

Monday February 2, 2009

## Reflecting Muar's historic charm

Story and photos by ZAZALI MUSA

OLD buildings in the coastal river town of Muar in northwestern Johor are a priceless heritage and definitely an attraction.

They may not be historically famous like those in Georgetown and Malacca, which were accorded World Heritage Site status by Unesco on July 7, 2008.

Nonetheless, they reflect the town's prosperous past and splendour and make interesting subjects for photographers, history buffs, visitors and architecture students.



In good use: The Sultan Abu Bakar Building now houses the Muar Land Office and District Office.

Muar's name originates from the Malay word *muara* or estuary.

History shows that Sultan Abu Bakar named it Bandar Maharani or Empress Town in 1884 after his consort Sultanah Fatimah.

Unlike today's structures, it is easy to identify the buildings of yesteryears as the dates of completion are visible on the exterior.



Outstanding: Well-preserved pre-war building in Jalan Maharani dominate in Muar's architecture.

Most of the buildings feature neo-classical and Georgian designs popular in 19th-century Europe, the United States and British colonies.

High ceilings, verandas, columns, arches, striped walls, louvre windows panels, decorative plaster and balustrades are common features of buildings of that circa.

Although most of them are of colonial design, the architects included Chinese, Indian and Malay motifs to adapt the designs to local culture.



Still vibrant: The Sultan Abu Bakar Building in Jalan Mejdidi is a replica of the Grand Palace in Johor Baru.

Rows of well-preserved pre-war buildings in Jalan Abdullah, Jalan Maharani and Jalan Sulaiman add colour to the streets as the buildings dominate as far as the town's architecture is concerned.

Standing proudly in Jalan Bentayan next to Wisma Kim are two Chinese pre-war houses adorned with intricate plaster stucco designs on the façade and tiles of Anglo-Saxon influence.

The Royal Customs and Excise building built in 1909 in Jalan Maharani was once an important landmark.

The back of the building that faces Muar River served as a landing port and was part of a railway network linking Jalan Sulaiman in Bandar Maharani and Sungai Pulai over a distance of 22.5km.



Standing tall: A view of Muar from the northern bank of River in Tanjung Agas.

Not many are aware that Muar was served by its own railway network known as Muar State Railways (MSR).

MSR operated from 1889 to 1925 and started just four years after the first railway line of the country from Taiping to Port Weld in Perak was inaugurated in 1885.

It facilitated the transportation of people and *kampung* products from surrounding villages to Malacca and Singapore via the port.

The service dwindled after the opening of Jalan Abdul Rahman in 1918 linking the town and Parit Jawa.

MSR came to an end in 1925.

Muar High School was founded in 1902 as a government English school.

Construction of the colonial-style building in Jalan Meriam started in 1904 and was completed in 1915.

It is among the oldest schools in Johor and has produced many famous names including former Johor Menteri Besar the late Tan Sri Osman Saat, International Trade and Industry Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman.

Construction of Sultan Ibrahim Jamek Mosque on the Muar riverbank in Jalan Petri was begun in 1920 and completed in 1927 at a cost of RM10,000.

It is noted for its four-storey minaret in its backyard and a worship place that depicts European-classical and Islamic architectural influences.

Passers-by in Jalan Mejdidi will not miss the Sultan Abu Bakar building (built in 1921) as it is a replica of the Istana Besar or Grand Palace of Johor Baru, which is now the Johor Royal Museum.

It houses the Muar Land Office and District Office.

Three double-storey link houses in Jalan Othman built in 1928 with Dutch architecture stand in stark contrast to their surroundings.