

THE DIVINE AT WORK

BY ANEETA SUNDARARAJ



“But there is nothing to do there!” This is a common response from city folk when I tell them that I’m going home to Alor Setar. I smile and no longer explain that nowadays, I’m busier than ever when I’m there. Desperate to capture and preserve images of this place where the powers that be are rushing to develop and industrialise, I don’t want to lose what makes this place in the north of Peninsular Malaysia unique.

First-time visitors to the birth place of two former Prime Ministers of Malaysia need time to get used to seeing the wide, open skies set against water-logged paddy land. So flat is this land that to this day, learner drivers still practice hill starts on a man-made gradient.

An hour south of Malaysia’s border with Thailand, Alor Setar is the capital of Kedah state which boasts a royal household with Hindu roots that go back centuries. Almost 1000 years ago, in 1025 AD, Rajendra Chola I from Tamil Nadu launched a naval expedition against the Srivijaya empire and conquered Kadaram (as Kedah was known at the time). Of the many theories that attempt to explain this invasion, the one that continues to fascinate me is that it was motivated by geopolitics with a religious nuance. This is because the Chola dynasty was said to be Shaivite in nature while the Srivijaya empire was predominantly Buddhist.

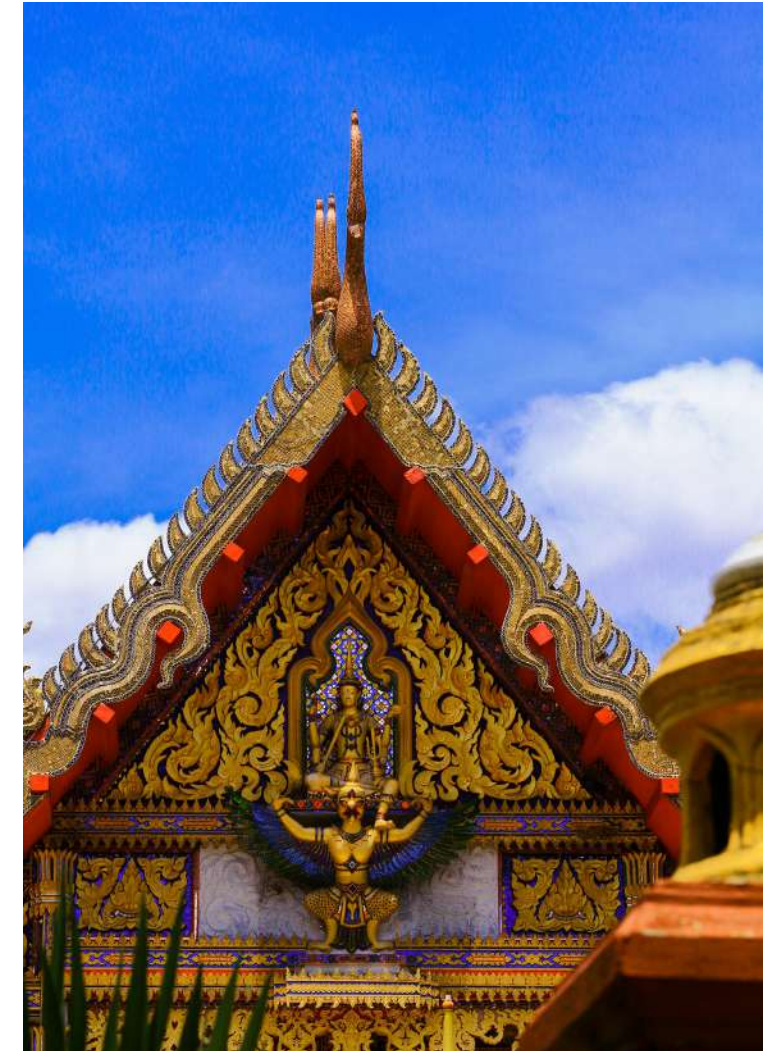
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Nothing reminds me more of this Hindu-Buddhist connection than when I stand before the Wat Nikrodharam, or as us locals call it, Wat Siam. Situated in the heart of the city, this quiet Buddhist temple comes to life each year when many Chinese in Alor Setar come to celebrate Wesak Day. Yet, in the centre of the lintel above the entrance into the main temple is a carving of a decidedly Hindu Vishnu-Garuda.

No one bats an eyelid when an old Malay-Muslim pakcik turns up at this temple. Choosing a spot in the shade of the many trees planted within the vicinity of this temple, he parks his bicycle to one side. In no hurry, he takes out a rusty box, deftly rolls the tobacco in paper and lights up his cigarette. Seemingly without a care in the world, he spends some time watching the world go by.

Rumour has it that Malaysia’s first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj, gifted the land for this temple in perpetuity to the temple authorities to honour his mother, Che Manjalara. She was of Siamese (Thai) descent and the sixth wife of Sultan Abdul Hamid Halim Shah. This temple also holds a special place in my heart for it is here that, for 29 years, my father served at a free bi-weekly medical clinic.

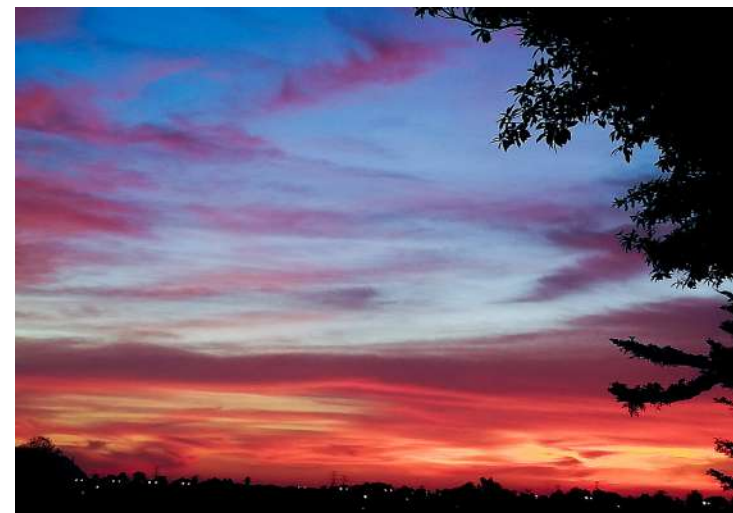
Although the Sultan passed away in 1943, visit any commercial establishment in Alor Setar today and, regardless of race, religion or ethnicity of its proprietors, you’ll find a framed portrait of him on the wall. I confess that I have the image of the Sultan on my computer’s desktop as I, too, sincerely believe that ‘having him there’ brings





good fortune.

During the Sultan's long reign, there were many developments in Kedah state, but two stand out. The first is the stunning state mosque, Masjid Zahir which was opened in 1912. With architecture that has a Moorish influence, this 100-odd-year-old place of worship is regarded as one of the most beautiful mosques in the world.



Rumour also has it that the other former Prime Minister of Malaysia whose birthplace is Alor Setar, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, duly inspired by Masjid Zahir asked that the same onion-shaped design for the dome be used for the Prime Minister's office in Malaysia's administrative capital, Putrajaya.

The second is the construction of the longest canal in Malaysia called Terusan Wan Mat Saman. Named after the Sultan's one-time Prime Minister, the 36-kilometre canal allowed for widespread irrigation of the paddy land, thereby, ensuring that to this day Kedah is still known as the Rice Bowl of Malaysia.

It is to these beautiful paddy lands that my parents and I often go to witness what I now call 'Paintings by the Divine'. In the 20 minutes that it takes for the sun to set, the cloudless sky swiftly turns from blue to all shades of orange, yellow and crimson. In all my years, never have two 'paintings' ever been the same.



Such flat terrain also means that it can become stiflingly hot and humid in Alor Setar. But here's the thing – it is precisely during these blistering times, usually in the months of March and April, that one of the most beautiful things happen. Heavy foliage on age-old trees will, in less than a week, be replaced by Tecoma flowers in a multitude of shades from pink and white to yellow and purple.



Add to this the profusion of chilli-red hibiscus, pots upon pots of the desert rose, blooming frangipani on road dividers and every second house that has bougainvillea in at least three different shades, Alor Setar is quite simply a riot of colours. It is a Kuala Lumpur born-and-bred friend who said it best when she saw my photos and asked, “Where is this? Paradise?”

Again, my response was to smile and say nothing. Instead, I thought, ‘Perhaps. After all, it’s where I’ve learnt to see the Divine at work.’