

# Sentul was a railway depot

Sentul is undergoing a rebirth as an upmarket, affluent neighbourhood for the elite of Kuala Lumpur. But for MARC LOURDES, a true-blue 'Sentulian', Sentul will always be about railway lines, diesel-stained bus depots and fond boyhood memories.



In 1973, Jalan Sentul Pasar was not as congested

in 1973, Jalan Sentul Pasar was not as congested as it is today.

THERE'S an easy way to determine who is from Sentul and who isn't. A non-Sentul resident would almost always consider Jalan Ipoh as part of the area. A Sentulian would respond by shaking his head at the geographical blunder.

For residents, Sentul is Jalan Sentul and its outlying kampungs, flats and link-house estates. Jalan Ipoh is to Sentul what Singapore is to Johor — some place totally different altogether.

It wasn't so long ago that Sentul was known for Botak Chin, Pasar Dalam and its railway depot, and not for YTL projects like Tamarind or Maple.

My family lived in Sentul from the late 1940s right through to the new millennium, bar a short hiatus in the early 1980s.

Most parts of it are unrecognisable today from my childhood and youth in the 80s and 90s, and even more so from my father's in the 50s and 60s.

### Despite its reputation for being poor and crime-ridden, Sentul was actually a place with delicate social nuances.

Before the days of Light Rail Transits and RapidKL bus services, the main public transport was the fleet of blue Sri Jaya buses that had its greasy and diesel-stained depot near my home in Sentul Bahagia.

Children's fare was a flat 20 sen while adults paid between 30 to 60 sen. The bus would wind its way along the bumpy and potholed two-lane Jalan Sentul, passing the market, St Joseph's Church and the La Salle and Methodist Boys (MBS) schools before eventually linking up with Jalan Ipoh and from there, making its way to the city centre.

That road was the main artery of the area and dozens of superb eating places sprang up along both sides. For great *thosai* and *idli*, there was no better place than the market,



Shophouses along Jalan Sentul in the early 90s.



Blocks of flats are now part of Sentul's new township.

which my dad used to take me to after Sunday morning mass.

Further down, there used to be an excellent *char kway teow* stall. Located next to a dingy gift store called Emporium Manjaku, the stall, its sides littered with cockle shells, used to be packed with regular diners.

At the junction to Taman Dato Senu and Sentul Bahagia can be found two of the best *nasi lemak* stalls. Both are

still around and going strong after more than 20 years.

One, a Chinese eatery, opens from 6pm to 9pm daily, and there is never a day when there isn't a large crowd patiently lining up for their food. The other, which I still visit at least once a month, is run by a husband-and-wife team who, in my opinion, make the best *rendang daging* this side of the South China Sea.

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The gritty Union, Sri Kelantan and Sri Terengganu flats, where large families would cram into impossibly small apartments, were not very far away from the idyllic Jalan Kovil Hilir area with its huge bungalows.

Kampung Ratnapillai, Muthiah, Sek Mah and Chubadak, hemmed in the middle-class areas of Sentul Bahagia and Taman Dato Senu. Bandar Baru Sentul was a relatively new addition to the enclave.

Before all that though, were the railway quarters. My family lived in Lorong Haji Salleh, which is now the location of a high-priced YTL high-rise.

Given the rose-tinted lenses with which the past is viewed, my father's stories still make "those days" seem like a much better time.

One of my favourite tales is about our next-door neighbour — the Chee family. Whenever my great-grandmother would cook one of her famous curries, the smell would waft to Mr Chee's verandah. He would then call across and ask her, in perfect Tamil, what was cooking. A pot of curry would immediately find its way next door.

Another chuckle-worthy story is about my uncle's friend Ragha who, on a dare, once cruelly kicked a cow (they used to be to Sentul what sheep are to New Zealand) on its behind. The animal retaliated by pooping on his foot.

I've got to admit that one thing they had then, which I'm glad has gone the way of the dinosaurs, is the "bucket" system of sanitation.



The Malayan Railways quarters have not changed in decades.

Progress does have its advantages.

I'm glad progress didn't march so fast that my childhood memories are just those of cyber-games. We used to have different sporting "seasons". It would be either football, badminton, bicycles, kites or rounders, depending on what was the craze at the moment.

Boys with footballing talent (I wasn't one of them) would "graduate" to the famed Sentul Rangers team, where they'd mix with the adults.

Sport was also important to the schools in the area, as they — with the exception of La Salle Sentul — weren't known for their academic prowess. The fierce tribalism of MBS, La Salle and Maxwell School wasn't limited to sports though. There used to be regular fights, sometimes involving dozens of boys. It was one of the things that contributed to Sentul's rowdy reputation.

Today, Sentul has gone upmarket. It's a maze of manicured one-way roads and swanky condominiums — thanks to corporate urban planning.

But to me, Sentul will always be about railway lines, diesel-stained bus depots and stories of cows pooping on naughty boys' feet.