

VIVA MALACCA

The UNESCO-listed former spice trading port now harbours a blossoming contemporary arts scene. Savour larger-than-life street art, lively festivals and charmingly cool cafes in the honeycomb of influences from the east and west.

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PHOTO INMAGINE



Standing at the top of St Paul's Hill, close to the ruins of a Portuguese church from 1521, Tony Yap soaks up the breeze from the nearby Malacca river, along with the historic vibe.

This atmosphere, he says, is highly conducive to creativity. The local dancer and choreographer is the creative director of the Melaka Art & Performance Festival (MAPFest; melakafestival.com), an experimental programme of free dance, theatre, film and music performances. It's been part of the city's cultural landscape since 2009. Last year's festival saw contemporary dancers performing alongside shamans from rural Java.

This year's edition (November 27-29, 2015) will again turn the city into a vast outdoor arts and performance space. While the festival may be decidedly contemporary, its main site will not be a futuristic art space as one might imagine, but the ruins of St Paul's Church, a vestige of an era when the Portuguese ruled the Malaysian city in the 16th century.

Besides the Portuguese, others – like the Dutch colonials and Indians – settled here in progressive waves, peppering the local architecture and culture with their diverse influences. Malacca's famous Peranakan (Straits Chinese) cuisine, for instance,

is the delicious result of the intermarriage between Chinese immigrants and local Malays.

While Malacca may have recessed into a sleepy town after being overshadowed by larger port cities nearby, it now welcomes a fresh current of international influences, thanks to its new arts scene. This was in part kick started by UNESCO's nod in 2008, recognising Malacca as a living testament of a historic trading town with a culture steeped in Asian traditions and European colonial influences.

ART AND SOUL

The new businesses that mushroomed in the wake of the city's listing as a World Heritage Site have retained a certain reverence for the past. Hip galleries, boutique hotels and cafes, housed in historic Peranakan shop houses restored to their bright hues, breathe modernity into the city known more for its colonial relics.

Says Malacca-based author and tour guide Serge Jardin, "The owners of many cafes, shops and galleries around here are recycling, restoring and reusing old Malacca heritage."



A History and culture can be found behind the colourful walls and doors of Malacca.

B An Indonesian dancer performing among the ruins of St Paul's Church at last year's MAPFest.

C Traditional enamel plates and trays adorn the wall of The Daily Fix Cafe.

One example of old crafts being fast-forwarded into the 21st century can be found at Huan Studio (9 Jalan Tokong, Tel: 60 6 288 1795). Here, artist Kooi Hin puts a fresh twist on the ancient art of xylography, using hand-carved woodblocks to create Chinese motifs and calligraphy. These prints are then transferred onto funky trinkets.

In Malacca's old town, Chinese temples sit among a network of brightly painted wooden houses, and raspberry-toned colonial buildings like Christ Church (48 Jalan Gereja, Tel: 60 6 284 8804) and neighbouring The Stadthuys complex, now home to a series of museums (perzim.gov.my/en). Among them are open-fronted kopitiams (coffee shops), artist studios, and buildings with large-scale murals by local street artists.

One of the most striking murals, an adorable primate with red fur, adorns the bright yellow exterior of The Orangutan House (59 Lorong Hang Jebat, Tel: 60 6 282 6872). The studio was founded by oil painter Charles Cham, whose abstract pieces feature faces in bold shades.

Cham is a pioneering member of the city's nascent artists' community, which has since attracted young creatives from Kuala Lumpur and as far away as Lithuania. They've turned traditional shophouses into studios for creating batik (textiles with patterns created with wax and dye), pottery and painting. "Today there are about 20 artists living and working in galleries around old town," says Cham.

Amid these, the old-timers endure. Workshops and stores specialising in wooden clogs and rattan baskets are interspersed with old-world barbershops, goldsmiths and locksmiths along Chinatown's main shopping strip, Jalan Tun Tan Cheng Lock.

At Colour Beads (colourbeads.com), the Lim family has been in the business of hand-sewing vibrantly coloured Nyonya (Peranakan) beaded slippers embroidered with gold thread for 30 years – and can make a pair with your choice of beaded panels and soles in a few hours.

"While we are continuing the tradition of kasut manek (beaded shoes), we are also continuously modernising our designs," says Billy Lim, who recently took over the business from his parents.

CUPPA CREATIVITY

Part of the current wave of modernity infiltrating the city is an individualistic cafe culture. Quirkily designed cafes and bars are cropping up beside rustic kopitiams along the gaudy red Oriental lantern-hung stretch of Jalan Hang Jebat, still known by its colonial tag, Jonker Walk. The flamboyantly festooned beca (Malay for trishaws) that ply the strip are illuminated at night, transforming the area into a brilliant carnival of blinking technicolour lights.

Over at the breezy, blue-shuttered shop house that is

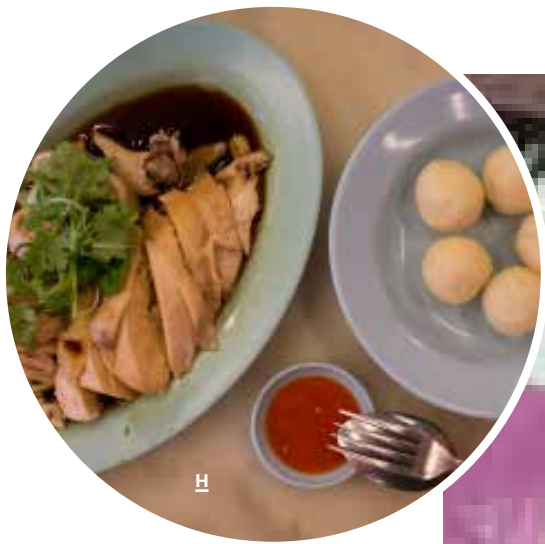
D The Orang Utan House is filled with Charles Cham's distinctive oil paintings.

E People-watch from Geographer Cafe's al-fresco seating area.

F Intricate hand-sewn Nyonya beaded slippers from Colour Beads.

G A boldly decorated beca parked by the historic Christ Church.





H Hainanese chicken rice balls – one of Malacca's signature dishes.

I The River Art Project has enlivened the area around the Malacca river with eye-popping murals.

Geographer Cafe (geographer.com.my), bar stools spill onto the pavement, where guests linger over beer and bar bites.

A perfect hideout to while away a lazy afternoon, The Daily Fix Cafe (55 Jalan Hang Jebat, Tel: 60 6 283 4858) is all vintage charm, with retro furniture, wrought iron fence, brick wall and bright Peranakan pottery bowls. As old-fashioned as its interior is, it serves up rose flavoured lattes and full-bodied shots distilled from a high-tech Italian Wega espresso machine.

In a tiny adjacent alley, Limau-Limau Cafe (9 Jalan Hang Lekiu, Tel: 60 12 698 4917) is a wonderfully eccentric newcomer crammed with an eclectic mix of Italian Murano chandeliers, Venetian and Chinese opera masks, mirrors and picture frames.

In some cafes, coffee and art collide. The Calanthe Art Cafe (letseat.at/calanthe), which serves brew from Malaysia's 13 states, is a cosy little spot with retro chairs and couches, surrounded by the traditional and contemporary works of local artists. Coffee varieties from Penang to Sarawak are crafted into specialities such as the ice cream laden Cappo Blast.

It's easy to identify the articulation between old and new throughout Malacca's modern landscape. And while some residents may be concerned about



CITY SPICE

Celebrity cookbook author and Nyonya culinary expert, **DEBBIE TEOH**, shares the best bites in her hometown.

LOCAL BREAKFAST

Kedai Kopi Juat Lye (371G Taman Peringgit Jaya, Tel: 60 6 283 3619) serves up authentic Malaccan yee kiao mee (egg noodles with springy fishballs, slivers of bean curd and spring onion). Order slices of toast slathered with butter and kaya (coconut jam) and dip them in kopi o kau (a dense brew of local black coffee).

PERANAKAN MEALS

For a few ringgit you get a big bowl of the best Nyonya laksa (noodles in spicy coconut based soup) or fishcake mee rebus (yellow noodles in a spicy potato-based gravy) at Donald & Lily (No. 16, Ground Floor, Jalan KSB 1, Taman Kota Shah Bandar, Tel 60 6 284 8907). Finish this off with a chendol, an icy dessert with gula Melaka (brown palm sugar) syrup, coconut milk and sago.

RELAXING HIDEOUT

Kaya Kaya Cafe's (32 Jalan Tukang Besi, Tel 60 18 984 5351) inner courtyard is very peaceful and is decorated with plants and stone sculptures. The food is natural and healthy with a fusion of Malay and European flavours – pastas, Belgian beer, and prawn sambal (chilli paste).

STREET EATS

You haven't been to Malacca until you've tucked into the hawker food from street stalls. On weekends the action centres on Jalan Hang Jebat where you can taste the famous Hainanese chicken rice balls – orbs of rice cooked in chicken fat, served with steamed chicken and accompanied by a fiery chilli sauce.



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over-commercialisation, Jardin reminds us of its past as a spice trading hub, “The city was born of trade for trade. During its heyday (in the 1600s to 1800s), there were shops even on the bridge!”

RIVERSIDE REVIVAL

Water has shaped Malacca’s history and geography more than anything else, and it still runs deep in the city’s arteries, giving it new life.

Down by the Malacca river at Jalan Kampung Hulu, murals of wild stallions, fruit and bowls of noodles dance across the walls of shop houses in striking shades. The River Art Project – an eye-catching collaboration between painters and graffiti artists – took off in 2010, as part of a steady riverside renaissance.

Says Razlan Adnan, one of the local artists involved in the project, “Far from taking away from the heritage value (of Malacca), it adds to it. People, especially art-loving tourists, like to see something new, creative and local – not just tall buildings.”

The Melaka River International Festival – a dazzling carnival of dragon boat racing and decorative floats – enlivens the waterfront every June. Its organisers, the Melaka River and Coastal Development Corporation, are working on reviving the



riverside with new boardwalks, resorts and shopping centres.

The development of a spanking new international port was announced earlier this year, and over the next five years, luxury hotels and restaurants will be built by the river.

All this may still be in the making, but one gets the feel Malacca is gradually awakening from years of gentle slumber, to once again become an unmissable port of call. ■

Fast Facts

CURRENCY
Malaysian Ringgit
US\$1 = RM3.81

VISA
Requirements vary.
Visit www.imi.gov.my
for details.

BEST TIME TO VISIT
Malacca’s tropical climate is consistently hot and humid year round, though the official rainy season falls between October and March. Most festivals and events – including the Malacca Carnival – happen between June and October.

HOW TO GET THERE
Malacca is a 3-hour drive from Singapore, Singapore Airlines’ home base.

MORE INFORMATION
www.tourism.gov.my



J The Daily Fix Cafe oozes retro charm and a laidback vibe.

K A stroll along the popular Jalan Hang Jebat, also known as Jonker Street.