

▪ **Getaway**

Looking east

LOSHANA K SHAGAR remembers Pahang as sleepy state but on a recent return visit, she was pleasantly surprised to discover that it had caught up with the times without losing its traditions. Here are highlights from her tour of the state's top attractions.

PHOTOS LAW SOO PHYE

Pekan: Regally rich

Home to the royal palace, Pekan is also the birthplace of Malaysia's second Prime Minister, Tun Abdul Razak, the father of the current Prime Minister. The late Tun's family home has been reconstructed and preserved at Kampung Budaya Pulau Keladi. There are three parts to the house: The verandah, hall

and kitchen. In the hall lies the original bed Tun Razak slept in as a child, along with displays of other trinkets depicting the humble beginnings of the late premier. For a better understanding of the life and times of Tun Razak, a visit to the gallery next door is a must.

Within the village grounds is the Royal Pahang Silk Weaving



Pahang



(Facing page) Well curated displays at the Tun Abdul Razak memorial; (clockwise from left) a weaver at the Royal Pahang Silk Weaving Centre; this beautiful piece comes with a price tag that reflects its intricacy and amount of work; coloured silk threads ready to be transformed into something wearable or decorative

Centre, started by the state's crown princess to preserve the precious art of silk weaving. Not to be mistaken with the songket made in Terengganu, Pahang silk was once upon a time only worn by royalty. In today's T-shirt and jeans era, silk has become a rare commodity but it is now being revived here and in training academies across the state. The thread comes from China but the dyeing process is done locally. In the old days, colours were mostly pastel as they were extracted from natural sources (green was taken from screwpine leaves, for example). Today, Pahang's silk comes in more vibrant and eye-catching hues.

I watch as master weaver Hajah Nortipah, one of the state's last surviving traditional silk weavers, works on a green material with black patterns. She had already been at it for a week, but that wasn't unusual; in fact, weaving a handkerchief-sized cloth could take up to three days, while a two-metre cloth takes approximately a week to complete. At the centre's sales gallery, a beautiful dark hued 2m-long piece of fabric catches my eye. Soft to the touch, it boasts of intricate gold thread design. Hajah Nortipah tells us it took her a whole month to design the *cindai* (silk), so unsurprisingly, it comes with a hefty price tag – RM4,000. Generally, professionally woven Pahang silk costs between RM200 to RM4,000 for 2m. ▶



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After that tour, my guide Albert takes me to the best *murtabak* (Indian flat bread with filling) in town. Murtabak Mengkasar counts the royal family among its regulars, and befittingly, the family-operated restaurant is located very near the Sultan Abu Bakar palace and the royal polo grounds. The owner, Haji Ahmad Tajuddin @ Haji Din, got the original recipe from a high-ranking palace official. The namesake bestseller is generously stuffed with minced meat and is a real treat for the palate. Haji Din sells about 300 to 400 plates of this delicious dish daily and has catered for numerous important functions.

Sungai Lembing: History and spirituality

Lembing means spear in Malay, and legend has it that a group of hunters thrust a spear into a deer, which jumped into the river – with the weapon still embedded on its side. Many years later, tin ore was discovered in the area and this brought a number of miners to the site. As they panned for tin in the river, they found the spear and named the place Sungai Lembing.

Back when tin was Malaysia's prime export, this was one of the country's most important mining areas. The original mines shut down in the late 20th century when global tin prices dropped and along with it, the area's popularity. I had learned all about it in school and a tour of the Sungai Lembing Museum provided a refresher course. Converted from the



former residence of British officers, the museum contains a replica of a mining shaft and makes clever use of mirrors to give visitors the illusion of looking down into a mine. A walk through the bungalow's two floors reveals many original artifacts from the mining industry.

Sungai Lembing's other specialty is still very much in demand today: Coconut biscuits, made of flour, coconut cream, sugar and topped with a sprinkling of

sesame seeds. The aroma of freshly baked biscuits wafts in the air at Mun Heng Trading. Owners Andrew Lim and his wife, Jacqueline, have been manning the business for 20 years, steadfastly holding on to the traditional method of hand-mixing and kneading. They hire two apprentices to help cope with the increasing demand. On Sun, they also sell low-sugar biscuits and coconut jam puffs, which are best enjoyed with soy milk.

Four large traditional ovens, dating back to the British era, are used to bake the biscuits. Unlike modern ovens, these are not fan-forced, which means that the heat generated is not ventilated out of the oven. This ensures the crisp texture and strong flavour of the biscuits. Baking with these ovens is time-consuming, but the owners would rather be low on quantity and high on quality.

Near Sungai Lembing is the imposing 1,000m-high Panching Hill, and sitting at its base is Charas Cave, a sacred spot visited by both Hindu and Buddhist devotees. To get to the lower cave, you have to climb 100 steps but it's well worth the huffing and puffing. You will come across a natural rock formation that resembles the goddess Kuan Yin, and a Hindu temple ▶



“BACK WHEN TIN WAS MALAYSIA'S PRIME EXPORT, THIS WAS ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S MOST IMPORTANT MINING AREAS”



(Clockwise from top) The Sungai Lembing Museum captures the town's glory days as the country's tin mining capital; the town as it is today – quiet, quaint and rustic; Murtabak Mengkasar is generously filled with minced meat; (facing page, from left) freshly baked coconut biscuits; cool and dank inside Charas Cave

Getaway



Picturesque Teluk Chempedak is one of Kuantan's most popular beaches; a wholesome meal of ikan *patin*; batik pieces hung out to dry



dedicated to Shiva Linga. Its layout is similar to that of Selangor's Batu Caves and oddly, this is the only breezy spot within the cave. The main attraction of Charas, however, lies at the end of the path lined with statues depicting Buddhist lore: A large stone sculpture of the reclining Buddha, attended to by resident monks. The walk up may tire you but Charas Cave's unique features will leave you recharged mentally and spiritually.



explains its higher price range. Post printing, the dyeing method starts. Lighter colours are dyed first, then the background and darker colours. After drying, the batik is soaked in a vessel of very hot water to melt the

Kuantan: All about the sea

Patin, or catfish, is arguably Kuantan's most famous seafood. There are two types – *patin sangkar* and *patin buah* – and the latter is more expensive. A popular spot to sample this local specialty is Akob Patin House, located by the Kuantan Riverfront. *Patin tempoyak* (catfish with fermented durian) is apparently the best way to enjoy this fish as the sweet durian taste remains in the mouth long after the last bite. Another must-try is the *ikan kerai goreng*, a fried fish that has to be eaten slowly as it's packed with small bones. Fried to crisp perfection, it doesn't stay long on the plate.

Neither does the *ikan bakar petai* (grilled fish with 'stinky' beans) at Ana Ikan Bakar in Tanjung Lumpur. Seafood stalls and restaurants are a dime a dozen in Kuantan, and this is one of the favourites. The freshwater fish is served with rice, but it is advisable to order an assortment of vegetables to go with the meal.

Pahang is also well known for its batik, and at the Natural Batik Centre, two different printing methods are used: Block and hand-drawn. The former involves dipping a patterned metal block into a hot mixture of plant resin and paraffin before pressing it firmly all over a piece of cotton cloth. Hand-drawn batik involves a considerably more challenging process that requires high precision, and is undertaken only by trained artists. Each silk cloth has a different design, which

wax, and the process is repeated until all the wax has dissolved.

From Kuantan, head towards Kemaman and you will come across the quaint town of Beserah. It was first inhabited by a small group of people, led by a man who had left his hometown following his daughter's demise. They faced multiple challenges and economic difficulties. The villagers contemplated leaving, but their leader convinced them to stay on and *berserah* (surrender) to God. Their conditions improved, and the place was named as such.

And finally, a visit to the East Coast is not complete without stepping foot on its picturesque beaches. One of Kuantan's sandy hotspots is Teluk Chempedak, fondly nicknamed TC by locals. On weekends (except during the monsoon season), a mixed crowd of sun worshippers, swimmers, windsurfers and kite flyers throng this beach. On weekdays, an easy tranquility prevails. With much of the beach deserted and the sparkling waters of the South China Sea lapping at its edges, this is the best place for a quiet stroll.

Indeed, Pahang is no longer the sleepy state I once knew but a lively getaway with a fair share of offerings to lure visitors. Its large towns and capital city, Kuantan, straddle that fine balance between urban and old-world. Most other places still enjoy a quieter pace of life, but are still worth a visit for their unique charm. ☑



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