Abdul Samad Building, built by the British in 1848. On your right is a building nicknamed the Vatican by the British, a reference to its elaborate and ornate facade. The Old Post Office, Textile Museum, the Old City Hall and the Old High Court are all housed in splendid brick buildings, a showcase of Mughal Indian and Islamic architectural styles. Cupolas, minarets and domes cap these elegant edifices, built between 1897 and 1909. Across the road is the National History Museum and Merdeka Square, a stretch of green overlooking the Selangor Club.

The old commercial centre of Kuala Lumpur is covered by the Market Square Trail, which takes you through the area bounded by Jalan Cheng Lock, Jalan Hang Kasturi, Lebu Ampang and Jalan Tun HS Lee. Originally called High Street, Jalan Tun HS Lee is believed to be the oldest road in the city. At No. 99 stands a pastel, 91-year-old three-storey shophouse housing a bank. This building's large windows, painted green, allude to its past as a printing press office. Beside the Central Market, along Jalan Hang Kasturi, is a row of colourful shophouses with their distinctive five-foot way (a shaded thoroughfare for pedestrians). Dating from the early 1900s, these buildings house sundry shops and restaurants selling *biryani* (spiced rice served with either mutton or chicken) and *roti canai* (fluffy flat bread served

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with curry).

Lebuh Ampang has rows of shophouses interspersed with the occasional Art Deco and neo-classical building. Indian immigrants, the Chettiaris, established themselves in the money-lending business at Lebuh Ampang and have left their mark on the urban landscape. Here you will come across two shophouses with peacock relief on their facade. The peacock is the symbol of the Hindu god, Lord Muruga. Across the road this symbol is repeated on tilework below the window of the house at No. 85.

As Kuala Lumpur grows, thankfully, its architectural heritage is being kept alive. These trails offer a refreshing view of the city seen on foot, rather than through the window of a passing car, bus or train. **KTO**

GETTING THERE

Japan Airlines and Malaysia Airlines fly daily from Kansai International Airport to Kuala Lumpur International Airport while All Nippon Airways flies five times a week.

The best time to visit Kuala Lumpur is between May and September. The rainy season starts in October. August is an especially good month to visit, as many events will be lined up to celebrate Malaysia's national day.