

WANDERLUST / Malaysia

# Coasting Forward

History-rich Kuala Selangor is known for its connection to Malaysia's past, but the town's lifeblood remains its coastal fishing communities.

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A grey heron in Kuala Selangor Nature Park surveys its surroundings – a secondary forest, mangrove swamp and brackish lake created as a bird sanctuary. The park is a nesting area for some 156 bird species. **Opposite Page** The local lighthouse keeper checks that everything is running like clockwork at the 80m-high Altingsburg Lighthouse, which was erected on Bukit Melawati in 1907 to guide ships plying the narrow Straits of Malacca.





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I paused before sliding the van door open, hoping the outside air would provide relief from the humidity back in Kuala Lumpur. Late March was hot as promised – and proved a perfect time to escape the city’s steamy streets.

But it wasn’t just the hope for a cool sea breeze that had brought me to Kuala Selangor, 70km west of Kuala Lumpur. Here, where the Selangor River empties into the Straits of Malacca, fishing has long been vital to the surrounding villages. I was here to learn about life in these vibrant communities.

My own recreational angling – years of unsuccessfully chasing striped bass off the northeast coast of the US – had given me great appreciation for those who sustain livelihoods from the uncertainties of throwing baited lines into an underwater abyss. In Kuala Selangor, I was told, I would

see communities that have been intimately connected to the sea for centuries.

“You’ll enjoy being out of the city,” my driver and guide, Norman Noordin, told me. “The fresh sea air will do you good.”

**Historic Hill** “Start here,” Norman instructed, pointing to a cannon overlooking the panoramic view of the strait, “and then, make your way around the hill.”

The hill – Bukit Melawati – would be my introduction to Kuala Selangor’s past. The area, about 10 minutes from town by car, is home to the ruins of Kota Melawati, an 18th century fort built during the reign of Sultan Ibrahim Shah – Selangor’s ruler between 1778 and 1826 – as a vantage point to track ships. At its highest points, fishing villages along the banks are visible, and on clear days, men in wooden

sampans can be seen setting out their nets.

Relics at the Kuala Selangor District Historical Museum help tell the region’s story. A small building at the hill’s crest, the museum highlights the area’s rich history, including Dutch influence in the 17th century and later, British colonial rule. The museum brims with historical artefacts such as Dutch pistols, ornate *keris* (traditional Malay daggers) and ancient currencies like *tampang* – tin ingots used throughout the Malay Peninsula between the 16th and late 19th centuries. However, to fully grasp Selangor’s history, what is outside the museum’s glass doors proves more instructive.

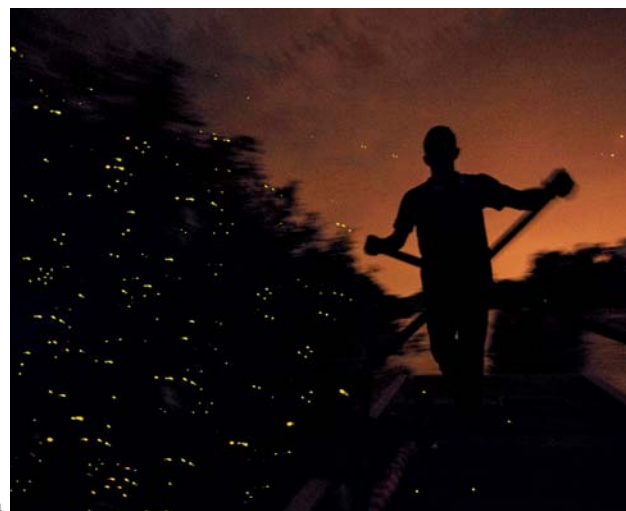
Nearby is Busut Melawati, a mound, which according to legend, was a spot where Selangor’s early sultans would rest under a drooping *angšana*



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1. A local fisherman inspects his nets at Bagan Sungai Yu, a fishing village in Pasir Penambang, located along the Selangor River. The fishing community supplies waterfront restaurants here with their daily catch. 2. Kuan Hwa Seafood Restaurant's 'Garden of the Ocean' seafood platter – priced at MYR500 (approx. USD122) – features eight to 10 specialties including five-spice mantis prawns and salted egg local crabs. 3. A must-try at Auntie Foo Cafe is *cendol*, green rice flour jelly in coconut milk, with shavings of ice, and swirls of palm sugar and refreshing coconut ice cream. 4. Kampung Kuantan is well known for its firefly colonies that reside in *berembang* trees along the Selangor River.

tree. The site is popular today for expansive views of the strait. Enjoying this seascape, I was reminded I was no longer in the city as a silvery lutung (also known as silvery langur) bounded in front of me, hopping onto a cannon pointing out to the meeting place of the strait and the Selangor River.

Perching himself on the cascabel, my primate companion seemed to enjoy the view as much as I did. Silvery lutungs are found in trees along coastal areas in Malaysia and Indonesia, and while there is no shortage of them on Bukit Melawati, these monkeys are considered 'near threatened' by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Further down the hill are more signs of Selangor's past. The Makam Diraja or Royal Mausoleum is home to the remains of the first three Sultans of Selangor. Little

is known about the first, Sultan Salehuddin Shah, who reigned from 1756 to 1778, but as I read about how the waterways surrounding the area were critical to the tin and rubber trade, I could imagine how important it would have been during this sultan's reign to safeguard the Selangor River and the strait. Interestingly, not far from Kuala Selangor, at the mouth of the Klang River, is reportedly where the sultan began his journey, sailing over to officially establish his rule.

Selangor remained an important trading port into the 20th century, and in 1907, a lighthouse was built on the hill. Originally named the Altingsburg Lighthouse, the Kuala Selangor Lighthouse, as it is widely known today, stands 27m high and is the most recognisable symbol of Kuala Selangor. It continues to serve as an important beacon for ships – foreign and domestic –

navigating the narrow, notoriously treacherous strait.

**Nature Up Close** As the midday sun arrived, I was happy to be back in Norman's air-conditioned van, though we were not travelling far.

At the bottom of Bukit Melawati is Kuala Selangor Nature Park, which is run by the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS). The MNS is one of the country's oldest NGOs, and is focused on education and conservation activities such as mangrove seeding and debris removal. The park is home to over 150 bird species including the milky stork, great egret and black-capped kingfisher, and includes a lake where a variety of migratory and endemic birds feed.

Connected to the park is Taman Ikan Air Tawar, a freshwater fish reserve featuring aquariums with local fish like the *toman* (giant





1. Auntie Kopitiam, which opened in 1935, is a typical Hainanese coffee shop serving toast with homemade *kaya* (coconut jam), *kuih lempeng* (local pancake), as well as their signature: curry noodles with hard-boiled egg, prawns, bean curd, fish balls and chicken feet. **Opposite Page A** local fisherman relaxes in the veranda of his colourful home in Pasir Penambang. There are around 200 households in Pasir Penambang and most of the residents trace their roots to Southern China.

snakehead) and *kap perak* (silver carp), as well as exhibits of nets, traps and implements used by Selangor's fishing community.

Driving from the hill toward town, the fusion of cultures in Kuala Selangor takes shape. In addition to several mosques in the area, 10km south of Bukit Melawati is the picturesque Sri Shakti Hindu temple. Its sandstone towers stand in contrast to colourfully ornate Chinese temples, including the Monkey God Temple at the southern end of Pasir Penambang, a sub-district known for its fish markets.

**Sea to Table** Feeling weary from a day of sun and stimulation, my senses were awakened as Norman pulled into a gravel lot just next to a man selling fresh durian out of his truck. Evening in Pasir Penambang arrived along with my appetite, and it was time to experience Kuala Selangor's most famous cuisine – its seafood.

Pasir Penambang is where Kuala Selangor's connection to the sea is most evident. Walking around this close-knit fishing community, I smelled fresh paint being applied to wooden boats, watched men lay out salted fish to dry, and women repair nylon nets. Most villagers here can trace their roots to southeast China, and almost everyone fishes for a living.

While tourism has helped offset some of the challenges this community faces, many remain. Illegal fishing activities, trawling and the increasing uncertainty of weather patterns continue to create headwinds for the fisherfolk.

Fortunately, the plight of local fishermen has received more attention recently. In 2017, a centre opened at Kampung Sungai Sembilang, a 15-minute drive south of Pasir Penambang. The building serves as a marketplace for fishermen to sell their catch.

Its launch coincided with an announcement from the Malaysian government that cost-of-living assistance would be provided to nearly 1,000 Selangor fishermen – a great boon to struggling anglers.

Today, Pasir Penambang's waterfront markets, fisheries and restaurants draw sizable crowds, including tour groups. Beyond fresh seafood, vendors also sell dried fish and a local specialty – prawn crackers.

Residents say the prawn crackers here are the freshest and most flavourful in Selangor – the result of being so close to coastal prawn farms. Manufacturing these snacks is a popular source of income, even though producing the crackers is labour intensive, as prawns must be collected, peeled, sliced, sun-dried and then fried.

Browsing the market stirred my appetite even more, so I made my way to Restoran Kuan Hwa,

## Sweet Surrender

There's more to Kuala Selangor's cuisine than just great seafood. For something to satisfy a sweet tooth, *kuih ketayap* is a must-try. The rolled crepe-like dessert is made from flour, eggs and pandan (screw pine) leaves that give it a green hue, and features a filling of shredded coconut mixed with *gula melaka* (palm sugar) – caramelised sugar made from the sap of palm trees. In Selangor, *gula melaka* is also used in *cendol*, another popular dessert that combines the palm sugar with pandan jelly noodles, coconut milk and ice shavings. Auntie Foo Cafe serves these home-made treats, as well as sandwiches and a variety of local teas and coffees.

[f AuntieFooKualaSelangor](#)

## vidi Kuala Selangor Tour

Vidi's eight-hour tour in Kuala Selangor includes a visit to Kota Melawati, a fort built atop Bukit Melawati by Sultan Ibrahim in the late 1700s; an exploration of Kuala Selangor Nature Park; a decadent seafood feast; and a firefly cruise down the Selangor River on board a *tongkang* (small, non-motorised boat).

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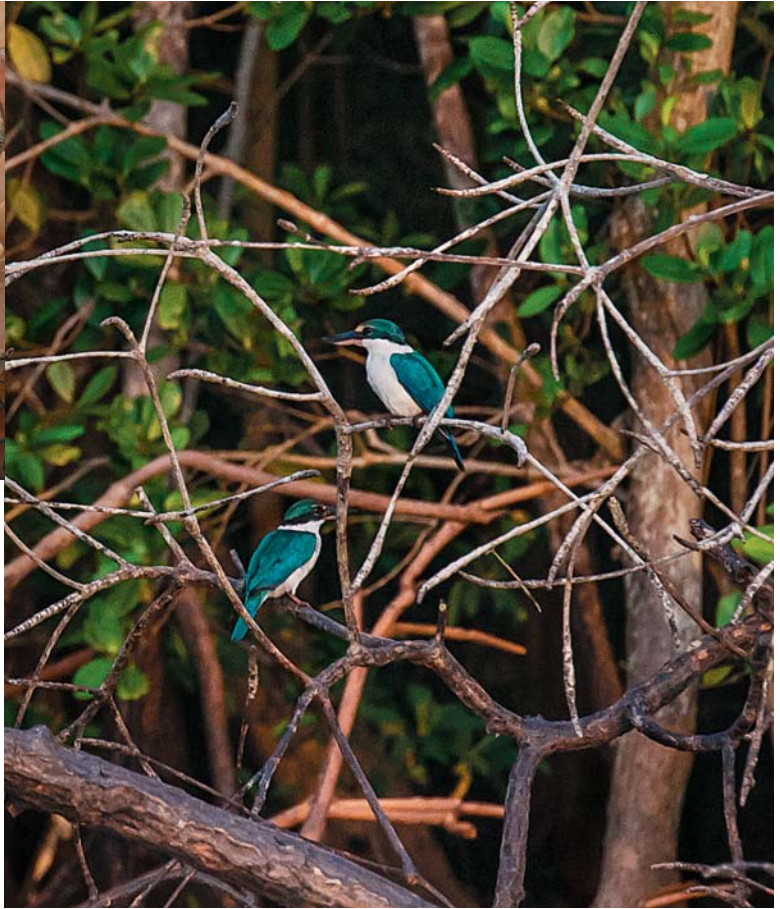








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1. Kuala Selangor's prawn crackers are made by steaming a dough of tapioca flour, fresh white prawn meat and white pepper, and then freezing it before cutting and sun-drying the crackers. 2. Two white-collared kingfishers perch along the Selangor River, giving a little pop of aquamarine to the lush greenery. 3. A diorama at the Historical Museum of Kuala Selangor District showcases Kuala Selangor's important role in maritime history. The district is located where the Selangor River meets the Straits of Malacca – one of the main shipping channels between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean.

considered the area's best seafood joint. Inside, a spacious room of cherry-red plastic chairs surrounded round tables. Tanks bubbled with sea cockles, oysters and white pomfret fish. Kuan Hwa's menu includes many items under MYR20 (approx. USD5) and reflects the background of its community, serving mostly Chinese-inspired dishes.

As I sat watching the sun disappear, I ate chili flower crab, fried *senangin* (threadfin) with ginger, and plump steamed prawns served with crumbled fried butter. My hunger and the daylight now gone, it was time to experience Kuala Selangor's most popular tourist attraction – its firefly colonies.

**Night Lights** I made my way down to the stilted docks of the Firefly Park Resort about 10km outside of town, where a line of boats waited for guests. Once on board, we headed

toward the *berembang* (*Sonneratia caseolaris*) trees – the fireflies' habitat. The sun slowly disappeared as flocks of white pelicans dotted the river's mangroves.

These mangroves are crucial to protecting the river's ecosystem. Numerous species, including anchovies, perch, mullet and spotted catfish, all rely on these areas to feed and spawn. This is particularly true in Selangor, which has one of the largest stretches of mangrove forest in Malaysia.

Pollutants and deforestation activities are factors contributing to the threat to mangroves, but even prawn farming has led to entire sections of mangrove being cleared – a reminder of the delicate balance between these natural resources and the community's ability to support itself.

After about 10 minutes, we arrived at our destination. The captain shut

off the boat's motor as I sat in silence, watching thousands of fireflies performing a synchronised ritual to the delight of their audience. I was told that a group of fishermen first discovered these colonies and suggested the village offer tours as a way to help the locals.

The boat slowly turned around in the darkness, and the motor hummed as we made our way back to shore. A flash of lightning over the strait signaled an impending storm.

As we docked, a man standing on the bow of a similarly sized vessel was throwing his lines off the pile, and three others on board stretched out fishing nets. For them, the day's work was just beginning. 🌟



#### GETTING THERE

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