

Old and new charm of Tin Town

TIN Town. Pomelo Town. White Coffee Town. Ipoh claims the title to all these, and more.

Add to the string of titles — Menglembu groundnuts and Ipoh taugeh (bean sprouts) — and you'll get the idea — Ipoh is a gourmet haven, save for its tin, of course, which harks back to the city's history.

But then again, because of its history, Ipoh is also known as the City of Millionaires where fortunes were made during the boom days of the tin-mining industry at the turn of the 19th century.

The once sleepy town then grew because of tin and local Chinese even call Ipoh as Paloh which relates to giant mining pumps used to extract tin ore in the old days.

In recent times, Ipoh City Council planted bougainvillea trees to beautify the city, thus earning it another nickname, Bougainvillea City, softening its long-standing image as Tin Town.

Talking about beauty reminds me of the famous term "Ipoh Mali" mall comes from the Malay word "mali", which means "come". Native Chinese find it difficult to pronounce "x", hence when they say words with this alphabet, they sound like "l" instead.

Often said in jest, it's a slang that goes wickedly with a gesture: "wink, wink, you know what I mean".

The term originally refers to beautiful girls for which Ipoh is also famous, especially Chinese girls with fair, silky and porcelain-smooth skin.

Though the term had a seedy connotation initially, today it refers to anyone and anything that comes from Ipoh.

Famous beauties of Ipoh include Malaysia's only Hollywood Bond girl Datuk Michelle Yeoh and Datin Josephine Fonseka (Josephine Lena Wong), Miss Malaysia Universe 1970,

the only Miss Malaysia ever to have made it to the semi-finals of Miss Universe pageant.

Ipoh is also home to Malaysia's most loved cartoonist, Datuk Mohammad Nor Khalid, famously known as Lat whose cartoons of Malaysian scenes, including his hometown, continue to tickle our funny bones.

Tucked in the sprawling Kinta Valley and surrounded by limestone hills believed to be over 250 million years old, Ipoh has grown by leaps and bound since it was founded about 117 years ago.

Replacing Taiping as the capital of Perak, it is today Malaysia's third largest city. Its population of nearly half a million in the early 1990s has more than doubled today.

Drive through the city and you can feel the buzz of development, especially in the outskirts of the city centre with new commercial and residential areas mushrooming in places like Meru, Jelapang and Tambun.

These places are also home to some of the city's main tourist attractions including the Lost World of Tambun with natural hot spring pools and Gunung Lang Recreation Park with a natural pool set against towering limestone hills.

These stand stubbornly against development. Thankfully, the old part of the city remains relatively untouched.

Charming pre-war buildings characterised by Straits eclectic shop-houses and imposing buildings from British colonial era dominate the cityscape.

The scenic Gunung Lang Recreation Park is a favourite spot for visitors.



Putri Zanina is an NST contributor

VISIT MY NEIGHBOURHOOD

The iconic Ipoh Railway Station, dubbed the Taj Mahal of Ipoh, and across it, the imposing Edwardian Baroque-style Town Hall building have picture-perfect facades.

Standing within the compound of the railway station is a 34-year-old Ipoh tree.

This species of tree, after which the city was named, is not commonly found, making the tree at the station particularly special.

Nearby is Ipoh Padang surrounded by historic, colonial-style buildings including the mock-Tudor style Ipoh Club.

A short distance away is good old Taman S.P. Seenivasagam with pockets of green fields, ponds and playgrounds.

A fairly new development has taken place just next to the park, and across the Kinta River which flows through the city.

Now, the Riverwalk@Kinta Riverfront is THE place to be for recreation and dining. Night time is the best time to enjoy this mini i-City of Ipoh with meteorite shower lights and psychedelic LED lights casting colourful shadows on the river surface.

Two bridges span the river and on one side of the river bank stands the outdoor Pulong Tin Mining museum showcasing the process and equipment used in the old tin-mining days.

The river walkway is also wide enough for cycling. You can rent bicycles, including tandem bicycles, at the riverfront.

While it's nice to have dinner at the riverfront and enjoy live music, I would rather head for long-established eating spots such as along Jalan Yang Kalsom for the addictive nasi ganja at the famous Nasi Kandar Vanggey restaurant, or any one of the old, authentic coffee shops at Jalan Bijih Timah to enjoy Ipoh white coffee.

Then there are the stalls at the open food court in Taman Kanak-Kanak right smack in the city centre, serving some of the best fried noodles, satay and the "mother" of the must-have delicacies here — lin chee kang.

Here, you'll get it just the way this sweet and cooling drink should be served — with spoonfuls of dried longan, persimmons and winter melon, as well as red beans, lotus seeds, white fungus, malva nut or kembang semangkok, barley and quail eggs.

My taste bud tingles at the thought of kampung-style Malay food at the famous Tasik Raban Restaurant near Ipoh Stadium.

Freshly grilled fish with chilli and asam dips, gulai tempoyak with fresh water fish, sambal belacan and a variety of ulam, rendang tok plus more than 50 other dishes often get me heady with excitement.

Driving past the stadium too never fails to stir some excitement in me as it evokes memories of my stint in athletics during my school days.

I can still remember the cheer that erupted in the stadium as I blazed the track to win a 400m run in the district-level meet in the early 70s.

It was also the venue when we would wait with bated breath to watch "Star" boys from Sekolah Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Ipoh compete in the adrenaline-charged 4x100 run against their arch rival, the MCKK boys from the prestigious Malay College Kuala Kangsar. We would root for the Star boys to win, every time.

Rain or shine, I would cycle to my training ground near the army barracks at Jalan Hospital, about 10+ minutes ride away from Greentown where I lived.

Those days, Greentown was indeed green with several football fields surrounded by mature trees.

Our wooden house in the government quarters was in front of such field where we enjoyed watching football matches right from the front staircase of our home.

My old school, the Main Convent was just a five-minute walk away. The 107-year-old school building is still standing and housing the secondary school in its newer wing though it is fighting the development all around.

I am glad to learn that the original school building is now a designated heritage site.

The old green fields in Greentown have long made way to modern commercial development, making the place one of the most happening spots in the city.

My family moved from Greentown well before the development took place.

We settled in a housing area at Jalan Lapangan Terbang, not too far from the airport. Those familiar with the area will know the road names, such as Jalan Jumbo Jet and the like.

Jalan Lapangan Terbang branches off from Jalan Raja Dr Nazrin Shah (formerly Jalan Gopeng) that leads to one of Ipoh's ancient cave temples, the Goddess of Mercy (Kwan Yin Tong) temple as well as the popular row of stalls selling many of Ipoh's famous products.

Visitors stop here to cart home juicy pomelos and packets of crunchy groundnuts, a perfect end to a stopover in Ipoh.

The Ipoh tree standing majestically in front of the iconic Ipoh Railway Station. Pix by Putri Zanina

