

Icons of independence

THE essence of Merdeka may be captured in photographs and memories, but it also lingers on in iconic sites and buildings. These five locales witnessed our nation in a different era: an era burgeoning with hope and expectation. They stood anticipating our freedom along with us, forming the resilient backdrop to our struggle for independence. SORAYA KEE walks these places to get the feel of Merdeka.

PADANG PAHLAWAN, MALACCA

The ostentatious Dataran Pahlawan Melaka Megamall now seems a little incongruous with the richly symbolic land upon which it stands. Back in 1956, thousands thronged the road leading to what was then Padang Bandar Hilir, as Tunku Abdul Rahman's car carried him to where a podium and a cheering crowd awaited. It was the afternoon of Feb 20, and Tunku, Tan Cheng Lock and V.T. Sambanthan had just returned from talks in London with the British. Malaya's independence had just been approved. On the podium, Tunku shed tears as he told of the team's success in securing independence and announced the date as Aug 31, 1957.

The location was historically significant, as Malacca was the state where European colonisation first began, with the arrival of the Portuguese in 1511. Adding another layer to this is the fact that Padang Bandar Hilir stands on reclaimed ground, and work in order to reclaim it was carried out by prisoners of the British, starting in 1921.

KUALA LUMPUR RAILWAY STATION

Long before trains were snaking through the KL Sentral railway hub, this grand old lady was a hive of activity. The KL Railway Station, with its ivory domes and arches, may see more tourists than trains these days, but it's more than just a postcard-worthy attraction on a tour of the city. Designed by A.B. Hubback, it was built in 1910. Today, though most of the rail networks have been redirected to its flashier, more up-to-date cousin, the station still serves as a KTM stop and an important reminder of the past.

The station has witnessed episodes of our history rattling past its chambers like a chugging locomotive. In 1942, the station was bombed by the Japanese during their occupation in the country. The communist insurgency also saw damage done to train networks—communists would disturb tracks in order to derail trains.

KTMB Museum manager Hambali Parjan says many would have travelled by train to Kuala Lumpur to witness Merdeka 54 years ago,



(Clockwise from top left) Merdeka Stadium, Coliseum Theatre, Carcosa Seri Negara and the KL Railway Station are witnesses to the history of our nation's birth and stand as reminders of times of grandeur, grace and great promise.

especially given the station's proximity to the Selangor Club Padang, since renamed Dataran Merdeka. He also shares anecdotes of the railway back in the day, when oil torches were used to illuminate the platforms and a hand-held bell alerted passengers to arriving trains.

"We've had some tourists whose British grandparents used to work here during the colonial times," Hambali says. "Some come all the way to give us pictures of the station from their grandparents' collection."

CARCOSA SERI NEGARA

Sitting elegantly atop a hill in the Lake Gardens is the immaculately restored Carcosa Seri Negara. Comprising two colonial mansions—Carcosa and Seri Negara—the blindingly white buildings now have been combined into a hotel. Today guests enjoy the opulence that whispers around every corner, stepping through French doors out onto verandahs where they enjoy tea and scones. It's a nostalgic throwback to the good old British afternoon tea tradition, which was probably savoured by Governor of the Straits, Sir Frank Swettenham, when he lived there over a century ago.

Swettenham started building his official residence in 1896, naming it Carcosa, which was inspired by a line from the book *The King in Yellow*. Carcosa's official opening was commemorated by a fancy dress ball, attended by only the upper crust of KL society. Seri Negara came a few years later, and the building's Merdeka significance is paramount. Back then it was known as King's House, and it was where the Declaration of Independence was signed between the Sultans of all the states and the Queen's representative Sir Donald MacGillivray. Just 20 days later, Malaya's independence became official.

After independence, Carcosa became the official residence of the

British High Commissioner, whereas Seri Negara housed visiting dignitaries. Over the years the building's hallowed halls have seen a stream of eminent guests, including Queen Elizabeth II herself. It was returned to the government in 1987, and assumed its new role as a luxury hotel two years later.

COLISEUM CAFÉ AND COLISEUM THEATRE

Along the car-choked thoroughfare that is Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, lively music blares. It's an apt companion to the colourful riot of *baju kurung* and *kain songket* being displayed in shops on either side of the street. A short stroll further down towards Dataran Merdeka, and you'll come across an old KL stalwart that provides a cool, dim respite from the afternoon bustle.

The Coliseum Café and Hotel, established in 1921, remains popular for sizzling steak and chicken chop served at the timeless tables of its historic dining room. The adjacent bar was once the preferred watering hole of British generals and VIPs. These days the patrons tend to be locals who've been visiting Coliseum for years.

"Everything is good here—the food, beer and hospitality," says Guna, 53, a Coliseum regular of 15 years. "It's a favourite for those who know the place well. Even though there's a bar, people of all religions come to eat here."

His friend Steven, 50, adds that the food is cooked by charcoal fires, keeping old-time traditions alive. "There's also been no change in the design of the place since it opened."

Just next door is the Coliseum Theatre. Red numbers 1921 stand out against the smoke-grey façade, signifying the year it was built. Longtime moviegoer Joseph, 60, remembers the days when movie tickets were just RM2, and *teh tarik* was 60 sen. "I've been watching

movies here for 40 to 50 years," he says. "I saw a lot of action movies. The ones with Sivaji and MGR were packed."

He says the midnight shows would be sold out, and there was a real atmosphere about the smoky, non air-conditioned halls. "The audience would be very noisy throughout the movie," Joseph recalls. Today, though, ticket sales have dwindled, and there have been sweeping changes in the clientele.

Magazine and drink vendor Syed Hussain, 67, has been running his compact, well-stocked stall directly opposite the theatre for 43 years. "They used to screen Malay and Hindustani movies here," he says, "and back then the cinema's patrons used to be of all races".

STADIUM MERDEKA

The venue most synonymous with our independence, Stadium Merdeka, is also where the definitive image of Merdeka was captured. We've all seen it: Tunku Abdul Rahman, right hand raised, stands before a crowd of 20,000 chanting "Merdeka".

Economist Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, 76, made it to the life-altering event—but just barely. Then 22 and a student at Universiti Malaya in Singapore, he'd been disallowed from going by his father, and he didn't even have a ticket into the stadium. But after his mother gave him permission, Navaratnam went to Victoria Institution, crawled through a hole in a fence, and made it into the stadium via the back entrance.

"The atmosphere was electrifying," he recalls. "The throng of people was so full of happiness and relief, with so many expectations for our new nation." Even today, whenever he drives past the stadium, he's transported back to the scene. "It was highly inspirational," he says. "We felt a call to serve our country. That's one of the reasons I joined the civil service."

But while most are familiar as the stadium as an arena that witnessed an iconic event, what many don't know is the role football played in its conception. It was the Football Association of Selangor (FAS) that first broached the idea of a local stadium to replace the existing arena on Jalan Ampang that had been damaged by the Japanese.

Football-loving Tunku, who was FAS president before heading the Football Association of Malaya, added another feather to his cap in 1955 when he was elected chief minister. Right away, he set out to look into the construction of a stadium. Two years later, Stadium Merdeka was officially opened just in time for the Merdeka celebration, a "dream come true" for Tunku.

"The Independence of Malaya has been won on the football pitches of this country," he also said. Fittingly, just hours after the festivities, the stadium played host to another grand event—the Merdeka Tournament, which was, of course, a football tournament. J. Chua, 76, remembers how fans would pack the stadium to watch the national team take on sides from the region.

"Stadium Merdeka was the stadium in those days," he says. "Malaysians didn't have the EPL to watch then since they had no television. So we watched our country play."

Chua played on the stadium's illustrious turf, in a hockey match against South Korea in 1959.

In his official message in the programme to commemorate the stadium's opening, Tunku said: "Make the best use of it, never forget what the stadium stands for." While the stadium came close to being demolished in the 90's, it was restored in 2007. The numerous events held there over the years, and the significance the stadium brings to mind today, imply Tunku's words have indeed been heeded.

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dormitory kitchens and cook up a storm for 300 people. In so doing, they would promote Malaysian culture and bring together both Malaysian and non-Malaysian students in the university.

As one of those volunteers, I felt an instant connection with my fellow Malaysian students as we stood around enormous pots of curry and boiling noodles for *mee goreng* and talking about the best places to eat around KL. It was a home away from

home. Through them, I saw the best and worst of both worlds – car prices are so high in Singapore, but there is so much congestion in KL. Singapore is more prosperous as a country, but families in Malaysia are so much closer. Singaporeans are too rigid and law-abiding, but oh, look at the Malaysian crime rate! The list could go on and on – in the end, we could never conclude which country was

better. Instead, I just accepted that they were different, and they both had things that we liked, and things we wanted to see changed. Swapping stories of the schools we went to and tales of what growing up in each country was like, I could see that while my schooling was Singaporean, the values and the upbringing I had were distinctively Malaysian. While I never had the opportunity to grow up

in the place of my birth, there was still a Malaysia-shaped hole in my heart that made this country an inseparable part of me. To paraphrase a popular saying, you can take the Malaysian out of Malaysia, but this Malaysian is still going to hunt for the best *satay* or *roti canai* and drive three hours to eat it. Slowly but surely, I grew to accept that instead of having to just pick one, I was blessed to have two homes and

to have enough space in my heart to love both of them for what they were.

To sum up, I remember a discussion I had with my mother about where she thought home was. She had this to say:

"A child who has been fostered to another home may grow up feeling the love and warmth of their adoptive family. But deep inside them, there is always a longing for their biological parents. Singapore may be your adopted home, but always remember the place that gave you life."

I could not agree more.

Two homes, one heart