

THE SPELL OF OLD ASIA

Long ago a busy hub of the spice trade, Malaysia's old Malacca now harbors a mix of colonial-era buildings and quiet ethnic neighborhoods, where the pace of life is blessedly slow.



BY P. F. KLUGE PHOTOGRAPHS BY PALANI MOHAN



**"THERE IS NO
PLACE IN
MALAYA THAT
HAS MORE
CHARM,"**

W. Somerset Maugham wrote of Malacca 81 years ago. "It has the sad and romantic air of all places that have once been of importance and live now in

the recollection of a vanished grandeur."

I went to Malacca because of a Maugham story and because I loved the sound of its name. It resonated, like Zamboanga and Luang Prabang, like the lyrics of an old song. I went because the city is on the Strait of Malacca, where one-third of the world's commerce—and some 80 percent of Japan's oil—passes through a narrow channel that is one of the most heavily pirated places in the world.

I went to Malacca because I was looking for a piece of the Asia that used to be. Gridlocked, polluted, high-rise and high-priced, Asia's modern cities don't invite nostalgia. But, just a five-hour bus ride from Singapore, Malacca might still be the kind of place where Maugham sat under a fan, savoring an after-dinner brandy and a local cheroot. Or so I hoped. I'd been to Malacca for a day and a night, nearly 30 years ago: a small, sleepy, left-behind-feeling place with old colonial buildings, narrow lanes, night markets, a mix of Malays, Indians, and Chinese. The Asia of the past. Would it still be there?



"On Fridays and over the weekend, Jonker Street, a main street in old Malacca, comes alive in the evening as hundreds of people set up stalls selling everything from dim sum to hair bands," says photographer Palani Mohan. "I found these two women [right] walking the streets one evening just outside my hotel. What wonderful faces. You just can't stop looking at them." *Opening pages:* "There's a wonderful view of the Chee family ancestral house [left] from a window in the Hotel Puri," says Mohan. "All over Malacca you see these brightly colored rickshaws with all kinds of decorations [right]. They're a great way to take in the old city at the end of the day."



Now, after riding for miles through a Malacca that is busy and raw, at last I see something I remember, a red-painted Dutch-built city hall, a fountain dedicated to Queen Victoria, a strange clock tower. There's history in the neighborhood, the Sultan, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the English. Most of the history is downhill. Malacca's glory days were in the 15th century, when it was a hub of the spice trade between Asia and Europe. Colonial powers came, saw, conquered, and lost interest. The Dutch favored Indonesia, the British invested in Singapore. Energy and motivation moved away, the river silted up, the port dried. Malacca turned into the tropical backwater that Somerset Maugham described. That is just the kind of place I'm looking for. "I call my home the Small House," Serge Jardin tells me. "Not only because I like to eat small—I'm not French for nothing—but also because they are slow, and I like to be slow too. I don't like things that are fast—fast cars, fast track, fast women."

Somerset Maugham described "the most

labyrinthine houses of the Chinese merchants," and that's the kind of place Jardin and his Malacca-born Chinese wife, Y.C., have, right on old Malacca's Diaper Street. "Millionaire's Row," once home to Dutch colonial administrators, later to Chinese businessmen rich off rubber and tin. The house does not reveal itself to the street. Like most Malacca houses, it's no wider than a two-car garage. Tucked according to their width, Malacca houses were built narrow. And very long. The Small House runs in and out, through a front room with a tiled table, a little bar, and then an air well, open to the sky, with garden plants below, then an office library, a fold-out below another air well, a dining area, an outdoor kitchen and herb garden. On the second floor, front and back, mosquito nets hover over welcoming beds and bedrooms for Jardin and his wife, others for

guests. I notice dark wood, cool tiles, overhead fans, modern art, and black-and-white photos of old Malacca. I notice shelves of books. It's a house that accommodates guppies and geckos and me, a place where gin and tonics are served at room temperature, where guests broods paragraphs slow talk.

"A tourist can step off a bus and see Malacca in three hours, with time for shopping," Jardin says. "A backpacker can



Dragon dancers celebrate a holiday near the gateway to Diaper Street in the old center. "There's always some kind of festival taking place in Malacca over the weekends," says Wilson Sijapati. "This delicious street food is what I had for breakfast every morning. I just sleep in past 8 a.m. It's all good."



go to all the places that Lonely Planet recommends in one long day. But it's not what you find in the museums here that matters—it's what is in the streets. And you must walk those streets again and again. And that takes time."

BREAKFAST IN MALACCA means choosing between Malay sticky rice wrapped in a banana leaf, Indian roti *pisang*—a fresh, flaky bread with sweet bananas tucked inside—or Chinese dim sum, all of them consumed in crowded, noisy places, open to the street. And all of them—another benefit of visiting the past—cheap: It would be hard to spend two American dollars here. Then I walk.

There are perhaps 1,000 houses in old Malacca, three main streets, four cross-streets, countless alleys and spurs. I pass the coffinmaker's shop, a nearby temple where a wake is going on, another building that seems consecrated to karaoke singing and line dancing on weekends. A shop sells the paper houses, miniature furniture, appliances, and cars that are burned at funerals, converted into smoke that accompanies the dead to their afterlife. There are clusters of goldsmiths, locksmiths, tinsmiths, rattanmakers, butchers, foot reflexologists, a rattan weaver, a barrelmaker, and a place where, three or four times a minute, a woman places a ball of dough into a hot skillet, smooths it, turns it, and creates a fresh rice crepe. I have to see her each morning. But not as much as I need to see the blacksmiths, two of them working in adjoining shops, semi-synchronized blacksmiths, moving among anvils, bellows, furnaces, and forges impervious to the likes of me, watching from outside, delighted to be in a town with blacksmiths.

Malacca, Maugham wrote, "is a sleepy little town and strangers that come to it, losing their native energy, insensibly drop into its easy and lethargic ways." That, I guess, is what is happening to me. When the sun turns mean, I turn home. I can feel a nap coming on. I think of some of the Malay houses I've seen in quiet neighborhoods on the outskirts of town, sitting on stilts to catch the breeze, outdoor platforms so that people can talk and nap. That is where I really want to be. But I nap behind an air conditioner, and when I awake it is time for more Malacca walks.

I NEVER QUITE MANAGE to ask Dr. Tan Ta Sen exactly how he makes his money. He lives in Singapore, where I hear him described as a "businessman, an industrialist,

and a scholar." He owns the Hotel Puri, where I stay, and takes a friendly interest in me, introducing me to people, pointing things out, confiding to me that there's a solid older house for sale that I can buy for \$40,000. He walks me down Heeren Street, past tiled entrances, wood shutters, doors with Chinese characters: a movie set from the 1930s. It's easy to recognize an art gallery, a restaurant. But then

Dr. Tan points to a house no different from its neighbors. "This is a bird house," he says. A few years ago, a law that made it nearly impossible for landlords to evict tenants—even nonpaying ones—was repealed. With renters gone, the house filled with birds, swallows that excrete saliva into nests that go into costly bird's nest soup. Landlords make far more from birds than humans. But when a house goes



BREAKFAST IN MALACCA MEANS CHOOSING BETWEEN MALAY STICKY RICE WRAPPED IN A BANANA LEAF, INDIAN ROTI PISANG—A FRESH, FLAKY BREAD WITH SWEET BANANAS TUCKED INSIDE—OR CHINESE DIM SUM.



"MALACCA IS A JEWEL OF A LIVING COMMUNITY, OLD TRADES, SMALL TREASURES, MUSLIM GRAVES, HINDU TEMPLES, MOSQUES. IT'S PEACE AND TRANQUILLITY. IT'S UNDERSTANDING. IT'S DISCERNING."

to the birds, it's a death sentence. Swallows like dark, moist, cavelike surroundings. Tan points to drainpipes coming off the roof. They don't empty into the street; they've been rerouted to pour water inside.

A little later, Dr. Tan ushers me into a bright, newly painted building, his pet project, a memorial to Cheng Ho, also known as Zheng He, a Muslim eunuch who made seven trips to Malacca as admiral of the Chinese navy. Dr. Tan—who is president of the International Zheng He Society—leads me across an open courtyard to a wall-size painting that shows the admiral's armada standing off Malacca. Cheng Ho came on a mission of trade and tribute, and this, Dr. Tan believes, is the site of his warehouse.

There's some question as to whether Dr. Tan has located Cheng Ho's warehouse. But no one doubts the admiral brought large numbers of Chinese to Malacca and that

this helped establish Straits Chinese—or Peranakan—culture, with its own language, pottery, beaded embroidery, and shoes, delicate sarongs and *kebaya* blouses, and, blending Chinese ingredients and Malay spices, perhaps the world's first fusion cuisine. In Malacca, Straits Chinese lived in a style that was affluent and tropical, unapologetically showy. Consider the castle a few doors down from the bird house.

SEE TOURISTS pause outside the pillars and gate, peering down a driveway, looking up at a gold-domed castle that could have been transplanted from King Ludwig's Bavaria. It's an ancestral house, a shrine belonging to the Chee family, and isn't open to the public. But I call a friend named Chee in Singapore, who calls a brother in London, and late one morning the gate is open and Chee Swee Hoon awaits me.

First things first: He walks me across marble floors to where a family tree hangs on the wall. It begins with Chi Soo Sum, a general who fled China's Manchu regime and became a rice merchant in Malacca. His descendants prospered: tapioca and tin, opium and arrack, sawmills and ice plants and banking. In 1926, a sixth-generation Chi commissioned a Dutch architect to design a mansion. Chee Swee Hoon is eighth generation.

"This house used to be right against the sea," he says. This was before old Malacca was surrounded by landfill. "It was so beautiful to sit outside in the evening breeze and watch ships sail up and down the straits—British warships."

A family altar is at the center of the house, shelves of funeral tablets that have biographical information and burial location tucked in back. Otherwise the house

(Continued on page 123)

Altar boys get ready for Sunday mass. Malacca's Catholic community includes Portuguese, Chinese, and Indian members. For Malacca's Portuguese, religion remains one of the dwindling ties to their mother country. "Malacca is full of little details like this," says Mohan. "That's the beauty of the place."