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Soul of real Kuala Lumpur in Chow Kit



Taste Legendary Nasi Lemak (above), located in the Chinese food section of Pasar Chow Kit, offers pork curry, sambal cuttlefish and sambal ikan billis that are to die for. PHOTOS: ABEL ANG

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Infamous red-light district in Malaysia's capital is in the midst of transformation, but still retains its old-world charm



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People say Chow Kit is a world of darkness. - Ida, in the film *Ida's Choice*

Ida's Choice is a 2013 short film by award-winning Malaysian documentary maker Justin Ong. It tells the story of Ida, the child of a Chow Kit prostitute.

In the film, she turns 18, coming to the threshold of her adult life, and asks the question of what her niche is, in the world of drugs, gangsters and poverty around her.

The film, available on YouTube, was completely shot in the infamous red-light district of Chow Kit in Kuala Lumpur.

My wife and I recently spent a weekend exploring Chow Kit, which has just landed on The New York Times' coveted list of 52 places to visit in 2020.

My last visit was 30 years ago. The drug addicts who shot up in broad daylight are gone. The makeshift street stalls, run by people trying to dispose of their stolen wares, are also gone.

The area gets its name from Mr Loke Chow Kit, a well-known miner, municipal councillor and public official in KL in the 1800s. He was also the first owner of a local department store - Chow Kit & Co - which was the largest in the city at the time.

STAY

- **The Chow Kit:** The beautiful 113-room boutique hotel (www.thechowkit.com) has been lovingly decorated with an understanding of the historical significance of the area it is in. Check out the picture wall on the ground floor near the bar, which has framed works of significant happenings in the area. Look out for the picture of Malaysia's Bob Dylan, Sudirman Arshad, a local singer who sang at a free open-air concert in 1986, attracting more than 100,000 people.

- **Hilton Garden Inn Jalan Tuanku:** This is for travellers who seek the consistency and reliability of a large international chain. The 265-room hotel (str.sg/Jq3J) is next to Pasar Chow Kit, the largest wet market in KL.

EAT

- **Nasi kandar:** Opposite The Chow Kit hotel, you will find Restoran Kudu (335, Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Chow Kit, 50100 Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur), which serves some of the best nasi kandar (Indian mixed rice) in the city. Steamed rice is accompanied with various curries such as chicken and fish head. Other dishes include prawn sambal, fried squid and vegetable omelette. The servers select a special mixture of curries to be poured onto the rice, depending on the ingredients selected by the diner. No two plates from the stall seem

to taste the same. Each plate costs between RM7 and RM12 (S\$2.30 and S\$4). Go in the morning for perfectly crisp and fresh roti prata along with your curry rice. The waiting time is also much shorter. A lunch visit requires a wait of 45 to 90 minutes.

- **Durian cendol:** Behind Pasar Chow Kit, there is a stall, Cendol Durian Runtuh (57, Lorong Raja Bot, Chow Kit, 50300 Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur), which serves cendol with fresh durian, seeds and all. On a bed of shaved ice, a spoonful of sweet corn is added, after which six to seven seeds of premium local durian are shoved into the bowl. This bowl of delicious extravagance costs RM13 and you can amp it by upgrading to mao shan wang for an additional RM4.

- **Nasi lemak:** In the Chinese food section of Pasar Chow Kit, there is a small nondescript store, Taste Legendary Nasi Lemak (Pasar Chow Kit Zone 1C), with pots of food on the table, to top off steaming nasi lemak rice. This part of the market is hard to find, so ask the hawkers for direction. They will helpfully point you to the nasi lemak stall with the long queues. We would not have found it had it not been for a nice local, who insisted we head back into the market to try its offerings. The stall is now manned by the third generation. A chat with the younger Mr Siew reveals that his grandmother started the stall 60 years ago. The pork curry, sambal cuttlefish and sambal ikan billis are to die **for**.

I am intrigued by the opening of a new boutique hotel in the area, aptly named The Chow Kit, under the Ormond Group.

The hotel stands like a sentinel of the red-light district in Jalan Sultan Ismail, one of the main thoroughfares of KL, and has been lovingly refurbished by Ormond's chief executive officer, Mr Gareth Lim, and his team. It used to be a standard business hotel.

While many of the 113 rooms face the main road, the new sound insulation effectively keeps street noise out. Each room has fine details that are an homage to the red-light district it borders, from the trim in the curtains to the lantern-inspired bedside lamps - inspired by the symbol that used to signify a brothel.

Mr Lim says his vision for the hotel is to be part of the transformation taking place in the area. He sees it as an oasis of comfort for visitors who want to experience the real KL.

There is always a red-light district in any city of the world. In many instances, that is where the soul of the city is found, along with some of the best eating options.

My cursory walk through Chow Kit reveals a precinct in the midst of transformation with hipster bars, restaurants and co-working spaces.

With the Petronas Twin Towers towards the east and Bank Negara to the west, the area's renewal is, unsurprisingly, long overdue.

This does not mean the Chow Kit of 30 years ago has vanished.

Many parts still remind me of the Singapore of the 1970s, when I was a young child.

Next to The Chow Kit hotel, a Chinese dentist operates a dental chair in the open, providing patient privacy with only the simplest of swinging wooden saloon doors - akin to those seen in a Hollywood Western.

Across the street, two sisters operate Choi Hoong Shoe Shop, another throwback to the 1970s.

They custom-make prosthetic and orthotic shoes - cutting, shaping and moulding leather and materials, and sewing them together on an ancient Singer sewing machine.

Next to the shoe shop is a wonderfully messy furniture shop called Rattan Art, with rattan pieces carelessly strewn and packed into every nook and cranny of the space.

At the corner of that block is where Nasi Kandar Kudu is. My visit here reminds me of the coffee-shop treats I had as a child.

Supposedly the best nasi kandar in KL, the wait times at lunch hour are between 45 and 90 minutes (see facing page).

My early morning visit, with only four customers ahead of me, involves a 15-minute wait for my plate of delicious nasi kandar.

The heart of the district is Pasar Chow Kit, said to be the largest wet market in the capital.

A photographer's dream, this place comes alive in the mornings, with savvy locals seeking the freshest ingredients and produce South-east Asia has to offer.

The market is split into wet and dry sections. The wet side is where the meat, fowl and seafood are displayed for all to see. Live slaughter is still done at the market. The wet floors, cleavers landing and chickens gurgling their dying squawks can be an overwhelming assault on the senses.

In the dry market, you will find fruit and vegetable vendors selling the freshest of what is in season. Rambutans, longans, papayas and watermelons are all stacked high under bright lights to induce purchase.

Amid the fruit and vegetable sellers are spice merchants who hawk spices, sauces and condiments carefully curated from the region.

What strikes me is a hidden corner of the market - the dedicated Chinese section of Pasar Chow Kit.

Here, you will find food stalls that cook with pork, medicine halls and sundry shops.

A walk through the uneven narrow stairs transports me to my childhood years, with old men in singlets plying their trade and reading their Chinese papers, or measuring medical herbs for mysteriously potent tonics and brews.

You will also find Taste Legendary Nasi Lemak (see facing page).

Naturally, I take the opportunity to visit the red-light area blocks that were immortalised in the short film about Ida.

The low-rise buildings are still badly in need of a coat of paint. Small apartments have oddly bright blankets as curtains and broken windows. Tired sex workers stand at some of the windows.

Amid the modern metropolis that is KL, it appears that there is a small enclave which feels like Singapore in the 1970s.

The film Ida's Choice ends on a note of hope. Ida is looking forward to a new life and a new home, but her heart never leaves Chow Kit.

In many ways, that symbolises Chow Kit for me. With hotels such as The Chow Kit and the rejuvenation I have seen, I am filled with hope that the Malaysian capital will be able to blend old and new, clean and dirty, and keep a certain measure of what is the real KL.

• **Abel Ang is a monthly columnist in The Straits Times. He is the chief executive of a medical technology company and travels frequently for work.**

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