

Majestic Melaka:

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Getting there is only half the fun!

GETTING THERE

“Melaka! Melaka!” It was the second time I had passed the moustachioed tout, as I wandered up and down the multitude of ticket offices in this overgrown warehouse, otherwise known as Johor Bahru (or JB to locals) bus terminus. On the first run past, his call had not really caught my attention, but on this second time around he added: *“Bus leaving, three o’clock”*.

I checked my watch. It was just after three. *“You said Melaka?”*

“Yes, Melaka. Now. Hurry! Hurry!” He beckoned me towards him, as if leading me to some secret Aladdin’s cave.

I followed him around the corner to yet another ticket office, which I had not noticed before. *“How much?”* I queried.

“Nine eighty. You pay girl”.

He pointed to an Indian woman, wearing a colourful headscarf, seated behind the glass. I handed over a ten ringgit note. Then to save time, my adopted guide fished a 20-cent coin from his pocket and passed it to me. *“Take, take.”* He said. *“Then we go! Go! You very late.”* The woman smiled as she passed the ticket under the glass, inadvertently displaying an elaborate henna decoration on her right hand.

“Ah! You’re getting married?” Half statement, half question.

“No, my sister ... tomorrow. You like come?” Smiling more genuinely at me this time.

I grinned back, shaking my head. It was a tempting invitation, but I was programmed for Melaka; I followed the man back to where we first met and he pointed to a suitably modern looking bus that could be seen through a large open doorway, parked out in the open. It looked like the best of the three or four buses on display.

“The one with red and blue stripes?” I queried, just to make sure.

“Yes, yes. Hurry, hurry!” He waved me away, like a policeman hurrying traffic. I noted his pronounced liking for repeated imperatives.

“Bus leaving in just few minutes my friend. Have nice journey.” Then he was gone.

I walked over to the bus, only to find the dark-tinted, window-doors, shut tight. It reminded me of the previous night: I had been locked inside a Singaporean commuter bus for perhaps twenty minutes, when the driver wandered off to change shifts. All-in-all, I preferred locked out, to locked in, but as I stood in the sticky heat alongside another hopeful passenger, I did begin to wonder if we had both been *had*, by the same tout.

But no, not this time anyway. Just as I moved a few yards to gain the relative cool of the shade from a small tree nearby, the blacked-out doors suddenly swung into life. Along with my waiting compatriot, I climbed aboard only to find that there were already quite a few passengers scattered around the bus, seated singly, but taking up what - at a cursory glance - looked like almost all the twin seats.

In just a few minutes we were mobile and had negotiated the winding exit from the terminus onto the main road, to then face the traffic lights and eternal traffic jams of downtown Joho Bahru. But it was midweek and not too chaotic, so before long *JB's* red-traffic-light district was behind us and we were cruising towards a toll-gate, which turned out to be the entrance to a recently constructed, and quite impressive, dual carriageway (with hardly any cars on it) spearing North towards the capital, Kuala Lumpur.

I was soon to discover, that these high-roofed toll gates - looking like something designed by a Swiss architect, to ward off the snow – cropped up at regular intervals along the new highway. But going by the fact that the driver paid over less than one ringgit (or about 50 cents) at each stop, it all seemed a bit of a waste of time. I assumed someone, somewhere, had worked out that it would all add up in the long run, though a quick glance at the number of vehicles on this road might lead to the conclusion that it would take some considerable time to add up to very much.

Strangely – because the seats further back were nearly all occupied - I had been lucky enough to get a vacant double seat near the front of the bus, and diagonally across from the driver. Either this was some sort of good luck omen at play, or people knew more than I did about this particular bus journey. There was plenty of leg room and from this vantage point I had a clear view of the road ahead ... and the driver. Opposite me, across the aisle, a young Malaysian woman was distinguishable from a bundle of black cloths, only by a tanned nose which poked out from her black headdress.

The bus as it turned out was not quite as wonderful as its outside appearance would have any unsuspecting passenger assume. Comfortable though; with tinted windows, padded lay back seats, fold-down trays and air-con. “*What more could one want? ... Well, speed for one thing.*” I mused.

The rather dated and dark interior, contrasted with the flashy red, white and blue outer coat. There was an old-style, centrally located engine, rattling away under a black, quilted cover, which connected to the driver via a long-handled gear stick. Decidedly slow on the uphill bits, with lots of animated driver action – accompanied by muted

mutterings as he crashed the gear cogs into place - but certainly streamlined for the downhill runs and flat cruising. “*What you lose on the swings, you gain on the roundabouts.*” I thought to myself, staring out of the window, at an olive-green forest of regimented palm-oil trees, stretching out as far as the eye could see.

At first, the white-shirted driver was just a curiosity. He wore a multi-coloured, floppy cotton hat and sported a pair of suitably dark green, police-style sunglasses. Curiously, a red, white and blue, plastic fold-out chair - matching the colours of the bus and by coincidence his hat - sat on top of the black-quilted engine. For a short moment I imagined him reclining on some grassy knoll, between shifts, under the shade of a spreading Banyan Tree: perhaps a Malaysian bus driver’s life wasn’t so bad, after all.

But as we motored on, and because I was in a position to observe the driver quite closely, my thought modes slowly changed from languid roadside siestas to much darker scenes, and I began to wonder if indeed the good luck omen was wrong, and the much more sinister *other* option, was in fact right. I had indeed selected an excellent seat with a brilliant view of the road ahead, but the view of the driver - which most other passengers were spared – was becoming slightly worrying, to say the least.

He was a big, burly Indian; dark skinned and heavy jowled. His long, droopy moustache gave him the appearance of an overweight walrus. He glowered ahead at the road, legs akimbo and slouched over his enormous belly, seemingly bored to the extreme by his monotonous job and perhaps dreaming of promotion to a desk seat, where he could terrorise all his other lowly, driver-colleagues. Despite the ‘*DELORANG MEROKOK*’ (no smoking) sign prominently displayed above his head, he smoked continuously – and secretly – puffing smoke rings out of the driver’s side, sliding window.

I watched him constantly out of the corner of my eye, partly because I thought I might need to reach over and grab the wheel, if and when he actually did fall asleep. The man did everything possible, other than drive the bus as it should have been driven by a half-competent driver. He leaned on the big, flat steering wheel with his elbows; he picked at his finger nails and cracked his knuckles, and in between times was endlessly opening

and closing his driver's side window, to expel mouthfuls of smoke or release yet another gob of spittle ... or both!

He looked to be almost asleep at times and the bus often meandered, as if under its own remote control, between lanes. It was a great demonstration of how *not* to drive a bus and I was somewhat surprised, but exceedingly thankful, as we finally pulled into the Melaka bus station ... our destination.

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BEING THERE

Lawrence of Melaka

A thin, dark, Malay man sat behind his small, wooden, one-drawer desk. He was typing furiously and after finishing each line, pushed the moveable trolley back, to start the next, accompanied by the loud *ding* of a bell. It all appeared slightly out of place, with the Melaka River and bridge - a scene of tranquillity - in the background.

I asked if I could take a photograph. He nodded as if to say it was OK, then followed up with: "*Sure, help yourself.*"

Looking more closely, I realised the man was working on some sort of business letter, so I sat down to wait until he had finished the task. Before long, the typewriter bell sounded the last line and he was working the ratchet wheel to release the page. He scanned through his work, then obviously satisfied, placed the sheet of paper carefully to his left, on top of a pile already completed, then reached for a small glass paperweight and put that on top of the pile, to make sure everything remained in place. As he turned to give me his full attention it was evident that he was a man accustomed to order.

Sitting on his client's stool to the right of his desk, I became intrigued by this man. I wanted to photograph him in the rather unique setting, but I also wanted to find out more about him and the work he was doing. He had set up with his desk, typewriter and stool, just a few yards away from three other similarly equipped – and correspondingly

dressed - men. Neither Lawrence nor any of his compatriots were young. His profession was, as he later explained, a dying art.

"I cater mainly for private citizens," he explained. "They need to write about some dispute between family members or an important community matter. But I also have a few business customers."

"How much to you charge?" I queried.

"Oh, for one foolscap page, (he held up a sample, smiling) maybe five Ringgit, maybe more. Depends on the client."

He told me that he had been working on the same job, at the same spot, for 45 years, which indicated he was probably well into his sixties. He now only worked for two or three hours a day, six days a week. If it rained, he closed his shop; the municipal government did not allow umbrellas!

He explained that nowadays, at his age, he would become a little weary after sitting for many hours in the hot sun, and pulled up the sleeve of his white shirt to show his dark tanned lower arm contrasting with the upper, as if to say *"This is what 45 years of hard graft in the Melaka sun has done to me."*

I showed some interest in his small, portable typewriter and he lifted it up to show me that it was an *Olivetti* - a well-known English typewriter brand in its day - and that it was made in Mexico, but of course sold in Malaysia. It is a small world, as they say! We both smiled about that. I think he knew instinctively about globalisation, and the fact that the remaining days for the job he had dedicated his life to, were seriously numbered.

I lined up two or three photos, with Lawrence in the foreground, poised at the keyboard - white, open-necked shirt, dark cotton trousers, thick black hair pushed back, and heavy-rimmed specs - his work mates and bridge as the backdrop. After a short while a new customer came along, introducing himself as John. Lawrence and I both laughed about his Mexican sombrero-style hat, though John didn't quite get the joke.

I felt privileged to have met this man, who had given me time at his workplace in Melaka.

The Old Majestic

Old is the operative word. What must it have been like in the past? What might it become in the future?

Unlike its Sarkie Brothers' counterparts, existing in Singapore (Raffles) and Penang (The E & O), which have both been turned into modern-day, luxury clones, *The Old Majestic* in Melaka – a staging post between the two - appears pretty much in its original state.

Sky-high, battoned ceilings, support old and yellowed fans. A maroon and mustard tile mosaic covers an expansive floor, with a mix of gnarled armchairs and glass-topped tables scattered here and there, all around what once must have been, very clearly, a most *majestic* lounge. The room's perimeter consists of eight-foot tall, wood-panelled doors, with stained glass arched windows above. At one end, leather-cushioned bar stools cluster around a highly polished bar ... now devoid of any customers.

Today the place sits, a faded relic, doomed it would seem alternative fates: destruction, or upliftment to the 5-star class. I wasn't sure which was worse. A balding gentleman sits in a weathered leather armchair, not far from the bar, exactly the same as the day before. Is he a guest, a staff member ... or an eternal monument to this great hotel? It's hard to tell. The young Chinese receptionist, smartly styled in black and white, leans on the bar with nothing to do. An attendant goes about his routine of switching on the fans and tuning the TV ... the one visible gesture to modernity!

No one speaks, nothing stirs, except now, the new sound of whirring fans, as they slowly gather speed to slice through the hot and humid air. It must have been a wonderful meeting place in its hay day. But I like it even now - love it perhaps - with its high ceilings and thick walls; a cool retreat from the oppressive, late afternoon heat.

"Perhaps the place is heaving in the evening hours." I think to myself, looking around.

Then aloud I order a drink; my voice coming from nowhere and startling the petite lady, behind the bar.

“Can you mix a gin-sling, like they do in Raffles?” I ask, thinking the answer will probably come back as a blank stare. But no

“Yes sir. Right away sir. Coming up sir. You like with pineapple and lime?” Half question, half statement.

I lean on the bar and waggle my head in the Indian mode, indicating yes. She half-turns to look at me, smiling back as she fixes the drink.

A few minutes later I am also reclining in a faded brown, leather armchair, legs crossed, directly under a ceiling fan revolving with minimal sound, sipping this gorgeously tall, beautifully ice-cooled drink.

“This must be heaven.” I find myself murmuring.

“Sorry sir. Is the drink OK?” The petite young lady, still standing behind the bar, obviously had extremely good hearing.

“No, it’s fine, thank you. Just thinking I need to leave by seven.”

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