

LIFE&TIMES **HERITAGE**

Blocks of tradition

The designs on many buildings in Kedah are an interesting mix of influences, discovers **Aneeta Sundararaj**



Balai Nobat, next to Balai Besar, is where the sacred instruments of the Kedah nobat are kept



Balai Besar, where the recently installed Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah was crowned the 28th Sultan of Kedah

PEOPLE of Kedah are used to hearing visitors say, "There's nothing to see here, nothing to do." Their response is usually a smile and nothing more.

For those who have come to appreciate the beauty of Kedah know that there is probably no place like it anywhere else.

For a start, the next time you travel to Kedah, just north of the town of Sungai Petani, look out the window. Observe how flat the land is. If you're patient and lucky, you might see the reflection of rays of the setting sun on the perfect, water-logged squares of padi land. Such beauty is, in part, the result of a well-thought-out and well-executed plan by a man who helped make Kedah a major producer of rice: Wan Mat Saman, the Chief Minister in the Court of the 26th Sultan of Kedah, Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah.

The story goes that when Wan Mat Saman visited Bangkok, he was impressed by the canals there. Upon his return to Kedah, he set about planning a canal to provide effective irrigation for the people to plant padi. The project was started in August 1885 and completed in July 1896. The canal was named after him, Terusan Wan Mat Saman.

Still in use today, the canal is about 36km long, 1.5m deep and

7.5m wide. It starts from Alor Star and ends at the foot of Gunung Jerai. While that doesn't sound like a mammoth task by today's standards, remember that it was built using traditional tools and physical manpower. At the time of its completion, Terusan Wan Mat Saman was the longest canal in the world.

For all the modern machinery in today's padi cultivation, Datuk Dr Wan Shamsudin Mohd Yusof, an expert in Kedah history and the chairman of the History Association Of Malaysia, Kedah Branch, says: "There are old customs and traditions about padi planting which are still adhered to. For instance, before the seeds are planted, the farmers will recite a mantera or doa to appease the semangat of the padi land.

"Then only seven seeds will be planted first in the nursery. When the saplings are ready, only seven will be transferred first to the fields. When it's time for harvesting, again, only seven stalks will be harvested first. The number '7' is very important. It has to be an odd number."

Naturally, padi, being so important to Kedah, has influenced the architecture and decorations of many buildings in the state.

One building surpasses all others



Wan Muhammad Saman Wan Ismail, the man responsible for building a canal that was once the longest in the world, Terusan Wan Mat Saman



The beautiful **Masjid Zahir** in the heart of Alor Star

and to see it is to understand what it means to create something for the glory of God: the State Mosque called Masjid Zahir. Situated in the town square, the mosque was first built on the site where warriors defended Kedah against a Siamese invasion in the early 1800s.

Inspired by the Masjid Azizi in Bandar Langkat, Sumatra, there is also a Moorish influence in the architecture of Masjid Zahir. The word zahir is said to mean "clear". About 11,615sqm, the main minaret is situated in the south-east. Its unique onion-shaped domes are said to have inspired the incorporation of a huge green onion-shaped dome above the magnificent splendour of the Prime Minister's office in Putrajaya.

Opposite Masjid Zahir lies Balai Besar. Wan Shamsudin points out that it is made using teak wood and

the intricate carvings reflect the scenery of Kedah. This is the place where the Yang di-Pertuan Agong Tuanku Abdul Halim Mu'adzam Shah was crowned the 28th Sultan of Kedah. It is also where the 26th Sultan of Kedah hosted the weddings of five of his children in 1904. By all accounts, it was a grand affair and is still talked about.

Next to Balai Besar is Balai Nobat. During the reign of the 26th Sultan, this building, which was no more than a three-storey wooden structure, was fortified with mortar and bricks. It now has three storeys and, again, an onion-shaped dome that mirrors Masjid Zahir's. As its name suggests, Balai Nobat houses the sacred instruments of the Kedah nobat.

Being geographically close to Thailand, it's not surprising to see Thai influence in the designs of

Top Picks

Here are 18 must-see places in and around Alor Star:

1. Darul Aman Stadium
2. Paddy Museum
3. Tunku Abdul Rahman Memorial
4. Kedah State Administrative Museum
5. State Museum
6. Alor Star Tower
7. Istana Kuning
8. Merdeka House
9. Sultan Abdul Halim Gallery
10. Balai Nobat
11. Balai Besar
12. Masjid Zahir
13. Balai Seni
14. Monument commemorating 250 years of the formation of Alor Star
15. Pekan Rabu
16. Sultan Abdul Hamid College
17. Pekan Cina
18. Birthplace of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad

some of the buildings in Alor Star. This is most evident in the capital's impressive Buddhist complex. Situated close to the city centre, the temple Wat Nikrodharam has a gilded roof with colourful mosaic walls. At night, when the lights of the city are reflected on its structures, they shimmer and the roof practically glitters. A golden garuda suspends over the main gate and Buddha's teachings are inscribed in three languages on the outer walls of the temple.

As you can see, there's plenty to see and appreciate in Kedah, the Rice Bowl of Malaysia.