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JOM!



Masjid Ubudiah in Perak is one of the many symbols of Islamic heritage. **BELOW:** Iskandariah Palace, situated on Bukit Chandan, is the official residence of the Sultan of Perak.

Lessons in history, culture and nature

Silas Low zooms in on Malaysia's royal towns and highlights their uniqueness

A ROYAL town or Bandar Diraja is a unique feature that only nine states — Selangor, Perlis, Kedah, Perak, Negri Sembilan, Johor, Pahang, Kelantan and Terengganu — that practise a monarchical system of government have.

This is opposed to the gubernatorial system used in Malaysia's Borneo states (Sabah and Sarawak) and Straits states (Penang and Melaka), where their respective ceremonial head of state is the Governor, also known as Yang di-Pertua Negeri.

A fun and known fact about the rulers of the nine states (seven sultans, one raja, and one Yang di-Pertuan Besar) is that they rotate every five years for the office of the federal head, known as the Yang di-Pertuan Agong.

Islamic Tourism Centre chairman Datuk Dr Noor Zari Hamat says each state has its own unique story to tell with regard to

history and civilisation, and this includes its monarchical institutions.

"Malay civilisation is rich and dates back many years pre-colonial period. Those who love history and heritage will enjoy visiting all these Bandar Diraja," he says.

He also believes that the royal towns hold so much potential as tourist attractions and should be showcased more to promote Malaysia as a destination for Islamic tourism.

"Together with Malaysia's halal food, easy access to mosques, Muslim-friendly hotels and other hospitality services, as well as the safety aspects and peacefulness here, Malaysia has everything to cater to the Muslim tourist market," adds Dr Noor Zari, who is also secretary-general of the Tourism, Arts and Culture Ministry.

Let's zoom in on these royal capitals and see what makes each unique and special.



KUALA KANGSAR, PERAK

Nestled in north-central of Perak, just outside the vicinity of state capital Ipoh and in the confines of the Keledang Range, is Bandar Diraja Kuala Kangsar.

Icons of royalty in this town include Istana Iskandariah, located atop Bukit Chandan about 500m from the western banks of Sungai Perak on the southeastern edge of Kuala Kangsar, which serves as the official residence of the state's ruler.

Not far away from the palace is Masjid Ubudiah. Arguably the landmark of the royal town, it was designed by an English architect some 110 years ago and at present, has been declared a national heritage.

Also found in Kuala Kangsar is the Sultan Azlan Shah Gallery, which serves as the state's royal gallery dedicated to the late Sultan Azlan Shah, giving visitors a glimpse into His Majesty's colourful life and also an exhibit of His Majesty's personal effects. It was officially opened in 2003 by His Majesty, who was the ruler then.

Sultan Azlan Shah, to date, was the only monarch to have served as the head of the judiciary, having been lord president of the Supreme Court from 1982 to 1984, prior to appointment as Sultan of Perak (1984-2014). Sultan Azlan Shah also served as the ninth Yang di-Pertuan Agong (1989-1994).

KLANG, SELANGOR

Selangor's royal town, Klang, which is situated along Sungai Klang some 40km downstream from Kuala Lumpur, offers notable attractions, including a trinity of mosques all located less than 5km apart.

Masjid Pasar Jawa, or the Klang Royal Town Mosque, is the largest and the only one found on the northern bank of the river, along Jalan Pasar. In the Little India area on the southern side, along Jalan Tengku Kelana, sits the Masjid India Muslim Tengku Kelana.

The third mosque, Masjid Diraja Sultan Suleiman, is located in the grounds of Istana Alam Shah, the official palace of the Selangor ruler, and once served as the state's official mosque until the completion of Masjid Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz in the state capital Shah Alam, in 1988.

Besides housing the Royal Mausoleum for the state's royal family, this mosque is famous for its unique combination of architecture (not found anywhere else in the country) that ranges from Moorish to English, Neoclassical and Western art deco styles.



Istana Alam Shah is the official palace of the Sultan of Selangor.

This is seen in its interior and exterior building designs which reflect those visible in cathedrals.

Located near the town's railway station is the Sultan Abdul Aziz Royal Gallery, housed in an old colonial heritage building built in 1909, Bangunan Sultan Suleiman. Named in honour of the former sultan, Sultan Salahuddin Abdul Aziz Shah — Abdul Aziz being His Majesty's birth name — the gallery gives an insight into the late ruler's life and a history of the Selangor sultanate too.

PEKAN, PAHANG

Located some 30km south of the state capital Kuantan, along the eastern coast of the peninsula, Pekan takes its name from a flower, white in colour like jasmine, the bunga pekan (not to be confused with the word "pekan", which means town in Malay).

Nicknamed the Abode of Tranquility, Pekan boasts several places of interest with ties to the royal family. The most well-known of its royal icons is Istana Sultan Abu Bakar, named after the fourth sultan, Sultan Abu Bakar Riayatuddin Al-Muadzam Shah (reigned 1932-1974).

Not far away from the palace, closer to the banks of Sungai Pahang, along Jalan Sultan Ahmad, is Muzium Masjid Sultan Abdullah. Built more than 80 years ago, it was launched as the gallery of Pahang's royal institution. It served as the main mosque of Pekan from 1932 to 1976.

Also located in Pekan is the State Museum, known as Sultan Abu Bakar Museum. This is where visitors should head to get a better understanding of Pahang's history. More than a century old, the museum was once the official residence of the British resident in Pahang and then, the Sultan of Pahang.



Istana Abu Bakar was named after the fourth sultan, Sultan Abu Bakar Riayatuddin Al-Muadzam Shah.

TURN TO PAGE 20

Prominent landmarks

FROM PAGE 19



The Sultan Ismail Petra Arch is one of the prominent sculptures in Kota Baru.

KOTA BARU, KELANTAN

Kelantan is one of two states that have their state and royal capitals in the same town. The other one is neighbouring Terengganu.

One of the prominent sculptures in Kota Baru is the Sultan Ismail Petra Arch, which is made of timber. Situated in the city centre, across Jalan Sultanah Zainab from Padang Merdeka, each arch has three columns bearing inscriptions of Islamic calligraphy.

Not far off is the Kelantan Islamic Museum, which was once the residence of a former menteri besar, and had housed the state's Council of the Religion of Islam and Malay Culture until 1991 when the museum was launched. Today, the museum boasts more than 350 collections.

The museum is housed in a building built in 1902 with a style emulating that of Malay houses. It comes as no surprise as Kelantan has been dubbed the "cradle of Malay culture".

In fact, the Sultan Ismail Petra Arch was constructed to commemorate the occasion when Kelantan was announced as a cultural state showcasing Malay culture.



The Kelantan Islamic Museum boasts more than 350 collections.



Masjid Alwi was gazetted as a national heritage in 2009.

ARAU, PERLIS

Given its size of just 819 sq km, it comes as no surprise that attractions in Perlis are located relatively near each other. For instance, its royal town Arau is just 10km east of state capital Kangar.

Notable attractions in Arau include Istana Arau and Arau Royal Gallery, located in the same enclosure, across Persiaran Jubli Emas from the railway station.

The former, being the residence of the Raja of Perlis, boasts a good mix of colonial and pseudo-Moorish architecture, and can be identified by a pair of golden domes.

A short walk away down south along Persiaran Jubli Emas sits the Perlis State Mosque. Featuring noticeable Moorish influence in its architecture, the mosque can accommodate up to 7,000 congregants and was completed in 1972.

Over in Kangar, Masjid Alwi stands out with its Mughal design and dome bearing resemblance to that of Masjid Zahir in neighbouring Kedah. Opened in 1933, it was gazetted as a national heritage in 2009.

MUAR, JOHOR

Nicknamed Bandar Maharani, the royal capital of Johor is also the birthplace of Malay traditions such as the Zapin dance and the Ghazal musical art. Kuda kepang, a traditional horse dance, has also been said to be best performed by the Malays in Muar.

Those on a sightseeing tour should start with Tanjung Emas Park, a recreational park located at the estuary of Sungai Muar. The park offers beautiful sights of the river. It also has a decorative sidewalk and a nine-hole golf course.

Hour-long boat cruise services are also provided that give visitors a close-up experience of the view from the river.

Just a stone's throw away from the park is the oldest mosque in Muar, the near-century-old Masjid Sultan Ibrahim Jamek. Constructed between 1925 and 1930, the royal mosque is unique for its appearance.

Its white-blue coloured fusion of Western and Eastern architecture can easily make one mistake it for a palace at first look.

While visiting the mosque, don't forget to catch an old but still functioning sundial on the grounds.



An aerial view of the riverine Royal Town of Muar.

SERI MENANTI, NEGRİ SEMBILAN

Located in the district of Kuala Pilah, Seri Menanti is right in the middle of the state, about 30km from the capital city Seremban and 20km from the town of Kuala Pilah.

The monarchy of Negri Sembilan is noted for its Adat Perpatih and the Minangkabau culture, both forms co-existing and originating from the Minangkabau Highlands (today centred around Indonesia's West Sumatra province).

Distinctive Minangkabau elements can be seen at the "old palace", Istana Lama, the former abode of the state's ruler (the Yang di-Pertuan Besar or Yam Tuan Besar), especially the design of its roof and the use of two types of wood known as *cengal* and *belian*.

The much newer palace and current residence of the ruler is called Istana Besar, or the "main palace", which was completed in 1932, 24 years after the construction of Istana Lama.

Adjacent to Istana Lama and the Royal Mausoleum sits Masjid Diraja Tuanku Munawir, named after the father of the current Yam Tuan Besar, Tuanku Muhriz. It displays a blend of both Mughal and local designs, the latter seen in the construction of its verandah (*serambi*).

Worth checking out while in Seri Menanti is Ladang Alam Warisan, which is known for its equine activities and landscape.



Distinctive Minangkabau elements can be seen at Istana Lama, the former abode of the Negri Sembilan ruler.



Istana Anak Bukit sits on the eastern bank of Sungai Anak Bukit that flows down to Alor Setar to meet Sungai Kedah.

ANAK BUKIT, KEDAH

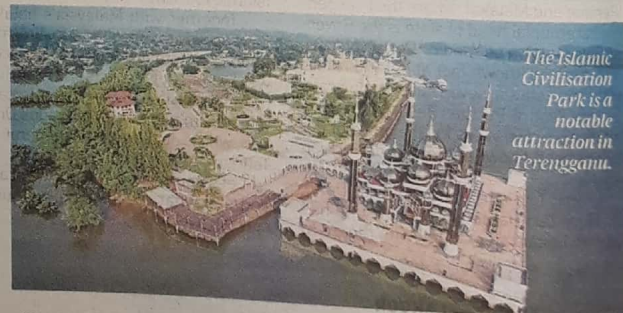
Anak Bukit, directly translated as little hill, is situated in the same district, Kota Setar, as the state capital Alor Star. Anak Bukit is just a short 10km drive up north from the capital.

Visitors will be greeted, upon entry into Anak Bukit, by the Sultan of Kedah's official residence Istana Anak Bukit. It underwent a facelift 12 years ago to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of the reign of the then ruler, Tuanku Abdul

Halim Muadzam Shah.

Like the rest of Anak Bukit, the palace is situated on the eastern bank of Sungai Anak Bukit, which flows down to Alor Star where it meets Sungai Kedah. Also found in the palace grounds are a mini zoo and the royal garden.

Today, the royal town also houses the Kedah state government's offices and the state's Syariah Court complex whilst Alor Star continues to serve as state capital as well as its commercial centre.



The Islamic Civilisation Park is a notable attraction in Terengganu.

KUALA TERENGGANU, TERENGGANU

A coastal city, the rapidly expanding Kuala Terengganu has many landmarks bearing Islamic cultural heritage, from a number of mosques to a civilisation-themed park and an iconic drawbridge.

Serving as both the state capital and royal abode, Terengganu's monarch resides in Istana Maziah which is located at the foot of Bukit Puteri, on the bank of Sungai Terengganu.

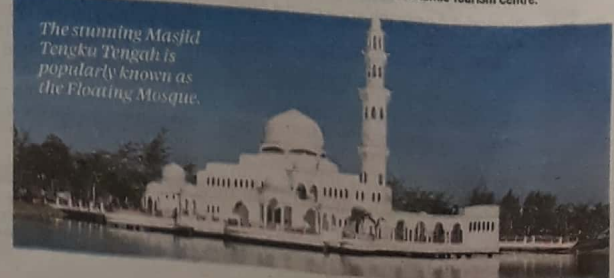
The palace stands out with its architecture resembling French and European motifs, and was completed in 1903.

Also found in the city centre are Masjid Abidin and Masjid Al-Muktafi

Billah Shah. The former, a stone's throw away from the palace, was known as Masjid Besar (Grand Mosque), while the latter, a little further down southwest, serves as the state mosque besides housing the Royal Mausoleum. It is also called Masjid Ladang, owing to its location in the Kampung Ladang locality.

Other notable attractions are the Islamic Civilisation Park where the stunning Crystal Mosque sits, and the beautiful Masjid Tengku Tengah which is popularly known as the Floating Mosque.

Silas Low is an assistant executive in the Communications Unit at Islamic Tourism Centre.



The stunning Masjid Tengku Tengah is popularly known as the Floating Mosque.