

Kelantan

In the 'Land of Lightning' that is Kelantan, expect to see the best of the traditional Malay culture. Indeed, time stands still as the people here still take pleasure in enjoying the simple things in life. Fishing villages and handicraft centres give visitors a glimpse of Kelantan's rich heritage and traditions, while its beautiful beaches and idyllic rural villages soothe the tired traveller's soul.

GETTING THERE

An excellent network of roads in Peninsular Malaysia allows you to drive comfortably to Kelantan from most major towns. Travelling from Kuala Lumpur using the Karak Highway eastwards takes you through Pahang and Terengganu in a matter of hours. If you prefer a more relaxed journey, hop into a comfortable express bus or take a train to Wakaf Bharu or Tumpat stations. There are also daily flights to the capital city.

MAJOR ATTRACTIONS

Kota Bahru

This is the capital of Kelantan and is a stopping point for many visitors on their way to neighbouring Thailand. A mixture of old and new architecture, it has the outwardly charms of an ancient city but also modern infrastructure for convenience. It is situated on the northern end of the Kelantan River, which is the centre of a fertile rice basin, and is also the place where the Kelantan royal family resides.

MUSEUMS

Museums here are located near Padang Merdeka, otherwise known as Independence Square. They are open daily except on Fridays.

Bank Kerapu (War Memorial Museum)

The building this museum occupies was built in 1912 by the Mercantile Bank but was taken over by the then Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank after World War II. It contains a collection of photographs from the Japanese Occupation, as well as other materials relating to the forced pursuit of the state.

Syura Hall (Islamic Museum)

This mosque-like building, which was once known as Serambi Mekah or the 'Annex of Mecca', is where the history of Islam in Kelantan can be found. The ground floor of the building was once used as a classroom for its first religious school. On display here are artefacts and inscriptions relating to the involvement of Kelantan Rulers in spreading Islam. Islamic art, handicrafts as well as a photographic collection of Prophet Muhammad's personal belongings are also on display.

Istana Jahar (Royal Customs Museum)

This palace was built in 1887 during Sultan Ahmad's reign from 1886-1889 for his son Long Kundur, who eventually succeeded his father to the throne. A work of art in itself, the palace highlights carved and intricate wooden panels and frameworks alongside iron staircases – evidence that Kelantanese craftsmen are among the most gifted around. A visit here will surely leave you trying to imagine what it must have been like to witness the grandeur of the royal ceremonies that took place here long ago.

Istana Batu (The Royal Museum)

This is the brick extension of Istana Jahar built in 1939. It was turned into the present museum in 1991. Housing replicas of crown jewels, costumes worn by royalty and other paraphernalia, the Royal Museum is also a good place to visit to learn more about the social activities and personal life of the Kelantan royalty through precious photographs.

Museum Negeri (The State Museum)

The main office for the Kelantan State Museum Corporation, Muzium Negeri houses an art gallery on ceramics, traditional musical instruments and much more.

Kampung Kraftangan (Handicraft Village and Craft Museum)

Looking to take home a piece of authentic Kelantan? This place is a must as it sells a wide range of handicrafts and shows the visitor the traditional processes involved in making silver articles, batik printing, and songket weaving, to name just a few. There are also 30 species of palm trees around here that gives the place an authentic village-feel.

Cultural Centre

This is the hub of all of Kelantan's cultural activities, where tops the size of a human head spin effortlessly, giant gaily-coloured kites frolic in the air, and wayang kulit (shadow play) and rebana ubi (drums) thump to the rhythm of your pulse. Indeed, this is the only place in Kelantan where you can also watch other traditional performances like the Mak Yong.

Interestingly, wayang kulit is a unique form of theatre inspired by Hindu epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata. The Tok Dalang (puppet master) tells his ancient tales by manipulating the puppets behind a silhouette screen. The puppet figures are carved from buffalo hide and mounted on rattan sticks.

Mak Yong combines dance, drama, opera and comedy and for many centuries popular as court entertainment. Performed mainly by women, Mak Yong conveys tales of legendary princes and princesses passed down the generations. The Cultural Centre is located along Jalan Mahmud near Perdana Hotel and admission is free on Saturdays and Wednesdays between February and October.

FISHING VILLAGES

A visit to Kelantan would not be complete without making at least one fishing village excursion. Two of the most well known ones here are at Sabak Beach and Kuala Besar. Both are about 14 to 15km from Kota Bharu. To fully appreciate the experience, make your way to these places after lunchtime, which is about the time fishermen arrive back at shore with their daily catch. The scenario that follows is priceless and you will witness the din associated with sorting the fresh catches and the haggling between wholesalers and fishermen.

BEACHES

Pantai Cahaya Bulan

This beach is located at the northeast stretch of the state's coastline. An ideal getaway, the shore is shaded by swaying casuarinas and coconut palms and is a must among picnic lovers and campers. Only about 10km from Kota Bharu, the road leading to this beach is flanked by various cottage industries selling handicrafts such as batik prints and

kites.

Pantai Irama

Pantai Irama or the Beach of Melody is one of the most pristine beaches along the coast of Kelantan. Located 25km south of Kota Bahru in the district of Bachok, the clean stretch is a welcome sight for the tired soul.

Pantai Bisikan Bayu

Feel the sea breeze run through your hair and whistle in your ears as you visit Pantai Bisikan Bayu, which ironically translates to the Beach of the Whispering Breeze. Located about 50km from Kota Bahru, it is near Semerak in Pasir Puteh.

Pantai Seri Tujuh

This is another stretch that gives you the feeling that you are lost in time. Located near the border with Thailand, it is only seven kilometres from the state capital. It is also the venue for the annual International Kite Festival.

Pantai Dasar Sabak

Pantai Dasar Sabak is graced with a quaint fishing village and many other rural hamlets that will enthral you with a whole new cultural experience.

WATERFALLS

Cascading waterfalls are also one of Kelantan's many attractions. Take a dip in any of these waterfalls hidden within Kelantan's lush forest. Most of these waterfalls are located close to the state capital and are easily accessible by road.

Jeram Pasu and Jeram Lenang

Jeram Pasu and Jeram Lenang are about 12 metres high and are rejuvenating, to say the least.

Lata Beringin

Another interesting waterfall is Lata Beringin, which towers majestically at 120 metres. One of the highest waterfalls in the country, the captivating views from here of the state's natural wonders makes it an ideal spot for avid campers.

MOUNTAINS

Gunung Strong

One of Kelantan's highest peaks at 1,422 metres is Gunung Strong. Tackling this mountain is a challenge not to be missed by adventurers and mountain climbers. While you are doing that, do not forget to pay a visit to the nearby Gua Ikan cave. Its name was derived from a solitary rock that looks like a fish. Explore the cave and its surroundings and you may just stumble upon treasures believed stashed away during the Japanese Occupation.

LOCAL HANDICRAFTS

The outskirts of Kota Bahru is dotted with cottage industries that line the beaches and other places, and provide you the opportunity to see Kelantanese culture at its best. Kelantan is famous for its batik – both manufactured by hand as well as those produced using modern methods. Among the places you should visit are Kampung Puteh, Kubor Kuda and Kampung Badang.

Songket was only used by royalty in the olden days but is now prevalent in Malay ceremonies such as weddings. The songket cloth – usually silk – is laced with gold or silver threads to form geometrical designs. A good to get your songket is Pantai Cahaya Bulan at Kampung Penambang.

Wau - or kite-flying is one of the oldest traditional games in the Malay culture, especially in Kelantan. The skill and patience that go into kite-making are worth every effort when they are ready to be flown; these gaily-decorated giant kites swaying high up in the sky add a colourful persona to Kelantan's unique being.

Numerous kite designs have been spawned since the early ages. They include the peacock kite (wau merak), bird kite (wau jalabudi), moon kite (wau bulan) and cat kite (wau kucing), and come in various sizes, shapes and designs. They are also sought-after collector items.

One of the most popular kite-flying spots is also Pantai Cahaya Bulan, as well as Kampung Kijang and Kampung Redang. The shops here usually open all-day.

Kelantanese silverware is also popular among tourists who love the tea sets, jewellery and vases for their intricate designs. Made using the filigree technique among others, these wares can be found at Kampung Marak and Kampung Badak, en-route to Pantai Cinta Berahi.

The craftsmanship of Kelantanese woodcarving is also among the best in Malaysia. Favouring motives inspired by floral designs, you can observe the making of these wooden art pieces and buy them in places like Pakatan Jurukir Tradisional in Pengkalan Chepa. However, please remember that these shops are usually closed on Fridays.

SHOPPING

Shopping is a must wherever you go in Kelantan. Indeed, the state is a proverbial treasure chest waiting to be discovered by you. Other things the state is famous for include silk and/or batik kaftans, woven mats, household items and trinkets that would delight your heart but would not be heavy on your wallet.

Buluh Kubu Bazaar

Buluh Kubu Bazaar (Bamboo Fort Bazaar) is one place to look for bargains. It is a one-stop, three-storey shopping complex that also sells t-shirts, silver ornaments, mats woven with mengkuang leaves and other knick-knacks.

Central Market

This market is made up of stalls selling all sorts of vegetables, seafood and meats. What is most interesting about this place is that the majority of traders here are women, something you would be hard-pressed to find elsewhere in Malaysia.

Jalan Temenggong

A visit to Jalan Temenggong is definitely worth your while as you stroll along the beautifully decorated shops that offer jewellery, textiles, brassware and other goods. Even haggling over the price is an experience not to be missed. It may even provide you with fond memories and tales to tell of shopping in Kelantan.

EATING OUT

A truly Kelantanese experience must include the food. The local Ayam Percik is a skewered chicken piece marinated in a special sauce and then barbequed. Another mouth-watering Kelantanese dish is Nasi Dagang – glutinous rice cooked in coconut milk. The rice, which is white or pinkish in colour, is usually served with fish or chicken curry, cucumber pickles and coconut sambal. You can also have it with beef or seafood curry. There is also Nasi Kerabu, which is bluish or yellowish rice normally served with fish, sambal and other dishes.

In addition, there is also Nasi Berlauk and traditional Kelantanese pastries such as Sekaya, Serabai and Cik Mek Molek. These and many more local delicacies can be found at restaurants and food stalls all over.