

Seri Menanti Palace of Negeri Sembilan



The Seri Menanti Palace Tour is one of those "Must Do" activities on the MANZA calendar. The last time Angie our guide ran this trip was two years ago. On that occasion the ladies came back raving about it especially their visit to a traditional Malay home in the nearby kampong. Wasting no time I got on the phone and reserved my place!

On the morning of the tour our coach trundled down the highway towards Seremban, the state capital of Negeri Sembilan. Although within commuting distance to Kuala Lumpur, Negeri Sembilan is rarely visited by tourists. I once passed through en route to the East coast to catch a ferry to Tioman. Once we got on to the country roads the region came unto its own. Not a condominium in sight but replaced by contours of hills dotted with rubber and palm oil plantations. The cultural heritage of Negeri Sembilan began to unfold.

This region is home to the Minangkabau people, originally settlers from Western Sumatra. They practice a matrilineal tradition of inheritance known as 'Adat Papatih' where inheritance is passed through the generations from mother to daughter. During the 15th and 16th Centuries the men were attracted to the trading port of Melaka and many chose to settle there. The Minangkabau have been crossing the Melaka straits for generations and settled in several villages each of which had a chieftain. Since there were nine groups of villages they established a confederation of nine fiefdoms which became known as Negeri (country) Sembilan (nine).

Local houses were built on stilts traditionally designed to guard against flood waters along river settlements. The stilts prevented snakes from entering and allowed the



circulation of cool air beneath the houses. Examples can be seen en route. The roofs have a distinct design feature, constructed to resemble a pair of buffalo horns with the two end gables pointing upwards. Legend has it that to prevent a battle with a neighbouring tribe a buffalo fight has to be arranged. The opposition brought with them a prized bull whilst the Minangkabau offered up a calf. The calf had sharp spikes attached to its horns so whilst attempting to suckle from the bull it impaled it killing the bull. The score was settled!

The Seri Menanti palace is the ancestral home of the Yam Tuan and his descendents. In 1773 a member of the Western Sumatran royal family Raja Melewar was invited to be the sovereign of the newly formed state of Negeri Sembilan, and was proclaimed the first Yam Tuan, the local equivalent of the Sultan.

The original palace was destroyed in the 1875 Sungai Ujong War between warring factions of the chieftains, the Yam Tuan and the British. The present wooden Istana Lama was built in 1902 crafted by master craftsmen *Tukang Kahart* and *Tukang Taib*. Every piece was carved and the timber palace, set on 99 pillars and 5 stories high, was assembled without the use of nails or screws. The last royal resident in the Istana Lama was Yang Dipuan Besar Tuanku

Mohammad in 1931 when the royal residence moved to a new palace built nearby. The Istana Lama became a royal museum in 1992 and houses several examples of original furnishings in the throne room, bedroom and dining hall. Portraits of the royal members bedeck the walls.

As we wandered the grounds of the Palace to our surprise the local police had arrived. Given that we were the only tourists there I was beginning to wonder what was up! We were beckoned onto the bus to make haste to our much awaited lunch stop. To our surprise we were given a police escort to the lunch stop, treated like real VIP's! They joined us in a sumptuous meal laid on by our host Puan Raja and her family in the setting of her traditional Negeri Sembilan home. We were greeted by the smells of Satay and then an unveiling of the banquet. There was biryani, pineapple curry, prawns, sweet and sour chicken, mixed vegetable, lemong and the best beef rending I have ever tasted. All this was followed by an amazing array of fruits, deserts and cookies in all shapes and colours. Not knowing where to start I followed the other ladies at one end of the long table and munched gradually along to the other!

Puan Raja then graciously invited us to look around the house and gardens, a living testimony to a traditional way of life, under pressure from the lure of the big city.

This tour was held soon after Hari Raya. The experience of visiting and sharing a traditional banquet gave us an insight of what a Hari Raya open house really means.....kampong style!

Reporter/photographer: Rita Dutta

